

Broadening
engagement with
just transition:
Opportunities and
challenges



About Climate Outreach

Climate Outreach is a team of social scientists and communication specialists working to widen and deepen public engagement with climate change. Through our research, practical guides and consultancy services, our charity helps organisations communicate about climate change in ways that resonate with the values of their audiences. We have 15 years experience working with a wide range of international partners including central, regional and local governments, international bodies, academic institutions, charities, businesses, faith organisations and youth groups.

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Cover photo: Floorhands working on a drilling rig. Photo by [Mikael Kjellstrom](#) (used with permission).

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Executive Summary

The concept of a ‘just transition’—where communities affected by the move to a low-carbon economy are supported through a managed process of change, with rights and livelihoods protected—has become more prominent in recent years. But it is rarely used outside the political and technical literature, or by the people who are likely to be most closely affected.

This short report is aimed at civil society representatives, policymakers and academics who want to engage in conversation about just transition with people working in industries that are most likely to be affected by the transition to a low-carbon economy, as well as the communities they support.

Recommendations

POLITICAL SPECTRUM

While traditional just transition language will appeal to some workers, including union members, many others will hold less straightforwardly ‘left’ political values. For this reason it is important to broaden the appeal of messaging across the political spectrum.

PRACTICALITIES

In Climate Outreach’s previous work with affected communities, respondents understood that the transition to a low-carbon economy will not be easy, and responded well to messaging that acknowledged that. The idea of just transition prompts negative reactions amongst some union representatives, who see it as a conversation about job losses, with little realistic chance of recompense. In order to be successful, dialogue has to be grounded in a practical and feasible plan, and present a response to the audience’s legitimate concerns.

FAIRNESS

In previous testing, the imagery and language of ‘justice’ has not resonated well across the political spectrum with centre-right audiences, suggesting that ‘just transition’ may prompt the same response. The subtly different framing of ‘fairness’ may work better with people who hold these values. Fairness is about doing right by everyone involved; justice, by contrast, may imply wrongdoing in the past that must be atoned for.

IDENTITY

People’s sense of identity is often closely bound up with the work they do. Extractive industries like coal mining are often, for example, closely associated with pride and a strong sense of place. Demonstrating gratitude and respect for the contribution of fossil fuels can create a strong basis for mutual discussion in the future – with renewables and natural resources as an extension of that pride.

AVOID BLAME

When people feel criticised and devalued, they are much less likely to engage. Approaching a conversation without a sense of blame is an important part of a productive dialogue.

TRUST

Many communities are turned off by the imagery and stereotypes associated with environmentalism, and will speak more openly with trusted members of their own community. In successful communications, trust between all parties is essential.

FUTURE WORK

In order to develop the concepts and suggestions in this report further, a series of narratives and visual stories should be developed, capturing the different elements of just transition and testing them with different audiences.

Background

The idea of just transition first emerged in the 1970s, when US union leader Tony Mazzocchi¹ proposed that people whose jobs were threatened by nuclear disarmament should be compensated for the loss. In the 1990s Mazzocchi broadened the argument to refer to workers in environmentally damaging jobs, whose employment is affected by new policies aiming to reduce pollution.²

The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) now defines just transition as reducing emissions while ensuring “decent work, social inclusion and poverty eradication.”³ Its basic elements, according to ITUC, include public and private investment to create green jobs, advance planning to compensate for the negative impacts of climate policies and opportunities for retraining for people whose jobs are affected.⁴

A wide range of groups – including environmental NGOs, labour justice groups and policymakers – have since adopted the idea and it is codified in international climate policy. The preamble to the 2015 Paris Agreement requires the international community to take into account “the imperatives of a just transition of the workforce and the creation of decent work and quality jobs”⁵ and the European Commission aims to bring more focus on “social fairness” in tackling climate change.⁶

