



ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT
PARTNERSHIP

Navigating by the Southern Cross: Local Leadership, Municipal Realities & the Search for a Just Transition in South Africa.

June 2026

Cite this document as:

Economic Development Partnership. 2026. Navigating by the Southern Cross: Local Leadership, Municipal Realities & the Search for a Just Transition in South Africa. Available at: <https://www.wcedp.co.za/local-just-transition>

Acknowledgements

The Economic Development Partnership gratefully acknowledges the support and collaboration of the [South African Local Government Association \(SALGA\)](#), [Heinrich Böll Stiftung South Africa](#), [New Economy Hub](#), and the [African Climate Foundation](#).

Written: Alexandrea Roberts & Innocentia Modau
Edited: Natalie Tannous & Michelle du Toit
Design: Nicole Fraser

This work was delivered in partnership with:

The Economic Development Partnership gratefully acknowledges the support and collaboration of the South African Local Government Association (SALGA), Heinrich Böll Stiftung South Africa, New Economy Hub, and the African Climate Foundation. The final text does not necessarily represent their views.

Executive summary	1
Why the Just Transition is local	2
From national ambition to local realities	2
Why municipalities matter in a Just Transition	2
The risk of leaving local government behind	3
Dialogues Intentionally creating space for a different kind of conversation	4
What was heard across nine provinces	6
Different understandings of the Just Transition	6
The emotional landscape of the Just Transition	7
Reframing the Just Transition Leveraging decarbonisation for development	9
What it will take to move from conversation to collaboration	10
Municipal champions	10
Partnerships	11
Learning peer networks	11
Navigating by the Southern Cross	15
Star 1: Relational Infrastructure	16
Star 2: Lived Justice	16
Star 3: Local Resilience	17
Star 4: Collective Navigation	17
The necessity of centring municipalities in the Just Transition	18
Building the Southern Cross A discussion paper on localising the Just Transition in South Africa	19
What comes next	23



Executive summary

South Africa's Just Transition is often discussed through national policies, investment plans and sectoral reforms. Yet the realities of the transition will ultimately be experienced and navigated within municipalities and communities across the country.

Recognising this, the Economic Development Partnership (EDP), in collaboration with the South African Local Government Association (SALGA), convened the Local Just Transition Dialogues project across all nine provinces between September 2024 and March 2025. The project created structured spaces for stakeholders to reflect on what the Just Transition means within local contexts and how municipalities can respond to the challenges and opportunities it presents.

More than 400 municipal officials, traditional authorities, civil society organisations, community representatives, academia and private sector actors participated in the dialogues. The dialogues were designed to function as technical consultations that surfaced lived realities, institutional challenges and locally grounded opportunities shaping the transition across different parts of the country.

Across provinces, the dialogues surfaced municipal officials' strong interest in the opportunities associated with the transition. Yet significant concerns emerged about municipal capacity constraints and fragmented governance systems and pressures of navigating multiple policy frameworks while managing existing service delivery challenges

with limited human and financial resources. Community representatives framed the transition through everyday realities such as energy affordability, unemployment, water security and climate vulnerability.

These reflections underscored that justice in the transition must address local developmental challenges alongside national decarbonisation ambitions and that partnerships and local leadership are crucial in driving change. Across provinces, participants pointed to the role of relationships, peer learning and individual champions who are working to advance locally grounded solutions within municipal systems.

Insights from the dialogues were synthesised to inform the Local Just Transition discussion paper, which articulates eight considerations aimed at understanding and supporting the role of local government in South Africa's Just Transition. Together, these considerations outline a shared agenda for improving the enabling environment for municipalities and ensuring that the transition is implemented in ways that are equitable, inclusive and locally grounded.

This booklet brings together the knowledge generated through the Local Just Transition Dialogues project. It reflects on the perspectives shared by stakeholders across the nine provinces, highlights key lessons emerging from these conversations and introduces a framework for strengthening local leadership in South Africa's Just Transition.

Why the Just Transition is local

What does a just transition look like when it is shaped by those who will live through it? This is the critical question the Local Just Transition (LJT) Dialogues project sought to answer.

Set up as an initiative between Economic Development Partnership (EDP) and South African Local Government Association (SALGA) funded by Heinrich Boell Stiftung, African Climate Foundation and New Economy Hub, this project convened a series of provincial dialogues across all nine provinces in South Africa over the course of a year.

The rationale is that rather than waiting for ideal conditions, let discussions about implementing the Just Transition begin in the places where the impacts of both climate and economic exclusion are already most deeply felt: rural towns, coal belt municipalities, informal settlements and under-resourced districts.

