

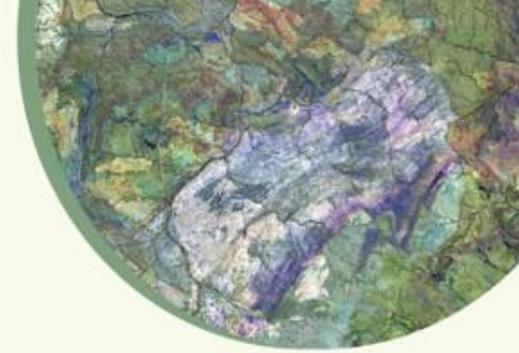
The linkage between the Just Transition and Sustainable Development Goals

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Key-messages/Summary

- Territorial Just Transition Plans (TJTPs) support a range of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for economic growth while supporting the transition to carbon neutrality.
- Meso-level organizations underscore the need for supportive interventions to provide skills across their regions.
- Marginalized communities share these goals but prioritize improvements in their communities and opportunities for their direct engagement through more inclusive decision-making.
- Engaging with meso- and micro-levels supports a contextually relevant framing of just transitions within the SDG framework.
- The priorities of marginalized communities complement the objectives found within TJTPs but were not adequately captured through the TJTP participatory processes.
- Place-based and demand-driven approaches could be helpful for better integrating and addressing their needs.



Introduction

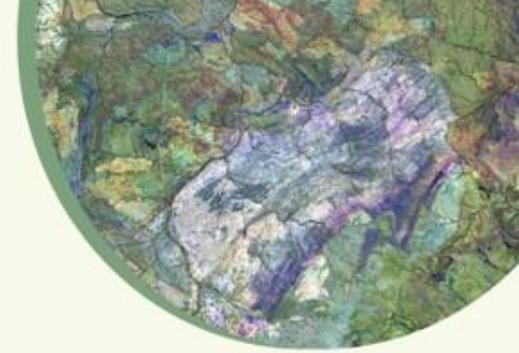
The European Green Deal has the ambitious objective of achieving carbon neutrality for the European Union by 2050. One of its key components is the Just Transition Mechanism with its dedicated Just Transition Fund (JTF). The JTF, which targets specific regions in Europe who may face greater challenges in the transition, aims to ensure that the transition to carbon neutrality is done in a fair manner. Each region eligible for the JTF developed a Territorial Just Transition Plan (TJTP) to guide the implementation of the JTF (EU, 2021). The BOLSTER project studies the just transition processes in seven regions: Hainaut (Belgium), Halle (Germany), Istria (Croatia), Léon (Spain), Prahova (Romania), Stara Zagora (Bulgaria), and Upper Silesia (Poland). The purpose of this policy brief is to illustrate the linkage between Just Transition plans and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in these seven regions.

Globally, just transition processes have been positioned to support the SDGs (UN, 2023). The JTF also aims to achieve the SDGs. From the JTF legislation:

“Reflecting the European Green Deal as the Union’s sustainable growth strategy and the importance of tackling climate change in line with the Union’s commitments to implement the Paris Agreement and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, the JTF is intended to contribute to the mainstreaming of climate action and environmental sustainability” (EU, 2021: 2).



Figure 1. United Nations Sustainable Development Goals



The JTF also supports the SDGs through its aim to ‘leave no one behind.’ To leave no one behind in this context involves protecting “citizens who are most vulnerable to the climate transition.” These marginalized groups, apart from the climate crisis, are fighting against inequalities, poverty, and access to sustainable energy. For workers, it entails helping them “adapt to new employment opportunities”, supporting “their active inclusion into the labour market,” and paying “special attention to vulnerable groups that suffer disproportionately from the adverse effects of the transition, such as workers with disabilities” (EU, 2021: 4).

This puts the focus on certain vulnerable or marginalized groups and aligns with SDG objectives of no poverty (SDG 1), gender equality (SDG 5), employment opportunities for marginalized communities (SDG 8), and reduced inequalities (SDG 10), among other goals.