Just transition is an important concept; a tool for facilitating dialogue between different stakeholders and challenging the discourse of ‘jobs versus climate.’ As one report puts it, it has the potential to be “at the heart of a powerful narrative of hope, tolerance and justice; a narrative that is grounded in people’s actual lived experiences and aspires to guide collective action while simultaneously giving rise to tangible alternatives.”⁷

It is also important from a pragmatic perspective. Recent events – including the Gilets Jaunes protest against a government proposal to raise fuel prices in France⁸ and President Trump’s championing of jobs in the US coal industry as a reason for pulling out of the Paris climate change agreement⁹ – demonstrate the need to seek social consent for the low-carbon transition, or risk it being undermined.

The term itself, however, is little used outside the policy and technical literature, and hardly used at all in the global South, where it may conflict with other strong cultural narratives – for example the need for poorer countries to develop and use more energy.¹⁰ In countries where the idea is more current, only a limited amount of research has been carried out exploring what the idea of just transition means to the communities it is meant to help.

Yet the idea of ‘social dialogue’¹¹ between governments, businesses, trade unions and civil society is at the core of just transition, according to many unions.¹² Social dialogue means engaging in discussions about what transition means for people’s lives and sense of identity; for jobs, communities and place.¹³ If just transition is to move from pages of policy reports into reality, then attention needs to be paid to how to frame the dialogue between advocates of a low-carbon economy, and those who are likely to be most fundamentally affected.

About this report

This short report is aimed at civil society representatives, policymakers and academics who want to engage in dialogue about just transition with people working in industries that are most likely to be affected by the transition to a low-carbon economy. This may include people working in heavy industry, farming and other energy-intensive industries, as well as the communities they support. In an area where there is limited research, it offers a perspective on the way forward and makes recommendations for narratives that could be tested in the future.

The report is based on a rapid review of literature on this topic, existing Climate Outreach knowledge on climate communications and experience of engaging with different communities on this topic. Data is particularly drawn from reports exploring union members' attitudes to climate change (four focus groups in 2010), sustainable narratives in Wales (16 focus groups in 2012), narratives of energy transition in Alberta, Canada (55 workshops, including seven with oil workers in 2017), interviews with UK union leaders about just transition (2019), and a comparison of 'climate justice' narratives to other climate narratives (online survey as part of wider peer-reviewed paper, 2016).

Many of the principles offered are also likely to be relevant to other occupations and different communities around the UK. Few are likely to be unaffected by a society-wide effort to reduce emissions - and occupations as diverse as athletes, musicians and academics will also go through a process of change.



An oilsands worker inspects the pipeline. Photo by Ian Wilson from [Iron and Earth](#) (used with permission).

Dialogue about just transition with affected communities: reflections and recommendations

1 Security, attachment to place and pragmatism

Values, worldviews and political viewpoints are fundamental to people's identity and play a central role in shaping how people respond to messages about climate change and decarbonisation.¹⁴ People who hold a centre-right political perspective, for example, are strongly drawn to the values of pragmatism, security, continuity and responsibility, and are likely to be put off by the idea of rapid change.¹⁵ Foregrounding the values of affected communities, who may favour this political perspective, is likely to mean taking an approach that respects the values of security, respect for nature, a sense of fairness and the wish for autonomy.¹⁶

Some union leaders accuse environmentalists of failing to recognise how much a person's identity arises from the work they do and the people they work with.¹⁷ In Climate Outreach's research in Alberta, Canada, citizens shared a strong shared sense of community, resilience and independence from government. Perhaps for this reason, management and oil workers were resistant to the core idea associated with just transition that their livelihoods should be secured during the transition.¹⁸

Communications guidance: The imagery and language used in just transition communication needs to draw on the identity of the audience. Work and place play fundamental roles in people's sense of identity, making this even more important in the just transition debate.

