

Planning and implementing just transitions: opportunities for South-South cooperation

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Key messages

- Just energy transition partnerships represent an innovative form of North-South cooperation that aims to support low-carbon transitions in developing countries while incorporating social justice considerations; however, these partnerships face limitations in financing, local ownership and equity in implementation.
- South-South cooperation offers complementary opportunities for advancing just transitions by fostering peer learning, building context-specific solutions, and sharing technical expertise among countries facing similar socio-economic and governance challenges.
- While just energy transition partnerships often prioritize donor agendas and a techno-economic framing, South-South cooperation can promote more holistic, justice-centred approaches that integrate local development needs such as energy access, job creation and socio-political inclusion.
- The experiences of South Africa and Colombia illustrate the challenges of implementing just transitions; at the same time, there is untapped potential for cooperation between these two countries in areas such as mine closure, green industrialization, institutional coordination, and community benefit-sharing.
- Realizing the full potential of South-South cooperation to aid just transitions will require greater institutional support, inclusive multi-actor engagement and sustained knowledge exchange. Nevertheless, these efforts can help reframe just transitions as a pathway for broader, transformative development aims.

1. Introduction



The concept of a just transition is gaining prominence in both bilateral and multilateral development cooperation as countries seek equitable and inclusive pathways to meet sustainable development and climate goals (OECD, 2024; Pollock, 2022). A just transition aims to ensure that the shift towards low-carbon economies does not leave vulnerable communities behind, and that it instead creates opportunities for social and economic development. Within this context, just energy transition partnerships (JETPs) stand out as an innovative model, with the potential not only to accelerate climate mitigation, but also to tackle broader development challenges.

A solar array is part of the transition strategy for the coal-fired Komati Power Station in Steve Tshwete Local Municipality, Mpumalanga, South Africa. Photo: Jesse Burton



JETPs represent a form of North-South cooperation that – at least in theory – acknowledges the priorities of recipient countries to a greater extent than traditional development-assistance models. These partnerships aim to align international support with national needs and leverage private-sector involvement to scale impact. While these partnerships offer a promising framework, it is still too early to assess their outcomes. Nevertheless, they are only one aspect of the broader cooperation landscape, and one that is not free of criticism. In some respects JETPs have tended to reproduce asymmetrical relationships between “Northern” and “Southern” countries in terms of matters such as debt, local ownership of the transition plans, and prioritization of initiatives (Ha-Duong & Cassen, 2024; Karg et al., 2025; Sweeney, 2024).

At the same time, there is also increasing potential for South-South cooperation to support just transitions in ways that can address gaps and challenges inherent in North-South partnerships. South-South cooperation can offer a platform for developing countries to share knowledge, exchange technical expertise, build capacity, and create joint or complementary solutions that better address local realities. This approach allows countries in similar circumstances to collaborate on innovative practices and projects that align with their socio-economic contexts, offering alternative pathways that can supplement or reinforce the JETP approach.

This brief summarizes some key challenges with the JETP approach and explores opportunities for South-South cooperation in advancing just transitions, using the experiences of South Africa and Colombia as examples. Further, the brief highlights the potential for knowledge exchange and collaborative approaches to drive sustainable and equitable energy transitions in middle- and low-income countries.

2. Just energy transition partnerships: innovations and constraints

JETPs are diplomatic agreements between an international partners group (IPG) of donors and a host country to support that country’s transition away from fossil fuels and towards renewable energy in an equitable way. The first JETP was signed with South Africa in November 2021 to transition away from coal. Since then, three more JETPs have been signed, with Indonesia, Vietnam, and Senegal (see Table 1).

JETPs represent an innovative and promising financing mechanism, as they aim to go beyond addressing only the techno-economic and greenhouse gas emissions aspects of the energy transition to also encompass social issues. By design, these partnerships are intended to be country led, meaning that investment planning is to be guided by the knowledge of local experts who understand their country’s unique circumstances and needs. Some suggest that this approach has raised the profile of justice considerations in energy transition policies, and contributed to building local expertise and institutional capacity to plan and implement just transitions in host countries (Kramer 2022; Simpson, Jacobs, & Gilmour, 2023).

However, JETPs face several challenges (Cassel et al., 2024; Curtin, Healy, & Rambharos, 2024; Simpson, Jacobs, & Gilmour, 2023). There is a significant financing gap. Pledges fall far short of actual investment needs, and a high proportion of loans adds to recipient

countries' debt burdens. Limited grant and concessional funding fails to provide adequate support for socially equitable approaches and essential policy reforms. And countries continue to struggle to attract sufficient private-sector finance to implement their transition agenda, though this can also reflect domestic uncertainties and policy blockages. Further, the partnerships incorporate few measures or limited funding dedicated to ensuring that the energy transition is equitable and inclusive in planning and practice. There are various reasons for this, including the limited commercial returns on “just” elements, the ambiguity of what “just” means in JETPs, and the lack of best practices and case studies to guide project design and implementation.

