



## What is a “Just Transition” and why should O&G workers care?

by Alison Isherwood

A [2020 survey](#) of 1,546 UK O&G workers found that 91% of respondents had not heard of the term *Just Transition* despite being at the heart of its intentions. Therefore I decided it was a worthy addition to our Net Zero 101 series!

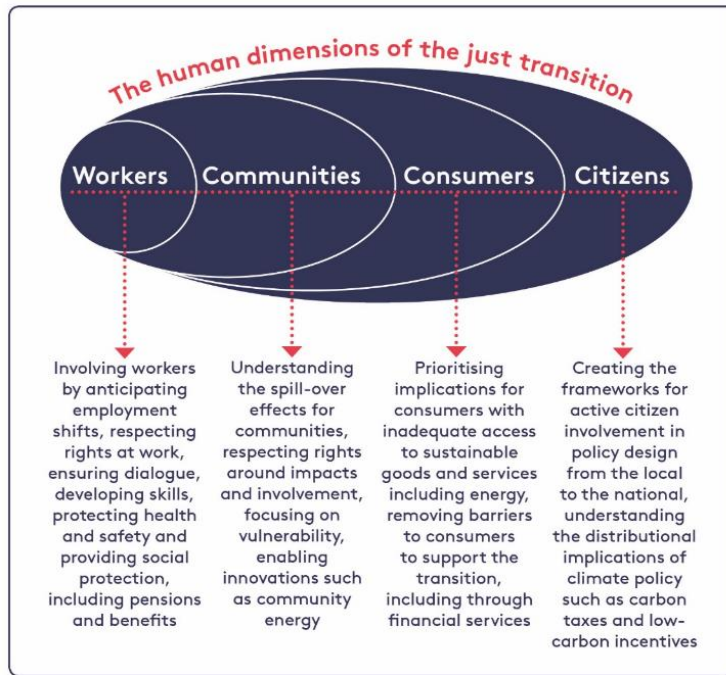


Earth Day Protesters 1970's

The concept of a *Just Transition* emerged in North America in the 1970's when trade unions fought to protect workers' rights while acknowledging the need for more stringent environmental regulation. If chemical plants or coal mines had to close then the workers and their communities needed support. It was a coming together of labour and environmental activism. However the term has only been used more widely since 2015 when it was included in the Paris Agreement<sup>2</sup> and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) published global *Just Transition* guidelines<sup>3</sup> to support governments in developing policy that “anticipates impact on employment” and provides “adequate opportunity for skills development and social dialogue”. This captures two fundamental elements of a *Just Transition*, long term skills and employment planning and giving

workers a voice. It also suggests that governments hold the ultimate responsibility for ensuring a *Just Transition*.

The 2019 EU Green Deal (obviously no longer applicable in the UK) proposes providing “...tailored financial and practical support...” for workers moving away from hydrocarbon based industries, and includes a *Just Transition Mechanism*<sup>4</sup> to ensure they “leave no-one behind”. This is a poignant phrase that I think sums up *Just Transition* rather nicely. Some take the definition of *Just Transition* far beyond the protection of fossil fuel workers, extending it to the cascading human impact of climate response across society<sup>5</sup> or viewing energy transition as an opportunity to fundamentally change our economic system and reduce inequalities<sup>6</sup>. However if we focus, for now, on fossil fuel workers what does “protecting” them mean? To me it is about much more than financial compensation, it is about empowering and preparing workers to play their role in the future of energy and helping them maintain their sense of purpose through the energy transition. It is about ensuring that there is focus on the human aspect of the transition in order to get buy-in for the transition across all parts of society, as without that it will not happen with the urgency required. The recent UK climate assembly<sup>7</sup> was one attempt at this but received limited publicity.



