

Introduction

Under the UN climate regime, just transition is best understood as a recognised but still contested organising concept. Its clearest legal anchor remains the preamble to the Paris Agreement, which refers to “the imperatives of a just transition of the workforce and the creation of decent work and quality jobs in accordance with nationally defined development priorities”. At the same time, the term remains open-textured: there is still no agreed definition within the regime, and the language of nationally defined development priorities leaves significant room for different political and developmental readings.

Just transition now operates as a bridging framework linking climate ambition to implementation across multiple workstreams, including mitigation, adaptation, finance, technology transfer and support for developing countries. What began as a largely workforce-centred idea has progressively expanded into a wider discussion about how climate action should be pursued in ways that are equitable, inclusive and development-sensitive. Recent developments in the negotiations, culminating at COP30, show that just transition has moved beyond being a rhetorical commitment and has become an institutional question within the regime itself, centred on how international cooperation, support and governance should be structured in practice ([LRI, LACLIMA, 2026](#)).

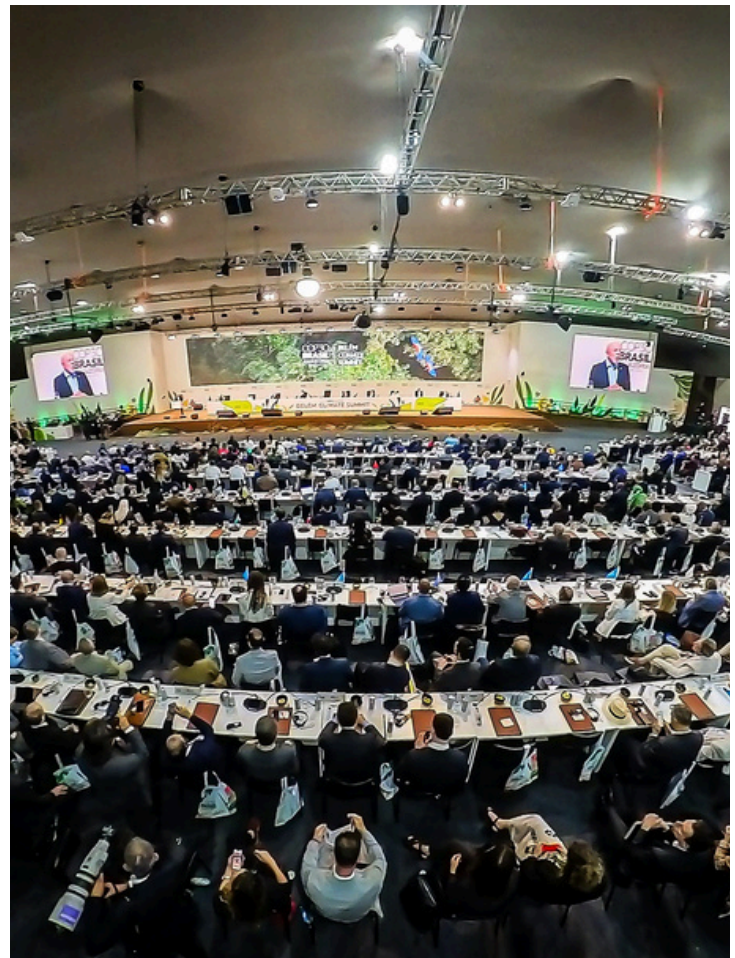
Existing definitions and competing narratives

One of the main difficulties with the just transition is the variety in existing definitions of the concept. For practical reasons, this section will focus only on the definitions that have most influenced the general understanding of the topic.

