

## 2. Using the SDGs to solve the just transition Rubik's Cube

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### Introduction

Imagine a Rubik's Cube. All of its colours are messy and muddled. You play around with it and manage to make one of the 6 sides yellow, but the rest remains shuffled. Have you solved the Rubik's Cube?

The answer of course is no. In order to solve a Rubik's Cube you must solve all sides simultaneously. This is what makes the challenge so difficult.

It is the same with sustainable development.<sup>1</sup> Efforts to decarbonise (i.e. reduce carbon emissions) without paying due regard to societal and ecological impacts presents an unequal, 'unsolved' approach to development, resulting in an unjust transition to a greener economy.

### An 'urgency dilemma'

Ireland, like most countries, finds itself in an 'urgency dilemma'. Average temperatures have increased by approximately 1.1°C since before the Industrial Revolution, while the overarching goals of the legally binding Paris Agreement stipulate that the global community should hold "the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels" and pursue efforts "to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels." Meeting this ambition is looking increasingly unlikely with every broken temperature record.<sup>2</sup>

Ireland boasts the unsavoury accolade of having the second highest greenhouse gas emissions per person in the EU (EPA, 2023). Nevertheless, the internationally ground breaking climate law - the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021 - legally compels the Irish government to reduce

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<sup>1</sup> This analogy is borrowed from Timothée Parrique (2023).

<sup>2</sup> See 'July 2023 sees multiple global temperature records broken (2023)' from the Copernicus Institute. Available at: <https://climate.copernicus.eu/july-2023-sees-multiple-global-temperature-records-broken#:~:text=The%20month%20started%20with%20the,hottest%2029%20days%20on%20record.>

Ireland's 2018 baseline of greenhouse gas emissions by 51% by 2030, and to reach net zero emissions by 2050. This herculean task is underpinned by three carbon budgets that have been set for 2021-2025, 2026-2030 and 2031-2035, each of which contain sectoral emissions ceilings (SECs) for various parts of the economy and aim to set Ireland on a pathway to climate neutrality by 2050. In its Annual Review 2023, the Climate Change Advisory Council says that, "at the current rate of policy implementation", Ireland will miss its targets for both the 2021-2025 and 2026-2030 carbon budget periods "unless urgent action is taken immediately and emissions begin to fall much more rapidly". We have already eaten the lion's share of the 2021-2025 budget and any extra emissions for this period will be carried over to the next budget, making the emissions reduction for that period even more challenging.

It is evident that drastic changes must be made, but significant effort will be required to ensure that the political decisions to drive the climate transition account for the particular challenges some sections of society, such as those with disabilities, will face as part of this inevitable process.

The urgency of the situation is clear, but the dilemma is this: how to square the circle of reducing greenhouse gas emissions at an unprecedented scale and speed, while also ensuring that the distributional effects of this transition don't cause harm to those least able to bear it? This is the overarching challenge of our time and one which, if we don't get right, will have enormous and far-reaching consequences.

This paper explores the political economy of the just transition in Ireland and offers the Sustainable Development Goals as a useful framework for ensuring that nobody is left behind as we make the transition to a greener economy.

## **Sustainable development and just transition: Two branches of the same root**

### ***Just Transition***

A transition has been defined as a "radical shift in the provision of services such as energy, transport, food or sanitation" (Newell and Simms, 2020, p. 2). This is supported by the IPCC (2018, p. 42),

*"While transitions are underway in various countries, limiting warming to 1.5°C will require a greater scale and pace of change to transform energy, land, urban and industrial systems globally...There is an urgent need for deeper and more rapid transitions to limit warming to 1.5°C. Such transitions have been observed*

*in the past within specific sectors and technologies. But the geographical and economic scales at which the required rates of change in the energy, land, urban, infrastructure and industrial systems would now need to take place, are larger and have no documented historic precedent.”*

Geels (2005) notes how the term ‘socio-technical transition’ refers to deep structural changes in systems involving long-term and complex reconfigurations of policy and infrastructure landscapes. Some academics say that the term transition does not adequately capture the scale of what is required. Leach et al. (2020) claim that what is needed is in fact a *transformation* rather than a transition, as a fundamental, structural, systemic change is needed rather than simply a linear change from one state to another.