It is in these contexts that the project engaged municipal leaders, civil society, workers and community members to surface practical, locally relevant strategies for a transition to a resilient and just climate future.

The LJT Dialogues project was established to better understand how the Just Transition is being navigated and implemented at municipal level.

The project created spaces for stakeholders across South Africa to reflect on what the Just Transition means within their local contexts and to surface the opportunities, tensions and priorities shaping implementation. Through engagements held across all nine provinces, the dialogues brought together over 400 municipal officials, traditional authorities, civil society organisations, community representatives, academics and private sector actors.

Rather than positioning the dialogues as only technical consultations, the project sought to capture a diverse range of perspectives on how the transition is understood and experienced across different municipal contexts.

From national ambition to local realities

South Africa's Just Transition is frequently discussed at the level of national policy, international climate commitments, national investment priorities and sectoral transformation. These frameworks and discussions are essential because they set the direction for the country's transition. However, they do not always reflect the institutional realities municipalities face in translating policy ambitions into practical action. The implementation of the transition will ultimately unfold within municipalities and communities across the country.

Municipalities throughout South Africa are navigating multiple pressures. Climate impacts place increasing strain on infrastructure systems, while energy affordability challenges affect both municipal finances and household livelihoods. Persistent inequality, unemployment and spatial fragmentation continue to shape development priorities at the local level. It is in this local reality that national policy and climate commitments must land.

Why municipalities matter in a Just Transition

Municipalities are responsible for the services and infrastructure that underpin everyday life, including electricity distribution, water provision, waste management, spatial planning and local economic development. They are

also the sphere of government closest to communities. This means that they will be the first to witness the firsthand experience of the social and economic pressures associated with climate change and development transitions. For them, South Africa's Just Transition is intertwined with questions of livelihoods, infrastructure resilience, service delivery and local economic opportunity.

Localising the Just Transition therefore requires recognising municipalities not simply as implementers of national policy, but as key actors shaping how the transition unfolds in practice. It means grounding the transition in local contexts, acknowledging the institutional constraints municipalities face and ensuring that communities are able to participate meaningfully in shaping development pathways.

The risk of leaving local government behind

Some of the stories about the realities faced by municipalities in South Africa are dire. They paint bleak pictures of small town boreholes that have long run dry; informal workers like waste pickers consistently excluded from tendering processes; and officials exhausted from trying to deliver on climate mandates without the resources, support or mandate clarity to do so.

The stories in this booklet reflect the structural challenges municipalities face daily and underscore a crucial insight from this work: without meaningful, context-responsive collaboration, the Just Transition risks reinforcing the very inequities it aims to dismantle.

A Just Transition that is not grounded in local realities cannot be truly just. Supporting municipalities to navigate the transition is essential for ensuring that South Africa's transition strengthens communities, protects livelihoods and builds more resilient local economies.

The Just Transition will not happen in boardrooms or blueprints alone - it will live or fail in municipalities

– Participant, Mpumalanga dialogue



Mpumalanga dialogues

Dialogues | Intentionally creating space for a different kind of conversation



Limpopo dialogues

Intentional dialogue becomes necessary to ensure the national priorities of a Just Transition map onto the local realities of the country’s municipalities. The actions below describe how this project designed the structured spaces across South Africa where local voices shaped potential transition responses rooted in lived experience and local context. Stakeholders from municipalities, communities, traditional authorities and the private sector engaged in this process. This was not a consultation. It was a co-creation process to build readiness, share understanding and establish long-term partnerships for implementing a Just Transition at a local scale.

The Local Just Transition Dialogues were so much more than a checklist item, stakeholder map, or a way to validate predetermined plans. They were spaces municipalities used to define their own entry points into the implementation of a Just Transition in their province, adapting engagement methods to fit different capacities and contexts. And perhaps most importantly, these dialogues needed to be designed in a way that held the discomfort of when communities pushed back, challenged assumptions and when the road ahead was unclear.

