

— KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER NOTE N°1

Towards a Just Transition in Switzerland: Introduction, Definition and Approach

What is
a just
transition?

Who pays for the
decarbonization
of the dwelling
stock?

Why should
vulnerabilities
be embedded in
environmental
policies?

What is a
fair price for
food?



Key Takeaways

- **Environmental issues are inevitably linked to social inequality issues**, as not all individuals and groups are equal in the face of environmental issues and policies, depending on their economic situation, gender, age, health, etc.
- **Swiss environmental policies are largely blind to social justice concerns**. So far, the debate is limited to the narrow and vague idea of social acceptability. This reflects a technocratic and top-down approach focused on reducing conflict after decisions have been made. Recent examples of deadlocks have shown that people can strongly resist this style of policymaking.
- For Switzerland to reach its environmental goals, a more ambitious path is needed. **Social justice needs to be central to environmental policies** to avoid increasing social inequalities and potential blockages. Just Transition offers such a promising path.
- **Just Transition is a process of transformative change towards dignity for all within planetary boundaries**, putting social and participatory rights at the heart of environmental policies.
- Central to our approach to Just Transition is the ambition to **identify, assess and reduce both non-transition risks** (i.e. potential negative consequences of environmental issues) **and transition risks** (i.e. potential increase of social injustices due to environmental policies).
- Implementing Just Transition measures in Switzerland requires to **consider the most pressing (non-)transition risks existing in the country, the specific features of its institutions, and its current environmental policies**. Some elements of this context are outlined in this note.
- The implementation of **Just Transition also requires practical tools to guide policymakers**. Existing and new policies need to be analyzed based on an integrative approach that strives to combine both social and environmental goals. The main building blocks of an implementation framework for Just Transition in Switzerland are outlined in this note.

A Transition Without People?

Switzerland's climate strategy aims at reaching zero net greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by 2050. To reach this and other environmental goals, society needs to embrace and implement major changes in the collective framework structuring everyone's lives.

Yet, while these transformative processes have only started, they are already being challenged. Government projects and popular initiatives ranging from broad strategies to sectoral measures highlight the tensions between social and environmental issues. The contested legitimacy of these measures leads to slowdowns, unambitious actions, or even deadlocks.

When taking a closer look at these situations, one recurring issue appears: the lack of awareness about social justice concerns. In strong contrast, the idea of Just Transition claims that any kind of ecological transition will simply not happen without justice. Or, put differently, that reducing injustices during transition processes is the very condition for them to take place.

Tackling the social and environmental nexus

Adopting a Just Transition approach requires to acknowledge how environmental and social issues interact in complex and dynamic ways. Recent or forthcoming votes in Switzerland can illustrate this claim.

In recent years, various initiatives have been proposed with environmental objectives: conservation of natural resources, mitigation of GHG emissions, limitation of pollution, protection of biodiversity, or the use of planetary boundaries as limits to the development of the economy.

While most of these proposals have been rejected, all of them had major socioeconomic implications. More or less explicit in the proposals, these implications included large changes in the way food is produced and consumed, mobility is organized, economic development is managed, population and migration are controlled, buildings are designed, etc.

All these changes have a major potential to create injustices and inequalities – if their socioeconomic impacts are left unmanaged. The same can be said about current processes at the regional and local levels related to the renovation of the dwelling stock. In these cases, the pursuit of energy and climate objectives creates broad debates on how to protect tenants during and after the renovation processes, who should pay for it, at what pace it should be carried out and how ambitious targets should be, how to develop a skilled workforce, etc.

Multiple examples could be further given, for instance on water provision, agriculture and food systems, sustainable modes of production and consumption, land planning, renewable energy, etc. In all these examples, multiple social dimensions dynamically and mutually interact with much needed environmental objectives and actions.

Environmental inequalities in Switzerland

The vague mention or even absence of social justice concerns in Swiss environmental policies is blatant. Only scarce references to “social acceptability” can be found in climate and sustainability policies (see the focus on Switzerland below). This mobilization of the idea of social acceptability reveals an abstract and narrow understanding of environmental inequalities, despite these inequalities being numerous: environmental questions inevitably create issues of justice, as not all individuals and groups are equal in the face of environmental issues and policies, depending on their geographical location (e.g. urban or rural), economic situation, gender, etc. For instance:

- Vulnerable groups contribute relatively less to environmental degradations, yet they are overexposed to pollution, environmental risks, and a degraded environment.

- Vulnerable groups are relatively more exposed to the impacts of environmental policies, and their voices are less heard in the development of these policies.

Only roughly outlined here, these inequalities remain to be thoroughly identified and assessed in Switzerland, insofar as no robust and systematic research has been conducted in that regard.

