



Just transitions and resilience in contexts of conflict and fragility: the need for a transformative approach

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Countries affected by conflict and fragility are disproportionately affected by climate crises that are not of their making. Calls for Just Transitions (JTs) to post-carbon societies are accelerating, with scholarly attention to these contexts. This article critically reviews literature on JTs and environmental peacebuilding for insights and evidence to build a foundation for more informed analysis and action. We argue that durable transition pathways in such contexts require a transformative, political economy lens. Such a lens goes beyond a focus on adaptation, seeking solutions that address the root causes across crises, supporting accountability and financial responsibility for climate crisis consequences, and framing action around measures that build transformative resilience at multiple scales.

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Introduction

Violent conflict in the world is not subsiding, and neither, as climate trends suggest, are climate-related crises. These crises are also increasingly intermixing with and reinforcing other forms of crisis, alongside fragility,

poverty, and inequality. While a vast, compelling set of statistics reveals how developed countries are disproportionately responsible for climate change,¹ countries affected by conflict and fragility are experiencing disproportionate effects of the climate crisis. Of the 1.3 billion people in the world exposed to climate hazards, 40% of these are in conflict-prone and fragile states ([43], e856), most of which are in the Global South.

As calls for climate action mount, efforts to find durable pathways to reduce the propensity, scale, and impact of such crises are engaging the notion of Just Transition (JT). While conceptual consensus remains challenged, most definitions reflect the core need to pursue sustainability for the planet on the one hand, and justice for the most vulnerable in society, on the other. The concept of resilience, too, is increasingly featured in JT plans (and financing them), framed around supporting communities to confront disasters through adaptation (adjusting natural or human systems in response to actual or expected climatic stimuli) [76].

Despite a burgeoning focus on what JTs entail in different contexts, there is paltry attention focused on countries affected by conflict and fragility. A wide literature review across google scholar, academia.edu, and broad library and gray literature reveals little.² This includes literature focused on contexts with intersecting crises, despite growing commitments to build more synergistic approaches across the peace, humanitarian, development, and environmental enterprises. Academic and gray (civil society) literature, while reflecting attention to the specific challenges and needs of JTs in the Global South³ (see [8,42••]), also does not give specific attention to these contexts. Neither do policy actors, who tend to frame JTs around enabling low-carbon futures and greening advanced, emerging, developing,

¹ High and upper-middle income countries account for less than half of the world's total population and yet were responsible for over 80% of all CO₂ emissions in 2021. (see [5]).

² Conferences similarly reveal the gap. At the 2022 Earth System Governance Conference with 400+ presentations, none addressed these contexts.

³ 'Global South', often used to describe developing countries, is a 'meta-category' with plural meanings [79]. It often denotes countries' political and institutional marginalization and shared historical experiences of colonialism ([14], 4–5). We utilize this term given its alignment to the critical orientation of this piece, employing 'developing country' and other terms as the authors use them.

and even ‘mineral rich’ economies [39,61,82]. While countries affected by conflict and fragility tend to be disproportionately and increasingly located in the Global South,⁴ understanding their specific contexts remains paramount for crafting relevant and sustainable JTs that also support inclusive peace and development, and pathways out of fragility.

To address this gap, building a foundation for informed thinking and action, we explore JT debates, framings, and evidence, reflecting on key trends in practice, including how transformative notions of resilience feature. We then turn to environmental peacebuilding literature to pull insights, crafting key priorities to guide research and policy efforts for JTs in contexts affected by conflict and fragility.

This paper argues that a transformative lens is needed to guide analysis and action on JTs in these contexts. Concurring with the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), JTs should “tackle the root causes of injustice and unsustainability that are part and parcel of the current political economy” ([57], 29). A transformative lens places the question of climate inequity (including the causes, as well as disproportionate burdens and impacts) at the fore, recognizing the great benefits accrued in the Global North through the dominant political economy and growth model, and the disproportionate burdens accrued to those with less power, resources, and capacity to address them. Transformative, political economy approaches also lie in the structural tradition of peace studies [51,52] and can further support the development of synergistic responses to interlinked crises common across these settings.