A persistent challenge with JETPs is the dominance of a technical framing of solutions and the risk of uncritically transferring so-called “best practices” from high-income countries such as Germany. These models often rely on a techno-economic paradigm that emphasizes emissions reductions through specific technologies and market-based mechanisms, with limited consideration for the broader developmental realities of recipient countries. This has been referred to as taking a “socially or ecologically exclusive” approach (Karg et al., 2025). In practice, donors tend to have their own agendas. They set conditions that do not always consider the local circumstances, socio-political contexts, or developmental priorities of the recipient countries. Funding requirements can lead to funding limits, in turn narrowing objectives and excluding topics considered by many actors to be essential for a transition to be just – such as energy access, food and water security, industrialization and job creation.

The implementation of South Africa’s Just Energy Transition Partnership illustrates several key challenges that highlight the gap between ambitious international commitments and realities on the ground. Political resistance – particularly from within the national government – has contributed to hampering progress, with influential actors defending continued coal use, promoting unproven technologies like carbon capture, and advocating long-term gas investments (Strambo et al., 2024). At the same time, social tensions have surfaced, as seen in the job losses and unrest that followed the closure of coal-fired power plants like Komati, exposing weaknesses in planning for employment and economic diversification (Bavier, 2024). A further concern lies in the way resources are allocated and used: there is a risk that funds end up being concentrated in high-level consultancy work or foreign-led diagnostics, rather than being invested into community-based projects, local capacity building and infrastructure, where resources are most urgently needed. Civil society organizations have warned about key concerns: the absence of transparency about which entities are responsible for implementation, what financial intermediaries are involved, and who governs JETP projects (Croset, 2024). One successful element of the South Africa partnership has also been the institutional innovations to address critiques, including exploring new models to enable funding to flow to projects on the ground through matchmaking, business development and project preparation support.

With four JETPs underway, efforts are now concentrated on making these partnerships effective and learning from their implementation, before expanding to new partnerships. Meanwhile, multilateral development banks (MDBs) and development finance institutions (DFIs) are ramping up their involvement. They are working to support JETPs, enhance financing, and provide technical assistance for energy transitions in recipient countries (Simpson, Jacobs, & Gilmour, 2023). Alongside these, there is increasing potential for South-South cooperation in just