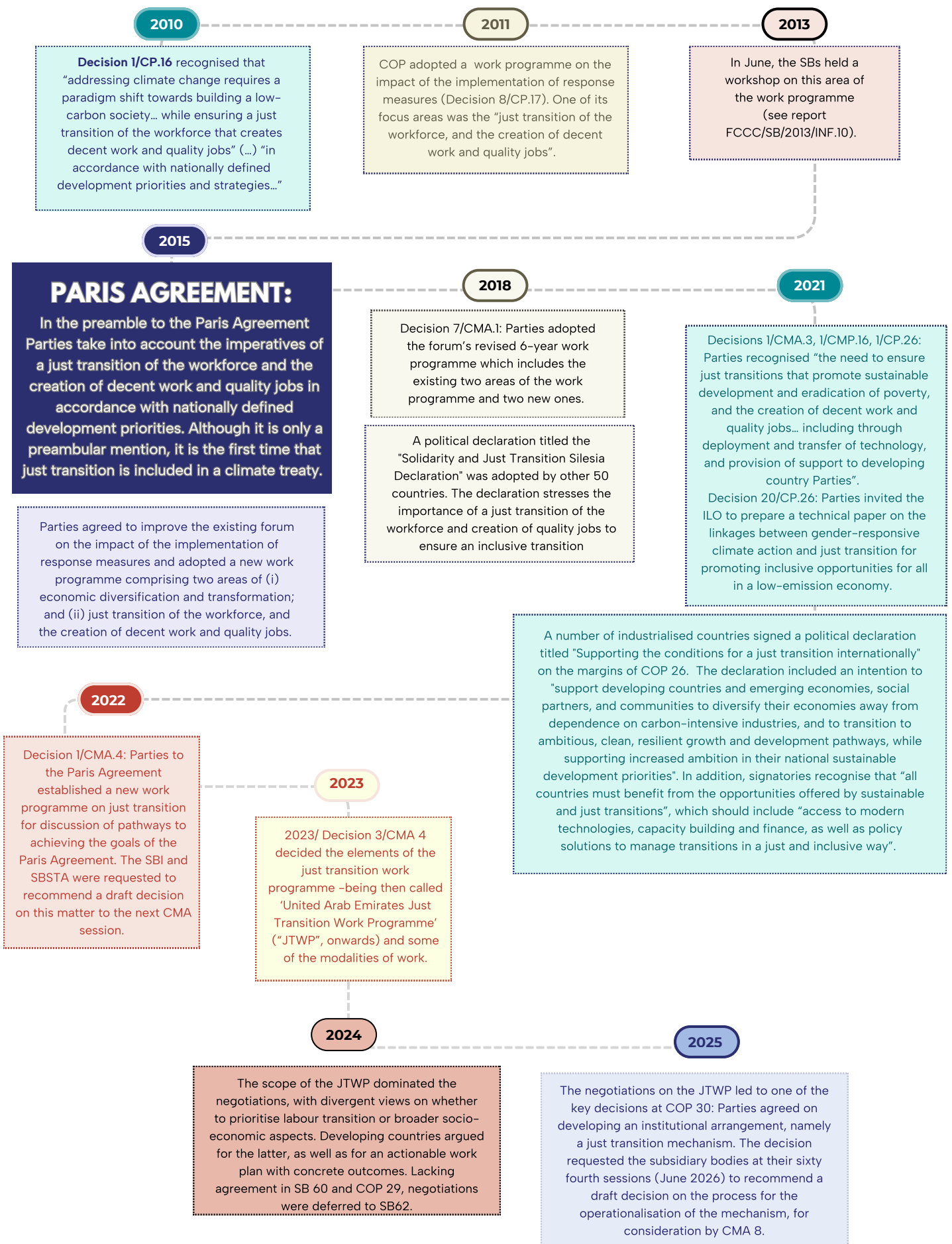
Traditionally, the term 'just transition' is associated with the labour force. In that tradition, the concept means greening the economy in a way that is fair and inclusive, creates decent work, manages disruption, relies on social dialogue and leaves no one behind ([ILO, 2015](#)). In a Technical Paper, the [UNFCCC](#) (2016) framed the transition to an inclusive green economy as one that should maximise economic prosperity, social justice, rights and social protection while minimising harm. Other international institutions, such as [EBRD](#) and the [OECD \(2025\)](#), share this emphasis on jobs, livelihoods and the distributional effects of moving away from carbon-intensive production.

Another set of definitions remains influential. Expanding on the justice element of the concept, [experts](#) suggest that just transitions concern both social and judicial protection of workers, taking into account redistribution of wealth and proposing [reformed institutional arrangements](#) to achieve it. On a similar note, some argue that just transition policies should minimise the relative net costs borne by the most vulnerable groups, while also discounting the importance of the relative costs borne by groups with higher responsibility for environmental damage, taking on a more formal [distributive](#) account than those normally used in the negotiations. Lastly, others approach this concept from a development perspective, considering the impaired relationship between developed and developing countries, where basic access to energy and essential services may be an immediate priority, and thus a matter of just transition. More [evidence](#) finds strong support for frameworks centred on poverty reduction, equality, climate finance and accountability, rather than a narrow focus on energy transition alone.

The IPCC ([AR6, 2024](#)) expands the concept and recognises that just transition entails fairness in energy access and use and social dialogue, among others, and that just transitions may embody the redressing of past harms and perceived injustices.