Transformative JTs, especially in countries affected by conflict and fragility (which often face greater climate risks and the potential for disasters), should also be underpinned by bold notions of *transformative* resilience. While absorptive and adaptive dimensions of resilience — focusing respectively on systems coping or adjusting to crisis — play important roles,⁵ they pay insufficient attention to issues of social agency, power, and the deep structures underpinning the potential for needed transformative change ([18,31], 71; [25], 87). They also generally absolve Global North responsibility in fostering crises that primarily Global South societies confront [20].

⁴ The World Bank (n.d(b)) [83] projects that by 2024, the total numbers of extreme poor in countries affected by conflict, fragility, and violence will surpass those in the rest of the world. This number is projected to increase to 59% by 2030.

⁵ The ‘3 D’ (absorptive–adaptive–transformative capacities) resilience framing popular among aid-oriented policymakers suggests all three capacities are varyingly required in different contexts to tackle different shocks and stressors ([13], 3–4).

Transformative approaches to JTs, as conceptualized here, seek solutions that address the root causes of crisis (including conflict and disasters), supporting accountability and financial responsibility for climate crisis consequences, and framing action around measures that build transformative resilience at multiple scales. These efforts hold promise, we argue, for promoting peace, preventing future crises, and safeguarding our global public goods. As argued by socio-ecological, social, and development schools of resilience, transformative approaches are also the driver of complex systems’ adaptive capacity and their long-term structural change ([6], 16; [55]).

Moving toward transformative just transitions

JTs are commonly associated with transitioning away from fossil fuels toward sustainable economies [69,77], advancing equity and reducing the transition’s harmful and unequally distributed impacts ([21], 439; [36,81••], 3). They have been varyingly theorized and categorized, including by ideological perspectives and political beliefs [16,35,57], themes [81••], and country contexts [12,42••,66]. Here, we engage the ideological, primarily, to support framing the paper’s wider arguments around both challenges and pathways to better understand JTs in the context of conflict and fragility.

Four framings of JTs as offered by UNRISD [57], reflecting the wider literature, are ‘status quo’, ‘managerial reform’, ‘structural reform’, and ‘transformative’. Status quo tends to be framed around ‘green capitalism’, mainstreaming sustainability into hegemonic economic growth models. Managerial reform approaches — or ‘socio-technical transitions’ go further [81••] — integrating justice and equity concerns in still largely technocratic JTs that fail to challenge the hegemonic global political economy ([57], 13). More disruptive are structural and institutional change approaches acknowledging disproportionate environmental and social burdens, calling for distributive and procedural justice (ibid. 14) and more inclusive and equitable decision-making processes [81••].

Calls for more far-reaching transformative approaches to JTs, from varied policy literatures with foundations in political economy and political ecology, seek to tackle the root causes of climate and environmental injustices and inequalities, socio-economic inequalities, and ecological and environmental degradations ([78], 263; [16], 1014). These aim to systemically change, or overhaul, dominant economic models driving the climate crisis, advancing new forms of development, and reconfiguring the human-nature relationship [2,22]. The aspirational treatment of JTs, where trade-offs are glossed over and win-win scenarios are advocated, is also of concern [21,54]. Illustrative, the Global North’s JT aspirations

often require the quick extraction of minerals that can come at the expense of Global South transitions ([42••], 5,11; [10]). Bold propositions to advance JTs include calls for a new eco-social contract that reconfigures power relations [77] and social democracies built on local power [42••].

At the core of transformative JTs, we argue, lies the need for transformative resilience at multiple scales to address the root causes of shocks and stressors that make resilience unattainable for so many. This aligns with the recognition that resilience in adaptive systems is shaped by multiple, cross-scale interactions and influences [37,80]. It also reflects the broad movement in the literature in transformative directions as scholars aim to confront critiques that resilience thinking has not effectively addressed issues of power, marginalization, and the external and structural factors that fuel these scourges [7,18]. Resilience as practiced tends to privilege underlying inequalities ([18], 71–72), tied to the very nature of capitalist social relations — that in turn undermine the resilience of local communities [47]. Transformative resilience can offer a promising lens to tackle these issues across scales. Measures could include targeting development and climate finance to communities, ensuring national wealth distribution programs (such as universal basic income), and working toward more inclusive and equitable supply chains ([70], 7). Addressing vulnerability is key, but also requires special attention to the root causes, including poverty perpetuation and oppression. This will also serve to “break out of the normal trajectories leading to the normality of disasters” ([41], S136, S138).