Table 1. Just energy transition partnerships

Host Country	Donors/ international partners group	Year signed	Amount (in USD)	Financing target (in USD)	Percentage concessional capital (or includes private- sector investment pledges)	Scope	Identified challenges
South Africa	Initial partners were the EU, France, Germany, the UK and the US. The following joined: the Accelerating Coal Transition (ACT) investment program of the Climate Investment Funds, the African Development Bank, Canada, Denmark, the European Investment Bank, the Netherlands, Spain, Switzerland and the World Bank. The US withdrew in March 2025.	2021	8.5 billion initially; later increased to 12.8 billion, accounting for new pledges and the US withdrawal	98.7 billion, 2023 – 2027	Of the original 8.5 billion (including pledges from the US) ~30% was commercial debt and equity. Commercial debt and equity, export credits, and guarantees account for less than one-third of total pledges of the current partners group (including DFIs and MDBs). However, 92% of allocated funding has been through grants, policy or concessional loans.	Three goals: energy security, just transition and economic growth. Four priority sectors: electricity, new energy vehicles, coal (in Mpumalanga province), and green hydrogen. Two cross-cutting priorities: developing skills and boosting municipal capacity. Additional priorities identified in the 2023 implementation plan include energy efficiency, road-to-rail, and the renewable energy masterplan.	- The closure of several coal-fired power plants (CFPPs) is outlined, but political obstacles and government conflicts of interest may delay progress. - While replacing aging CFPPs with renewables is vital, the plan dedicates minimal funding (0.1%) to renewable manufacturing. The coal region of Mpumalanga province receives some support for workers, communities and economic diversification. Nonetheless, the process 1) excludes communities from decision-making, 2) risks privatization that may burden poorer households, and 3) relies heavily on loans, increasing debt distress. The financing terms of many loans are, however, favorable compared to South Africa's typical borrowing costs. - Concerns remain that the transition will be "socially exclusive" and insufficiently just, despite its ecological framing.
Indonesia	Initial partners were Canada, Denmark, the EU, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Norway, the UK and the US. The US withdrew in March 2025.	2022	20 billion	97.3 billion, 2023 – 2030	Matching private-sector investment pledges	- Four working groups on: 1) technical issues, 2) policies, 3) financing and 4) just transition aspects. A fifth working group on energy efficiency and electrification is envisioned. - Priorities: expanding and improving the grid deployment and network of transmission lines; retiring coal-fired power plants early; expanding renewable energy generation; and undertaking assessments and interventions on just transition to support for workers and communities affected by the transition.	- This JETP allows for the construction of CFPPs with carbon capture, despite high reserve margins – thus undercutting ambitions for early retirement of such plants. - Heavy reliance on fossil fuels risks stranded assets and ongoing subsidies. - A focus on privatization may undermine energy affordability and access, especially in rural areas unattractive for investment. - Large-scale renewables are prioritized, potentially reinforcing socio-ecological disparities. - Although some procedural rights are recognized in national law, overall, the transition excludes social and ecological priorities, likely leaving vulnerable communities behind.
Viet Nam	Initial partners were Canada, Denmark, the EU, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Norway, the UK and the US. The US withdrew in March 2025.	2022	15 billion	134.7 billion, 2023 – 2030	Matching private-sector investment pledges	Priorities include improvement of the regulatory framework for the energy transition; early retirement of coal power generation; development of a renewable energy industry; power transmission; energy storage; energy efficiency; and ensuring a just transition.	- The plans foresee a continued building of CFPPs until 2030, locking in fossil fuel dependency, stranded assets, and subsidies for decades. - The JETP pathway leans towards privatization, creating tension with affordability and shifting risks to the public sector. - Civil society participation is suppressed, making community involvement nearly impossible. - By prioritizing large-scale renewable projects with little attention to inclusivity, Viet Nam's approach remains "socially and ecologically exclusive", endangering equitable energy access (cp. A. Karg et al., 2025 pp.8-9).
Senegal	Partners are Canada, the EU, France, Germany and the UK.	2023	2.7 billion	Information unavailable at the time of publication.	Information unavailable at the time of publication.	Priorities include deploying renewable energy, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and ensuring universal access to affordable electricity.	This JETP had yet to be made public at the time of this publication. Details available at that time suggested that plans were being put forward for an "ecologically exclusive" pathway prioritizing natural gas alongside renewables, both for domestic power generation and for export. Prioritizing exports appears to reflect European interests in alternative gas supplies. - Consultations have been limited, and the focus on privatization risks worsening inequality. - With only 6% of funding provided as grants, Senegal faces a high risk of exacerbating its debt distress, limiting the potential for a genuinely just energy transition (cp. A. Karg et al., 2025 pp.8-9).

Source: Authors, drawing on multiple sources, including the Jet Investments Register (2025), Karg et al. (2025) and Shai (2024).

transition endeavours, particularly for sharing knowledge, exchanging technical expertise, and building capacity. Such cooperation could help address some of the challenges above by fostering peer learning, building local capacity, diversifying sources of technical expertise, and reducing reliance on donor-defined models.

3. South-South cooperation on just transitions

South-South cooperation (SSC) refers to “cooperative action promoted by the governments of Southern countries or multilateral and regional organisations involving these governments that involve the transfer of financial resources, technology, personnel and/or knowledge between developing countries” (Aneja 2018, p. 141). This type of cooperation differs from North-South cooperation in standards, practices and principles (Haug, 2021). SSC is characterized by principles of non-interference, mutual benefit, non-conditionality and solidarity (Aneja, 2018; Fernando, 2019). However, because these principles are rarely put into practice, SSC also refers to a political narrative that challenges Northern hegemony in global affairs (Haug, 2021).

One significant benefit of SSC is that it has brought alternative funding sources and development institutions and practices into international cooperation circles (Aneja, 2018). Another benefit is the focus it places on the exchange of knowledge and experience, technology, best practices, and resources that support national development priorities between countries that face similar challenges (Roy & Andrade, 2010) – at least along some key dimensions, and, often, in contrast to patterns that have surfaced in North-South relationships.

Nevertheless, researchers and practitioners have highlighted concerns about effectiveness, transparency and good governance of SSC arrangements (Chaturvedi, 2021; McMillan Polonenko et al., 2019). They have also pointed out that, despite the principles of mutual benefit and equitable partnership, significant power asymmetries and divergent interests persist, potentially reinforcing or reinventing traditional unequal development dynamics (Aneja, 2018; Gudynas, 2016). It is also important to acknowledge that private multinational corporations and state-owned enterprises based in the Global South – some of which are closely aligned with fossil fuel interests – play influential roles in shaping SSC, potentially hindering efforts to promote just transitions away from fossil fuels. Examples include the China National Petroleum Corporation, which has extensive oil and gas operations across Africa, and the Adani Group, an Indian conglomerate heavily involved in coal mining in Indonesia.