According to the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, a ‘just’ transition is an integrated approach to sustainable development which brings together social progress, environmental protection and economic success into a framework of democratic governance (UNECE, 2023). One of the earliest formulations of the concept was developed in the 1980s by the US trade union movement in response to regulations to prevent air and water pollution which resulted in the closure of offending industries (Newell and Mulvaney, 2018). The International Trade Union Confederation’s (ITUC) 2017 definition includes protecting jobs in vulnerable industries in cases where those jobs would be offshored in a process of globalisation, or in situations where the organisation in question has not adequately prepared for the transition to a greener economy resulting in job losses that otherwise would not have been required.

The offending industries above, which in their closure resulted in the loss of numerous jobs, were also the industries that spurred a global examination of how to reconcile the tension between economic growth and environmental degradation. In other words, how to continue to develop for the long-term without incurring environmental harm that would hinder human and economic progress.

### ***Sustainable Development***

The term ‘sustainable development’ was first defined in the seminal ‘Our Common Future’ Report of 1987 as:

*“Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Brundtland, 1987).*

More commonly known as the Brundtland Report<sup>3</sup>, it was the outcome document from the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) which had been established in 1983 and tasked with developing an approach to development that could reconcile global development with a reduction in environmental harm. Three contextual situations led to the establishment of the WCED: severe environmental disasters in the 1970s and 1980s; the acceleration of an increasing liberal<sup>4</sup> approach to the economy which prioritised deregulation and the exploitation of natural resources for the purposes of economic growth; and stark levels of poverty around the world, in particular in the Global South. Today, over 35 years later, we are tasked with the same challenge. How do we meet the needs of all without transgressing the Earth's planetary boundaries?<sup>5</sup>

In 1992, five years after the Brundtland Report was published, the world saw the first United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) or 'Earth Summit' take place in Rio de Janeiro. At this event the first ever agenda for Environment and Development, known as Agenda 21, was adopted which required countries to draw up a national strategy of sustainable development. The summit also led to the establishment of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development.

Ten years later, in 2002, the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg led to more governmental commitments and helped extend the concept's reach into the areas of business, local government and civil society.

Yet another ten years later, in 2012, the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (also known as Rio+20) was held as a 20-year follow up to the 1992 Rio Summit. At the Rio+20 Conference, a resolution known as 'The Future We Want' was reached by member states. Among the key themes agreed on were poverty eradication, energy, water and sanitation, health, and

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<sup>3</sup> After its Chairperson, Gro Harlem Brundtland who would go on to become Prime Minister of Norway.

<sup>4</sup> Neoliberalism: A political-economic approach or philosophy that prioritises free trade, deregulation of industry, free market competition, a state with a relatively smaller role in managing the economy and meeting public needs when compared to other political-economic approaches, and reduced welfare. See Neoliberalism exposed by Dr. Rory Hearne <https://www.tasc.ie/blog/2016/06/15/neoliberalism-exposed/>

<sup>5</sup> The planetary boundaries concept presents a set of nine planetary boundaries within which humanity can continue to develop and thrive for generations to come (Rockström et.al. 2009).

human settlement. It was at this Conference that the idea of a set of sustainable development goals that would apply to all countries was first raised.

## **The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**

In 2013, the UN General Assembly Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals was established to identify specific global goals for the period 2015-2030, and in 2014 the President of the UN General Assembly, appointed Ireland's UN Ambassador in New York, David Donoghue, and his Kenyan counterpart, Machiara Kamau, to lead negotiations between world governments on this new set of goals. These goals were agreed in September 2015 and adopted by 193 UN member states.

