

What is a “just transition”?

When we talk about a “just transition” we are juxtaposing this with a transition that is not just or fair. Many proposals that provide technocratic fixes to the global ecological crisis, for instance those that argue that economic growth can be decoupled from environmental impacts, or those that propose geo-engineering as a solution for mitigating climate change do not necessarily – in fact are not likely to – lead to a just transition. A just transition engages with the multiple and intersecting injustices that permeate our current society. It requires that we recognise that we live in a toxic system, and that a comprehensive cultural, social, economic and political shift is required in order to move towards a regenerative society. In addition, climate change is a justice issue because we know that it is happening, we understand the implications and the steps to take to tackle it, yet we are doing nothing. Compared to 1990, CO₂ emissions in Europe as a whole in 2016 had decreased by 21%, but *increased* by 2% in the Netherlands ([ING 2018](#)) – and CO₂ emission levels have failed to decrease since.

Climate and ecological justice

The concept of a just transition is closely related to the notions of ecological and climate justice. Climate justice is based on the notion that those least responsible for causing climate change will suffer the worst of its impacts, the poor and marginalised of the world. It draws attention to the social impacts of climate and ecological degradation – and forces us to recognise that environmental change is fundamentally a social justice issue. In the words of Donna Haraway: “there will be no nature without justice. Nature and justice [...] will become extinct or thrive together” (Haraway 1992: 311). With “ecological justice” we understand that climate and environmental change do not only touch humans, but that these also undermine other species’ existence, whose concerns must also be incorporated in our vision of a just world.

A just transition in The Netherlands

The debate on a just transition in the Netherlands thus far has mostly focused on who pays the price for the Climate Agreement (‘Klimaatakkoord’). This includes concerns regarding the unfair distribution of the burdens and benefits for industry vis-a-vis households and small businesses, as well as the fact that policies threaten to aggravate income inequality as people with the lowest incomes stand to lose out the most economically ([CE Delft 2019](#)). The “polluter pays” principle, which means that polluting companies finance the transition, and the notion that the effect of policies needs to be economically redistributive are important elements to a just transition. In the Netherlands, ten companies emit over 50% of all emissions from Dutch industry and businesses, and three times as much as all households combined ([Nederlandse Emissieautoriteit 2018](#); [NOS 2018](#)).

However, it must be kept in mind that injustices and inequalities in the Netherlands go far beyond income and wealth differentials. Based on black feminist thought, social scientists have for decades demonstrated the ways in which different inequalities intersect and reinforce each other (e.g. hooks 1981; Kimberlé Crenshaw 1989; Hill Collins 1990). Injustices exist along the lines of class, race, gender, sexuality, ability, age, nationality and others in our country. These inequalities are complicated and can reinforce each other: for instance, institutional racism means that people of colour generally have less access to higher education and have lower incomes. In addition, people living in rural areas like Groningen are already suffering from fossil fuel extraction. To realise a just transition, it is necessary to recognise the different ways in which this toxic system affects people. Limiting the impacts of climate breakdown and ecological breakdown is not enough: we simultaneously need to move towards eradicating racism, sexism, classism, homo-, bi- and

transphobia, ableism, xenophobia etc. To realise a just transition, everyone needs to have a say in the decisions that are made and the policies that are implemented, in order to ensure that the most marginalised and vulnerable benefit most. This will require that existing hierarchies of privilege and power are challenged.

In addition, the concept of multi-species justice (Haraway 2018) is central to a just transition. Having a just transition not only means remedying intersecting injustices among humans, but also breaking with the anthropocentric bias which places humanity at the centre of the ecosystem, and respecting the rights of nature and all living beings on their own terms. Some concrete steps to achieving this would be to formally recognise the rights of nature, much like we have human rights, as Ecuador has done in its 2008 constitution. Another proposal is to criminalise ecosystem destruction by making ecocide law, which has been elaborated by Polly Higgins.

