

Best Practices for a Just Transition in Vancouver

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Executive Summary

Introduction

In 2020, the City of Vancouver approved the Climate Emergency Action Plan (CEAP) to ensure Vancouver reduces carbon pollution by 50 percent below 2007 levels by 2030. An increasingly recognised part of moving to a zero emissions world is to provide a “just transition” for workers who may be impacted by this socio-economic transformation. The Vancouver Economic Commission (VEC) was tasked within CEAP to develop an economic plan that supports businesses and workers to successfully and prosperously decarbonize. Through this Zero Emissions Economic Transition Action Plan (ZEETAP), VEC plans to support and accelerate Vancouver’s economic transition to a zero carbon future in ways that enhance socio-economic equity.

The purpose of this project was to research and assess global best practices to inform a just transition in Vancouver. The following report consists of a high-level definition of what a just transition could mean for Vancouver and a jurisdictional scan of just transition practices happening elsewhere, especially at the local or regional level. Additionally, the report presents a brief overview on Vancouver’s labour market context and provides a deep dive into understanding how two of the largest emitting sectors – buildings and transportation – are currently undergoing labour market transitions, and what need(s) must be met to achieve a just transition. In particular, the report reviews transition planning in cities with a similar governance, economic, and/or environmental landscape to Vancouver. It concludes with recommendations, including an outline of a regional “Just Transition Council,” that VEC and other stakeholders may assess and expand as part of the development of ZEETAP.

Methodology

The research methods include a comprehensive scan of existing literature on the just transition, interviews with global cities’ planning and local stakeholders, and participation in C40’s Inclusive Climate Action Academy on equitable job access in a green and just recovery. Findings and recommendations were filtered through an External Advisory Group consisting of union representatives, industry representatives, academics, and local government representatives.

Key Findings

- There is no universal definition or approach to a just transition. The purposes of the project found a blended definition of existing definitions to be most ideal:

“A just transition is a worker-inclusive approach that aims to minimize the impacts of environmental policies on workers in affected industries. Additionally, the just transition will move towards an equitable future, ensuring that new opportunities in the ‘green economy’ will include those previously excluded from the high-carbon economy. A just transition is met when everyone has social protection, all jobs are decent, emissions are low or at zero, and communities are thriving and resilient.”

- Alignment on just transition work with different levels of government is key. However, many cities – and notably Vancouver – often move more swiftly than senior orders of governments on climate action. This speed discrepancy poses challenges, which are exacerbated by the lack of significant regional market planning.
- Vehicles and buildings are the two largest contributors to greenhouse gas emissions in Vancouver and Metro Vancouver, and account for two of the larger and more fragmented sectors of employment. Because of this, a just transition in these sectors must consider independent workers not represented by a union or other organizations.
- Any just transition planning in Vancouver must also address or at least navigate the ongoing shortages of skilled workers in many sectors, particularly as retirements and a lack of younger and diverse workers (especially women and people of colour) who feel comfortable entering these trades and industries.
- The limited examples of just transition planning have often been done at a national level, and have been focused on coal and fossil fuel reliant communities. The most relevant local or regional just transition examples for Vancouver include New York City, Oslo, and Los Angeles, all of which are still at very early stages of development or implementation.

- Across all case studies, important principles for success include:
 - Importance of clear, accountable governance structures to inform key stakeholders and aid effective decision making
 - Cross-departmental collaboration within and between government(s)
 - Inclusion of workers from historically marginalized communities from the earliest stages of planning and research to ensure inequalities will not be reinstated in new labour market patterns and structures.
 - Understanding of the data (and its gaps) and the demographics of workers and future trends of the transitioning sector(s)

Recommendations

Based on the literature review, interviews with global cities and local stakeholders, and discussion with an External Advisory Group, this report recommends:

1. VEC build buy-in with key stakeholders on the concept of a Regional Just Transition Council based on the outline proposed in the report for VEC;
2. VEC and the City of Vancouver engage with First Nations to better understand their interest in future labour market planning with respect to climate action;
3. VEC identifies and works with industry and community leaders to support marginalized groups' entry to the workforce in key sectors, especially construction; and
4. VEC takes an active advocacy position by creating alignment between all levels of government on just transition initiatives in Metro Vancouver.

Next Steps

Since the discussion of a just transition has only recently begun to gain local traction, there is still a great deal of research to conduct. With so few successful case studies regarding a just transition outside of a coal or fossil-fuel reliant communities, there are many research gaps the VEC can address moving forward, including:

1. Approaches to integrating environmental justice and a “transition to justice” in labour market planning in Vancouver, to better serve communities that have and continue to face various forms of marginalization.
2. Understanding how the impacts of just transition planning and approaches in Metro Vancouver will be felt in the rest of British Columbia.
3. Understanding how to engage the finance sector in just transition planning, particularly larger institutional investors.
4. Identifying ways to leverage and align with existing work done locally or provincially that may not be listed under but is still relevant to just transition work, such as the CleanBC Workforce Readiness Plan, Skills Certification Program, and Vancouver Regional Construction Association (VRCA) Construction Workforce of Tomorrow project.
5. Working with school boards in the region, and post-secondary institutions, to review and audit programs and courses of significance for decarbonization; and to conduct future labour market projections of the green economy and integrate these in clear, accessible communications to workers.

Conclusion

The just transition is ultimately an umbrella term for a variety of practical programs to help workers gain the skills and keep (or gain) the support necessary during periods of immense change. However, it is more than a haphazard collection of courses or funding schemes; it is also a deep and profound moral commitment central to any successful climate policy. We cannot reduce emissions and prevent the worst impacts of climate change unless we can guarantee a better life on the other side of that transformation. While Vancouver’s labour market faces a peculiar series of challenges that make its journey to a just transition different from many others, there exists enough commonality that we can learn and respond with the benefit of what others have experienced. Vancouver has long been a leader in climate action, and has secured notable successes in protecting workers — now is the time to bring those together. As Brian Kohler, Canadian union activist, memorably stated in 1996: “The real choice is not jobs or environment. It is both or neither.”