Just transition in the climate negotiations



The Just Transition Work Programme (JTWP)

The UAE Work Programme on Just Transition Pathways is the central negotiating vehicle on just transition under the Paris Agreement. Established at CMA4 and detailed at CMA5, it is implemented under the guidance of the subsidiary bodies through a joint contact group, accompanied by at least two hybrid dialogues each year and an annual high-level ministerial roundtable. Its seven elements cover: just transition pathways for achieving the goals of the Paris Agreement; pathways including energy, socio-economic and workforce dimensions; opportunities and barriers relating to poverty eradication and sustainable development; approaches to adaptation and resilience; just transition of the workforce through social dialogue, labour rights and social protection; inclusive and participatory approaches; and international cooperation as an enabler of just transition pathways.

Until today, the JTWP has held five dialogues: Bonn, Germany in June 2024 on pathways through NDCs, NAPs and LT-LEDS; Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt in October 2024 on people-centred and equitable pathways, including a breakout discussion on technology transfer; Panama City, Panama in May 2025 on adaptation and climate resilience in the context of just transitions; Addis Abba, Ethiopia in September 2025 on energy and holistic approaches to just transitions based on nationally defined development priorities. The fifth dialogue took place in Yeosu, Republic of Korea, on April 2026, and covered holistic approaches to food security, with a focus on agriculture and oceans.

COP30's final decision recognised 22 key messages emerging from the 2024–2025 dialogues, including the need for whole-of-society and whole-of-economy approaches, the absence of a one-size-fits-all model, respect for human rights, and meaningful participation by workers, communities, Indigenous Peoples and other vulnerable groups. The decision also invited the JTWP to integrate relevant outcomes of the first Global Stocktake ([LRI](#), [LACLIMA](#), 2026).

Just Transition Mechanism (JTM)

The more notable outcome of COP 30 was on the Just Transition Mechanism. What began as a civil society and cross-constituency proposal for a new institutional arrangement under the UNFCCC (the Belem Action Mechanism) was translated into negotiations. Its starting point was that just transition efforts had become fragmented, uneven and often weakly connected to climate goals. To this end, civil society proposed a more coherent architecture built around three core functions: coordination and coherence; knowledge sharing and generation; and action and support. In practical terms, this meant a coordinating entity to map initiatives and identify gaps, an improved JTWP as a knowledge hub, and a component of action and support, capable of providing helpdesk functions, matchmaking, capacity-building, technology support and mobilisation of non-debt-inducing finance, particularly for the Global South ([CAN International](#), 2025).

At COP30, that proposal evolved into a negotiated outcome: whilst the G77 and China pushed for a Just Transition Mechanism, the UK and other developed countries preferred lighter alternatives such as improving existing modalities, mapping initiatives or developing an action plan ([LRI](#), [LACLIMA](#), 2026). The final compromise was to agree to develop a just transition mechanism to enhance international cooperation, technical assistance, capacity-building, and knowledge-sharing, and to enable equitable and inclusive just transitions ([Decision 2/CMA.7](#), 2025), while making clear that it should build on and complement existing workstreams, including the JTWP.

Comparative box – Institutional Arrangements

A wide range of terms can be used to describe formal structures or constituted bodies created to carry out a mandate. Under the UN climate regime, these terms fall under the umbrella expression of “institutional arrangements”, that include mechanisms, platforms, task forces, committees, networks and similar structures. It is crucial to discuss the main similarities characteristics between some of these configurations that are key in upcoming just transition discussions, specially on the mechanism and continuation of the work programme.

Mechanisms: An implementation structure with the mandate to perform defined functions with the support of an operating entity of the UNFCCC (i.e. SBI or SBSTA). It is often used when Parties require an operational outcome, resulting in an actual institution that may have executive and/or technical functions, operating entities, and/or a mandate to mobilise support. For instance, the Warsaw International Mechanism (WIM) for Loss and Damage associated with Climate Change Impacts was established almost two decades ago to enhance support, including finance, to address loss and damage so as to enable countries to undertake actions.

Action Plans: This is a programming configuration that sets specific objectives, priority areas, activities, timelines and responsible actors are established. Instead of a practical outcome, the structure aims to produce a roadmap to execute particular functions. Under this arrangement, the work is often streamlined to operate through existing bodies, the secretariat, Parties and stakeholders. An example is the Belém Gender Action Plan (GAP), which “sets out objectives and activities under five priority areas that aim to advance knowledge and understanding of gender-responsive climate action and its coherent mainstreaming in the implementation of the [Convention...]”