Calls for ‘just resilience’, ‘globally just resilience’, and ‘disruptive resilience’ [9•,26,44] reflect this transformative use of the term. Confronting ‘disruptive risks’ (i.e. Covid-19) involves harnessing opportunities to rework systems and rules that guide them, transforming failing institutions and structural legacies, and recrafting policy visions in far more inclusive ways [49]. ‘Disruptive resilience’ measures can also be taken by local actors and institutions, (i.e. relying on local knowledge to find quick and more locally relevant solutions to risks) [9•]. However, while transformative resilience is being embraced by policy and academia, its operationalization in ways that tackle political economy dimensions at higher levels and scales will require ongoing attention [6].⁶

How to deliver climate finance also inspires heated debate with implications for the transformative potential of JTs. The international climate finance architecture,

heavily Global North-driven, has allocated more finance to techno-economic solutions for low-carbon practices supporting a mitigation agenda [73], while the JT priorities of many Global South countries are rooted in securing economic development, adaptation, and greater resilience against future shocks. While their unique challenges include large informal labor forces, low-energy security, and high-energy poverty [8•], they are rightly concerned about having to pay for the consequences of a climate crisis they did not cause and cannot afford.

Many developing countries and civil society actors globally are advancing climate justice arguments through policy proposals reflecting a transformative lens. The creation of a loss and damage fund at the 2022 COP27 for developed countries to compensate developing countries for economic and noneconomic losses is illustrative. However, only months before the 2023 COP28, little progress has been made, and questions remain regarding how finance will be tailored to different countries, markets, and institutions ([33], 1). Meanwhile, developed countries are still failing to deliver the \$100 billion per year (2010–2020) for adaptation and mitigation purposes — a 2009 Copenhagen Summit pledge. Furthermore, developing countries in greatest need of adaptation face an immense adaptation financing gap [19,4,62,75]. These conditions threaten JTs (not to mention transformative ones) in the Global South (see [63•]), and especially in countries affected by conflict and fragility with intersecting crises.

Conflict, fragility, the environment, and just transitions

A wide evidence-based consensus suggests that while there may not be direct causal relationships between the climate crisis and conflict, analyses increasingly illustrate the multidirectional and compounding nature of threats, with myriad forms of intersectionality. As threats multiply, the social, political, and economic impacts and consequences of these threats become greater for those more vulnerable, and especially women [17,27,46,71]. While countries affected by conflict and fragility, and increasingly by environmental crises, share many legacies and characteristics of those of the Global South, they require context-specific attention.

Common features that increase vulnerability of such countries to climate crisis that need factoring into interventions include their weak institutions (as reflected in the New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States [2011] framing)⁷ and their historical and structural legacies (i.e. structural cleavages, institutional legacies,

⁶ For example, the IPCC [40] definition of resilience acknowledges its transformative capacity generally, but does not articulate its potential to challenge the existing global political economy.

⁷ https://www.pbsbdialogue.org/media/filer_public/07/69/07692de0-3557-494e-918e-18df00e9cf73/the_new_deal.pdf

and histories of violent conflict and state formation) ([60], 26). The propensity, well-documented, for these states (and many developing countries [66]) to be dependent upon primary natural resources (i.e. fossil fuels), also challenges their achieving peace, development, and JTs. Oil-producing countries affected by conflict (i.e. Nigeria, Libya, and Timor Leste) feature, while smaller countries hold little power to influence global political economy dynamics, that is, around pricing. High political patronage attached to such income in these contexts further challenges JTs ([15••], 58). Notably, the natural resource wealth of many countries affected by conflict and fragility, if managed effectively, can also support achieving development goals [48], and potentially, JTs.