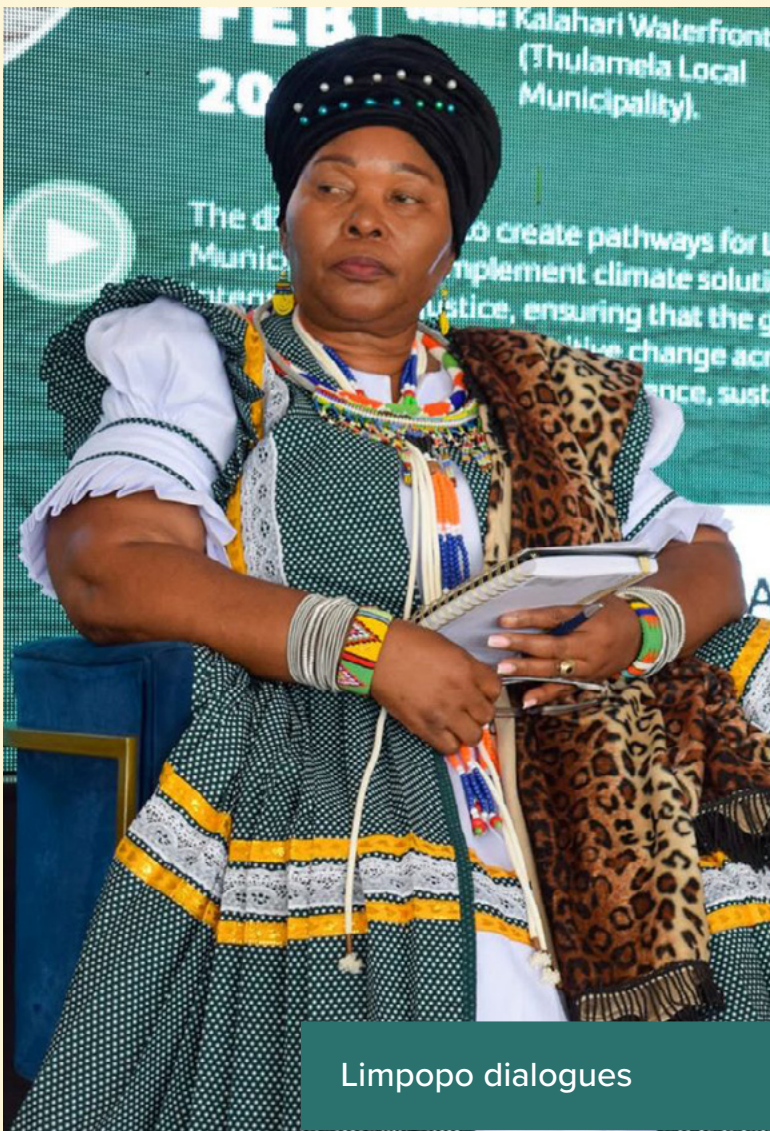
The EDP uses ‘dialogue’ to refer to the creation of a structured, participatory mechanism that enables diverse stakeholders, including local government officials, traditional authorities, youth, civil society and business, to share their realities, voice concerns, reflect on opportunities and collaboratively envision

how a new, potential reality can unfold in a specific context. Used appropriately, a dialogue achieves three objectives: it surfaces diverse lived experiences, builds consensus and shapes actionable locally-relevant responses.

The analysis that follows draws on the body of qualitative evidence generated throughout the LJT Dialogues project. It reflects insights emerging from multiple sources, including:

- Provincial dialogue discussions and participatory workshop sessions
- Reflections and feedback captured during breakout activities
- Stakeholder interviews and follow-up engagements
- Desktop research and provincial context analysis
- Workshop reports and dialogue documentation produced after each engagement

These sources collectively provide a rich qualitative dataset that capture how municipal actors, communities and stakeholders perceive the Just Transition and the challenges and opportunities associated with local implementation. The project prioritised interpretive learning; identifying patterns, tensions and recurring themes that emerged across different provincial contexts.



Limpopo dialogues



Free State dialogues

What was heard across nine provinces

Insights from the provincial dialogues were consolidated and analysed to identify cross-cutting themes and shared concerns shaping the localisation of the Just Transition. Particular attention was given to:

- Recurring barriers faced by municipalities
- Opportunities emerging within different provincial contexts
- The institutional and governance dynamics influencing local action
- The role of partnerships, networks and leadership in enabling progress

These reflections informed a set of thematic narratives and lessons that form the core of this booklet. The insights also contributed to the development of the SALGA Local Just Transition discussion paper, which seeks to move towards a shared agenda for strengthening the role of local government in South Africa’s transition.

The dialogues reveal that while municipalities face significant constraints, they also hold critical knowledge and leadership potential that will shape the trajectory of South Africa’s transition in the years ahead.

You cannot build solar farms on land where people still feel displaced.