Going beyond incentive-based and behavioral approaches

Until now, most approaches to socioecological transitions merely attempt to create the right (dis)incentives for people, raise awareness, or enforce new obligations, rather than to reduce these inequalities. These “social acceptability” approaches are often technocratic, top-down, and focused on reducing conflict after key decisions have been made. They could be characterized as “a-social” approaches, as they mainly focus on individual behavior changes, forgetting about the importance of people’s identities and cognitive patterns, inequalities in social relations, existing physical infrastructure, etc.

Hence, individuals face moral or regulatory imperatives to change their behaviors, while embedded in an unchanged physical, socio-cultural, economic and cognitive environment that prevents or hinders these changes.

The socioecological transition cannot happen without or against people. A change of perspective is therefore urgently needed. In the face of growing inequalities, climate change and other environmental issues, processes of Just Transition can offer a path towards this needed change.

Just Transition: Our Approach

Originally coined by the US labor union movements in the 1980s, the idea of Just Transition is widely disseminated today. It is for instance included in the 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change, mobilized by various international organizations, and implemented at regional and national levels through dedicated policies.

This idea can be grasped from multiple perspectives, each based on different normative and political visions. While for example the EU focuses on fossil fuel industries and workers, other approaches go beyond this focus and include other industries, communities, vulnerable groups, etc.

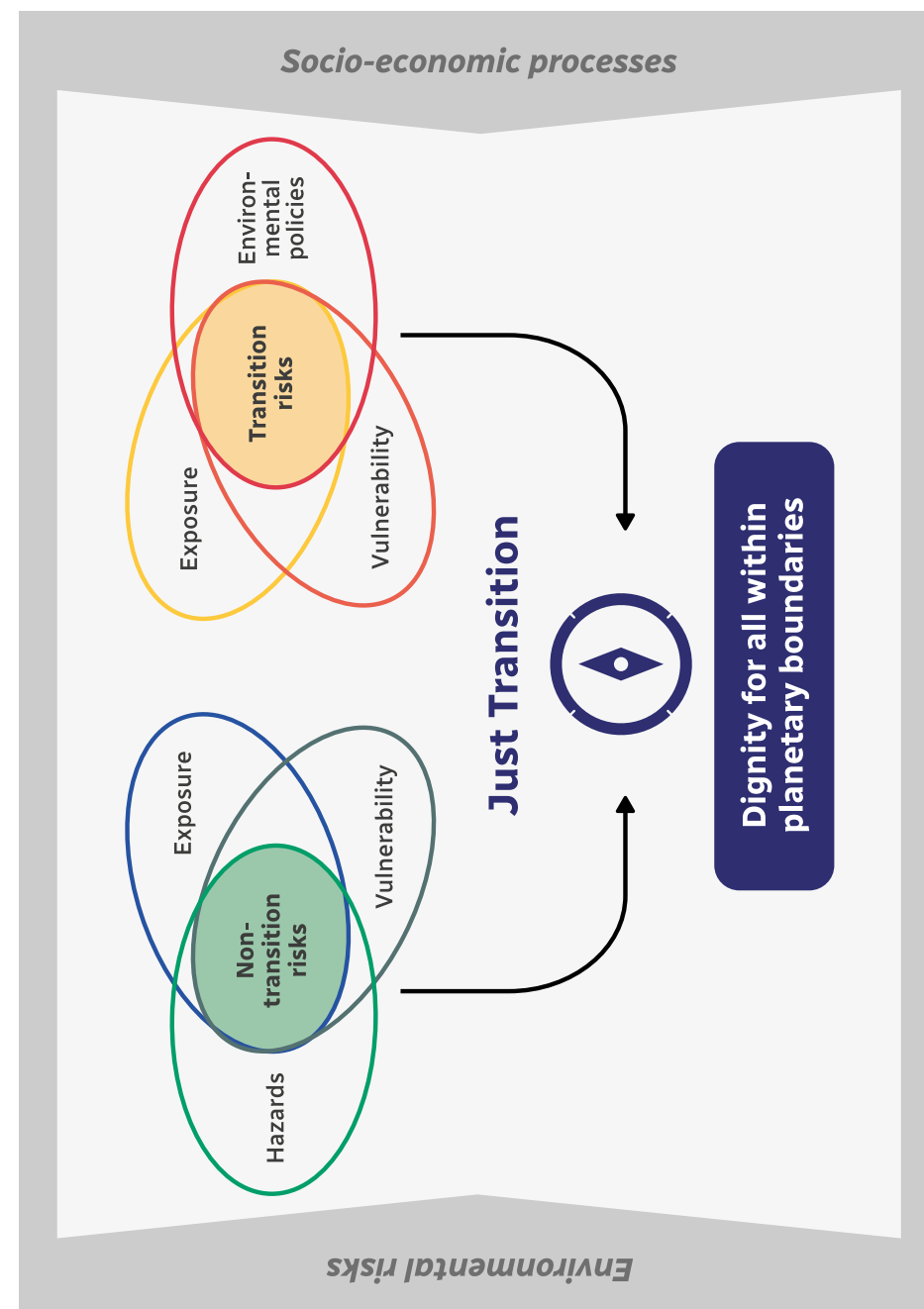
This broader focus is relevant to Switzerland, a country without extractive fossil fuel industries, even if many economic sectors heavily rely on fossil fuels. In any case, Just Transition is pertinent in Switzerland as well, because every region, industry and community undergoing a socioecological transition is confronted with social justice issues.