Work Programmes: Under this configuration, there is structured, usually time-bound or permanent process of engagement with a specific agenda item or negotiation topic. The aim is to organise activities that foster discussion and understanding among Parties. Common activities include dialogues, submissions, workshops, reports and review, without yet creating a heavier implementation structure. As explained above, the UAE Work Programme on Just Transition Pathways is the central negotiating vehicle on just transition under the Paris Agreement. Another example of this structure is the Glasgow Work Programme on Action for Climate Empowerment (ACE), adopted at COP26 for a period of 10 years to “[...] set out the scope of and provides the basis for activities related to implementing ACE in accordance with the provisions of the Convention and the Paris Agreement” ([Decision 22/CMA.3](#), 2021).

COP 31: Operationalisation of the Mechanism

COP31 will be the key site for negotiating the mechanism's operationalisation. The Subsidiary Bodies at SB64 were asked to recommend a draft decision on the process for operationalising the mechanism for consideration at CMA8 ([LRI, LACLIMA, 2026](#)). On that basis, the likely negotiations in Turkiye will not concern whether just transition deserves institutional attention in the abstract, but how the new mechanism should actually function. Most recent literature suggest several likely axes of negotiation: the relationship between the mechanism and the JTWP; its governance and the balance between Party ownership and stakeholder participation; the extent to which it should include concrete support tools such as helpdesks, matchmaking and finance facilitation; and the substantive principles that should guide it, including rights, participation, labour, Indigenous Peoples' concerns, finance, technology transfer and broader developmental priorities ([CAN International, 2025](#)). A summary on the views and submissions provided by negotiation groups and relevant stakeholders alike can be found in the [JTM submissions one pager](#).

Just transition and other negotiation streams

Mitigation: Just transition intersects most directly with mitigation because Parties are increasingly expected to embed social and economic transition planning into NDCs and LT-LEDS. For instance, many NDCs and LT-LEDS now refer to just transition, while the first JTWP dialogue itself focused on pathways through NDCs, NAPs and LT-LEDS. It also intersects with adaptation, since just transition is not only about decarbonisation but also about livelihoods, resilience and avoiding maladaptation, especially in climate-vulnerable countries. As stated above, in May 2024, the third dialogue on the JTWP was on "approaches to enhancing adaptation and climate resilience in the context of just transitions".

Finance: With regard to climate finance, the NCQG decision recognised the importance of continued efforts to 'support just transitions across all sectors and thematic areas, and cross-cutting efforts, including transparency, readiness, capacity building and technology development and transfer, in developing country Parties'. COP30 deepened that connection by recognising the need for grant-based, highly concessional and non-debt instruments to support developing countries' just transition pathways.

The BAM proposal goes further still, treating gaps in finance, capacity and technology transfer as a core justification for creating a mechanism ([CAN International, 2025](#)).

GST: Just transition is also related to the Global Stocktake ("GST", onwards). At COP28, it called for transitioning away from fossil fuels in energy systems in a just, orderly and equitable manner, and COP30 invited the JTWP to integrate relevant GST outcomes. The workstream also has an indirect relationship with climate transparency.

Transparency: The Enhanced Transparency Framework potentially provides a further opportunity for Parties to highlight the just transition dimension of action and support in their Biennial Transparency Reports (BTR), the first of which they were required to submit by 31 December 2024. In addition, Parties are encouraged to report on both social and economic impacts of mitigation and adaptation plans, which is likely to increase the amount of available data for countries to implement just transition approaches. By including just transition measures in their reporting, countries can enhance transparency, accountability and fairness in the transition.

Response Measures: There is some significant political tension between just transitions and response measures, especially around trade restrictions and unilateral trade measures. COP30 showed that the controversy on the latter could easily derail progress on just transition, which is why the issue was partially shifted into the Mutirão decision and future trade-and-climate dialogues rather than being fully resolved in the just transition decision itself ([LRI, LACLIMA, 2026](#)).

What's the future of just transition under the UN climate regime?

The immediate picture is one of institutional progress coupled with substantive discussions. COP30 marked a shift from the definitional debate towards implementation architecture by agreeing to develop a just transition mechanism and by recognising the lessons already emerging from the past just transition dialogues. At the same time, some of the hardest political issues remain unresolved: unilateral trade measures remain unresolved; references to transitioning away from fossil fuels remain contentious; debates over critical minerals, financial quality, and the social conditions of implementation will continue. Looking ahead, SB64 and COP31/CMA8 will be decisive, as Parties must negotiate how the mechanism will be operationalised. Also, the UN climate regime will continue to address how just transition relates to other negotiation workstreams, particularly trade, finance, mitigation ambition and implementation support.

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