south to south JUST TRANSITIONS

CLIMATE Strategies

Policy Brief

Unlocking a Just Transition in Kenya

Policy Gaps, Opportunities and Global Support

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary 3

Introduction 4

Key Sectors for Just Transition in Kenya 4

Existing Just Transition Policies 5

Climate Action Governance and Just Transition Implementation 6

Challenges and Barriers to Just Transition Implementation 7

Best Practices and Lessons Learned 9

Gaps and Opportunities for International Support 11

Conclusion 12

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Executive Summary

Kenya has emerged as a regional leader in climate action and green growth, bolstered by strong obligations to renewable energy, climate resilience and sustainable development. However, while the construct of Just Transition is increasingly recognised in the national conversation, its integration into Kenya's legal and policy framework remains partial and/or unclear. The country's constitution, national development plans and climate policies and strategies, among others, offer a solid foundation for a Just Transition through the principles of social justice, equity, public engagement and environmental protection. However, Just Transition is not clearly defined or operationalised in the policy and legal framework. Failure to explicitly integrate Just Transition in existing climate policy and legal framework and strategies, weak coordination between the national government and sub-nationals, limited technical capacity, inadequate data and weak monitoring and verification are some of the barriers to Just Transition in the country. Others include inadequate funding, instability in existing financing avenues and weak integration of the concept of Just Transition in the current academic and technical training programs.

Despite these challenges, Kenya offers important lessons and emerging best practices. The country's leadership in the expansion of renewable energy and electricity access demonstrates the potential for green growth linked to inclusivity and employment creation. The Existing governance system that coordinates in sub-nationals and devolves planning structures provides an entry point for embedding Just Transition. Additionally, the existing stakeholder engagement arrangement provides an opportunity for all the citizenry to air their views on proposed policies or changes in existing legal and policy frameworks. Significant gaps remain in entrenching and operationalising Just Transition in policy and legal frameworks, especially in financing, strengthening institutional coordination, enhancing technical capacity in the national and sub-national governments and integrating the concept of Just Transition in the academic and technical training programs. These gaps present clear opportunities for international actors' support. International actors could play a critical role in operationalising the concept of Just Transition in Kenya through the following approaches:

a. Providing technical capacity to integrate Just Transition explicitly in climate action legal and policy frameworks.
b. Providing technical support to develop data and monitoring systems related to Just Transition.
c. Development partners could require that Just Transition is explicitly embedded in climate actions they support financially.
d. Providing technical support to the integration of the construct of Just Transition into academic and technical training programs.

Combining this international support with strong domestic leadership can help ensure that Kenya's transition to a low-carbon and climate-resilient economy is inclusive, equitable and socially sustainable.

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Introduction

Just Transition (JT) involves a controlled shift from high-carbon, low-quality livelihoods to low-carbon, climate-resilient economic pathways. These pathways aim to achieve sustainable development with a strong focus on adaptation by generating decent jobs, reducing poverty and inequality, and prioritising the inclusion of marginalised and minority groups, such as women, youth, the elderly and persons with disabilities (Government of Kenya (GoK), 2018; Mulwa et al., 2022; GoK, 2023). Although Kenya has not enacted a JT law or developed a formal JT framework, the concept is increasingly recognised in the country's energy, climate, and development planning as an essential approach to align climate action with social and economic objectives (GoK, 2023; Mulwa et al., 2022). Just Transition in Kenya is important for three reasons:

- Kenya's economy relies heavily on agriculture, natural resources, and informal services, which are strongly influenced by an unpredictable climate, thus ignoring social aspects risks leaving vulnerable groups behind.
- Kenya's strong renewable energy potential from geothermal, wind, solar can create green jobs and attract investment with people-cantered planning.
- Without clear JT measures that help in mapping labour shifts, strengthening safety nets, reskilling workers, and ensuring inclusive voices, the benefits of a greener economy may not reach those most in need, risking resistance from left out groups and threatening progress.