A focus on transition risks

The starting point of our approach to Just Transition is the idea of risks, as the potential negative impact on something we value: people, ecosystems, assets, etc. Reviewing Swiss policies shows that environmental risks, i.e. the negative consequences that will occur if GHG emissions are not reduced for instance, are generally well documented. We call these risks **non-transition risks** (see the illustration below). Non-transition risks are biophysical risks created by inaction. They do not only depend on the intensity of a “natural” disaster such as a flood (hazard), but also on how many people and goods are exposed in a given area (exposure), and on how society and people are organized, prepared, and able to respond to this particular event (vulnerability).

Yet, the missing piece is the flip side of the coin, i.e. how people are affected by the measures enforced to address these non-transition risks (e.g. policies to reduce GHG emissions). We call these latter risks **transition risks**, i.e. risks of increased social inequalities resulting from environmental policies, together with exposure to these policies, and the vulnerability of specific populations.

In our approach, Just Transition considers non-transition and transition risks simultaneously. The relationship between these two types of risks is complex and only partly reciprocal. Our approach prevents the use of transition risks as a justification for inaction. It also acknowledges that reducing transition risks is a necessary but not sufficient condition to reduce non-transition risks. In any case, considering both non-transition and transition risks simultaneously allows for a Just Transition. We can now define this transition as a process of transformative change towards dignity for all within planetary boundaries and guided by principles of justice (see these principles below).



Principles of justice

- **Distributive justice:** ensuring a fair allocation of burdens and benefits for all – including in the distribution of natural resources, nuisances and risks, as well as with regards to the impact of policies dealing with these risks and benefits.
- **Procedural justice:** guaranteeing fair and transparent decision-making processes and procedures, and meaningful participation of all actors concerned, both in the development and implementation of policies.
- **Recognition justice:** acknowledging plural needs, values, identities and perspectives of all people and groups, with particular attention to marginalized or vulnerable groups, to ensure all people's dignity.
- **Global justice:** minimizing the impacts a transition process, carried out in a given perimeter, has on the exploitation of people and natural resources outside of this perimeter, and acknowledging the differentiated historical responsibility for creating environmental issues.

The three objectives of a Just Transition

Based on this broad definition of risks, processes of Just Transition should aim at three objectives: identifying, assessing and reducing both non-transition and transition risks. When it comes to transition risks, this means first to make them visible, assess how different groups of people are unequally impacted by environmental measures, and fight the social blindness of these measures. Furthermore, potential conflicts need to be identified, and a fair framework to

respond to non-transition risks defined collectively. Finally, this means reducing as much as possible social inequalities, both preexisting ones and the ones produced by environmental measures. This includes prevention measures reducing the risks for individuals, households and groups to fall into situations of deprivation, as well as supportive measures ensuring access to basic needs and social right. In other words, Just Transition can be considered as a compass, an arbiter and a shield for people involved in processes of socioecological transition. Combining all these elements leads to the following definition:

Definition of Just Transition

“Just Transition is a process of transformative change towards dignity for all within planetary boundaries, guided by principles of justice. This process aims at identifying, assessing and reducing transition and non-transition risks as much as possible and puts social and participatory rights at the heart of environmental policies.”

Focus on Switzerland

Measures and policies for a Just Transition are always implemented in a specific geographical and institutional context that determines their nature. Some elements of the Swiss context are here briefly outlined and will be considered by this project.

Switzerland is a wealthy country with a high level of consumption on average. This is for instance reflected in its high level of resource consumption and GHG emissions per capita. While the country has few natural resources, its overall environmental impact is largely caused by production abroad, and transportation of products imported for domestic consumption (material and carbon footprint). Overall, Switzerland ranks among the top countries in terms of per capita environmental impacts.

Due to this situation, Switzerland is vulnerable to both transition and non-transition risks, with foreseeable disruptions in a variety of sectors: agriculture, forestry, tourism, chemical and pharmaceutical industries, air transport, as well as banks, insurance, pension funds, etc., whose financial performance depends on investments in GHG emitting activities, or activities affected by climate-related hazards.

