

Dear Commissioners,

We commended the European Commission's leadership in launching the Just Transition Mechanism as a cornerstone of the European Green Deal. The substantial financial support provided through the Just Transition Fund, complemented by other EU resources, demonstrates an essential recognition: that climate neutrality must go hand in hand with local development and social justice. Moreover, the JTM stands out as the most participatory financial instrument provided by the EC, also fostering the deepest local approach. It is a global example for those who aim to achieve a fair and just transition toward carbon neutrality.

In this letter, we want to highlight how the just transition has strengthened the economy of carbon-intensive regions and – with a few adjustments – has the potential to harness the underused innovative power of former industrial regions. In this way, the Just Transition can strengthen Europe's Competitiveness Compass and contribute to achieving the goals outlined in the Draghi report. However, we also want to point out that canceling or scaling down the commitments of the Just Transition would fuel growing political polarization. We have observed how the loss of employment can feed anger and dissatisfaction into (European) democratic processes that generate polarization. The territorial focus of the Just Transition is therefore very important; regions that are at risk of being left behind must get the support they need and the local approach implemented so far should be continued and strengthened. Furthermore, we want to highlight that there is a clear mandate in the Von der Leyen Commission to fight energy poverty and prioritize housing, topics that are deeply connected to the Just Transition. Lastly, we want to stress the importance that not only current member states embrace the Just Transition, but accession countries - such as the Western Balkans, Ukraine and Turkey - also need support in their just transition through targeted initiatives. We strongly recommend to use the JTF to:

- 1. Strengthen the Just Transition to fight political polarization**
- 2. Strengthen local NGOs and foster inclusive governance**
- 3. Unlock Just Transition regions as engines for reindustrialization**
- 4. Make funding work more effectively**
- 5. Foster local ownership to accelerate industrial transformation**

We are aware that the JTF has not always reached the established absorption goals. In our research, we found that the timeline of setting up the JTF planning, fund allocation processes, and project implementation was too short. Stakeholder engagement needed to be organized, plans designed, a governance structure set up, all within a constrained timeframe. We need to learn from the past challenges and strengthen the JTF process to keep promises made to the people living in Just Transition regions.

This letter is supported by a diverse group of people and organizations – mayors, NGOs, businesses and universities – from thirteen European countries, and based on the recently presented findings of the **Horizon Europe BOLSTER project** (Bridging Organizations and Marginalized Communities for Local Sustainability Transitions in Europe). BOLSTER has examined how the Just Transition is unfolding in practice across multiple European regions and has provided actionable insights drawn from over 300 interviews, community-led projects, and governance workshops. **In conclusion**, the Just Transition is not only worth preserving – it provides a foundation to build successful democratic economies. The BOLSTER project and all the other JTM activities have shown us how. By amplifying community voices, adjusting regulatory frameworks, and ensuring equitable access to funding and power, the EU can lead the world in building a green transition that is genuinely just, inclusive, and durable.

The Just Transition Mechanism must not be seen as merely an opportunity – it is an urgent necessity to stop the outmigration of young people, to address the widespread lack of investor confidence, and to stimulate local innovation. It is essential for rebuilding trust between citizens and public and educational institutions, and for effectively reintegrating former industrial areas into the economic circuit through the creation of sustainable jobs.

This transition requires time, multiple steps, and a strong commitment. It is crucial to simplify access to funding for **authentic local organizations, rooted in the community**, that are genuinely involved in the transition process. These actors play a vital role in bringing communities back to the forefront of regional development, through education, civic participation, and reconnection to Europe's economic and financial systems.

We welcome further dialogue and stand ready to contribute to the next stages of shaping an EU transition that leaves no one behind. We have developed more concrete policy recommendations, for example on [creating transformative projects](#) and [improving participation](#), that we are more than willing to explain in more detail. You also find more detailed recommendations below:

The following recommendations are supported by the findings of BOLSTER:

1. STRENGTHEN THE JUST TRANSITION TO FIGHT POLITICAL POLARIZATION

The Just Transition provides a bridge between Draghi's report on strengthening competitiveness and the growing political polarization. We suggest the following measures:

- Learning from the current just transition processes in the regions and expanding successful projects.
- Strengthening the local approach implemented so far, focusing even more on empowering local stakeholders
- Making investments possible in local public transport to increase the mobility of workers.
- Making investments possible in housing cooperatives and social housing projects.
- Enlarging and strengthening the possibilities to fight energy poverty.

