

Just Transition in four questions

For more information

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At the COP24 in Katowice, Poland is inviting world leaders to endorse the **Silesia Declaration on Solidarity and Just Transition**. The document emphasizes the importance of decarbonizing economies to protect the climate in a socially responsible way, stresses the great potential that green jobs hold in this respect and highlights the needs of developing countries. What does Just Transition stand for? And is Poland taking it seriously?

What are the necessary elements of a Just Transition?

In contrast to mine closures of the past, which were often unmanaged, poorly planned and failed to offer safety nets to workers and communities, a Just Transition is a process of phasing out coal in a way that leaves no-one behind.

The blueprint for achieving this objective has been developed by US trade union experts based on the experience of a wide range of past transitions.

A Just Transition has to involve **early planning**, because the implementing the process in an orderly way takes at least around ten years. Decisions concerning the transition have to be made in a **participatory and democratic** way involving everyone affected, including workers, unions, local governments, businesses, civil society, educational authorities and other actors. It also needs to be based on **a clear decision** about the phaseout of coal and its timing, to provide clear guidance to investors and other actors.

A Just Transition must also foster the development of new economies to replace coal jobs and tax revenues for municipalities and as such must secure **adequate funding** for investments. It must also provide **adequate reskilling and/or early retirement** opportunities to avoid throwing former coal workers into unemployment and social exclusion. And finally, a Just Transition should improve the **quality of life** in order to stop depopulation, which is a common developmental challenge faced by coal regions in Central and Eastern Europe.

But does Poland really mean it?

Poland's actions at home are a far cry from what the declaration advocates. In short, Poland does not seem to be moving away from coal at all. In an unusual move, the Polish Ministry of Energy has issued its own position ahead of the COP24, in which it calls for a revision of global climate policy and opposes increasing the EU emissions reduction targets. Poland has also just unveiled its new draft energy strategy to 2040, which immediately raised brows as it plans for a phase-out of... onshore wind by 2035 and provides that Poland will still produce 60% of its energy from coal in 2030 (down from the 80% currently, but only in relative terms; in absolute figures coal

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production is expected to remain at the current level). A similar message resonated during last week's official celebrations of the miners' day (Barbórka) where Krzysztof Tchórzewski, the minister for energy, told miners that Poland needed more coal, and the Prime Minister Morawiecki said that mining was the cornerstone of Poland's economy and would continue to play that role in the future.

Will coal have a future in Poland then?

Poland's recent moves and statements regarding coal call into question its credibility as an advocate of Just Transition and as the presidency of the COP. However, the pledges to keep mining coal may never materialise.

The dominant role of coal in Poland's energy mix has been creating more and more headaches for the country's leaders. Firstly, Poland has been increasingly relying on coal imports to meet its energy needs, and most of those imports have been coming from Russia, raising energy independence and energy security questions. Secondly, with the rising prices of coal and soaring prices of emissions allowances, utilities have been struggling to figure out how to continue making profit while keeping energy prices for households within politically acceptable limits. Thirdly, Poland has been grappling with a massive air quality emergency at the core of which lies the question of poor-quality coal (or indeed mining waste) which continues to be sold to households. It poisons the country's air in winter and as such will have to go at some point, delivering a blow to the mining companies' profits. And finally, while there is still a lot of coal underground in Silesia and elsewhere in Poland, most of it will have to stay there because digging it up would be economically unjustified – the coal that is left is too deep underground and technically too difficult and dangerous to extract for the Polish mines to ever be able to compete with cheaper imports – which is why domestic production has been systematically decreasing in recent years, along with employment in the mining sector.

Why it's important to have a Just Transition now?

Poland's thinking about Just Transition is heavily influenced by the trauma which Silesia suffered in the 1990s when many unprofitable mines were closed – without an alternative plan for the communities affected and without adequate social safeguards – which led to disastrous social consequences. Those events created the persistent conviction that mine closures are best avoided.

Today, however, the situation is very different, and a well managed, carefully planned and participatory transition is the best deal the miners can get as the inevitable end of coal looms on the horizon. It is also important that the transition starts now – at a time when Poland's low unemployment and a shortage of labour present a good macroeconomic window of opportunity to smoothly transition a large workforce to other sectors. If Poland misses this opportunity now, it may face another 90s-style wave of sudden, unmanaged mine closures in a couple of years from now – and the miners will pay the price again.