— Participant, Northern Cape dialogue

Different understandings of the Just Transition

The dialogues surfaced differences in how the Just Transition was understood. For some stakeholders, the concept of a Just Transition was still abstract. For others, it was conflated with energy policy alone: renewables, coal, loadshedding. These divergent perspectives provided the perfect point of entry into the dialogues. The dialogues provided a space where stakeholders could trust that understanding can unfold where there is difference.

Transition is not a policy document; it’s how we survive tomorrow.

— Youth delegate, Eastern Cape Dialogue

And in many places, that is exactly what happened: local government officials who began with uncertainty moved toward asking how to integrate the Just Transition into their Integrated Development Plans and Local Economic Development strategies. That happened through listening, reflecting and linking the transition to their lived realities.

The emotional landscape of the Just Transition

Implementing the Just Transition in South Africa will require more than technical readiness. The dialogues revealed that emotional receptivity will affect the success of implementation. During the dialogues, officials spoke of ‘exhaustion’ and ‘hope’ in the same breath, while communities oscillated between excitement about ‘opportunity’ and anxiety about being ‘left behind’.

Through the dialogues, bureaucracy could be humanised. In towns still buckling under the weight of unemployment, drought or

displacement, the act of being heard mattered as much as the policy itself. The dialogue became a component part of what made the planned transition just.

We are not short of policies; we are short of pathways.

— Participant, Mpumalanga dialogue

Common threads across nine provinces

Theme	What Participants Shared
Different Understandings of the Transition	The Just Transition means different things. For some it is decarbonisation; for others it is about justice, livelihoods and survival.
Leadership Shapes Momentum	Where political leaders were present, momentum was tangible. Where they were not, officials voiced fatigue and uncertainty.
Municipal Capacity and Readiness	Municipalities are stretched thin but remain deeply committed. “We are willing,” one official said, “we just need clarity and support.”
Finance as a Critical Barrier	Every province identified finance access as a major barrier; project preparation, technical support and equity in allocation were recurring needs.
Skills, Jobs and Economic Opportunity	From coal regions to coastal towns, participants called for concrete reskilling pathways, particularly for youth and workers in transition.
Communities Want to Co-Create the Transition	People want to be partners, not beneficiaries. Traditional leaders, cooperatives and informal networks asked to co-author their futures.
Justice Must Be Geographic	Rural municipalities cautioned against a “metro-first” transition. Justice, they argued, must also be geographic.



Mpumalanga dialogues



Free State dialogues

Reframing the Just Transition | Leveraging decarbonisation for development

Unlike traditional consultation processes, the dialogues about the Local Just Transition prioritised inclusion, lived experience and co-creation. By grounding climate discussions in provincial contexts and fostering peer-based learning, the project helped stakeholders reframe the Just Transition and what it meant for their work.

The content in which the Just Transition is often discussed at an international or national level can contribute to conflicting ideas of what it may mean of local municipalities.

Governments in Sub-Saharan Africa face shrinking fiscal space, with government revenues falling from approximately 22% to 17% of GDP over the past decade and public debt rising sharply. Countries are paying more in debt servicing than they can invest in basic infrastructure, let alone a green transition. At the same time, over 500 million people in Sub-Saharan Africa still live without electricity.

These realities make it clear: expecting countries to use an energy transition to leapfrog fossil-based development without transitional support is not only unjust, but also undermines the very possibility of success. The dialogues surfaced three critical factors to ensuring that a transition to a green economy can be a just one:

Local governments are willing to transition to clean energy but are under-resourced to

make that change. Municipalities carry much of the responsibility for service delivery but lack the policy certainty, fiscal tools and technical support to lead transition processes.

A Transition must start with livelihoods. The immediate needs of communities like jobs, food security, water, energy access are inseparable from their climate vulnerability. Any consideration of a Just Transition must begin with how that transition addresses economic needs.

Procedural justice is foundational. Transitions imposed from above, without inclusive participation, risk repeating the exclusions of the past and are guaranteed to be unsuccessful.

These insights affirm that while South Africa, like others on the continent, may be “too poor to leap” in traditional terms, the country is not starting from zero. There is abundant social capital: lived experience, trust networks, innovation and – most importantly – a deep desire to shape a better future. And there is dedication to using the Just Transition as a mechanism to achieve that future.

The real question then shifts to whether the global climate finance system will support locally rooted, politically complex and socially just pathways that are being implemented across the global South. The LJT Dialogues project illustrates one such pathway. It deserves our attention, and our investment.