2. STRENGTHEN LOCAL NGOS AND FOSTER INCLUSIVE GOVERNANCE

Engaging communities and local civil society in the opportunities of the Just Transition reduces political polarization and fosters economic growth. We argue that inclusive governance needs to be bolstered in Just Transition regions, therefore we propose:

- Making sure that strategic plans and the funding of projects are aligned with local needs. What is important here is that there is first extensive research on the needs of communities – especially those most marginalized – before plans are designed.
- Appointing participatory ambassadors to activate underrepresented groups.
- Minimum inclusion targets for civil society and local actors in governance structures combined with dedicated funding to support civil society.
- Tenders for projects should be shaped by local NGOs and community representatives.
- When organizations apply for funding, they should make clear how NGOs and community representatives will be involved in their project. NGOs and community can implement activities to ensure that there is a connection with the local community.
- Reforming technical assistance funds to:
 - Make it possible for (local) NGOs to apply for the JTF for community-led projects (creating a dedicated funding line)

- Make it possible that local NGOs and companies, organizations grounded in the regions, be paid for their work and involvement for technical assistance projects.
- A minimum percentage of the technical funds should be reserved for local NGOs and companies to build their capacities for change.
- Making technical assistance funds available for feasibility studies and technical project preparation.

3. UNLOCK JUST TRANSITION REGIONS AS ENGINES OF REINDUSTRIALIZATION

To fully harness the productive potential of former industrial regions, the Just Transition Mechanism must foster endogenous economic growth. This is only possible when local governance structures are strengthened, and economic opportunities are available to local people. In this way, people learn to be entrepreneurial. Therefore, we propose:

- Fostering the creation of local associations of SMEs, civil society, and workers, who are often less organized on the regional and local scale.
- Setting up teams that manage regional and local networks and find opportunities to collaborate on economic and social activities.
- Making small grants available for local SMEs, start-ups / local entrepreneurs, and NGOs and associations to start small-scale projects.
- Designating a minimum amount of funding for community-led projects open to non-formally organized community groups.
- Introducing simplified and less bureaucratic application procedures for local entrepreneurs, SMEs, startups, smaller municipalities and NGOs, which are now often not able to apply for projects.
- Making sure that smaller towns and cities in the regions also benefit

4. MAKE FUNDING WORK EFFECTIVELY

Local and community-based actors are often key enablers of industrial renewal and know local needs. They can ensure projects that really strengthen local economies are funded. Therefore, we propose the following:

- Making sure that the projects are being funded as described in strategic documents, and that all the objectives are being reached.
- Strengthening the capacities of regional and local authorities to set up and launch calls.
- Ensuring that NGOs and representatives of SMEs are part of both the design and implementation of plans and funding mechanisms.
- Ensuring that NGOs and representatives of SMEs are engaged and supported in monitoring activities.
- Appointing members of NGOs and other local representatives in committees selecting projects funded through the JTF.
- Make sure that there is Just Transition funding for accession countries

5. FOSTER LOCAL OWNERSHIP TO ACCELERATE INDUSTRIAL TRANSFORMATION

Revitalizing industrial regions requires shared ownership over transition pathways. Supporting energy communities, community benefit agreements, and the reuse of abandoned industrial assets can catalyze local reinvestment and social cohesion. Therefore, we suggest:

- Facilitating the use of abandoned industrial assets to local NGOs and entrepreneurs.
- Requiring community benefit agreements in large projects to ensure shared prosperity
- Stimulating SMEs that receive funding through the JTF to take on community responsibilities.
- Accelerating regulatory reform to enable energy communities.
- Stimulating experiments with co-ownership agreements of workers or the community with large investment projects to foster a cooperative economy.

With respect and commitment,

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