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### **The regional just transition melting pot: whether conceptualization meets practice?**

The just transition, seen as a socially responsible approach to implementing large-scale climate-friendly actions, mainly aimed at reducing emissions, is currently being facilitated by the European Union and its Member States. The support is being offered within the framework of the European Green Deal policy with a specific measure targeting regions in transition, i.e. the Just Transition Fund (JTF). However, the just or fair approaches to aligning the pro-climate / low-carbon / energy transition policy initiatives with the socio-economic fundamentals of countries, regions and local communities have been emerging across the globe.

This raised an **increased interest in the academic community and think tanks** concerning the approaches, typologies and impacts of this transition. The discussion is the domain of human / socio-economic geographers, sociologists, political scientists, economists, and urban planners. Naturally, it entered the mainstream of regional science. Ipieca's report (2022) shows that the conceptualization emerges from practice in different sectors: intergovernmental, non-governmental organizations / think tanks, human rights, investment and finance, business, labour organizations, benchmarking and academia. While Wang and Lo (2021) research-wise structure the concept in five themes, i.e. just transition as a labor-oriented concept, just transition as an integrated framework for justice, just transition as a theory of socio-technical transition, just transition as a governance strategy, and just transition as public perception. In a territorialized approach, Bridge et al. (2013), even before the just transition term was coined, pinpointed that this kind of transition needs attention within the six concepts, namely: location, landscape, territoriality, spatial differentiation, scaling, and spatial embeddedness.

The presented paper is however **mainly inspired by** Stark's (Stark et al. 2022) work on the centrality of justice theory as well as the implications of the relative ambiguity with which governance models and theory have been conceptualized. The authors describe the "why" (justice) and the "how" (governance of transitions) of just transitions, and how these relate to the "what" (worker retraining, early retirement, regional development programmes, and so forth) and show this focus area as an opportunity for future academic examination. This perspective ideally matches our current research experiences.

The main source of these **experiences originates from the EU-funded (Horizon) BOLSTER project** that aims to understand how marginalised communities are affected by climate policies and whether involving them in decision-making processes increases the support for transition plans. In 2022-2023 we have organised a series of individual in-depth interviews and focus group interviews, enriched with creativity workshops, stakeholder analysis and desk research to obtain a panorama of perspectives on how the just transition process is governed in the seven EU carbon-intensive regions.

In the proposed paper we **focus on the Slaskie (Silesia) region in Poland**. It is one of the industrial hotspots of Europe and the place where coal mining, coke production, and

coal-based energy and steel production still operate in quite large numbers (over 100 thousand employees plus employed in the value chain companies). However, the structure of the regional economy is fairly diversified and strong. The region is well and densely populated (over 4.5 mln citizens, 368 inhabitants per square kilometre). It is also the main European beneficiary of the JTF. For these reasons, the complexity and advancement of the just-transition-related processes are enormous here and incomparable to any other location in Europe. The Territorial Just Transition Plan for the region and the JTF funding are incorporated into the regional operational programme, serving a wide range of measures governed regionally (listed at the end).

Our **research objective is to cross-check whether in case of Silesia the conceptual / academic framework of the just transition meets the framework of the funding**. The latter is obviously the resultant of the regional consensus and the limitations imposed by the Just Transition Fund Regulation (EU 2021/1056). Special attention is given to the notion of transition management (Loorbach 2007 and later; Hölscher et al. 2019) i.e. to the governance experimentation setting that seeks to empower individuals and communities to shape sustainability in their own environments, and in doing so contribute to the desired transitions to sustainability.

Thus we primarily **focus on** the state of the art review concerning the just transition and on the analysis of the empirical evidence, i.e. the submissions being the answers to the JTF's calls for proposals. We cover the measures listed below and specifically those that are expected to boost bottom up initiatives and empower communities, including the lagging behind, i.e. the measure 10.24.

This is currently the research in progress. However the initial results allow some **hypotheses** to be further tested in February-July 2024. We expect that the governance mechanisms are "path-dependant". They strongly rely upon the tools, techniques and routines used for the "good-old-EU-money". This enables efficiency and coordination. However, has no or negative impact on boosting small-scale bottom-up initiatives and enabling community empowerment. Municipalities and regional authorities tend to promote large-scale projects, so the syndromes of "the usual suspects" and "business as usual" are quite clearly visible. In case of the measures targeting the inclusion and community initiatives, we can see the "first mover advantage" taken by those who have already been in the funding game. Therefore the outreach to potentially left behind citizens is probably minor.

Through the proposed paper we want to offer **value in the areas of**: theory-practice integration (bridging academic theories with real-life evidence from the BOLSTER project); empirical analysis (use of various data collection methods); governance mechanisms (transition management patterns at the local level); examination of funding frameworks (alignment with the regulations, regional consensus and academic models); evaluation of implementation challenges (understanding potential gaps in policy design and execution, especially regarding community inclusion and empowerment); regional focus on Silesia (a detailed case study of a specific, industrially significant European region). The paper will allow formulation of policy recommendations concerning the listed issues.

***Annex - The list of JTF measures in Silesia (analysed for the paper):***

***10.01 Use of brownfields for regional development through business investment***

- 10.02 Research, development and innovation in enterprises for transition*
- 10.03 Support of SMEs for transition*
- 10.04 Support of large enterprises for transition*
- 10.05 Innovative infrastructure to support the economy*
- 10.06 Development of distributed energy based on renewable energy sources*
- 10.07 Reclamation of post-industrial, devastated, degraded land for environmental purposes*
- 10.08 Improvement of water relations in the area of influence of mines*
- 10.09 Reuse of post-industrial, devastated, degraded land for regional development purposes*
- 10.10 Support for transition planning*
- 10.11 Systemic management of brownfield sites*
- 10.12 Improving the mobility of the region's population and transport cohesion of mining subregions*
- 10.13 Higher education infrastructure for transition*
- 10.14 Vocational training infrastructure*
- 10.15 Use of endogenous potential of mining subregions*
- 10.16 Development of entrepreneurship*
- 10.17 Adult education*
- 10.20 Support for starting a business*
- 10.22 Regional observatory of the transition process*
- 10.23 Vocational education in the process of just transition of the region*
- 10.24 Social inclusion - strengthening the process of just transition*
- 10.25 Development of higher education in line with the needs of the green economy*
- 10.26 Strengthening the process of just transition in the region*