2 Honesty about the nature of the transition

The idea of just transition puts unionised workers "on edge" and "leaves a bad taste in their mouths," according to a report from the US-based Labor Network for Sustainability.¹⁹ This is because workers are cynical about the reality of whether there will be any jobs to transition to, and understand it as a conversation about loss of livelihoods - or "just an invitation to a fancy funeral" as one union representative puts it.²⁰

Gopal Dayaneni of the American NGO Movement Generation²¹ criticises the term 'transition' for making the process sound like "a smooth, almost easy process."²² This resonates with Climate Outreach's research with communities in Alberta, where all the groups tested welcomed the phrase "it [the energy transition] will not be easy" as being honest and authentic.²³

This report does not address the question of whether just transition can be understood purely in the light of job creation, or requires a more fundamental challenge to power relations.²⁴ But it is clear that the reality of the solutions offered need to address the audience's legitimate concerns in order for any dialogue to be effective.

Communications guidance: Simplistic, utopian statements about a shift to a world of green jobs are unlikely to go down well with these audiences. In contrast, honesty about the nature of the challenge is likely to be far more effective.

3 Take care with the term 'justice'

The term just transition itself may not resonate with people from affected industries and communities. In previous testing the imagery and language of 'climate justice' – which argued that “the poorest people in the world are the ones who suffer the most from climate change, but do the least to cause it” – was not well received by centre-right audiences.²⁵

Restoration, injustice and the idea that the rich have an obligation to the poor are ideas more commonly associated with a leftwing political perspective.²⁶ The concept of 'fairness', with its connotations of success being rewarded and transgressions punished, in contrast resonated well with centre-right audiences.²⁷

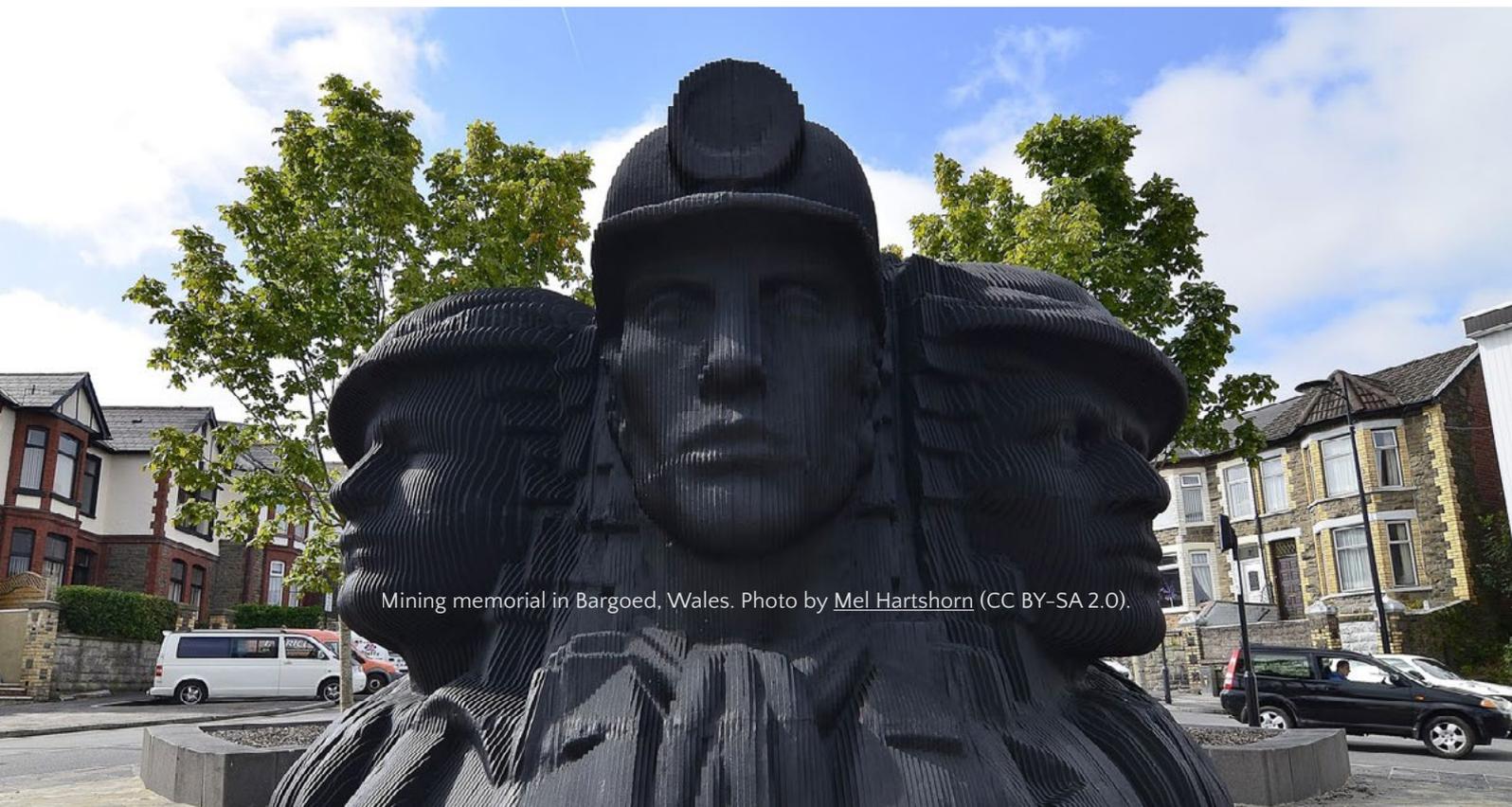
Communications guidance: Consider working around words like 'justice' that may trigger negative reactions. The same meaning can be expressed, for example, with dialogue about 'climate and jobs' or 'fairness', and asking how the changes we now need to make can involve everyone and be led by workers, not politicians and campaigners.

