

## Recommendations based on the workshop: Cultivating Just Transition in Central and Eastern Europe

The international workshop created a space for sharing stories of just transition from several Central Eastern European (CEE) regions. These experiences might serve as examples of how to approach the just transition in the near future. In this paper, we bring the key messages of these stories together with recommendations for policy makers and NGOs on how to make the just transition a reality.

Examples of good practices come from the following regions:

- Jiu Valley, Romania
- Kičevo and other regions, North Macedonia
- Horná Nitra, Slovakia
- Konin, Poland
- Kolubara region, Serbia

### Creating the just transition story

**The transition story provides a framework necessary to navigate a complex but a necessary change** towards a better future brought by the decarbonisation process in the fossil-fuels intensive regions. The just transition encompasses technological, economic, social and institutional changes, it touches both the history and the future of the region, it is related to people's identity and their communities. The transition story allows to cover these topics into a comprehensive and inclusive vision touching on who and where we are, where we are heading and why. It is not a data analysis or a focused plan, though these are no less important for a successful transition, but rather a broader perspective of the transition process growing from the local realities.

*The Jiu Valley is a central region in the Romanian Southern Carpathians mountains dealing with the coal phase-out: in 1990, 90 000 people worked in the coal sector, while today the coal industry employs around 3 000 people. The transition story is recounted by a mural representing the past, present and future of the Valley. It was created in cooperation with a number of stakeholders including seniors, youth, coal workers, citizens' initiatives etc. to truly encompass the story of the whole community.*

**Public engagement and participation of all stakeholders is needed** for the transition to be accepted, supported and implemented by locals. The experience from different countries shows how important participation is as it brings people together to share their visions, provides a space for discussion and conflict resolution and strengthens the coal-phase out plans and there is a range of tools to be used for it, i.e., public consultations, working groups, surveys, workshops, discussions and more. The

plans for the coal phase-out are being created in most of the coal-intensive regions, seldom a meaningful and fully participatory process is implemented along the way by the government. More frequently, participation is promoted by voices of active citizens and local initiatives that want various voices to be heard and fight for their place at the table, and in some regions more than others, these voices are heard, and the process opens up for multiple stakeholders.

*The experience of local activists from the Eastern Wielkopolska region, Poland, shows that the bottom-up approach bore fruits: the local initiative succeeded in coalition building as it was able to put together various stakeholders including majors, national and EU NGOs, academia, business, ZE PAK (the biggest company in the region), youth, energy sector workers, who signed the regional agreement on just transition and created the working groups in order to prepare the coal phase-out plan. There is no single recipe, but various approaches worked out: in Poland, the coalition was built slowly by strengthening good relationships with people through cooperative projects and events. The experience also shows that clear communication and open dialog is key: 'Talk and cooperate with everyone, you never know when you will meet someone who will help you to meet someone who you need.' The transparency and inclusiveness (keeping people informed, inviting for participation) also help to avoid rumours and fear of being left out and brings a mutual trust.*

**Simple and inclusive communication of just transition performed by local media** is an important element for the story to be rooted into the local reality. Making things simple for people to come for the debates is the general rule. The message is best heard when it is communicated in cooperation with municipalities, so people know that their opinions will be heard by those implementing the solutions. Furthermore, don't discuss the rules of operational programs or the technical solutions first-hand, rather ask questions people understand: what is your vision of the community? What do you consider a quality job? What branches have the potential to thrive in the local conditions?

*In Slovakia, the discussions on coal phase-out started with the initiative of a local mayor of the city of Prievidza, who together with the Association of cities and municipalities organised several open meetings to discuss and plan the transformation. Thanks to this set-up, people had an opportunity to bring issues they found the most pressing together with ideas on how to solve them. Initiated and communicated by the local authority, the message was heard and around sixty active citizens participated in these debates. Later, the compiled action plan was again discussed with locals on several public consultations in 4 cities.*

## People at the center of just transition

**Just transition must not be reduced to energy transition.** In principle, the just transition process should concentrate on the prospective future of locals in the coal-intensive regions. Therefore, it should not only support the current companies in the energy sector and industries who deal with transition to new energy sources, contrarily, it should look



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out for new forms of economic activity that have the potential to thrive in the specific regional conditions, as it might not be possible (due to the number of created jobs or specific skills they require) to reemploy all coal workers in the decarbonised energy industry. The struggles accompanying the coal phase-out prove that the economic monoculture based on a small number of large companies is an unsafe economic model. Unfortunately, the experience shows that the focus is often shifted to the replacement of coal capacities by low-carbon sources and the jobs it will bring, and less attention is given to the diversification of the economy. Now it is mainly energy companies prepared to take part in the process of just transition, but everyone is needed for the transition to be successful.