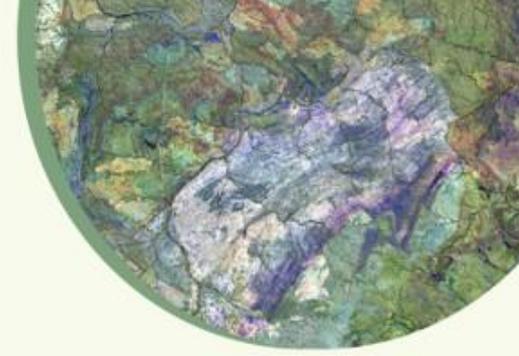


Figure 2. SGD 1, 5, 8 and 10

However, in practice, recent research from the BOLSTER consortium identified that TJTPs tend to generically define marginalized communities, using catch-all terms such as ‘other vulnerable groups.’ These plans thus neglect to unpack specific target groups to prioritize in transition processes. At the same time, TJTPs generalize different categories of people or groups, forcing them to fit into one community, when the actual situation is more nuanced (Bueno Patin & Stapper, 2025).

For instance, in the Hainaut TJTP, training and employing “as many young people as possible” (Government of Wallonia, 2021: 260) for the jobs of tomorrow emerges as a goal. However, insights from BOLSTER multi-actor fora with youth and youth coordinators indicate that realities are sharply different between university-track students and youth that are not in employment, education, or training (or “NEETs”), who require a completely different approach for their integration (Pachova, Horne, et al., 2024).

Relatedly, in certain cases, the way in which TJTPs were coordinated from the



very beginning led to the exclusion of marginalized communities in just transition processes (Clement et al., 2025). This resulted in some key communities being left out of decision-making spaces.

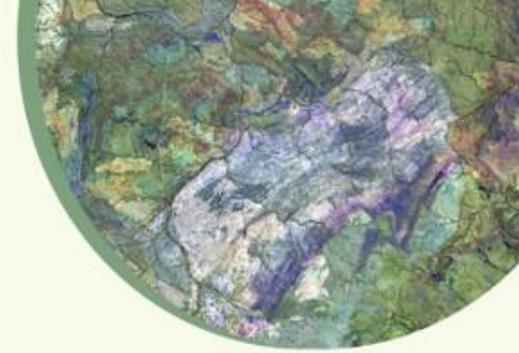
As a result, the BOLSTER project aimed to unpack how TJTPs are contributing to the SDGs and what added value could be achieved by including marginalized communities in decision-making processes. Findings suggest that if the priorities of marginalized communities were considered in official channels, they could fill in important gaps in attaining the SDGs. Including marginalized communities in these decision-making processes would therefore complement the official channels and support a broader and more inclusive realization of the SDGs. It will also increase prosperity and reduce inequality by integrating its objectives into climate change in a fair and equitable way. Furthermore, innovative financial instruments such as crowdfunding can be a solution for energy justice (Šeho & Hodžić, 2024).

Methods

We consider three perceptions, corresponding with different levels of actors. First, we look at the macro-level of just transition processes in each region by studying the TJTPs. Second, we consider a meso-level, represented by so-called Local Just Transition Alliances (LJTAs). Finally, we analyze perceptions of marginalized communities at the local level through Multi-Actor Forums (MAFs).

In brief, we follow the Priority Score Card approach developed for each region that juxtaposes the perceptions of different groups (Pachova, Verán, et al., 2024). We extend this approach through a qualitative analysis of the TJTPs and by applying it to the SDGs as a way of better relating the just transition processes to pre-existing social commitments at a national and global scale.

LJTAs were created in each BOLSTER region. They are groups of individuals from organizations that represent marginalized communities, public bodies, civil organizations, and industries. The LJTAs represent a “middle” or meso-perspective, as they