3.1 Why South-South cooperation for just transitions?

Despite these critiques, SSC may contribute important opportunities for supporting just transitions in countries with high levels of economic and fiscal dependency on fossil fuels, especially in local regions where dependence is often even higher. These areas often face similar regulatory and governance challenges and have socio-economic similarities – for example in levels of inequality, unemployment, and informality. This is not to say that all Global South countries face the same challenges. There are important differences. Nevertheless, there are likely to be more similarities in challenges faced between two Global South countries than between a North-South pair.

Just transition requires addressing many fronts: diversifying economies, managing major building infrastructure, dismantling or reconvertng fossil fuel infrastructure, and addressing the legacy of environmental impacts. These challenges are enormous – particularly for countries with limited capital; governance and corruption challenges; historical distrust of the state; and limits on the capacity of the state to hold companies accountable. SSC offers at least the possibility of learning from successes and failures of other countries with comparable challenges.

SSC can also contribute by drawing on insights from the local level. Existing JETPs have tended to over-emphasize a national-level focus, missing out on important contributions that local-level engagement can provide. By bringing local voices into the discussion, SSC can help push for a more justice-centred approach in two ways. Local partnerships can help integrate fundamental aspects of a just transition into processes by seeking to address human rights and historical inequalities, and by working to ensure access to basic services, and access to decision-making into planning and implementation processes. They can also promote a basic premise: that a just transition is in itself a vehicle for achieving transformative outcomes.

Even where there are relevant lessons from Northern experiences of energy transition, SSC may provide a useful pretext to establish a different openness among elected officials, technocrats, and the public itself; and to address shared legacies of colonialism and fraught experiences of negotiating with Northern powers – whether in the recent past or hundreds of years ago.

This positioning can also bring specific technical expertise relevant to just transitions. For example, strategies may address negotiating terms of non-concessional or concessional finance with Global North partners, navigating legal challenges around trade and investor protection agreements, avoiding unfavorable financial arrangements in the face of debt burdens, and holding international firms accountable – whether through regulatory changes or litigation. SSC can serve as a foundation for building new multipolar trade and South-South economic exchange.

3.2 Examples of efforts to promote South-South cooperation for just transitions

Efforts have begun to draw lessons for just transitions across Southern geographies, especially through research and academic exchange. Some rely on funding from Northern academic and development cooperation entities and thus might be considered triangular cooperation. For example, the Transnational Centre for Just Transitions in Energy, Climate and Sustainability ([TRAJECTS](#)) aims to support transcontinental exchange, strengthen research capacities, and expand educational opportunities; a major focus of the initiative is on climate change mitigation, including fossil fuel phase out.

Other initiatives have adopted a premise that applying the just transition concept in the Global South requires a broader approach than is the case in the Global North; such efforts seek to go beyond mitigation to include adaptation and resilience, and greater diversity of pathways to transition. One example is the [South to South Just Transitions](#) project, led by Climate Strategies (based in Europe) and involving partners in Argentina,

Bangladesh, Colombia, Ghana, Indonesia, Kenya, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malawi and Viet Nam.

The Global South Alliance for a Just Transition to Renewable Energy ([JustRE Alliance](#)), in which SEI Latin America is part of the core team, emphasizes the networking of organizations, communities and grassroots movements to share lessons and experiences on the development of large-scale renewable energy projects, with special attention to the social dimensions of such projects across Latin America, Africa, and South and Southeast Asia.

The work by the Independent Expert Group on Just Transition and Development in Africa is also relevant (Sokona et al., 2023). It presents an integrated vision for a just and sustainable transformation in Africa, rooted in the continent's rich cultural and developmental potential. It identifies enduring structural challenges: a lack of food, the absence of energy sovereignty, and a reliance on low-value exports. It concludes that these challenges are compounded by climate change, extractive economies, and policy traps inherited from colonial and post-colonial eras. The group advocates for a renewed development framework centred on Indigenous ideas, food sovereignty through agroecology, pan-African industrial strategies, and energy sovereignty via decentralized renewable systems that empower communities. It also promotes a progressive financing agenda – combining domestic capacity building, debt relief, reparations, reform of global financial and trade mechanisms, and innovative multilateral cooperation – to fund and sustain this vision, while safeguarding against exploitation and ensuring African agency. Efforts are underway to use similar approaches in Latin America and South Asia.