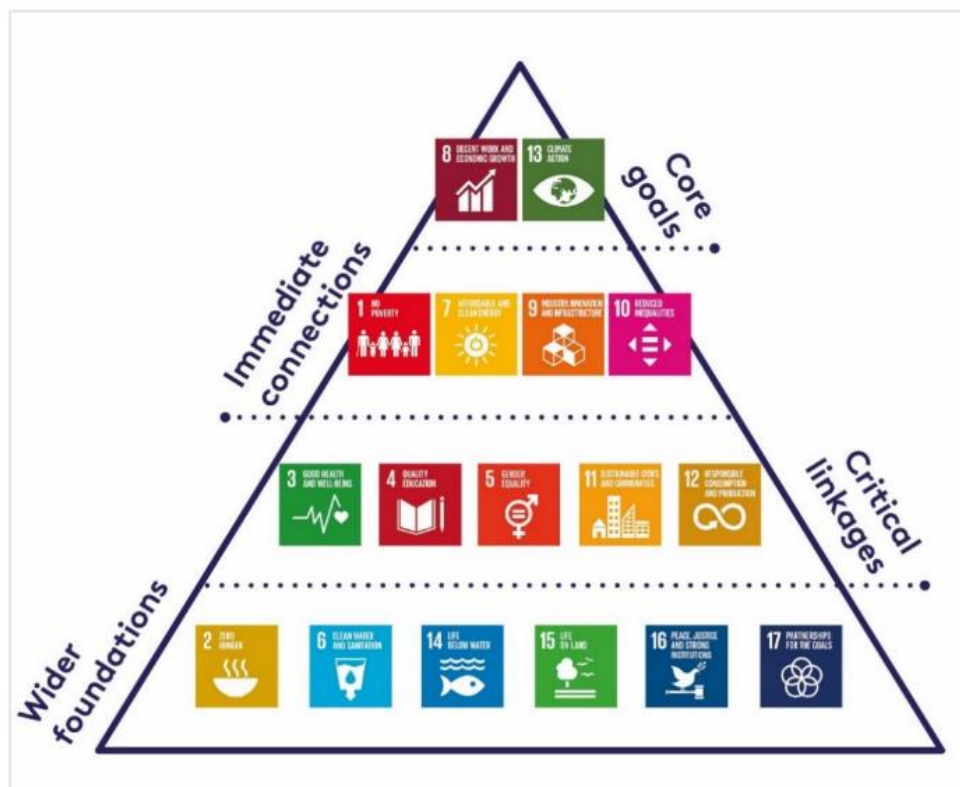
Robins et al (2019)<sup>5</sup>

**So what is being done in the UK to ensure a just transition for O&G workers?** I am pleased to say that a lot of foundations have been laid over the last year, but Scotland are ahead of the rest of the UK. The Scottish government formed the Just Transition Commission (JTC) in early 2019 to decide how the ILO guidelines should be implemented in Scotland with a final report due Jan 2021<sup>8</sup>. In late 2020 Scotland also announced a £25 million National Transition Training fund<sup>9</sup> and plans for establishing a “Green Job Skills Hub” through Skills Development Scotland (SDS)<sup>10</sup>. Skills is a devolved issue and the comparable UK-wide skills commission, UKCES, closed in 2017. While the UK government do not use the phrase *Just Transition*, in November 2020 they announced the launch of a *Green Jobs Taskforce* which states as one of its main aims to “support workers in high carbon transitioning sectors to retrain in new green technologies”<sup>11</sup>. Hopefully this taskforce can play a similar role to Scotland’s SDS and JTC for the wider UK O&G workforce. Given more than 60% of UK O&G workers reside outside of Scotland<sup>12</sup> this is important.

No UK-wide funding for skills development has been announced yet however the recent UK government Energy White paper suggested that a *North Sea Transition Deal*

will be agreed in the first half of 2021 to ensure we “retain existing skills and capabilities in the O&G sector to give the UK first move advantage in emerging low-carbon sectors”<sup>13</sup>.

While governments may hold the ultimate responsibility for a *Just Transition*, proactive action at business and worker level, including through professional societies such as SPE, can help optimise and guide the direction of that transition, especially in the area of upskilling. One promising initiative is being led by OPITO, the not-for-profit energy industry skills body. In late 2019 OPITO formed the Energy Skills Alliance (ESA), with representatives from O&G, nuclear and renewables, government bodies and trade unions, to “help create an integrated skills strategy for a net zero UK energy industry”<sup>14</sup>. This work is ongoing, with no official workplan, timeline or results published to date but I linked into those involved in this initiative through my University studies. I hope over the coming months we will be able to share more information with our membership on how we can ensure subsurface professionals get the practical support they need for a *Just Transition* through the ESA or other initiatives.



Source: Adapted from Robins et al. (2018b)

### **Just Transition & The Sustainable Development Goals**

My personal opinion is that the use of the phrase *Just Transition*, and the dialogue and activity surrounding it, can play an important role in achieving a balance between the social, economic and environmental elements of sustainability as we strive for net zero. Many people are now strongly focused on reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and rightly so, but *climate action (goal 13)* is just one of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These 17 goals cover a wide spectrum of interconnected environmental, social and economic targets, including *decent work and economic growth (goal 8)* and providing *affordable and clean energy (goal 7)*. As energy professionals I believe we all have a responsibility to help others understand the interplay of these SDGs goals, including the continued role of O&G, at the same time as proactively working to secure our own *Just Transition*. My priority goal as Net Zero Committee Chair at London SPE is to help facilitate this process.

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