Who are currently disproportionately affected by climate change and ecological breakdown in the Netherlands?

The people who are currently affected by the climate and ecological crisis include people near fossil fuel extraction and processing sites. A marked example of this is the population of Groningen, where earthquakes that result from the extraction of natural gas are destroying peoples' homes and livelihoods (Van der Voort and Vanclay 2015; SodM 2019). *Other examples.*

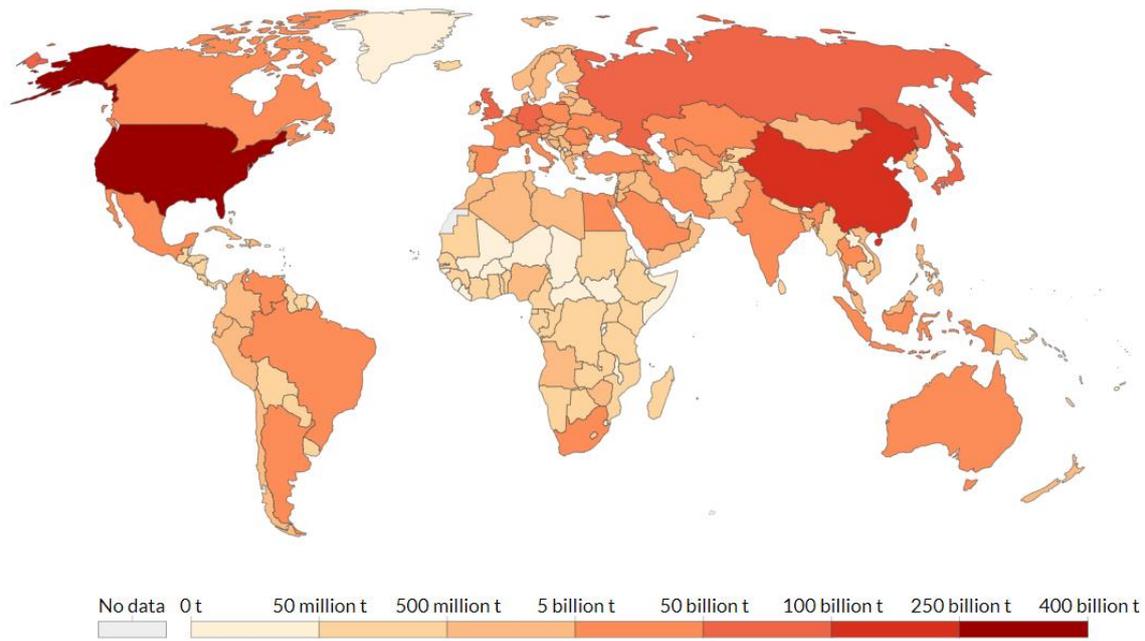
In addition, those who in the future will be most adversely affected include already marginalised and vulnerable populations, who are less protected from rising sea levels, increasing food prices, and other climate-related disasters. During heat waves, it is poor people who cannot afford air conditioning, and vulnerable people like the elderly and children that suffer the worst impacts.

The role of the Netherlands in a just transition globally

A just transition looks beyond the borders of the Netherlands. Countries and communities in the majority world that have contributed the least to climate and ecological breakdown are suffering the worst of its impacts. The responsibility for climate and ecological breakdown lies primarily with advanced industrial countries. It is industrialisation, and the associated exploitation of natural resources and populations in the majority world through centuries of colonialism, imperialism and unjust trade policies that are driving global climate and ecological breakdown.

As can be seen in Figure 1 and 2, only a few countries are historically responsible for the brunt of global CO₂ emissions, including the Netherlands. It is important to note that these calculations do not consider the emissions embedded in trade, but instead represent the emissions of production. Considering that wealthy countries have externalised much of their environmental impacts by outsourcing polluting manufacturing industries to lower-income countries, and thus much of the CO₂ is emitted in other parts of the world in order to manufacture goods or acquire natural resources for consumption in the EU, the total impact of our consumption is much higher than these numbers suggest. The [Global Footprint Network](#) demonstrates that the Netherlands has a biocapacity deficit of 487%, among the highest in the EU and the world. The per capita ecological footprint of the Netherlands is 2.8x the available biocapacity per person on this planet.