These contexts also experience unjust, highly disproportionate access to climate finance. Only \$2.1 per person on average is delivered for adaptation in extremely fragile states, compared with \$10.8 in fragile states and \$161.7 in nonfragile states ([68], 3). Project funding follows similar disproportionate patterns (ibid.). Bearing in mind these realities, we ask: what does the evolving environmental peacebuilding literature offer to support framing this analysis?

Turning to the environmental peacebuilding literature for insights, Ide et al.'s [38••] useful mapping explores shifts in this research responding to changing contexts, politics, and issue awareness. While the first 'generation' (from 2000) grew attention to shared environmental problems as a basis for peace-making, the second (from 2009) turned to the role of natural resources in intrastate, post-conflict settings. Issues of climate change, energy, and resilience emerged here. The evolving third generation places the environment as an integrative platform to advance peace, sustainability, and development. It is marked by five trends: bottom-up approaches, gender, conflict sensitivity, the use of big data and frontier technology, and monitoring and evaluation.

While undoubtedly important themes, these do not sufficiently speak to our critical inquiry. Ide et al. [38••] observe a spattering of critical literature spotlighting technocratic approaches that obfuscate attention to asymmetrical power relations (i.e. [3]). Their third generation as represented, however, does not build these needed conversations. While gender (i.e. [28]) and bottom-up approaches (i.e. [11]) are critical to transformative resilience, they will not, on their own, tackle the persistent power asymmetries and intersectional inequities underpinning the climate crisis, conflict, and fragility. Critical peacebuilding scholars have pushed against a wholesale adoption of the 'local turn' scholarly focus for similar reasons [52,64]. Here, we highlight key growing areas reflecting a transformative lens that can support framing JTs in contexts affected by conflict and fragility.

First, acknowledging historic critiques around the notion of whether and how to address the root causes, policy actors have nonetheless agreed this is a sustaining peace necessity.⁸ While policy literatures offer nuanced analysis of conflict–climate crisis intersections and potential pathways forward, they tend to gloss over *actual* root causes of crises, depoliticizing the issues. Illustrative, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute expansive *Environment of Peace* report frames JT efforts around conflict sensitivity and risk reduction ([15••], 79), yet the root causes are identified as deforestation and other areas of the environment decline, rather than the political economy drivers that fuel climate injustice and conflict. Critical peacebuilding scholars have similarly observed that despite the expansive literature locating causation in hierarchies of power and structural violence within our global political economy, local mal-dispositions are often the focus of intervention [67].

With respect to resilience, peacebuilding scholars have engaged both adaptive and transformative notions. While both are concerned with the political and social resilience capacities required to anticipate and adapt to crisis, adaptive perspectives tend to theorize resilience in relation to complexity and a focus on endogenous capacities to self-organize and respond (i.e. [24]), while transformative perspectives place more emphasis on questions of power, transforming conflict structures be they endogenous or exogenous in the process (i.e. [34,53], 3). Conversations between these perspectives are needed.

New analysis is also arising around transformative resilience in climate crisis contexts. [34] argues that climate adaptation programs in cities are hampered by structural issues — that is, insufficient resources and capacities. Achieving transformative resilience requires “negotiated, calibrated and inclusive process[es]” and “joint engagement with funding investments to enable the required transformative change.” Nicoson's [58] ‘climate resilient peace’ framework, alternatively, argues for a degrowth strategy to address asymmetrical power and resource imbalances accrued to climate change.