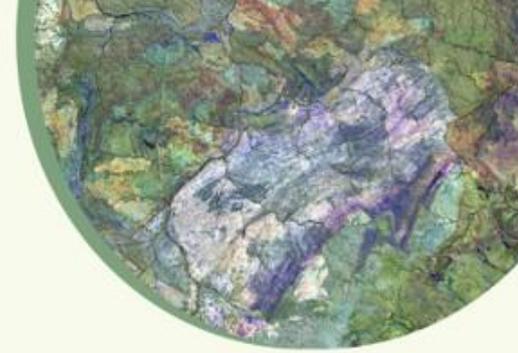


account for views at an organizational level (public, private, civil society) in the regions. In some of the regions analyzed, such as Istria (Croatia), LJTA members were involved in shaping transition policy or decision-making, as they communicated with local stakeholders, entrepreneurs, and craftsmen as an official authority. In other regions, like Hainaut (Belgium), the LJTA members were not involved in shaping the transition policy or in decision-making processes. For the study at hand, three LJTA stakeholder meetings were held in each region. A framework was developed by BOLSTER researchers to guide the meetings and included specific information to collect. This information was documented in regional reports, which were used as the key texts in this analysis (Baron et al., 2024).

A series of MAFs (between 3 and 5) were held in each region. MAFs are used to evaluate how the priorities of marginalized communities would complement the linkages between the JTF and the SDGs, if said communities were involved in decision-making processes. Reports on MAFs were developed in the BOLSTER project

through an in-depth qualitative assessment (through the multi-actor fora and supplemented by interviews with marginalized communities) of the priorities of marginalized communities in each region and their capacities to influence the transition. This analysis was complemented through a participatory prioritization exercise undertaken as a part of the development of local visions and roadmaps for just communities in each BOLSTER region. The reports are used as the key texts for this analysis, representing a local or micro-level perspective of just transition processes.

For all sets of documents (TJTPs, LJTA reports, MAF reports) in each region, each text was coded using the SDG framework as a guide. In the SDG framework, there are 17 goals with a total of 169 targets. In detail, BOLSTER researchers used an excel file with each goal and its various targets, and coded '1' for a given target if text was found in a given document that would support achieving it. These values were added up to indicate the targets and, in aggregate, the goals that were most supported across the different levels/actor groups.



Results

Figure 3 provides a comparison of the SDGs prioritized across the different actor groups.

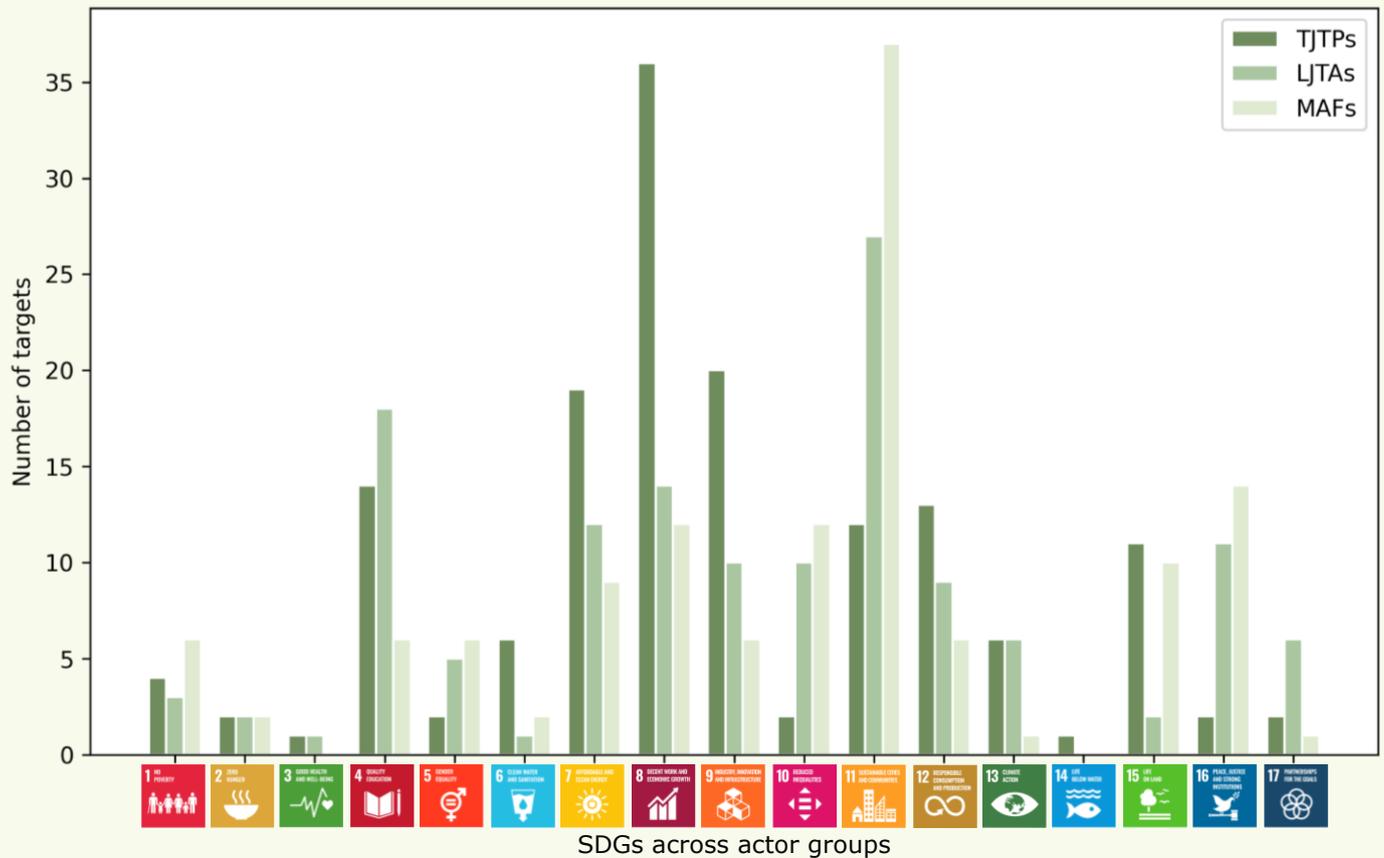
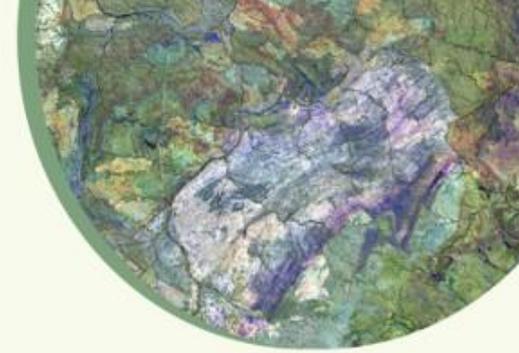


