

From Fairness to Repair:

Why Just Transition Must Be Reframed
Through Loss and Damage

Under the

Youth Engagement in
Loss and Damage Program

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The Missing Question in the Just Transition Debate

In the bustling policy forums of the UNFCCC processes and green growth summits, Just Transition is hailed as the humane path to decarbonisation. The dominant question rings out: how do we achieve this with all the guiding principles that stem from the UN Charter. Reskilling programmes, “green” jobs, and infrastructure investments promise a smooth passage to clean energy without leaving workers and communities behind. However, for most of the Global South, this framing misses a much more fundamental question: how do we transition in a world where climate harm has already been inflicted, and where responsibility lies unequally with those who industrialised first? For countries like Botswana, whose National Development Plan 12 (NDP12) gestures toward just transition while its pastoralist communities absorb escalating losses from drought, erratic rainfall, and livestock death are, unfortunately, not waiting at the starting line of a fair race. They are already deep into a process of attrition for which they bear almost no historical responsibility.

The distinction that follows from this observation is that Just Transition has been built on distributive justice: the equitable sharing of burdens and benefits across a managed change. Also enshrined in the UNFCCC, is the Warsaw International Mechanism established to address loss and damage from climate change in vulnerable developing countries, later at COP28, the Fund responding to Loss and Damage (FrLD) was operationalised to provide financial support built on reparative justice; the acknowledgement and redress of harm already done i.e. recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction. As scholars including Schipper (2020), Mechler et al. (2019), and Calliari et al. (2019) have argued, these represent structurally different moral and political projects. Treating them as interchangeable forecloses the more difficult, and much more necessary, conversation.

Why Current Just Transition Thinking Falls Short

Just Transition frameworks suffer from at least three structural blind spots that render them inadequate for the climate frontline.

The first is temporal blindness. Most Just Transition models gaze forward, assuming a linear trajectory from fossil fuels to renewables. They fund solar farms and battery supply chains while ignoring the backward glance demanded by Loss and Damage. For Botswana's pastoralist communities, the question is not about the energy mix of tomorrow's economy, it is about the herds already lost to successive droughts, the incomes already destroyed, and the land already degraded. The National Development Plan (NDP12) 's transition ambitions sit uneasily against this accumulated loss. A framework that cannot look backward falls short in governing the present.

The second is the growth-centric logic. Just Transition, as currently institutionalised, is tethered to “green” growth paradigms: Gross Domestic Product (GDP) boosting metrics such as industrial competitiveness and investment de-risking. The World Bank's Just Energy Transition Partnerships (JETPs) exemplify this, blending public finance with private capital in pursuit of “bankable” projects. Loss and Damage upends this entirely. Its logic prioritises compensation for social reproduction; rebuilding housing after cyclones in Mozambique, supporting women's unpaid care labour amid food insecurity in Malawi, restoring informal economies gutted by supply-chain disruption. The measure is not return on investment but restoring dignity after loss.

The third is depoliticisation. Just Transition is packaged as technical: skills audits, infrastructure blueprints, supply-chain mapping. This framing contains the problem, making it manageable and fundable. Loss and Damage is inherently political as it names responsibility, invokes liability, and exposes power asymmetries that technocratic language is designed to obscure. A transition framed without loss misdiagnoses the problem and overlooks a policy gap.

The Political Stakes: Why Loss and Damage and Just Transition Remain Separate

Understanding why this reframing matters requires understanding the distinct political trajectories of Loss and Damage and Just Transition; recognizing that their separation is not accidental.

Emerging from demands by Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and Least Developed Countries (LDCs) in the early 1990s, it took decades to overcome developed countries' resistance. The Warsaw International Mechanism (2013) was a compromise to acknowledge without commitment. The breakthrough to establish a dedicated Fund came after sustained pressure from developing countries, amplified by youth movements and civil society. Even then, the operationalization came with initial capitalization falling dramatically short of needs. Critically, Loss and Damage centres attribution of harm and allocation of responsibility, as it asks: who caused this damage, and who must pay for it? This is why developed countries insisted on non-liability language in COP decisions, the political and legal implications of acknowledging responsibility are profound.

Just Transition, by contrast, was embraced through co-optation. Rooted in labour movement advocacy dating back to the 1970s, it entered negotiations as a concern about workers in carbon-intensive industries facing job losses. Unlike Loss and Damage, it has been readily embraced by developed countries because it can be framed as forward-looking mitigation policy rather than backward-looking accountability. This reframing threatens entrenched interests in market-driven climate governance. Introducing reparative considerations into transition frameworks would disrupt the legal and financial scaffolding that allows for climate finance to be presented as investments rather than obligation.