Examining areas for South-South cooperation on just transitions between South Africa and Colombia

Here we suggest specific possibilities for cooperation between South Africa and Colombia on just transitions; to do this, we draw on the authors' expertise on just transitions, and on ideas cultivated while one of the co-authors, a University of Cape Town-based researcher, worked as a visiting researcher in Bogotá under a TRAJECTS grant. While not an exhaustive list, these areas have significant potential for cross-country and cross-regional learning and capacity building:

- **Building on existing South-South networks and initiatives** – There is potential to draw on the academic and non-governmental models mentioned above to establish government exchange platforms and to secure more substantial financial and institutional support. Such exchange should include government officials (from municipal to national levels), and involve those with permanent, technical roles who can carry lessons across electoral cycles.
- **Establishing technical exchanges on mine-closure challenges** – Such exchanges could provide expertise on legal, regulatory and civil or hydrological engineering matters; landscape and ecological restoration; water management; and contamination mitigation. This expertise is also relevant for land repurposing for economic diversification.

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- **Leveraging experiences with peace projects** – Colombia and South Africa have different histories but share efforts to establish peace and integrate societies with deep divides. In Colombia, regional and territorial development projects developed in the context of peacebuilding can provide lessons for more inclusive spaces and holistic planning required by just transition planning.
 - **Using cooperation platforms** – Platforms and similar institutions can help coordinate international aid flows to national and subnational levels. They can help avoid duplication, counterproductive efforts, stakeholder fatigue and inefficiency. Avenues used for North-South cooperation can be leveraged for South-South cooperation. Such avenues in South Africa include the institutional infrastructure for the Just Energy Transition Investment Plan (JET IP), the Just Energy Transition Project Management Unit (JET PMU), and the classification and bank of just transition projects; and in Colombia the Presidential Cooperation Agency (Agencia Presidencial para la Cooperación) and the Country Platform, a nascent mechanism for international collaboration to support the country’s energy transition and other climate goals.
 - **Defining just transition projects** – There has been discussion in the South African context about developing typologies to identify and classify exactly what constitutes a just transitions project. Lessons could help address the challenges of identifying, starting, scaling and financing innovative projects; and setting up and securing innovative financing mechanisms, such as through fossil fuel tax reform (coal export taxes, for example).
 - **Green industrialization** – There are many technical, institutional, regulatory and social challenges and opportunities in “green industrialization”, especially considering the geographical, historical and cultural diversity of both Colombia and South Africa. These include developing new infrastructure, regulatory frameworks, financing, and public-private partnerships. Renewable energy sources must be integrated into existing electricity grids and planning processes. Mechanisms are needed to ensure that the benefits from any green industrialization project are shared, are socially sustainable, and include related retraining and education reforms. It may also be possible to leverage complementarities between the natural resources that can be found in both countries to create stronger industrial value chains. For example, they could explore producing green steel using South African iron ore and Colombian renewable energy, or processing Colombian copper in existing South African smelters.

4. Conclusion

The pursuit of just transitions is an urgent and complex challenge facing many countries in the Global North and South as they seek to move away from fossil fuel dependence and, at the same time, address pressing development needs. Just energy transition partnerships (JETPs) offer an important, though imperfect, model of international cooperation to support this shift. While these partnerships may have raised the profile of justice in energy transitions and mobilized significant funding, they have also exposed the limitations in donor-driven approaches – particularly around financing modalities, inclusivity, and alignment with local priorities.

In this context, South-South cooperation (SSC) emerges as a vital complement to North-South mechanisms. SSC enables countries with shared development challenges to exchange knowledge, build capacity, and co-develop contextually relevant solutions that reflect local realities and aspirations. While SSC is not without its challenges – including power asymmetries and governance concerns – it can foster deeper ownership, promote justice-centred approaches, and support systemic change beyond emissions reductions alone.

This brief proposes how SSC can enrich just transition efforts through technical collaboration, institutional learning, and the co-creation of strategies to tackle mine closures, green industrialization, and inclusive development. Developing, strengthening and scaling such efforts – particularly by involving subnational governments, civil society, and knowledge institutions – can help build more effective, resilient, and equitable transition pathways.

Ultimately, achieving just transitions requires moving beyond one-size-fits-all models. To be effective, efforts must foster diverse, multi-actor coalitions that place justice at the core of the enterprise, empower local actors, and recognize the transformative potential of shared experiences across the Global South. SSC offers a promising channel to help achieve these goals.

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