Key sectors for Just Transition in Kenya

Kenya's climate policies already integrate socio-economic and climate objectives. The country aims to achieve its long-term development objectives through an inclusive, low-carbon, climate-resilient pathway. Kenya's second NDC highlights the need for a JT toward sustainability. Climate change documents, including the latest NDC (2031–2035), prioritise climate action based on emissions, decarbonisation potential, and opportunities for green jobs. The country considers the energy sector its cornerstone for decarbonisation. Kenya aims to deliver 100% renewable energy by 2035. Policies in the sector aim to increase capacity to unlock e-mobility, a clean industrial revolution, and electric cooking while creating employment, attracting private investments, and ultimately fostering economic growth. Key policies include the Kenya National Long-Term Low Emission Development Strategy 2022–2050, which consists of the Kenya Energy Transition and Investment Plan (ETIP), the Kenya National Cooking Transformation Strategy, and Kenya's Third National Communication. Delivering a JT to a low-carbon, gender-responsive and inclusive transportation system is also essential. Cheap, clean transport helps reduce fossil fuel use and emissions and serves as a pillar of the growing urbanisation, which is projected to reach 40% by 2035. It will create green jobs in proposed mass transportation initiatives such as bus rapid transport (BRT).

Agriculture, Forestry, and Land Use (AFOLU) sector is also a priority area. While the AFOLU sector employs and sustains the livelihoods of the majority of the population and helps empower vulnerable smallholder farmers and pastoralists, it is one of the country's GHG-emitting sectors. Current efforts to enhance Just Transition in the sector include the adoption of climate-smart agriculture, tree-cover expansion,

and REDD+. Despite promotion of environmental quality, these interventions are important in promoting the lives and livelihoods of vulnerable populations, including farmers, pastoralists, and the rural population.
Lastly, low-carbon and equitable transitions in the waste management sector can deliver health benefits, urban resilience, and circular economy advantages. This sector is now emerging as a significant emitter, accounting for 5% of Kenya's greenhouse gas emissions. The informal sector plays a critical role but has been left out of the circular value chain, including extended producer responsibility policies and value chains.

Existing Just Transition Policies

Although Kenya does not have a JT law, policy, strategy, or framework, its climate documents increasingly incorporate JT elements. For instance, the policy development process references collaboration with vulnerable groups and the foregrounding of traditional and indigenous knowledge as key to ensuring that solutions are aligned with local needs.
The key legal frameworks and institutions that incorporate elements of Just Transition include:

- The Constitution of Kenya 2010, particularly its Bill of Rights, includes the right of all Kenyans to a clean and healthy environment.
- The Climate Change Act (2016), amended in 2024 to include new provisions for carbon markets, provides a stronger legal basis for climate action and planning integration to address climate change and its effects, supporting low-carbon, climate-resilient development.
- National NDC and Long-Term Low Emission Development Strategies (LT-LEDS) provide ambitious greenhouse gas mitigation targets with clean investment plans and impacts, including green job creation.
- The National Climate Change Council (NCCC), chaired by the president is mandated to oversee climate change action plans and develop the 5-year National Climate Change Action Plans (NCCAPs) to operationalise NDCs through sectoral mainstreaming.
- NCCAP III (2023-2027) mainstreams climate actions into national and county planning, signalling policy readiness for broader transition planning.

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Climate Action Governance and Just Transition Implementation

Kenya's efforts on climate change are strong in policy and law, despite lack of a Just Transition legal framework. Its climate planning has become more inclusive, involving experts, the private sector, civil society, and marginalised groups, such as women, youth, the elderly and the poor. The Climate Change Directorate (CCD), housed within the Ministry of Environment, Climate Change and Forestry, coordinates national and county government climate change activities (change planning, monitoring, reporting, and verification). This is done through the Climate Change Units in all 47 sub-national governments and ministries, ensuring whole-of-government implementation at the devolved level.