To deal with, and reduce these risks, Swiss policies remain poorly equipped. The 2021 long-term climate strategy of Switzerland does claim in its seventh principle that *"The Confederation will ensure, with the support of social partners, cantons and municipalities, that the transition to net zero is socially acceptable"* and that *"Additional financial burdens for low-income households or some regions will be avoided or compensated for by appropriate mechanisms"*. Yet, in the implementation provisions of this strategy (law on CO₂, law on climate and innovation), social acceptability is reduced to generic mentions without any appropriate implementation mechanisms, not to mention financial resources.

In these texts as well as in the 2030 federal sustainability strategy and action plans, transition risks are poorly identified, and social and environmental issues are discussed separately. Based on a flawed diagnostic, prognostics are mostly limited to the idea of internalization of external costs (e.g. tax on GHG emissions), the elimination of perverse incentives, and more awareness raising for the population – the incentive-based and behavioral approach discussed above.

Switzerland is vulnerable to both transition and non-transition risks, with foreseeable disruptions in a variety of sectors

Policies are consolidated in an institutional context that must be considered when defining actors in charge of designing and implementing Just Transition measures, and what decision-making process should be followed.

Features of this context are, for instance:

- The Swiss federalism and its principle of subsidiarity, leaving a broad autonomy to cantons and municipalities.
- The instruments of semi-direct democracy that influence the possible adoption of measures and need to be articulated with instruments of participatory and deliberative democracy.

- The configuration of the social partnership and tripartite dialogue between public authorities, labor unions and employers. Especially the decentralized, consensual and liberal-conservative character of this partnership that leaves a large autonomy for social partners to determine working conditions and wages for instance.
- The organization of the Swiss welfare state that relies on individual responsibility, the subsidiarity principles, and both private and public institutions to ensure social security. This system is largely based on traditional family models and full-time employment, and struggles to integrate recent changes in the society and the labor market.

Putting the Idea of Just Transition to Work

To be able to identify, assess and reduce transition risks when implementing public or private environmental measures and policies, a series of practical questions arise. This project aims to develop a full Just Transition framework providing answers to these questions. Some of the building blocks of this framework are presented in the illustration below.

When it comes to measures and policies, the basic logic suggested by the framework is to adopt an integrative perspective, by:

— Upscaling synergetic policies that already work for both social and environmental goals (e.g. expand support measures for a fair and ecological renovation of buildings).

— Integrating social concerns into environmental policies (e.g. fair conditions for all the actors in a glass reuse system).

— Integrating environmental concerns into social policies (e.g. extend compensation schemes to include loss of income in the event of a natural disaster).

Framework for Just Transition in Switzerland



Conceptual basis
and definition

Implementation
methods

Policies for a
Just Transition

JT scoreboard for
socioecological
transitions

Just Transition
narratives

Navigating Just Transition measures

A whole catalogue of Just Transition measures or policies can be identified based on the integrative logic described above and across many policies. For instance, existing social policies aimed at preventing or alleviating situations of poverty and social exclusion should consider (non-)transition risks. This alone can then lead to a wide variety of new measures: ensuring safe working conditions during heatwaves, developing training programs and addressing income loss in economic sectors in case of shifts and shocks, guaranteeing the rights to food or water through instruments such as food, social security or fair water pricing, etc.

To develop these measures and policies, one should, however, have a clear vision of transition risks. This is why a scoreboard made of questions and criteria for socioecological transitions is also needed to help decision-makers to identify and assess these risks when developing, implementing, and evaluating their measures and policies. This scoreboard can be used both as an initial checklist or once the measure is implemented. The questions and criteria are organized by principle of justice (distributive, procedural, recognition and global justice) and aim at helping decision-makers to consider the social-environmental nexus that might otherwise be disregarded.

Next steps?

This knowledge transfer note lays the conceptual framework that translates the idea of Just Transition to the Swiss context and defines core concepts. In the next step of this project, this conceptual framework will be presented and debated with Swiss stakeholders. Implementation methods and instruments, as well as compelling narratives will also be developed. The framework will then be tested and adapted to specific processes through the development of two prototypes or pilot projects in Switzerland.

The project team is available to support and accompany any attempt to implement Just Transition measures and policies in Switzerland. Please, feel free to contact us for more information.

About

About the project

JT - pour une Transition Juste en Suisse/ Für einen gerechten Strukturwandel in der Schweiz is a three-year project (2024-2027) funded by the Mercator Stiftung Schweiz. The project aims at paving the way for Just Transition in Switzerland, and to embed justice into socioecological transition processes, rendering them fairer and more broadly accepted.

This note was developed during the first phase of the project. A second phase will mobilize a large variety of actors for a Just Transition in Switzerland. In the third phase, Just Transition prototypes will be developed together with partners.

About us

Durabilitas is a non-profit Think & Do Tank committed to the socioecological transformation of Switzerland. The organization focuses on the topics of just transition, circular economy and soil health.

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