4 Gratitude and respect for the history of fossil fuels

Recognising and respecting the contribution of fossil fuel workers to the culture and the current prosperity of society creates a strong basis for mutual discussion in the future.²⁸ This recognises workers' pride in the hard work and achievements of the people who extracted them, and for the benefits that has brought to society.

In an exploration of sustainable development narratives with different audiences in Wales, Climate Outreach found participants in narrative workshops had a strong connection to, and pride in, the Welsh coal industry – even though the industry had been largely shut down.²⁹ The same attachment to a significant industry was evident in Alberta. It was this sense of shared identity, rather than personal opportunity, that led people to defend the oil industry against criticism.³⁰

Communications guidance: Refer to the fact that workers in extractive industries often work under dirty and dangerous conditions, and have done so for all of our benefit; people are grateful for the benefits and prosperity created by their hard work.



Mining memorial in Bargoed, Wales. Photo by [Mel Hartshorn](#) (CC BY-SA 2.0).

5 Pride in natural resources and renewable power

If you come to my town, where people are rightly proud of the role we played in powering this country through the last century, in dangerous dirty work in the coal mines, you won't find people who want to re-open those mines. But you will find a lot of people who want to see their children and their grandchildren powering us through the next century, just like they powered us through the last...³¹

Lisa Nandy MP, April 2019

NGO communications about renewables expansion often present the 'renewables revolution' as a radical break from a past dominated by 'dirty fossil fuels.' As an alternative to this, renewables and fossil fuels could be placed within an overall frame of 'natural resources', where renewables become an extension of an existing source of identity and pride; a part of wider industrial heritage and identity.³²

In the UK, for example, renewables might be connected to the idea of rebuilding communities who have powered the country in the past, and who have the right to be at the forefront of the changes underway now. They are part of a living and working landscape, which is evolving with time.³³

Communications guidance: Climate Outreach research in Wales found that people responded well to the idea that the country's natural resources built its reputation in the industrial revolution. But Wales is also rich in natural resources that will meet the challenges we face now: water, wind, forests and the sun can supply the energy needs for people far into the future. The money generated by developing these natural resources can be reinvested in local jobs and opportunities.³⁴