The two-tier governance structure aims to achieve coherence between national and subnational action. This system seeks to align subnational actors with Kenya's Vision 2030, the National Adaptation Plan (2015–2030), the LT-LEDS, and other sector strategies and policies. All local climate actions also feed into the NDC, which takes a whole-of-society approach to adaptation and mitigation. NEMA is the Designated National Authority (DNA) responsible for enforcing climate obligations and overseeing carbon markets. Youth engagement is broad, with consultations conducted in 47 counties via UNICEF's Yunitok platform, reaching over 14,000 children and youth. This promotes intergenerational equity in NCCAP, NDC, and Just Transition. County representatives are equally vital in Kenya's two-tier governance, alongside academia, labour, environmental justice groups, and development partners. Inclusion is crucial and has been deliberately extended to vulnerable groups, including pastoralists, hunters, fisher communities, women, children, persons with disabilities, the elderly, those with small landholdings or livelihoods dependent on natural resources, and residents in informal settlements. This ensures no one is left behind in climate action.

This broader approach aims for a just and inclusive climate response with other efforts and targets such as the planting of 15-billion trees by 2032 across the country, the low Emission Strategies launched in 2023, the second NDC drafted for 2031-2035, the REDD+ Strategy and the Green Hydrogen Strategy, introduced in 2022 and 2023, respectively. In technology, 27 counties have adopted gender-responsive climate tech, and 14 are participating in Kenya's solar project. There is also capacity building involving 40 counties working with communities to strengthen indigenous knowledge, and more than 200 youth have been trained through GIZ-NDC Assist. A gender analysis of the agriculture, energy, and water sectors was also conducted alongside collecting data on displacement and drought mobility support responses from 5 counties. In 2021, the government launched the FLLoCA (Financing Locally-Led Climate Action) to support priority climate actions over five years, and 45 counties prepared Participatory Climate Risk Assessments to improve tracking, monitoring, and verification. To minimise reliance on international funding and boost local private investment, banks were trained to establish green credit lines for renewable energy and efficiency projects. process was the commitments assumed by 12 ministries and 4 additional public institutions in the five-year action plan, which includes 101 national and local measures.

In terms of public participation, environmental law and the SEE allowed the realization of a national consultation on the NS draft, which led to 16 in-person workshops (one in each region) and online means for participation. Both mechanisms

involved more than 700 participants and led to more than 300 observations on the draft. Moreover, the creation of an Expert Panel allowed the involvement of 30 academic and civil society organizations, which gave recommendations during the NS' elaboration.

With respect to actors and sectors, the governance structure proposed in the NS offers important lessons on efficiency and institutionalization. The two interministerial committees (Socioecological and Hydric) were merged into a single high-level governing body—the IC-JSET—expanding ministerial representation from 12 to 15 ministries. The integration of the Ministry of the Interior in IC-JSET is also an innovation in the political weight given to the JSET agenda. In addition, the new structure introduces a regional body in charge of facilitating the intersectoral coordination and a national JSET Consultative Council, a tripartite space composed of civil society, the private sector, and public institutions of the national, regional, and local levels.

Challenges and Barriers to Just Transition Implementation

Kenya aims to embed JT in its development and climate plans but faces coordination challenges due to absence of a comprehensive national framework. Despite cross-sectoral efforts, institutional fragmentation and weak coordination hinder progress. Stakeholder engagement has improved but remains limited, especially in the private sector and civil society. Data systems are incompatible, and MRV capacity is insufficient. In addition, most agencies lack institutional strength, dedicated climate units, and training, while existing climate frameworks lack specific JT policies and are often misaligned with national development plans such as Vision 2030.

Kenya's Second Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) for 2031–2035 promotes a just and equitable transition, with a focus on workforce reskilling, gender equality, and the reduction of socioeconomic impacts. However, achieving this transition presents significant and complex challenges. While financing and institutional capacity are major challenges, Kenya also faces unique

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obstacles stemming from its decentralised governance, demographic changes, and reliance on a climate-sensitive economy. Kenya's governance structure includes one national government and 47 devolved county units. Climate change considerations are incorporated into county development plans and Climate Change Units, which are integrated into sectoral strategies. Nevertheless, the implementation of NDC objectives, such as providing affordable energy for e-mobility, assumes that all counties have equal capacity, thereby creating capacity gaps. Capacity limitations and national-level assumptions can hinder cohesive progress. For example, arid and semi-arid counties, which account for 89% of Kenya's territory, often lack the funds or expertise for local initiatives and may prioritise objectives that diverge from national objectives. Pastoralist counties may prioritise drought-resistant livestock over e-cooking solutions, thereby impairing the NDC's integrated approach and rendering workers in fossil-fuel sectors, such as charcoal production, vulnerable.