What it will take to move from conversation to collaboration



Western Cape dialogues

The LJT Dialogues project exposed the way that stakeholders perceive the Just Transition, the need to reframe it and why including local government in this policy movement is critically important. But they showed something else also. The possible mechanisms that could move this system from words to action.

Municipal champions

In every system of change, there are people who make the abstract real. They are the ones who keep showing up when the path ahead is uncertain. In South Africa's Just Transition, we call them champions: individuals who move ideas from intention to implementation, often without a title, budget or formal mandate.

Through the LJT Dialogues project, these champions stepped forward in every province. Some were municipal planners integrating climate risk into Spatial Development Frameworks. Others were officials navigating embedded generation reforms inside electricity departments. Some were youth leaders linking environmental justice to livelihoods in coal-affected regions. Across contexts, these champions shared a common trait: they were already carrying transition work forward inside constrained systems.

If the broader Just Transition debate highlights structural constraint, fiscal pressure, infrastructure backlogs, rising inequality, then these champions force one to reflect and ask what enables the people inside constrained systems to act?

The Just Transition does not begin with new institutions. It begins with individuals interpreting mandates differently. Innovation in municipal governance is rarely about entirely new programmes. More often, it is about integrating climate considerations into existing functions: planning, budgeting, procurement, energy services, water management and local economic development. What the dialogues showed is that these champions take familiar responsibilities and align them with emerging transition priorities. They coordinate across departments. They convene stakeholders. They translate national frameworks into local practice. More examples of champions' work in action were:

- Municipal officials embedding climate resilience into Integrated Development Plans and capital planning cycles
- Technical teams redesigning tariffs and exploring wheeling mechanisms to respond to energy system reform
- Cross-sector working groups emerging at provincial level to interpret Just Transition implications collaboratively

While these actions may appear incremental, in practice they are the mechanisms through which transition becomes governance. Transition responsibilities that are embedded in official job descriptions, departmental mandates and performance systems are more durable than those carried informally. Integrating climate and Just Transition priorities into IDPs, budget cycles and sector plans makes championing institutional rather than discretionary. Municipal champions consistently expressed the need for structured platforms to exchange practice and coordinate across sectors.

Partnerships

Climate risks do not fall evenly. Energy reform does not affect all households equally. Infrastructure failure has differentiated impacts across income groups, genders, informal

settlements and rural communities. Municipal champions operate within this layered reality and have an intersectional awareness that transition decisions shape who benefits, who bears the cost, and who is heard in the process. In this sense, championing is not simply an individual initiative. It is the human expression of adaptive governance, navigating complexity while holding equity and inclusion at the centre.

However, when adaptive work depends solely on personal conviction, it becomes fragile. Municipal champions must be supported institutionally if adaptive governance is to move from isolated effort to embedded municipal practice. If a Just Transition requires adaptive governance, then creating enabling environments for these champions becomes a deliberate governance priority.

Adaptive governance becomes a critical mechanism for supporting the Just Transition because it builds the capabilities of actors and systems to acknowledge uncertainty and respond through collaboration, iterative learning, distributed leadership and coordination across sectors and spheres of government. Institutional environments that operate in this way will protect champions from operating too cautiously or withdrawing after initial setbacks by providing partnership through coherent policy architecture, coordinated intergovernmental alignment and institutional legitimacy. When bottom-up insight and municipal authority move in step, transition becomes governable rather than aspirational.

Learning peer networks

The final mechanism that can move the systems involved in the Just Transition forward are learning peer networks that support peer exchange and collaboration among municipalities. Initiatives such as these are already being established. One such initiative is an interprovincial peer learning network being developed through SALGA's



Gauteng dialogues

Provincial Advisors. This network will bring together municipalities and relevant sector departments to deepen awareness of climate change and the Just Transition, share practices and co-develop locally responsive approaches to implementation.

The emergence of these networks reflects a growing commitment to building the institutional scaffolding needed to make these spaces ones of future knowledge-sharing, mentorship and joint problem-solving. Rather than replicating existing platforms, learning peer networks should aim to respond directly to the momentum and relationships built through these provincial dialogues, shaped by the needs and insights of those who participated.

Existing South African examples of similar learning peer networks illustrate their potential for the Just Transition:

- SALGA's provincial advisor networks facilitating inter-municipal alignment
- Energy and climate technical forums interpreting regulatory reform collectively
- Provincial disaster management clusters integrating resilience planning
- Emerging peer-learning platforms under the Local Just Transition Network

These mechanisms reduce isolation and enable transversal coordination across departments and spheres of government, a core requirement of adaptive governance. One of the clearest insights from the LJT Dialogues project was the energy that emerges when municipal champions are connected; learning peer networks will amplify this energy by connecting so many more champions.