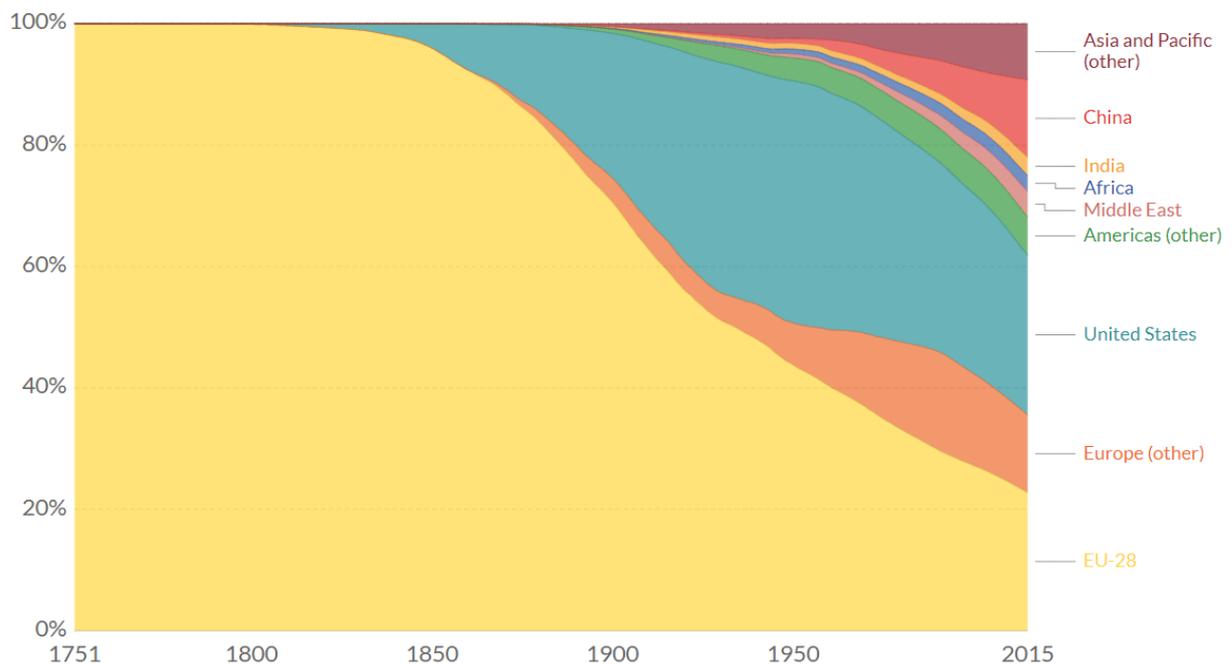
tonnes.



Source: Global Carbon Project (GCP); Carbon Dioxide Information Analysis Centre (CDIAC)

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Figure 1: Cumulative CO2 emissions (2016), representing the total sum of CO2 emissions since 1751 (in tonnes). Source: [Our World in Data](#).



Source: OWID based on the Global Carbon Project (2017)

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Figure 2: Cumulative CO2 emissions by world region from the year 1751 onwards. Emissions are based on territorial emissions (production-based) and do not account for emissions embedded in trade. Source: [Our World in Data](#).

