

Leeds University Business School – Research and Innovation Podcast

Episode: Introducing the “Just Transitions – a global exploration” project

Speakers: Professor Vera Trappmann and Dr Dennis Eversberg

[00:00:00] **Vera:** Hello and welcome to the Research and Innovation Podcast. I'm Vera Trappmann. I'm a professor of comparative employment relations at Leeds University Business School.

[00:00:14] **Dennis:** And I'm Dennis Eversberg. I'm a Junior Research Group Leader at the University of Vienna, Germany.

[00:00:20] **Vera:** The two of us, we are really excited to launch this podcast series today. So we will have a series of 12 podcasts over the upcoming year that will inform you about our new, just started, research project on Just Transition. It's a three-year funded project by the Hans Böckler Foundation and it's exploring understandings of Just Transition.

You might wonder what Just Transition is. So we all know we have to decarbonize our economies and Just Transition looks at how this is happening. And we are interested in the strategies of governments of trade unions, of labour activists, and environmental NGOs.

So Dennis, would you like to explain to the audience, what we understand by Just Transition.

[00:01:08] **Dennis:** Yeah, Just Transition of course, is a very complex topic, as is anything that we, that we do research on. I think we could say it's a concept, it's a debate or rather set of debates, and it's a practice. And all of that of course relating to trade unions and labour policy actors as our central focus.

So as a concept it has emerged from a series of struggles around environmentally motivated or environmentally necessitated structural change in different industries in different places, reaching back as far as the 1960s. Those were the first times, you know, pollution originating from chemical plants, necessitating closure of these plants, that those were the first places, as far back as the 1960s and seventies, where workers called for Just Transitions and for a kind of change they would not take place on their backs.

So the concept has always stood for the demand that such transformations or transitions must not take place at workers' expense. And it's always been something that debates, discussions and also arguments between labour and environmental movements have coalesced around.

And more recently it has become a core concept and trade union strategies for dealing with climate change and climate protection, as well as their effects on workers', livelihoods and working conditions. And this is of course what Just Transition as a debate or as an emerging and mushrooming field of debate is about, how can the structural changes in the transformations, not just of industries, but of whole societies that will be necessary to get to a post-fossil world. How can these take place in a socially just, inclusive and participatory way?

And the workers' concerns are, and remain, central in this, especially also in our own perspective, these debates have broadened, or yeah, you could say they've mushroomed in recent years, just over the last two, three, five years, to include a number of topics and issues, and Just Transition is now debated with respect to all sorts of marginalized and disadvantaged groups, and the effects of climate change and transitions in the wake of climate change on these groups.

And the concept has also been appropriated and integrated into the political agendas of governments as well as international bodies.

So that's Just Transition as a set of debates and then as a practice, of course, Just Transition, returning to what I said in the beginning, refers to the struggles that Just Transition in the call for Just Transition has originally been about, and is still about. So, union's practices of campaigning and mobilizing around calls and demands for justice in local and regional transitions in specific industries in certain regions; attempts to organize and influence these transitions and the kinds of practices that especially unions have been developing sometimes together with environmental movements to exert an influence.

And all of these three dimensions are of course, what we will be looking at in the project with regard to the 12 countries that we're investigating.

[00:04:14] **Vera:** Yeah. I think the energy crisis that we are living through at the moment, has amplified the need to phase out of fossil fuels and be energy-independent and do this in a sustainable way, so to invest in renewables. And this kind of transition period, to a kind of post-fossil world will have a lot of challenges.

So it might be that some of the sectors will inevitably have to be closed down. Yeah, so we won't see any coal sectors, coal industry anymore in the future. The automotive industry is definitely gonna be changing. Yeah. So we will have a lot of more electronic cars. Maybe we will have a lot less cars and more public transport, so that will affect the automotive industry.