Participants spoke not only about fiscal constraints or regulatory complexity, but about working in silos. About advancing transition priorities within departments without cross-functional alignment. About carrying responsibility for long-term resilience while navigating short-term political and administrative pressures. Learning peer networks represent one mechanism to helping champions step out of those silos and learn from other champions.

In the night skies of the southern hemisphere, the Southern Cross has long guided travellers home. Unlike the North Star, fixed and singular, the Southern Cross is a constellation. Four bright points must be read together. Its direction is not assumed; it is interpreted. It asks the navigator to understand context, relationship and position. For South Africa's Just Transition, this feels apt. The country's direction cannot be found by following a single star. It must be read through the constellation of our realities: social, economic, infrastructural and deeply human. Municipalities stand at the centre of that navigation.

Local government is not the final mile of implementation in the Just Transition. It is the site where justice becomes tangible, where climate ambition meets stormwater systems, electricity tariffs, informal settlements, spatial inequality and local livelihoods. In South Africa,

climate change is experienced locally. So too must the Just Transition be realised locally.

Across the nine provincial dialogues convened through the LJT Dialogues initiative, a consistent message emerged: the Just Transition will not succeed as a technocratic reform layered onto existing municipal strain. It will hold only if municipalities are recognised, supported and positioned as central actors in shaping the country's trajectory. The Southern Cross offers a way to understand what that requires.

Over the course of this initiative, several themes have surfaced repeatedly. Taken together, they form a constellation of orientations that illuminate what municipalities need to navigate a just and resilient transition. The following section describes these four orientations as the stars necessary to navigate the Just Transition.

Star 1: **Relational Infrastructure**

Municipal governance is not sustained by pipes and cables alone. It is sustained by trust, cooperation and alignment across spheres of government, communities, business and civil society.

The dialogues made clear that municipalities are fatigued not only by resource constraints, but by fragmented support. Plans proliferate. Reporting multiplies. But alignment is thin. Without coordination, even well-intentioned programmes create duplication and administrative burden.

Relational infrastructure in the form of peer learning, contextualised support, co-creative models and sustained intergovernmental dialogues is therefore not a soft add-on but a structural prerequisite for delivery under transition conditions.

Star 2: **Lived Justice**

National discourse often frames the Just Transition through megawatts and emissions. Yet for most municipalities, the transition is not primarily about managing industrial decline or disruption.

Of South Africa's 257 municipalities, only a small fraction are deeply embedded in

coal-dependent economies. The majority are navigating infrastructure backlogs, fiscal strain, extreme weather events and the daily realities of poverty and exclusion.

For them, justice begins with service delivery that is fair, resilient and future-oriented. It is about who has access to safe water during drought, whose homes are protected from flooding, whose livelihoods survive economic shifts and whose voices shape planning processes.

In this sense, the Just Transition is not a new mandate for local government. It is a deepening of its constitutional developmental mandate.

One of the strongest messages from the dialogues was this: equity is not a line item in a log frame. It is not something you achieve by reaching a certain percentage of stakeholder attendance. Equity is a way of working, a long-term commitment to who gets to lead, how decisions are made and whose knowledge is seen as credible. Adopting the orientation of equity as a living, negotiated and relational practice is what makes justice possible.

Star 3: **Local Resilience**

Climate change intensifies demands on infrastructure, budgets and institutional capacity. Municipalities are required to adapt water systems, modernise electricity grids, rethink spatial planning and manage shifting local economies often with constrained revenue and limited technical support.

Resilience in this context is institutional and social. A resilient system requires learning cultures, adaptive management and political environments that allow experimentation without punitive backlash. It requires protecting the redistributive role of municipalities even as energy and revenue models shift. A Just Transition that overlooks municipal financial sustainability risks weakening the very institutions tasked with delivering it.

Star 4: **Collective Navigation**

The most common cross-cutting theme from the dialogues was the need for coherence. Municipal officials repeatedly asked for clarity of direction in a crowded policy space. They called for rationalised guidance, simplified reporting expectations and support offerings that are tailored rather than generic.

Collective navigation does not imply uniformity. Municipal contexts differ widely but without some alignment of purpose and policy architecture, municipalities are left interpreting transition requirements in isolation. Learning, coordination and shared intent become the compass.