Yet the impacts of climate and ecological breakdown are mostly felt outside the industrialised countries that contributed most to it, as well as among marginalised communities in the minority

world that benefitted least from industrialisation. According to the UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, majority world countries will bear an estimated 75% of the costs of the climate crisis, despite the poorest half of the world's population causing just 10% of CO₂ emissions. Climate change could push over 120 million additional people into poverty by 2030 ([OHCHR 2019](#)). Biodiversity loss, the complete loss of coral reefs that occurs even at 2 degrees warming, and the increasing intensity and frequency of extreme weather events particularly effects people dependent on these ecosystems and agriculture for their survival – over 3 billion people, or almost half the human population (Cameron, Shine and Bevins 2013). In addition, it is mostly vulnerable communities that find themselves in the pathways of weather-related disasters. According to the [World Disasters Report](#), over 2 billion people were affected by weather-related disasters in 2008-2017, compared to 740 million in the 1970s. This number is only likely to increase, likely forcing hundreds of millions to leave their homes.

Climate and ecological debt and reparations

Given the imbalance between the responsibilities and impacts of climate and ecological breakdown, the Netherlands and other industrialised nations have incurred an ecological and climate debt to other countries (see Figure 3). The concept of ecological debt refers to the plunder of natural resources through colonialism, unfair international trade and the displacement of environmental burdens (Hornborg and Martinez-Alier 2016). The Netherlands has profited immensely from the appropriation of and trade in natural resources, including fossil fuels, timber, and tropical agricultural products like sugar, rubber, and more recently palm oil and soy, facilitated by slave labour and exploitation in the former colonies. This continues in the present: the Netherlands is one of the only countries in the world that obtains the majority of the material goods it uses – and inflicts the associated ecological damage – from outside its territory (Mayer and Haas 2016). In addition, the Netherlands is the second largest importer of soy beans in the world ([Tridge](#)), the majority of which comes from Latin America where it drives deforestation and the destruction of livelihoods of indigenous people and smallholder farmers (Lima et al. 2019; Choi and Kim 2015; Sauer 2018). Similarly, the Netherlands is the largest importer and exporter of palm oil in the EU, and Dutch banks have invested at least 4.9 billion euros in palm oil plantations (mostly in South East Asia) which lead to large-scale destruction of rainforests, land-grabbing and human rights violations ([Milieudefensie 2018](#)).

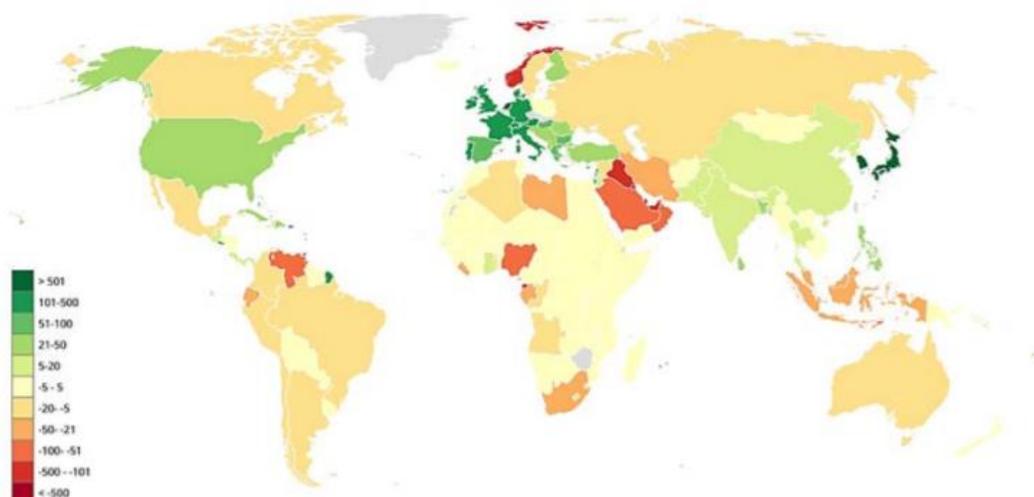


Figure 3: Cumulative physical trade balance 1950-2010. Greener colours indicate net imports of material goods per are, redder colour net exports. Source: Mayer and Haas (2016).