A set of 17 interconnected 'global' goals, they seek to holistically address complex problems in a coherent manner via a process of 'Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development' (PCSD). The 17 SDGs and their underlying targets and indicators<sup>6</sup> constitute the driving force behind Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2015), the follow-on agreement post Agenda 21. Agenda 2030 is grounded in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and international human rights treaties, drawing particular attention to the importance of empowering women and vulnerable groups such as children, young people, persons with disabilities, older persons, refugees, internally displaced persons and migrants.

## **Leaving no one behind: The Political Economy of the Just Transition**

The 'how' of transition matters greatly to whether it succeeds (Graeber, podcast, 8:21). Ignoring where the socio-economic burden of transition falls risks hindering the entire project of transition. Decarbonisation will only be truly sustainable in the long run if the socio-economic dimension is adequately appreciated, as actors who feel unfairly affected are likely to revolt if the burden of adjustment is perceived as unfair. There is no greater example of this than that of the 'Gilets Jaunes' in France, which powerfully demonstrated that climate policy should not be pursued by governments without consideration for the distributional impacts of these policies. A just transition influences public support for renewable energy projects and climate change policies and, if absent, tends to undermine trust in the relevant industries and government as a whole (Banerjee and Schuitema, 2022).

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<sup>6</sup> <https://sdg.humanrights.dk/en/goals-and-targets>

However, discussions around making a transition to sustainability can sometimes appear to be devoid of questions of social power and distribution (Newell et al., 2020), ignoring the aforementioned groups highlighted by the SDGs. The just transition will have to centrally address the key political economy questions of ‘who wins, who loses, how and why’ as they relate to the existing distribution of energy, who lives with the side effects of its sites of extraction, production and generation, and who will bear the social costs of decarbonising energy sources and economies (Newell et al., 2011).

This is bolstered by Dr. Mary Murphy who in her 2022 book, ‘Creating an Ecosocial Welfare Future’ claimed that “the wider social consequences of poverty and inequality are less considered in Ireland [in contrast to the concerns of the labour movement] particularly from a gendered and intersectional perspective or from the perspective of those most vulnerable and already left behind” and the National Economic and Social Council which describes transition as a process “aiming to leave nobody behind. Those most impacted, or most vulnerable, must be supported to embrace the transformation” (NESC, 2020, as cited in Murphy, 2022).

To leave no one behind (LNOB) is the central, transformative promise of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. LNOB not only entails reaching the poorest of the poor, but requires combating discrimination and rising inequalities within and amongst countries, as well as addressing the root causes of inequality and injustice. The LNOB principle compels a focus on the impact of multiple and intersecting inequalities.<sup>7</sup> It highlights that the barriers people face in accessing services, resources and equal opportunities are not simply accidents of fate or a lack of availability of resources, but rather are the result of discriminatory laws, policies and social practices that leave particular groups of people further and further behind.

## **Procedural justice: ‘Nothing about us without us’**

By neglecting to seek consensus on how a just transition can be achieved in practice, strong negative emotions and distrust among those who are affected are likely to emerge. In turn, this may result in a sub-optimal just transition process, which may stall or even reverse the energy transition locally and therefore globally.

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<sup>7</sup> Intersectionality: the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender as they apply to a given individual or group, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage (Oxford).

An approach to just transition informed by the SDGs could be described as an approach to reconciling development and environment that fully includes those at risk of being ‘left behind’, summed up in the phrase, ‘Nothing about us without us’. This slogan captures the idea that no policy should be decided without the full and direct participation of members of the group(s) affected by that policy (Charlton, 1998), in other words, reflecting the concept of procedural justice. This approach states that in order for the ecological transition to be ‘just’, there must be a process for enabling vulnerable groups, workers and communities to formally participate in the decisions that affect them, all the while acknowledging that participation in such processes may often be new and challenging for them (Banerjee and Schuitema, 2022).