The necessity of centring municipalities in the Just Transition

The power of the Southern Cross metaphor is that it does not point to a single destination. Its meaning emerges through alignment, through the relationships between its stars. Likewise, South Africa's Just Transition will not be secured by a singular directive. It will depend on whether relational infrastructure, lived justice, resilience and collective navigation are anchored in strong municipal institutions.

A constellation only becomes meaningful when we can read its centre point. Municipalities are at the centre of this Southern Cross. Not as an administrative afterthought. Not as a delivery agent at the end of a national policy chain. But as the constitutional site where justice is enacted.

The developmental mandate of local government to provide democratic and

accountable governance, ensure sustainable service delivery, promote socio-economic development and encourage community participation already mirrors the principles of distributive, restorative and procedural justice.

The Just Transition does not introduce a new obligation for municipalities. It intensifies and reframes existing ones in the context of climate change, decarbonisation and energy system reform. To centre municipalities in the Just Transition is therefore not a political courtesy. It is a structural necessity.

Building the Southern Cross | A discussion paper on localising the Just Transition in South Africa

Drawing on provincial dialogue processes and grounded in the lived realities of municipal governance, an emergent discussion paper articulates a clear argument: Just Transition policies and programmes must centre municipalities and recognise that the transition extends far beyond industrial restructuring. The Just Transition discussion paper is available as part of the suite of knowledge generated by this project to be drawn into SALGA's own position paper on the Just Transition.

The discussion paper frames the Just Transition as an infrastructure, finance and governance challenge as much as an energy and industrial one. The paper calls for conversation about coordinated direction, rationalised policy guidance, prioritised support for municipal capability and an enabling institutional culture that supports adaptation and learning. It posits that a Just Transition cannot be achieved if municipal financial sustainability, workforce resilience and core service delivery functions are compromised in the process. If municipalities are supported, coordinated and recognised as central actors, the Just Transition becomes navigable. If they are marginalised or overburdened, the country's ambition will falter at the point of delivery.

Under the Southern Cross, the question is not whether we have a vision. It is whether we are aligned around the institutional centre that must carry it. Municipal Just Transition capacity is the axis on which South Africa's Just Transition turns. When South Africa speaks about the Just Transition, the conversation often begins in the coalfields or boardrooms around megawatts,

industries and emissions. But as municipalities across the country have reminded us, the transition is not only industrial. It is human, infrastructural and profoundly local. It lives in the boreholes of drought-prone towns, in the stormwater drains that overflow during summer floods, and in the hands of officials who must deliver services under tightening budgets and rising expectations.

It recognises municipalities as system stewards, responsible not only for service delivery but for protecting people, enabling livelihoods and shaping spaces that can withstand the pressures of climate and economic change.

The discussion paper seeks to draw attention to:

- The role of local government in South Africa's national climate and development architecture.
- The enabling environment that allows municipalities to lead by reforming finance, resourcing, and governance systems and institutional conditions for learning and adaptation.
- Embedding justice in practice, aligning the principles of distributive, restorative, and procedural justice with the constitutional duties of municipalities.
- Establishing a coherent agenda to guide municipalities, provincial structures, national government, and civil society in building just, resilient, and sustainable communities.

There are eight considerations raised in the discussion paper. These provide entry

points to guide the sector and its partners on what municipalities could do, and how others could support them, to achieve a Just Transition. Together, these considerations

offer a starting point for co-creating a roadmap to implementation that is practical, people-centred and deeply aligned with South Africa’s governance realities.