6 Avoiding the blame game

When people feel criticised and devalued, they are much less likely to engage. In Alberta, oil workers said they felt 'attacked' and undervalued by environmentalists who were critical of the industry. They therefore tended, through a sense of loyalty, to defend their friends, family and community - even if they were also concerned about climate change.³⁵

Though research is limited, similar dynamics may be present in UK farming communities, who feel blamed for environmental pollution³⁶ while they see themselves as stewards of the land, holding unique and expert knowledge, which is ignored by the wider population.³⁷

In resource economies there is also a strong sense of solidarity and common identity across people connected with extractive industries - for example, mining, forestry, fisheries - meaning that language attacking or defending fossil fuel workers may have a much wider resonance, and political implications.³⁸

Communications guidance: In communications with communities and workers associated with fossil fuels, it is important to avoid messaging that blames the fossil fuel industry, as this is likely to close down the conversation.

7 Working with trusted messengers

Effective climate change communication needs a trusted messenger who shares the values and understands the needs of their audience. Language which is delivered by a trusted peer or opinion former is likely to be far more effective than if it comes from an outsider.³⁹

In addition to this, the stereotype of ‘environmentalists’ has negative connotations for many people, who may see this as a label for a particular kind of wealthy and/or moralising individual.⁴⁰ Climate Outreach’s research encountered this opposition to the iconography and language of environmentalism in both Alberta, Canada and in union members in the UK.⁴¹ This opposition to a perceived ‘green identity’ can lead people to take a strong stance against the idea that an energy transition is necessary or even that climate change exists.

Communications guidance: It is important to identify, nurture and support trusted communicators. These may for example be union leaders, people who work in the frontline of the fossil fuel industry and prominent people within their own communities.

8 Respectful dialogue

It’s no easy task to talk about transition with the workers and communities impacted. However, as the nation transitions to clean energy, it is critical to have these conversations and to be proactive about policies and investments that can help bridge that gap.

Labor Network for Sustainability, 2016⁴²

Just transition will need to be based on open and authentic dialogue and not just a ‘bolt on’ to environmental rhetoric.

It is important therefore to enter into discussions with fossil fuel workers, and communities, that are built on listening and respecting their struggle. Using the right language is only a route to starting a productive dialogue, not the end point.⁴³

Communications guidance: A successful just transition needs to involve people creating change together, rather than having it imposed upon them.

9 A conversation on common ground – with climate change at the core

There is a long-standing debate about whether grounding discussion about energy transition in the climate crisis is a useful way of having the conversation.⁴⁴ Focusing on the tangible co-benefits of reducing emissions – reduced local air pollution or health benefits for example – can speak much more powerfully to the needs of the audience.⁴⁵

Environmentalist messengers are, however, more likely to be trusted if they are seen as authentic and honest.⁴⁶ In the UK, growing public concern about the impacts of the climate crisis and the possibility that we are facing a ‘climate emergency’⁴⁷ means that it is important, and increasingly strategic, to keep climate change as a core part of the conversation about the response.

Communications guidance: Centering a conversation on the social and economic issues that matter most to those who are affected by transition, and whose support is needed, is respectful and likely to be effective. But climate change is a fundamental part of the conversation, and should not be ignored.

10

Include respectful images of fossil fuel workers, as people, in materials and communications.

Climate Outreach's research into the visual language of climate change confirms previous findings that imagery containing people or animals tends to affect the viewer powerfully, and that people respond strongly to photos of one or two individuals and to direct eye contact.⁴⁸

It also identifies the importance of showing real people in climate imagery, rather than using posed photos. Crucially, participants in the research also favoured authentic images over staged photo opportunities.

Communications guidance: The debate around just transition, with its focus on people's lives and work, offers an important opportunity to use respectful and authentic imagery of people who work in fossil fuel industries.