What a Loss and Damage Lens Actually Changes

Without a Loss and Damage lens, Just Transition quietly relocates the costs of decarbonisation onto those who neither caused the problem nor have the fiscal capacity to absorb it. Reframing Just Transition through Loss and Damage transforms the core elements of the process from being cosmetic. It shifts the following;

The object of transition from energy systems to social systems under climate stress. In developing countries health systems overwhelmed by heatwaves, flooded informal housing in low-income periphery areas, food systems eroded by compounding crop failures; informal economies severed from climate-disrupted supply chains are the relevant objects rather than grids and gigafactories. For coal-dependent economies like Botswana, where NDP12 emphasises economic diversification away from coal and diamonds, this reframing would mean embedding loss-responsive governance into the transition framework itself, not treating Adaptation and Loss and Damage as separate tracks managed by different ministries.

The subject of responsibility from domestic policy choices to historical emitters and structural inequality. The transition does not become a singular national policy challenge but a transnationally owed obligation. Echoed by frontline communities and a reflection of NDCs in Africa, coal phase-out, mining diversification, or clean energy initiatives cannot shoulder the financial burden alone. The atmospheric harm embedded in today's climate impacts was accumulated primarily by wealthy industrialised nations over more than a century.

The politics of legitimacy in ways that matter profoundly for implementation. The dominant justification for transitions that say, "this is good for growth," "this will create jobs," "this attracts investment," ring hollow in communities that have experienced only loss. Loss and Damage offers a different register: "this is owed because harm occurred." This reframes public consent for phase-outs (why accept mine closures without reparations?), recontextualises resistance from affected workers and communities, and rebuilds eroding trust in climate institutions. In Kenya's tea-growing regions, where droughts have devastated yields, or in Botswana's Okavango Delta communities, where cattle-based livelihoods are unravelling, repair is a more legible and motivating frame than investment.

The Urgency of Reframing: Why Communities Cannot Wait

Three converging realities make the case not merely compelling but pressing.

First, climate impacts are accelerating faster than decarbonisation. Record heat events across East Africa and Southern Asia in 2024, combined with barely perceptible global emissions reductions, mean that the cumulative harm absorbed by frontline communities grows with every year that reparative logic is excluded from transition frameworks.

Second, political backlash against transition is intensifying. From European farmer protests to South African coal communities to Pacific island governments confronting existential displacement, the word "just" is increasingly received with scepticism. Transition without repair does not feel just to those who have already been harmed. This is a concerning structural problem.

Third, the legitimacy of global climate institutions is weakening. The Fund Responding to Loss and Damage (FrLD)'s scale doesn't meet the need for **\$130 - \$940 billion** for 2025 alone, against pledges of **\$741 - \$789 million**, has already deepened distrust among the most affected nations. A Just Equitable Transition architecture shouldn't continue to ignore Loss and Damage when the latter will amplify this delegitimisation, it risks becoming a developed vs. developing countries process for managing decline which won't be a justification for repairing harm.

The 2025 Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice on Climate Change sharpens these stakes. The Court affirmed States' obligations under international law to protect the climate system for present and future generations, recognizing differentiated responsibilities based on historical contributions. This legal clarity creates new pressure: States can no longer claim that Loss and Damage is merely a political reference rather than a legal obligation. Just Transition mechanisms designed without reference to these obligations are, at minimum, politically unsustainable.

Integrating Loss and Damage into Just Transition for Decision-Makers and Advocates

The evolution required is both technical and conceptual. Just Transition must move from a framework for managing distribution across a stable system to a framework for governing in conditions of irreversible loss. For developing countries this means integrating Loss&Damage principles directly into national planning instruments, rather than treating them as the domain of a separate international fund. It means designing transition support around what has been lost as well as what might be gained. And it means accepting that the political legitimacy of climate governance depends on this reparative turn being visible and real, not rhetorical.

Conclusion

The dominant question in Just Transition discourse has been: how do we make the forward-looking transition equitable and fair?

The question Loss and Damage forces us to confront is: how do we govern when the world we are transitioning from has already been lost?

This is not a subsidiary question to be addressed after the "real" work of transition planning is complete. It is a foundational question that determines whether transition frameworks will be perceived as just by those experiencing them, and therefore whether they will be politically viable. The ICJ advisory Opinion(2025), the ILC Articles on State Responsibility, and the mounting pressure from frontline communities and youth movements have created a moment of possibility. The question is whether decision-makers will seize it or whether the operationalization of Just Transition mechanisms will become another exercise in managing the appearance of justice while avoiding its substance. The stakes could not be higher. The time for structured ambiguity has passed. The choice is ours!