So there's some sectors in the economy that will be definitely affected by decarbonization and by trying to mitigate the climate crisis. And we are particularly interested in understanding how this transformation process towards a more kind of ecological, social, sustainable economy will affect workers.

And that is what we try to do in this project - that we go out and talk to people and see, so first of all, what do they make out of climate change proposals on the table. What are their views? What pathways would be best to decarbonize economies, and what policy proposals do they have that would help ameliorating the effects on employment or even more far-reaching, how do they envision, could the economy look like in a more sustainable way?

So if we take the reaction to climate crisis seriously and the kind of implications that stem from decarbonization, it might have big implications for the way how we produce and how we consume. And we are particularly interested in the views of labour representatives of trade unions to understand what they think is the word of work looking like, in a decarbonized way and what are policy support measures that need to be put in place to support workers.

And I think what is really exciting about our project is that we have a comparative perspective. So we are not looking only at the UK, we have a couple of European countries that we have included in our sample, and we look at countries in the global south.

So we have a really huge variety of countries and case studies that we are looking at. And maybe Dennis, would you like to explain how we come about this kind of selection of countries?

[00:07:05] **Dennis:** Well, actually a lot of it happened in a cumulative way because people were so interested in the project that they said, "oh, let's also do this country". And then Hans Böckler Foundation also had one or two wishes for some countries that they wanted to add on as well.

We were initially thinking about seven or eight countries, and then we ended up with 12. So it had a lot of dynamic. But from the outset, we had been thinking about, "Okay, we need a balance between the global North and South. We need a balance between very large and smaller economies. We need a variety of different labour relations systems, a variety of different traditions in these economies. We need some mainly service-based economies, some resource economies, some industrial economies. And also, different varieties of capitalism", as it's called in the literature.

And we also looked at differences in carbon footprints. So, we want to have very emissions-intensive economies where it's clear that they will have to adapt in many ways and that their current model sustainable at all. But also ones that are not necessarily further down the road in terms of decarbonization, but that from the structure of what they do economically, perhaps will not have to adapt as much.

And, of course, we want to look at different degrees of intensity of economic activity as such. And so, using all these criteria, we came up with a choice of four European economies: The UK, Germany, Spain, and Poland. So also a balance between north and south, east and west, within Europe to further economies of the global north, the US, as well as the special case of Quebec as a regional economy within a broader Canadian economy, that has its own particularities and also its own very interesting political traditions.

Then we also chose to include four of the five "BRICS" countries. That is Brazil, Russia, China, and South Africa. Also, of course, all very large economies. But in themselves covering a wide range of very different political systems and political environments. And also very, very different economic foci of these economies.

And finally last, but absolutely not least, we have two economies of the global South: Nigeria and Africa, and Chile in South America. Both of which are traditionally resource-heavy economies, with a strong oil sector in Nigeria, and minerals extraction in Chile being a very important sector, and a lot of struggles evolving around that.

So, yeah, that's the sample and we think it really covers a wide range of different cases and different starting conditions and different historical trajectories. And it'll be very interesting to see how unions or their local equivalence, the kinds of labour organizations that exist in these countries, think about and deal with the challenges that lay ahead for their specific economies in the process of decarbonization.

[00:10:09] **Vera:** So what we will do, in the course of this project, is we will analyze understandings and concepts of Just Transition, but also the policies and practice in place. So hoping that we can identify some good practice examples that might be transferrable into different contexts. And speak to workers affected by transition processes, so to collect their voices aswell.

And we are very happy; we have a team of interdisciplinary researchers engaged in this project. A lot of us are based in Leeds, but we have also really good corporations with academics in other countries. And all of us will do a podcast on a particular country. So, this is just the kickstart.

Please come back to this podcast series if you are curious to learn more about one of those really interesting cases and countries. Keep in touch; there will be details on the project web page and details in the episode show notes below. Thank you very much for listening and hope to see you back soon. Thanks. Bye-bye.

[00:11:17] **Dennis:** Bye.