Figure 3: Priorities of SDGs emerging from different actor groups and levels – TJTPs, LJTAs, and MAFs.

From the analysis on TJTPs, SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth) was the most supported goal, followed by SDG 9 (industry, innovation, and infrastructure) and SDG 7 (affordable and clean energy). Table 1 provides details on which SDG targets were the most prevalent in the analysis, showing

the targets that were relevant for almost all (six) or all (seven) of our BOLSTER study regions. TJTPs mainly aim to increase renewable energy capacities; boost economic productivity; create jobs; achieve full employment; increase numbers of youth in education, employment, or training; and enhance



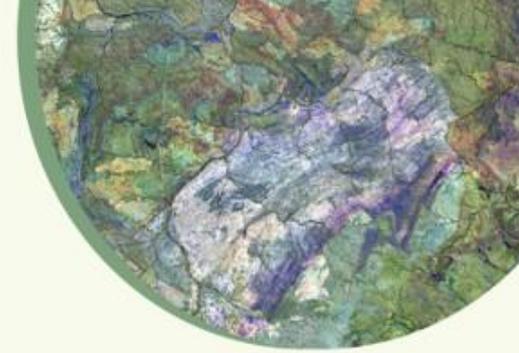
scientific research and technical capabilities.

Table 1: SDG targets most relevant for the seven BOLSTER TJTPs.