Public participation and deliberation around questions of energy governance has traditionally been very weak, and even when public participation is encouraged, it often serves more to legitimate preordained decisions than to involve stakeholders in shaping outcomes. For example, in many cases consultation input is sought on a limited range of policy choices which are based on models and forecasts, the assumptions of which are not open to scrutiny and the parameters of which are not open to change. Therefore procedural justice is critical to a just transition as decisions to allocate, use and consume energy in particular ways for particular purposes are mostly made out of the public eye (Newell and Mulvaney, 2018). The SDGs, with their focus on leaving no one behind, explicitly accounts for the importance of procedural justice.

### **Distributive justice: Who should bear the burden?**

Transitions are just as much about the decline of incumbent industries as about the rise of new ones (Fouquet, 2016, p. 9) and so there is no doubt that the transition will result in inconvenience at the very least to some sectors and groups. According to Oisín Coghlan, Chief Executive of Friends of the Earth,

*“Because of where we’re starting from [on climate action], there is no smooth path, and if we’re going to stop it [climate breakdown] from being destructive, it’s going to involve inconvenience” (2023).*

The question then arises, who should bear the burden of inconvenience? This is a question of distributive justice, the perceived justice of the distribution of costs and benefits inherent in any transition (Banerjee and Schuitema, 2022). A just transition process based on distributive justice would aim to prevent an inequitable or unequal distribution of harms and benefits across groups in society (McCauley and Heffron, 2018).

In order to secure a truly just transition, policy measures must be based on the needs of those affected and vulnerable, not the lobbying power of vested interests. In practice however, decisions regarding who bears the burden of adjustment are intensely political. For example, Irish Travellers (an ethnic minority) experience significant levels of energy poverty, and are largely still dependent on the burning of fossil fuels. However, Traveller families in trailers are excluded from access to retrofitting grants, and current policies and structures make it difficult for Travellers and Roma to switch to using low-emission mobility.

Another group disproportionately affected by the existence of certain policies or lack thereof are older people. It is estimated that more than 300,000 poorly insulated homes (60% of all homes with Building Energy Rating (BER) of E, F or G) are occupied by older persons, making them especially at risk of fuel poverty, and more than half of an estimated 586,000 older person households have low home insulation (Age Action, 2022). Yet even these two groups - Travellers and older people - are clearly two of the most negatively impacted by a dependence on fossil fuels, the aviation industry continues to receive an excise exemption (government subsidy<sup>8</sup>) costing the state €273 million in 2021 (CSO, 2023).

A transition can only be just and fair if it can ensure social justice for the vulnerable groups in society (Heffron and McCauley, 2018). This is what the SDGs can offer given their focus on leaving no one behind.

## Restorative justice

Bord na Móna, a Irish company established in the 1940s to industrially harvest peat, is required to exit its traditional peat-based businesses in the next 5-10 years, and they have already begun proceedings to transition. Affected workers, many of whom had worked their entire careers in the company, were ostensibly offered retraining in order to soften the blow of redundancy. However, despite the workers identifying various areas in which they lacked skills or needed support, these areas were not actually included in the training programmes eventually offered. This is an example of restorative injustice in practice.

Restorative justice implies rehabilitating those affected by an industry's end of operations. There will be situations in which job losses will simply be unavoidable, and in these cases adequate support for the affected people and sectors should be provided via compensation and retraining (ITUC, 2017).

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<sup>8</sup> A fossil fuel subsidy is any subsidy that directly incentivises or supports an increase in these activities.



However the new roles cannot just be any roles - they must constitute ‘decent’ work, conceptualised as paying a living wage, providing decent working conditions, being accessible to those with a range of skills and offering clear career progression opportunities (Bird and Lawton, 2009). It is crucial that the retraining opportunities are appropriate to the individuals, even if this is challenging to achieve in practice (Bannerjee and Schuitema, 2022).