Kenya is experiencing a demographic boom, with a median age of 19.8 and a projected population of 62.2 million by 2035. The NDC proposes a Green Skills and Green Jobs Strategy but highlights a skills mismatch where urban growth is expanding the informal sector, including boda-boda transport and retail in agricultural markets. At the same time, rural technical and vocational centres lack green job training in areas such as renewable energy and agroforestry, which are among the green transition's primary focus areas. This challenge is exacerbated by gender disparities since women may not have time to benefit from these initiatives as they are heavily burdened with traditional and drudgery work, especially in rural settings. Thus, existing training systems and work environments do not align with the investments and the skills needed for the green transition, leading people to prioritise survival livelihoods and threatening a just, inclusive future.

In line with emission reduction requirements, Kenya shelfed the use of its 400 million tons of coal and 2.85 billion barrels of oil reserves and turned to international support to cover 81% of the costs of its decarbonisation journey, especially in carbon markets. This approach is, however, vulnerable as high-quality credits from REDD+ or blue carbon projects attract private investment, but global price fluctuations and competition from cheaper offsets destabilise these flows. This impacts the most vulnerable, particularly those working in the AFOLU sectors, such as pastoralists, smallholder farmers, poor people in society, and the elderly, who produce 80% of agricultural output and contribute to these schemes by foregoing their economic activities on their land for conservation. Delayed funding, reduced income from credits, forgone income and poorly planned benefit sharing make it difficult for them to transition to healthier, more sustainable practices e.g. shifting away from synthetic fertilisers or use of charcoal fuel.

The country faces significant climate-related losses, with recent data indicating that these could be as high as 2% loss of GDP in the 2023-2024 financial year. Yet, the country faces financial constraints in addressing climate change, with the cost of mitigation estimated at 19% of the USD 56 billion required to implement the NDC. The Kenyan government has taken on debt to fund climate action, creating a cycle where climate-resilient infrastructure increases debt and diverts funds from initiatives such as worker retraining in manufacturing, which has shrunk from 10.4% to 7.8% of GDP. This cycle exacerbates slow-onset climate impacts, including rising temperatures, sea-level rise, soil degradation, glacier melt, and threats to food production and livelihoods. At the same time, private-sector adaptation finance favours urban projects, neglecting rural livelihoods.

Monitoring and verification (MRV+) system data and trends exclude non-economic

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losses such as cultural erosion and youth mental health and instead prioritises economic indicators. Consequently, many government climate documents, including the latest NDC, emphasise economic measures but overlook qualitative aspects of JT such as community ownership and women's participation. This may lead to unverified claims of equity. For example, although gender-disaggregated health data is available, data on workforce transitions are missing, risking the perception of progress being overstated and disparities within vulnerable groups' ecosystems being concealed.

Best practices and Lessons Learned

1. *Taking an inclusive approach*: Kenya's climate policies are increasingly emphasising participatory and inclusive climate action. Kenya's whole-of-government, whole-of-society approach to planning has worked particularly well. Current plans and strategies—such as NCCAP and NDC—are adopting this approach, ensuring that, from the outset, every stakeholder is included and justice is guaranteed.
2. *Translating high-level goals into actionable targets*: Kenya has adopted a disaggregated approach that translates huge goals into small, actionable targets and actions. For instance, Kenya's Energy Transition and Investment Plan (2023-2050) and the Kenya National Cooking Transition Strategy (2024-2028) employed this approach, translating national-level ambitious targets into concrete investment pipelines, technology options, timelines, and financing instruments, making projects bankable and easier to mobilise and implement.
3. *Decentralising climate finance*: The country has adopted decentralised

project delivery and flexible financing approaches, such as PAYG, result-based financing (RBF), and carbon/impact finance instruments. These approaches have increased the penetration of climate actions, such as clean cooking and access to renewable energy, in the most vulnerable rural communities and households, addressing upfront costs and mitigating crowding out of private actors. In return, the country is witnessing increased uptake while supporting local enterprises.