Target	Target description	N of regions
 7.2	By 2030, increase substantially the share of renewable energy in the global energy mix.	6
 8.2	Achieve higher levels of economic productivity through diversification, technological upgrading and innovation, including through a focus on high-value added and labour-intensive sectors.	7
 8.3	Promote development-oriented policies that support productive activities, decent job creation, entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation, and encourage the formalization and growth of micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises, including through access to financial services.	7
 8.5	By 2030, achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including for young people and persons with disabilities, and equal pay for work of equal value.	7
 8.6	By 2020, substantially reduce the proportion of youth not in employment, education or training.	6
 9.5	Enhance scientific research, upgrade the technological capabilities of industrial sectors in all countries, in particular developing countries, including, by 2030, encouraging innovation and substantially increasing the number of research and development workers per 1 million people and public and private research and development spending.	7

The next round of analysis was dedicated to analyzing the perceptions of Local Just Transition Alliance groups across the different regions. The most prominent SDGs are SDG 11 (sustainable cities and communities), SDG 4 (quality

education), and then SDG 8. It is noteworthy that while SDGs 16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions) and 17 (partnerships for the goals) are not the most cited in LJTA perceptions, they are substantially more significant than for



TJTPs. Table 2 narrows in on the specific targets. LJTAs prioritize: skill development; educational resources for awareness about sustainable development – linked to the just

transition; accessible green public spaces; and participatory decision-making at all levels.

Table 2: SDG targets most relevant for the seven BOLSTER LJTAs

Target	Target description	N of regions
 4.4	By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship	6
 4.7	By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development	7
 11.7	By 2030, provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities.	7
 16.7	Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels.	7

Moving to the MAFs, which reflect the perceptions and priorities of the marginalized communities engaged throughout BOLSTER fieldwork, SDG 11 emerges as the most prioritized goal, followed by SDG 16, and then – with the same number of targets coded – SDG 8 and SDG 10 (reduced inequalities). Table 3 provides the details of the most relevant targets for marginalized

communities. The MAFs indicate that these communities prioritize social, economic, and inclusion of all people; safe, affordable, accessible, and sustainable transport systems for all; the reduction of negative environmental impacts in their communities, focusing on air quality and waste management; safe, inclusive, and accessible green



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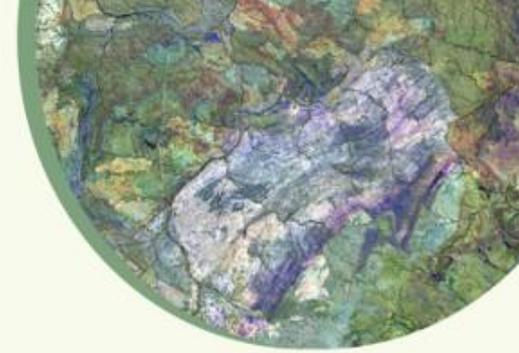
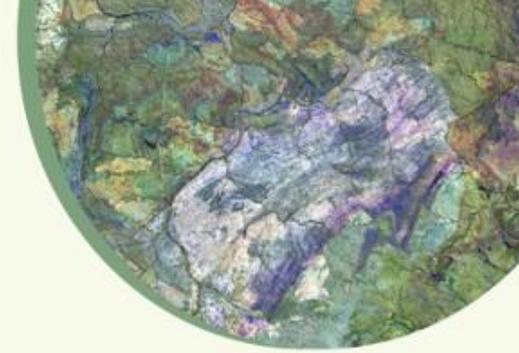


Table 3: SDG targets most relevant for the seven BOLSTER MAFs.

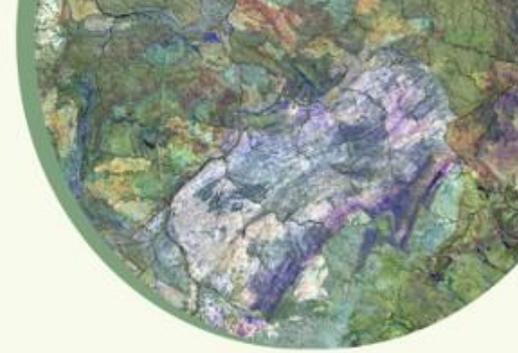
Target	Target description	N of regions
 10.2	By 2030, empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status.	7
 11.2	By 2030, provide access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport systems for all, improving road safety, notably by expanding public transport, with special attention to the needs of those in vulnerable situations, women, children, persons with disabilities and older persons.	6
 11.6	By 2030, reduce the adverse per capita environmental impact of cities, including by paying special attention to air quality and municipal and other waste management.	7
 11.7	By 2030, provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities.	7
 16.7	Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels.	7