Many workers whose jobs were lost in Bord na Móna perceived a lack of effort to integrate them into their communities after the job losses (ibid.). Simultaneously, many interviewees felt that, as they themselves were losing their jobs, energy produced from renewables was on the rise locally but created no space for them as the bulk of the jobs were created abroad. One interviewer even called this process “globalisation on a local scale” (ibid., p. 5), highlighting that there was a dearth of jobs in local wind farms since the bulk of manufacturing was taking place in Germany.

## **Offshoring injustice? Sustainable development, from local to global.**

The SDGs are a set of *global* goals and the aim is that they are achieved everywhere. If Ireland manages to transition to a sustainable economy within its national border while leaving no person in Ireland behind, but does so at the expense of people and nature elsewhere, can this be called a just transition?

This question problematizes Ireland’s approach to development more broadly, as an attempt to achieve a just transition within Ireland via a strategy of growth of all industries, regardless of their impact on sustainable development more broadly, offshores an *unjust* transition and threatens the achievement SDGs in other countries which we depend on for resources.

Take for example the policy goal of achieving one million EVs (electric vehicles) on our roads by 2030. This may indeed (partly) address one element of sustainability - greenhouse gas emissions produced by burning fossil fuels - however when the true concept of sustainability is appreciated which takes into account the full ecological footprint of this policy goal (material consumption and production), then it’s clear that a goal to constantly grow the number of EVs will have profound ecological and societal impacts on the areas of the world where raw materials for EV batteries etc. are sourced. A recent study by New York University and the Geneva Center for Business and Human Rights finds that major auto, battery and electronics manufacturers are doing too little to ensure the cobalt they’re using doesn’t involve child labour at Congo’s numerous

unsafe “artisanal” mines (Baumann-Pauly, 2023). It’s clear that the effort to continue growing the number of eclectic vehicles on our roads without recourse to the impacts of this approach abroad could result in environmental justice infringements around the world.

Critical scholarship on the spatial fixes<sup>9</sup> that are employed to avoid crises in the core of the global economy by sourcing solutions elsewhere or into the future (through carbon trading, biodiversity offsets, water grabs and the like) is helpful in understanding these dynamics (Harvey, 2003). An effort to transition via ‘spatial fixing’ abroad represents an effort by states to avoid domestic restructuring (Newell, 2020b). Transition *within* countries may be characterised by a pattern of exploitation and dispossession *in other countries* unless a commitment to a globally just transition is prioritised.

To remain in line with Agenda 2030 and the principles of sustainable development, developing a just transition should consider everyone within the entire supply chain, with a special focus on respecting human rights. An example of where this did not take place can be found in the manufacture of semiconductors needed for solar photovoltaic panels, which in the 1970s and 1980s produced vast amounts of toxic waste sites which disproportionately impacted immigrant women workers (Newell and Mulvaney, 2018). Without consideration for human rights and an appreciation of all elements of sustainable development, existing inequalities risk being exacerbated and already vulnerable groups risk being exploited even further.

## Addressing the ‘economic roots’ of an unjust transition

In order for new sources to become dominant, the service it provides has to be cheaper than the incumbent energy source, as well as offer enhanced characteristics such as ease of use, exclusivity, cleanliness, status etc. (Fouquet, 2010). This presents a dilemma for transitioning within our dominant economic system which demands that non-State enterprises require a significant surplus value, i.e., profit, in order to remain viable.

Investing in new, less ecologically intensive and harmful pathways may be less profitable or convenient (at least in the short term) than the alternatives with which they are competing, making those endeavours potentially less appealing to investors. Indeed, according to McKinsey, between now and 2050, almost half

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<sup>9</sup> The “spatial fix” theory explains the process of geographical expansion and development as a solution to the crisis of capital over-accumulation (Harvey, 2003).

the investment necessary for decarbonisation will not meet standard investment criteria relating to security, rate of return etc. (2021). In the period to 2030, less than 40 per cent of renewable technologies will be justifiable on commercial grounds. In industry and buildings, two sectors where emissions are hard to abate, a tiny fraction of the necessary investment will generate an adequate profit (ibid., as cited in Tooze, 2021).

