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# A Just Transition to a Low Carbon Future in South Africa

Edited by Nqobile Xaba and Saliem Fakir

**A Just Transition to a Low Carbon Future in South Africa**

While it has always been acknowledged that global warming will have a negative impact on all humanity, its disastrous impact on the poor is now better appreciated. Yet, depending on how it is handled, the transition to a low-carbon future can itself further worsen the conditions of life for the very same sections of global society that are marginalised.

It is in this context that the notion of a 'just transition' has arisen. The concept originated in the trade union movement to protect workers' livelihoods and has found broader resonance among forces advocating for common but differentiated responsibility. South Africa is in the midst of consultations and planning for its transition path, made the more urgent also by the COVID-19 pandemic.

This book, *A Just Transition to a Low Carbon Future in South Africa*, reflects on the issue from a variety of perspectives. It underlines the fact that the low carbon transition in South Africa has to grapple with complex historical, social, economic, cultural and political factors.

Authors offer policy recommendations that can be factored into decarbonisation strategies for a just transition in South Africa, drawing on case studies from the African continent and the rest of the world. Practical proposals are made also on interventions required to manage the decarbonisation of electricity generation, particularly in the Mpumalanga province.

The authors caution about the danger of powerful forces seeking to subsume low-carbon efforts into the pursuit of large profits, and climate diplomacy premised on selfish geopolitical interests. They argue that a just transition requires broad partnerships – with government, investors, workers and communities all part of the effort.

The main message is that the transition is possible, but it can only succeed if it is just and handled collaboratively.



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## Preface

There is now global consensus that humanity's impact on the earth's ecosystem is significant, and that climate change is an existential consequence of this for flora and fauna alike . Global discourse on mitigation and adaptation has evolved against the backdrop of growing scientific knowledge and all manner of social and geopolitical contestation .

While it has always been acknowledged that global warming will progressively have a negative impact on all humanity, its disastrous impact on the poor is now better appreciated . Yet, depending on how it is handled, the transition to a low-carbon future can itself further worsen the conditions of life for the very same sections of global society that are marginalised .

Strategies and policies on the transition to a low-carbon political economy have thus evolved from technicist, ecological interventions to a broader, transdisciplinary approach . It is in this context that the notion of a just transition has arisen . From its origins within the trade union movement to protect workers' livelihoods, this concept has found resonance among forces advocating for common but differentiated responsibility .

South Africa is in the midst of such debate, made the more urgent also by the COVID-19 pandemic .

This book, *A Just Transition to a Low Carbon Future in South Africa*, reflects on these issues from a variety of perspectives . It proceeds from the premise that South Africa's economic structure, political economy and broader social relations all come into play in charting the path to a low-carbon society .

Against the backdrop of South Africa's historical path dependency, the authors argue that the country's task resides in more than just

reducing carbon emissions . Rather, South Africa should use this opportunity to build a green minerals-energy complex . Extraction of minerals will continue; and South Africa has endowments that are important for green technologies such as Platinum Group Metals, manganese, cobalt and nickel . Unlike in the past, the country must process a large part of these endowments within the country for domestic and global use . The development of the hydrogen economy, for instance, will require bold strategies and practical actions .

In order to place green industrialisation at the centre of the country's transition, policy-makers should facilitate relevant economic activities across South Africa's primary, secondary and tertiary value chains . This implies an industrial strategy that includes ease of entry for firms, as well as focussed skills development .

The authors caution about the danger of powerful forces seeking to subsume low-carbon efforts to the pursuit of large profits and climate diplomacy premised on selfish geopolitical interests. It is important for working people and developing countries to resist any such tendencies. At the same time, all should eschew the warped logic that current carbon-intensive jobs can be preserved at the expense of humanity's future . A just transition requires broad partnerships - with government, investors, workers and communities all part of the effort .

The authors draw attention to the spatial dimension of the just transition, including local government - given the role of municipalities in the energy system and new regulations in this regard - and complementary continental actions in the context of the African Continental Free Trade Area . Practical proposals are made also on interventions required to manage the decarbonisation of electricity generation, particularly in the Mpumalanga province .

Central to all these initiatives is the responsibility to ensure that transition finance is adequate and appropriate . While the focus on coal-gobbling Eskom and the energy sector is understandable, just transition finance should apply to the whole project of green industrialisation; and it should involve local and international commercial and development finance institutions . Critically, hype should not be allowed to substitute for objective analysis of the structure of funding, and of the conditionalities and costs attached to its various components .

This book underlines the fact that the low carbon transition in South Africa has to grapple with complex historical, social, economic, cultural and political factors. The main message is that the transition to a low-carbon society is possible, but it can only succeed if it is just and handled collaboratively .

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Executive Director