

Why the UK needs connected strategies for net zero and leveling up

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The Government's Net Zero Strategy (2022) calls for more attention to community-based action to meet ambitious targets. Similarly, the

recently published report of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for "left behind" neighborhoods, "[A neighborhood strategy for national renewal](#)" (October 2023) makes a strong commitment to putting local communities in the driver's seat of the leveling up agenda.

Why is it, then, that the former pays nothing more than lip service to equity and fairness in how net zero can be rolled out across the U.K. and nowhere in the latter is there any mention of the urgent need to decarbonize the economy? What opportunities are being missed and what barriers are being created by this classic case of siloed thinking by [policy makers](#)?

The problem seems to lie in a lack of research on how to bring these two urgent agendas together, as well as in an overreliance on outdated ideas about what is needed to drive effective responses to the most pressing challenges of our generation. At the Sustainable Consumption Institute at the University of Manchester, we have drawn on decades of social science research to develop a Joined-up Sustainability Transformations (JUST) approach that we argue should be adopted by the next government.

JUST entails three core ideas that together enable a shift toward principles that respond to complex social and political conditions that currently block progress towards the scale of change needed to tackle the interlocking crises of climate, care, cost of living, and more.

First, as the acronym implies, JUST rests on the belief that these crises cannot be addressed adequately unless justice is placed at the center of research, policy making and program implementation. An important step in that direction is improving understanding of the connections between social inequalities and environmental unsustainability, which requires the analysis of power relations and how axes of difference (such as class, gender and race) create structural obstacles to the pursuit of net zero.

Second, we argue for transformation rather than transition. While there is no doubt that a transition away from [fossil fuels](#) is necessary, this concept sets parameters that are too narrow for the complex challenge at hand. In the context of climate change, transformation refers to "a process of social change that challenges, and ultimately replaces, dominant development trajectories toward desirable low-carbon, climate-resilient futures."

Our approach focused on the relations between [social inequalities](#) and sustainability enables a more comprehensive picture of these transformational processes that often remain constrained by relatively narrow economic, technological, or behavioral approaches.

According to a report by the Cambridge Sustainability Commission there is an urgent need to translate insights from the wealth of technical and behavioral research, which has been dominant for long enough, into win-win pathways that respond more effectively and sensitively to social and political barriers to meeting the U.K.'s net zero agenda. JUST's approach is designed to achieve these outcomes.

Third, JUST moves our attention away from nation-wide, top-down policies to place-based, co-produced strategies for transformational change. This both addresses inequalities and marginalization where they are lived and experienced, but also goes beyond the focus on "behavior change" by mobilizing the energy of communities that are often already engaged in myriad initiatives to address inequalities and climate action simultaneously.

This activity is always located in particular places and the challenges they face, "joined-up" research and action needs to start with the potential that exists at this community level. This entails a combination of co-productive research with communities about the lived experience of daily life, with the development and use of comprehensive datasets

which enable understanding at a granular level, down to the level of a terraced street, of who that lived experience shapes action and possibilities for action on sustainability.

Rather than "building back greener," as called for by the Net Zero Strategy, the JUST approach would not be limited to one color alone. Green is arguably too narrow and exclusive for inspiring popular support. What is needed instead is to set out a new social contract, with real prospects of better quality of life which is not only about jobs and income, but also about relationships, representation, leisure and care.

Various iterations of a green new deal for the U.K. provide good examples of the potential for this kind of holistic approach to transformative policy making. However, we recommend embedding a stronger element of democratic participation so that initiatives are co-designed and co-produced to respond to the needs of [local communities](#), working with local people to deliver JUST in ways that support and empower marginalized populations in "left-behind" areas to achieve a more equitable and sustainable low-carbon future.

Politicians are keenly aware of the potential for backlash against net zero strategies such as ULEZ and LTNs. The U.K. has seen a significant rise in such "[anti-net zero populism](#)" since around 2021. This resistance is largely political and cultural in nature, generated out of mistrust in politicians, fears that green transitions hit the poor hardest, and attachments to established practices and objects like petrol cars. This means that the backlash is unlikely to be overcome by more technological innovation or stronger scientific evidence.

Our JUST approach has potential to counteract negative assumptions and fears that reduce public support for climate policy, by overcoming mistrust through participative strategies, targeting policy action to reduce not intensify inequalities, and to generate spaces for imagining and

valuing new ways of living.

Provided by University of Manchester

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