The eight local government considerations

Consideration	Summary of intent	Provincial dialogue evidence
1. Recognition that a Just Transition goes beyond addressing the industrial transition	Reframes the transition as a societal, governance and infrastructural process, not only an economic one. Places municipalities — not industries — at the heart of implementation.	Communities called for people-centred, participatory governance; e.g., Northern Cape’s “mental readiness” and emotional ownership themes.
2. Municipalities need to work to understand their transition context, to plan and enable better support	Each municipality should develop a transition profile capturing risks and opportunities across infrastructure, energy, water, finance,agovernance and livelihoods.	Participants highlighted uneven understanding of the Just Transition and the need for locally grounded data.
3. Just Transition support needs to be contextualised and efficient for municipalities	National and provincial support must be tailored, demand-driven and efficient rather than generic or duplicative.	Smaller municipalities expressed frustration with one-size-fits-all capacity-building; rural under-investment was noted.
4. Resourcing and capabilities of municipalities need to be prioritised by all stakeholders	Municipalities need sufficient staff, skills and budgets alongside stronger technical partnering and learning capabilities, supported by enabling institutional environments that build transition capacity.	Officials across all provinces cited fatigue, overstretch and institutional fragility alongside a strong willingness to lead.
5. Financial reform for sustainable and redistributive business models need to be prioritised	Calls for urgent reform of municipal financial models, especially around electricity revenue to ensure equity, sustainability and long-term transition capacity.	Dialogues in Mpumalanga and Gauteng stressed project preparation barriers and climate finance access challenges.
6. Single source and clear messaging on municipal Just Transitions	Advocates for one coherent framework and contact point across government to coordinate transition-related policy, reduce confusion and align reporting.	Participants repeatedly mentioned “concept fatigue” and confusion over multiple, overlapping policies.
7. Prioritise the core functions of municipalities through rationalising reporting and regulation	Simplify oversight and compliance requirements so that officials can focus on delivery, learning, adaptation and innovation rather than administrative burden.	Provinces highlighted excessive reporting and audits that divert attention from implementation.
8. Deep and specified support for municipalities facing deep industrial transition, driven outside the local government sector	Municipalities facing industrial transitions require nationally coordinated, place based support that extends beyond the local government sector.	Kwa-Zulu Natal, Mpumalanga and the Eastern Cape provinces were particularly vocal about the need for labour transition strategies that prioritise the reskilling and redeployment of workers.



Free State dialogues

Each consideration is an echo of what was heard in the provincial dialogues: the exhaustion of under-resourced officials; the frustration of communities still waiting to see justice made tangible; the persistence of champions who continue to build partnerships despite uncertainty.

From recognising that the Just Transition is broader than industry (consideration 1), to creating a better enabling environment for adaptation (consideration 8), the discussion paper captures a shift in tone from reactive compliance to adaptive governance and transition capacity. It calls for contextualised support, financial reform, political leadership,

stronger municipal capabilities and coordinated messaging, all anchored in the lived experience of those implementing change on the ground.

The discussion paper supports the sector’s commitment to ensuring that the transition remains just in principle and in practice and recognises that while municipalities cannot carry the transition alone, they are indispensable to its success. The local realities of South Africa – from the droughts of the Karoo to the coalfields of Mpumalanga – must shape how the country navigates its future. And it offers a clear message to all partners: if the Just Transition is to work, it must work for local government first.

South Africa's Just Transition will ultimately be realised, or stalled, at the municipal level. The capacity of municipalities to navigate transition pressures depends on finance, infrastructure and whether the people already advancing this work are recognised as governance assets.

We need to take seriously the next phase of support. Whether that is piloting new models for learning exchanges, adapting funding tools to accommodate local complexity or embedding Just Transition principles into formal planning cycles without losing the flexible, bottom-up spirit that made the dialogues effective. The provincial dialogues opened a door. But the work of walking through it – of turning these initial efforts into long-term infrastructure for an equity-led transition – is just beginning.

If we are serious about not leaving anyone behind, then we must ask not only who was consulted but who was invited to lead. And whether we are prepared to build the scaffolding for them to do so. Our willingness to do that, more than any technical solution or policy roadmap, is what will determine whether the Just Transition lives up to its name.

The dialogues demonstrated that when municipal officials, councillors and community actors are given structured space to deliberate, bottom-up clarity emerges. Local priorities sharpen. Trade-offs become visible. Collective ownership strengthens. The challenge now is sustaining that connectivity beyond periodic convenings. If championing remains episodic, tied to events or external projects, it will struggle to influence institutional culture. Moving from dialogue to embedded governance practice requires:

- Ongoing peer-learning mechanisms across

municipalities

- Regular intergovernmental alignment spaces
- Transversal coordination across municipal departments
- Formal recognition of championing as legitimate institutional work

Bottom-up governance is the grounding of national ambition in local reality, with champions as the connective tissue that translates between these levels. The dialogues unlocked new momentum and revealed a strong appetite for continued action. As climate impacts intensify, municipalities need practical and sustained support. To deepen and sustain this work, three pathways are being explored:

1. A champions Learning Network or Community of Practice to enable peer mentorship and connections with technical and financial partners

2. An accelerator or pilot support programme to help municipalities package and finance climate-smart projects aligned with Just Transition principles

3. Strategic influence, ensuring that local voices meaningfully inform national and international climate governance

These next steps reflect a growing recognition that local leadership in the Just Transition is already emerging: in council chambers, ward committees, traditional forums and informal networks. This leadership now needs to be supported, consolidated, resourced and scaled.



ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT
PARTNERSHIP

www.wcedp.co.za