4. *Focusing on most vulnerable stakeholders in climate policy planning*: There is an increased focus on vulnerable populations. Smallholder farmers, pastoralists, ASAL residents, old people, children and youth, among others, are becoming central to every climate plan, action, or project. This reduces the risk of importing historical injustices, minimises the risk of exclusion, and lowers the social and economic costs of change.
5. *De-risking climate investment to support the most affected*: Kenya continues to explore innovative responses to climate change, including efforts to de-risk climate action and financing to make climate investment more attractive to the private sector, and to use these funds to support vulnerable groups and populations. One such mechanism is the proposed use of carbon credit gains to reskill and transition vulnerable groups who rely on biomass and dirty fuels for their livelihoods. Revenues from carbon markets will be allocated to social protection, including community-based forest management under REDD+ frameworks, thereby ensuring sustainability and reducing reliance on external funding.
6. *Monitoring JT metrics to increase investor confidence*: Transition plans such as Kenya's Energy Transition and Investment Plan (ETIP) estimate the costs, risks, impacts, and outcomes of climate investments and climate action projects. ETIP provides a monitoring framework for the energy transition including indicators such as employment generation, equity, and skills development. It proposes a dashboard for real-time monitoring of JT metrics (such as employment equity and gender-disaggregated data), with transparency guaranteed through annual reports. Such an initiative provides investors with an indication of the potential returns of mitigation and adaptation actions, creating a clear, easy-to-evaluate investment path and decision-making process. Although this initiative may not yet be fully implemented, it has the potential to improve efficiency and increase investment.
7. *Evidencing the positive impacts of Just Transition*: Transitions are, in most cases, framed just as a risk expenditure, with countries spending resources. However, in the latest climate change framing, Kenya views and treats JT as an opportunity. For instance, the ETIP highlights that, during the transition, it will create more than 500,000 new jobs with a $600 million investment, demonstrating that the energy transition can drive inclusive economic growth and decent work. Investment plans are now increasingly integrated with the JT agenda, showing that climate, social, and economic goals can be aligned.
8. *Centre inclusion from the outset*: Kenya's climate change plans have increasingly become people-cantered. Hence JT elements are already strongly integrated into climate policy. The country has continued to deliberately broaden the consultation table through workshops, surveys, and online platforms to ensure equity and social justice are not afterthoughts but central priorities, blending climate ambition with the needs and livelihoods of the Kenyan people.

Gaps and Opportunities for International Support

Despite the significant progress the country is making towards inclusive, shared-benefit climate action, substantial gaps remain, hindering Just Transition implementation:

- *The absence of a dedicated National Just Transition Framework (strategy, policy, law)*. This framework must cover all sectors, including agriculture, transport, energy, waste, industry, and manufacturing. It should address climate impacts, livelihoods, and vulnerabilities, with particular emphasis on vulnerable and marginalised populations. The framework needs to outline job transitions, reskilling, social protections, and support measures such as income assistance and retraining grants, aligned with Transition priorities. Development assistance may be required to achieve this, and additional capacity, expertise, and resources will be essential to expand public engagement and establish a comprehensive framework.
- *Limited or absent data and monitoring infrastructure*. Kenya needs robust systems to measure the impacts and benefits of new policies on livelihoods, jobs, and vulnerable people. Without well-tracked, verifiable, and documented results, building a strong case for assistance will be next to impossible. International communities have developed strong data and verification systems. Their intervention and support in establishing and building capacity for these systems could be beneficial.
- *Integrating Just Transition into climate finance*. Climate action is not always linked to Just Transitions, but by embedding JT within existing climate finance systems, the government could ensure these concepts are better integrated into new and ongoing programmes. For example, creating a JT support facility to collaborate with existing financial partners, such as the Green Climate Fund. Stakeholders, such as multilateral development banks and donors, should include social and labour transition goals in every programme