According to Leach, Newell and Scoones (2015), we “need to get to the economic roots” of the climate crisis in order to address it in a just way. This will require changing what are seen as legitimate pathways to making money, as we simply can no longer have an economy that rewards damaging the environment. The State must steer investments to maximise the impact on jobs, create quality jobs with access to social protection, manage risk and protect vulnerable populations to make the energy transition ‘just’ for all, both in Ireland and abroad. This will require significant state support and investment, as it is likely that the drive for profit will prevent private spending happening in the right areas to enable decarbonisation at the speed and scale required.

### **National integrity: Matching words to actions**

Ireland continues to leave vast swathes of its population behind, let alone its impacts on those in other countries. Over a third of Irish households are threatened by energy poverty despite attempts from the government to tackle this through an Energy Poverty Action Plan. Initiatives to retrofit homes risk leaving some people further behind, as the upfront costs make it inaccessible to many. The free energy upgrade scheme designed to target households in energy poverty is not accessible to tenants in the private rental sector. As mentioned earlier, two of the most vulnerable groups in Irish society - Travellers and older people - are being left behind when it comes to retrofitting. There are many more people in Ireland being left behind and at risk of being left behind, for example persons with disabilities, people living in direct provision, those with long-term health issues, one-parent families, homeless people (especially children), those in poverty, refugees and asylum seekers. Reaching a 51% reduction of 2018 levels GHG emissions by 2030 will require serious change, and who bears the burden is ultimately a political question.

Ireland in September 2023 recommitted to the Sustainable Development Goals, with Taoiseach Leo Varadkar stating that he “commits to bold, accelerated, just and transformative actions...anchored in international solidarity and effective

cooperation, to create a sustainable future for all.”<sup>10</sup> However, the declaration that a transition is ‘just’ is not tantamount to fact (Banerjee and Schuitema, 2022). The Just Transition Commission has been delayed until 2024, despite the most recent Climate Action Plan (2023) including a commitment to establish a commission with a target timeline of the middle of 2023. It is evident that a coherent approach to sustainable development remains lacking, and Ireland’s grand words are not yet matched by equally grand actions.

According to the head of the Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC) in October 2023, “too much discussion around climate and biodiversity relies on slogans with not enough examination of what businesses actually need to do... just transition is another slogan. The hard yards are actually identifying what needs to be done.” The same criticism could be levelled at the Irish government who, as aforementioned, endeavoured to deliver a just transition for the Bord na Móna workers while ignoring the crucial tenets of procedural and restorative justice.

## Conclusion

*“Transition is inevitable; justice is not”*

*(Climate Justice Alliance, 2023).*

Not all paths to a safer environment are just. It is possible to transition sufficiently fast but to do so in an unjust way (Scoones et al., 2015). The Irish government has a choice; rapid but socially regressive transition involving the reorganisation of the economy and social contracts, or rapid lock-in of climate breakdown along unsustainable lines (Newell and Simms, 2020). Concrete, sufficient, sustained action on the part of the State is required in order to ensure distributive, procedural and restorative justice in the face of intensifying climate breakdown.

The SDGs can be the tool by which we make the just transition politically viable; for ensuring climate action is just. It’s time for politicians to pick them up from the shelf, dust them off and finally put them to their intended use in Ireland, for local impact, and global, so that we can finally solve the Rubik’s Cube of sustainable development, and transition in a just way.

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<sup>10</sup> [https://estatemements.unmeetings.org/estatemements/10.0010/20230918090000000/m2I3qkeWGcpM/Dr0poy2oUqoM\\_en.pdf](https://estatemements.unmeetings.org/estatemements/10.0010/20230918090000000/m2I3qkeWGcpM/Dr0poy2oUqoM_en.pdf)

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