Working on the Stoneham Drilling Rig in Alberta, Canada. Photo by [Mikael Kjellstrom](#) (used with permission).

CASE STUDY 1

Oil workers in Alberta

The province of Alberta, Canada, has the largest deposit of oil sands in the world⁴⁹ and oil and gas production is the single largest sector of the Albertan economy. In Climate Outreach's 2018 research into how Albertans talk and think about climate change, almost all the 500 participants from across Albertan society were connected to the industry in some way, via their own work or that of friends and family.

Connection with the industry has a major influence on people's attitudes to climate change and energy. People involved in the study repeatedly expressed the view that the oil and gas industry – and, by extension, their own lives – were undervalued or under attack. Albertans placed a high value on supporting each other and pulling together, leading them to defend the industry out of a sense of loyalty to their wider community.⁵⁰ It is this sense of shared identity, rather than personal opportunity, that led the Albertans in this study to dismiss climate change and 'side' with the oil industry against environmentalists.

This study was also one of the first to test language specifically on energy transitions. While participants were generally receptive to the concept, the word 'just', with its social justice connotations, was negatively received. Many interviewees also showed a resistance to the idea of government handouts, and saw climate change as an emerging, rather than front-and-centre, challenge.

The study recommends a narrative of 'diversification' rather than 'transition', stressing positive future opportunities instead of moving away from a negative past. It suggests that communicators avoid the language of blame – and instead start from a position of recognition and gratitude in discussing what just transition might mean for these communities who are closely linked to energy-intensive industries.



Oil pipeline workers in Alberta, Canada. Photo by [Jason Woodhead](#) (CC BY-NC-2.0, edited).

CASE STUDY 2

UK Union audiences



Union Banners at Durham Miner's Gala. Photo by [Durham Today](#) (CC BY-NC-2.0, edited).

In early 2019, Climate Outreach provided some insights into the research of the New Economics Foundation, into how to build common ground with UK unions on just transition (New Economics Foundation, forthcoming September 2019).

Unions have championed the idea of just transition over the last two decades – but many union leaders still view it as an ‘environmentalist’ agenda, and there is no evidence that union members are any more aware of the concept than the rest of the population.

All unions see their primary purpose as protecting workers. Successful communications with union leaders are therefore likely to put the needs of workers at the heart of the narrative. The need for workers to have a meaningful voice in industrial change and a sense of control over their futures came through strongly from interviews with union leaders.

Attitudes to just transition can also vary between and within unions. Some unions interpret protecting workers as fighting to protect all jobs today; others may focus more on a transition to widespread employment tomorrow. Unions representing people who are more likely to be negatively affected (for example energy-intensive heavy industry) are understandably more wary of the concept of just transition. Activist audiences may be attracted to messaging about the rights of workers, while the same ideas come across as a sales pitch to ordinary workers.

Positive and active language, focused on the defence and protection of workers’ wellbeing, is likely to work well with union audiences. Language that is practical, pragmatic and realistic is also likely to be effective with this audience.

Next steps

Whilst this report has focused on some of the workers and industries that will likely be most impacted by the move away from fossil fuels, no part of society will remain unaffected. Building a productive dialogue with workers in the industries discussed here can only succeed as part of a broader national conversation about a just transition away from fossil fuels.

Research has shown there is wide public support in the UK for a just energy transition.⁵¹ Ensuring the national conversation builds on this positive foundation requires an understanding of the language and visual vocabulary that captures and communicates those aspects of the transition that people consider to be important. In order to take this research further, the findings in this report would need to be combined with additional interviews and a wider literature review, to develop a series of narratives and images for testing with relevant audiences. These could then be tested using the Climate Outreach Narrative Workshop methodology.⁵²

Research is also needed to understand who the trusted messengers are for communicating just transition messages. For this message the trusted communicators are unlikely to be scientists or advocates, and more likely to be people who share a work-based identity with the audience.



Photo by Antenna on Unsplash

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