Not observed explicitly in Ide et al.'s [38••] analysis is the movement to establish the humanitarian–development–peace (HDP) nexus across policy and practice communities. This nexus responds to the intersecting threats and associated complexity across the three fields [30,34,59] and reflects an ‘integrated platform’ in practice. It builds upon other nexuses (i.e. conflict–disaster, humanitarian–development, and climate security), embracing synergistic analysis, methods, and response mechanisms toward consolidating capa-

⁸ This is reflected in twin Security Council and General Assembly Resolutions (A/RES/70/262 and S/RES/2282).

cities and resources to foster and sustain resilience across societies and systems. The HDP nexus goes beyond an emergency focus of other nexuses and seeks to engage the root causes [71]. Scholars are arguing that synergistic action needs to occur “across scales, stakeholders and geographies” [1]. Morales-Muñoz et al. [56] use systems thinking and co-benefits theory to attempt this, identifying high-value areas for integrated targeted action on interlinked crises. More such efforts are needed, and must employ a transformative lens to ensure that co-ordination, systems analysis, and a focus on co-benefits serve transformative outcomes.

Finally, we concur with the importance of conflict sensitivity to properly account for the conflict context in programming [38••] and in planning and implementing JTs. The push across scholarly and policy literature for this in climate programming is vital (i.e. [15••,23,68]) — and also needs to occur in financing — a practice mainstreamed, that is, in the UN Peacebuilding Fund [29]. This is particularly key in conflict contexts with heightened vulnerability to threat, that are being asked to undertake adaptation and mitigation — inherently change-oriented processes. Rising evidence reveals how such measures can exacerbate conflict [65]. Supporting integrative efforts that speak to multiple threats, conflict analysis informing JTs should accompany vulnerability analysis while both need to be informed by a political economy lens to capture the issues and actors in play, beyond the technical [45,49,72]. Such analysis also needs to apply to the strategic policy level, not just programming.

More such efforts are needed to tackle the complexities across crises. Yet for these to be effective, they need to be tackled systemically and with epistemological pluralism [49,50]. They need to be informed by conflict and political economy analyses that target the root causes of crisis and vulnerability, engaging actors and solutions at all levels, while not shying away from questions of moral and financial responsibility.

Conclusions

At the 2022 United Nations Climate Change Conference, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres emphasized the need for a “Climate Solidarity pact” to prevent a ‘Collective Suicide pact’ should climate negotiations fail [74]. This statement reflects the urgent need for transformative JTs everywhere, but especially in countries that have contributed little to the crisis and yet feel its most dramatic consequences. To address the observed literature gap, we have drawn insights across several literatures to inform transformative JT framing, planning, and action in such countries. Adopting a transformative, political economy lens, key priorities include:

- *Pursuing JTs in context- and conflict-sensitive ways* — that reflect local priorities and conditions, seeking to ensure that programming does not do harm, and

contributes to transforming conflict systems and building more fair and inclusive ones;

- *Addressing the root causes of climate crisis and conflict.* While a case can be made for addressing proximate drivers of conflict, more immediate risks and threats, and equally and simultaneously, sources of vulnerability, building agreement about the root causes of interlinked crises and working toward their resolution lies at the core of transforming and preventing their reoccurrence and multiplication;
- *Supporting transformative notions of resilience* — and decentering the dominant mitigation and adaptation lenses, directing attention to the systems causing climate crises, and how to transform them through processes prioritizing endogenous capacities and knowledge that will promote sustainability;
- *Building synergistic responses that target local, national, and global levels for multiscalar responses* — through integrative efforts at multiple levels underpinned by a transformative set of agreements, values, and aligned strategic direction;
- *Cultivating processes to advance agreement around moral and fiscal responsibility.* Transformative JTs require climate negotiations to advance agreements around how to fairly compensate Global South countries to address crises not of their making. Meeting the long-overdue climate finance pledges is a critical first step.

It can be said that these priorities are important in all contexts — particularly as we witness shifting awareness about different types of conflict-affected countries across the Global South and Global North. The adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals similarly globalized a commitment to peace across the development framework, for all countries. This is a good thing.

At the same time, the Global North’s moral and fiscal responsibility is key to ensuring that JTs do not perpetuate status quo responses and undermine the resilience of those affected. JTs need to be opportunities for truly transformational change. We acknowledge the monumental political challenges this presents. Yet, such measures are nonetheless imperative elements of transformative JTs that also hold promise for preventing future crises.

Data Availability

No data were used for the research described in the article.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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