*To tackle this issue, local NGOs in the Kičevo region of North Macedonia addressed the practitioners of traditional and viable activities such as pottery, agroturism and other sustainable branches to find out about the potential of these activities and promote their support.*

**Bringing the people to the front means concentrating on the needs of locals**, especially those most influenced and most vulnerable to the transition. The emphasis should be made on the needs and wants of the people, based on that, the mix of supported projects should be developed – a balanced combination of new solid infrastructure, such as communications or buildings, and the initiation of soft projects such as education, community building, social work, etc. That is especially needed in coal regions given the fact that these regions often struggle with the structural underdevelopment manifested by lower quality of life, lower pensions, higher rates of unemployment, social exclusion and more. In many regions, however, the emphasis on the first category heavily prevails. As for the coal workers, the focus on people means starting a dialog in order to inquire about their vision of the transition, their future life and eventually the character of their new jobs in order to set the support for requalification and job creation accordingly. Similarly, the voice of the people living next to the power plants and coal mines is often suppressed by the louder voices of the industry itself, and for the sake of job creation the industry might be supported against the will of locals.

*In Slovakian region of Horná Nitra, the biggest concern is depopulation as people are leaving the region to make a better livelihood in the cities and wealthier regions. Therefore, the solution might be to invest in people and the facilities they need to stay in the region, which is one of the the priorities of the just transition efforts. As they say, caring about people's future should be a new standard and role model also for other social issues.*

## Ambition and leadership

**Decarbonisation is an urgent matter, requiring ambition and devotion** to bring the just energy transition into reality. Mitigating climate change is the primary reason for the urgency, but other environmental issues such as pollution and landscape devastation or economic reasons brought by the allowances price rise are following suit. Also, the finances for both the technical and social transition provided by the EU are available now,



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rather than later. Still, there is often the tendency to postpone the change, and strong leadership and decision is needed to face the challenges of coal phase-out.

*North Macedonia is the first Western Balkan country to plan the coal phase-out. Currently, the coal thermal power plants produce about a half of the country's electricity output and cover around a third of the total electricity consumption. Thanks to the political will and local support, the phase-out date was set in the year 2028. This development is backed up by the new Energy strategy 2020-2040 that analysed the several scenarios. The plan is to accelerate the renewable capacity built-up: 100 MW of photovoltaics will be installed in the former coal mine, in total, 2 200 MW of new renewable capacity will be invested into.*

### **Role models from other countries might accelerate the needed changes in less ambitious regions.**

When there are strong voices from the coal industry, energy experts advocate for the status quo and the politics is interconnected with the heavy industry elites, the coal phase-out process will easily lack ambition. In this situation, the success stories of other countries dealing with the coal phase-out brought into the local context by activists or the international organisations might be a crucial moment for the shift of local debate. However, calls from the international community can be obscured by other topics, if not accompanied by the work on the ground and conversation with citizens.

*In the Serbian Kolubara region, the energy strategy completely relies on coal and the coal industry is backed up by credits obtained from Japan and China. Very few people are thinking about the end of coal and the national government will not drive energy transition. The local activists and NGOs are driving the change and sharing stories from Visegrad and other CEE countries is a very helpful method. Also, the Initiative for coal regions in transition in the Western Balkans and Ukraine managed by the European Commission and collaborating partners such as the World Bank is present in the region. Serbia cannot finance the transition on its own and the threat of foreign investment into the carbon intensive industry (e.g. mining of copper) rather than decarbonisation needs to be addressed by the international community.*

## Recommendations

### Recommendations for NGOs on different approaches to support the just transition:

- NGOs and local citizens are encouraged to start a discussion about just transition on the ground and to build coalitions with multiple stakeholders by means of an open dialog.
- It is important to keep the message simple, communicate positively, inclusively and concentrate on the topics familiar to the locals, while cooperating with the local media and municipalities.
- NGOs can bring valuable insights into the local debate and push for more ambition and implementation of proven tactics such as building the just transition around people's needs and visions or creating the space for meaningful public engagement.

### Policy recommendations on setting the just transition process

- Policy makers should set ambitious goals for the energy transition hand in hand with adequate measures to ensure just transition and provide a strong leadership towards decarbonisation.
- People should be the primary focus of the just transition policy; accordingly, the policy makers should open an inclusive and accurate public dialog in order to include everyone into the decision making process and hear out the voices of local communities. special attention should be given to the dialog with coal workers and their communities.
- Policy makers should build the just transition plan and action around the needs and wants of local citizens, in other words, help them realize their visions and ideas for the region.

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