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they fund and embed JT work and funding in Global South.
- *Limited knowledge and skills in key areas*. The personnel responsible for training often lack the necessary knowledge, skills, and manuals, leading to ineffective outcomes. Many academic institutions lack the curricula and capacity to prepare workers for green jobs, creating a mismatch between the skills taught and those needed for the green economy. Kenya and Africa could benefit from regional expertise hubs for a just transition that serve as centres for knowledge building and global lesson-sharing. These hubs can connect international frameworks such as the ILO and UNFCCC with local agencies, promoting decent work, reskilling, and integrating the informal sector into transition plans.
- *Limited scaling*. Numerous models have been tested, and significant capacity-building efforts have been made in climate adaptation and disaster preparedness, yet limited scaling has been done. It's time to build on these successes by exploring ways to expand proven approaches. The focus should be on scaling up and horizontal expansion to ensure that principles of JT reach more people and sectors. This process should also emphasise community involvement, local ownership, and sustainability to ensure lasting impact.

Conclusion

Kenya's climate change plans are increasingly becoming people-cantered, with Just Transition elements continuously being integrated, ensuring equity and social justice remain central. The country has continued to widen inclusion and consultation through workshops, surveys, and online platforms, blending climate goals with people's needs. Evidence shows that Just Transition is gaining momentum, integrating climate response with social inclusion. Community-led, consultative planning guides climate action with elements included in recent climate documents such as the second NDC and NCCAP, promoting the inclusion of marginalised groups. However, progress is inconsistent as there is a lack of a dedicated JT framework alongside structural gaps such as skills shortages and mismatches, weak data systems, among others, that hinder full socioeconomic and climate integration. The country, therefore, needs to:

- Develop and operationalise a national just transition framework.
- Enhance and strengthen data and monitoring infrastructure to track progress for appropriate scale-up or mitigation actions.
- Scale up workable Just Transition models or adaptation readiness capacity developed for wider implementation, including specific attention to the ASAL counties.

It is appropriate to shift the international discussion toward a more localised leadership approach, highlighting the urgency of action and the effectiveness of co-creation a solution, rather than implementing models that do not align with local contexts. Thus, the international actors could help:

1. Restructure global climate value chains to reward producing countries: The focus of the international debate should now shift from financing needs to the fair redistribution of value. Achieving this requires restructuring green value chains—covering renewables, carbon markets, nature-based solutions, among others—so that value producing countries like Kenya receive greater value-added benefits. This involves implementing mandatory local value-

add requirements for green mineral supply chains, ensuring fair and stable carbon credit measurement, verification and pricing, and establishing revenue-sharing mechanisms that protect communities. Such measures aim to direct the benefits of a Just Transition to those who matter most—workers, communities, and local enterprises—rather than to global investors alone, thereby addressing longstanding injustices.

2. Make JT indicators mandatory in global climate reporting and investment decisions. Borrowing from emissions reporting, JT transforms from a normative guideline into a measurable worldwide benchmark by requiring all climate investments, carbon market initiatives, and multilateral programmes to report on labour impacts, gender equality, community ownership, and social safeguards. This change shifts focus from the amount of climate finance mobilised to the fairness of the transition, establishing a global accountability system that emphasises social justice.

3. Establish south-led transition coalitions focused on technology co-creation. The regions most affected should now take the initiative to lead the transitions. It is vital to move beyond solely capacity building to support regional, developing-country-led collaborations that co-develop technologies for green transitions (clean energy, agroecology, green transport, and climate-smart services). This shift replaces the traditional transfer model with an emphasis on technology co-creation, open innovation, and shared intellectual property, grounded in local ownership. With such models, Kenya and other developing countries can craft their own green industrialisation strategies and foster industries suited to their local context, rather than relying on imported models.

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