Key messages and policy recommendations

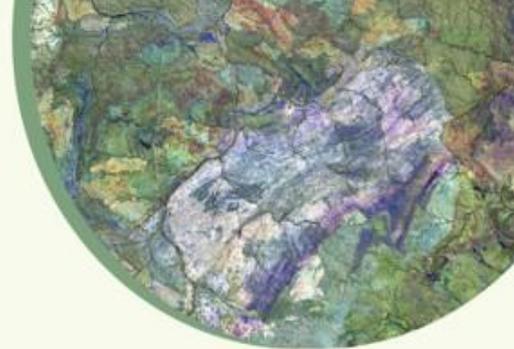
From our results, we first note a series of key messages:

- 1** The TJTPs support a range of SDGs and targets that aim to trigger economic growth while also supporting the transition to carbon neutrality, exemplified through energy and research and development investments, paired with initiatives to create new jobs in these emerging fields.
- 2** LJTPs underscore the need for **supportive interventions to provide skills** across their regions.
- 3** From the MAFs, marginalized communities also want employment but prioritize their need to be enabled and motivated through more opportunities, **highlighting demand side policies – or strategies directed to citizens to improve access or to shape behavioural changes - are largely missing from transition plans.**
- 4** Relatedly, for marginalized communities, inequality measures (SDG 10) tied with economic measures (SDG 8) reflect that while **economic growth is important, it must happen in a socially inclusive way.** This is supported through **participation in decision-making** (SDG 16.7), as marginalized communities in each region highlighted this as a priority.
- 5** Territorial-specific initiatives, seen through SDG 11, emerge as most the important factor for both the LJTPs and marginalized communities. **Engaging with marginalized communities supports a place-based, contextually relevant framing of just transitions** within the SDG framework. **Meso-level structures with strong connections to the local level, like LJTPs, support linkages across levels in decision-making processes.** LJTPs recognize the importance of **governance and partnership for the just transition.**
- 6** The **priorities of marginalized communities complement the objectives found within TJTPs but were not adequately captured through the TJTP participatory processes.**



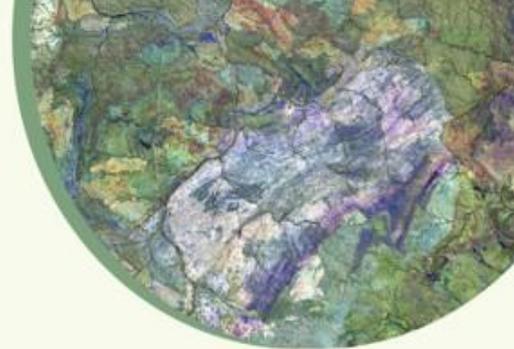
From these messages, we propose a set of complementary policy recommendations:

- 1** **Improve the alignment of just transition processes with SDGs** to reinforce internationally accepted sustainable development ambitions.
 - Open the scope of just transition processes beyond the economic and environmental pillars of sustainability, to **better include the social pillar**.
- 2** Ensure the **engagement of marginalized communities from the beginning of just transition decision-making processes** to improve the local relevance and influence of official transition plans. Ensure that interest of specific groups (social, gender, ethnic, etc.) are considered in this process.
 - Engagement helps **frame broad objectives in a locally rooted context**, improving the relevance for the region or local place.
 - Engagement **establishes an ownership of the plan**, providing marginalized communities with a heightened interest in the success of just transition initiatives.
 - Engagement supports **embedding social objectives alongside economic ones to drive economic growth in an inclusive manner**.
- 3** For engagement, **open and institutionalize participatory mechanisms at the local level**, which connect to higher (regional, national, European) levels to enable marginalized communities to take part in and influence decision-making processes.
- 4** **Mobilize meso-level structures as linkages between local and higher-level governance structures** to facilitate the reach of marginalized communities and their voices in macro-level decision-making spaces.
- 5** Establish, in addition to supply-side initiatives (e.g., investment in key industries; provision of education and training), **'demand-side' actions to complement the plans for a just transition** (e.g., unlocking both physical (accessible transport systems) and societal (social inclusion) opportunities for marginalized communities to access education or training).



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