In addition, the Netherlands also has a climate debt to the rest of the world, which has two dimensions: an emissions debt for the excessive historical and current per capita emissions of greenhouse gasses, which denies atmospheric space to the majority world, and an adaptation debt for contributing to climate change which will require that majority world countries take measures to adapt to climate breakdown. Repaying these debts involves both physical restoration of ecosystems, radical cuts in greenhouse gas emissions, as well as financial and technology transfers to the majority world. [Climate Fair Shares](#) has calculated that The Netherlands would have to pay 17.19 billion dollars in reparations in addition to reducing its emission levels by 61-71% compared to 1990 levels by 2025. Additional measures could include revising unjust trade policies and intellectual property rights, cancelling external debts to make up for ecological debts, and taking responsibility for the people that are forced to migrate as a result of climate breakdown by eliminating restrictive migration policies (Warlenius 2018).

What policies and measures do we need for a just transition?

There are many proposals and suggestions that can contribute to a just transition. It is not a matter of either/or, but rather a combination of alternatives that is most viable. Some of these have already been discussed, such as repayments of ecological and climate debts (possibly as part of a Global Green New Deal), eliminating restrictive migration policies, and dismantling trade and investment agreements that impede governments from regulating TNCs or holding them accountable for environmental damage, and maintain exploitation of the majority world through intellectual property rights, agricultural subsidies, and other unfair regulations.

Within the Netherlands, some proposals could include:

A Green New Deal: extensive investments in renewable energy, infrastructure and retrofitting of housing, as well as the creation of well-paying jobs. A Green New Deal would tackle both inequality and climate change, ensuring that for instance workers in the fossil fuel industry and marginalised communities are the first to benefit. Giorgio Kallis has argued that a Green New Deal should not be an instrument for economic growth, but instead should aim to enhance wellbeing independent of growth (Kallis 2019).

Degrowth. Proponents of degrowth propose a wide variety of alternatives to our obsession with economic growth, including commoning, an expansion of the care economy and shrinkage of polluting and socially harmful sectors, a universal basic income, community currencies, democratic management of energy systems, localised food systems etc. (D'Alisa et al. 2015).

Legal instruments. For instance recognising the rights of nature and making ecocide a crime.

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Reconceptualising wellbeing

Our current societies are mainly oriented to economic growth, often reduced to growth of the Gross Domestic Product, as the main indicator for progress or wellbeing. Attempts have been made to replace GDP as the universal indicator of progress and wellbeing, such as Bhutan's Gross National Happiness Index, the Happy Planet Index of the New Economics Foundation, and the Better Life Index developed by the OECD, which take a multidimensional approach to wellbeing, such as life expectancy, life satisfaction and education, and take into account ecological dimensions.

However, it is increasingly widely recognised that infinite growth is impossible within a finite planet (see Daly 2015, Raworth 2017, Kallis 2019). Economic growth requires ever-increasing material and energy inputs: it inevitably requires increasing extraction of natural resources, and thus degrades ecosystems (Daly 2015). This has led leading ecological economists and political ecologists to call for “degrowth” in industrialised societies, arguing that the use of energy and materials needs to be reduced in order to repay the climate and ecological debts of these countries (D’Alisa et al. 2015). However, this does not need to result in a decline in living standards: instead it requires an alternative orientation to what wellbeing means, beyond economic growth. Degrowthers propose a wide range of alternatives, including commoning, a universal basic income, local food production systems, and decentralised, democratically organised energy systems (D’Alisa et al. 2015). Similarly, Oxford economist Kate Raworth (2017) advocates for a society that stays within the nine planetary boundaries identified by the Stockholm Resilience Centre, while satisfying basic social and economic needs of its citizens. From the majority world come a variety of ways of conceptualising wellbeing rooted in indigenous worldviews, including the notion of Sumak Kawsay or “living well”, and Ecological Swaraj (Kothari et al. 2014).

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