POLICY BRIEF

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OJTA
Operationalising a Just Transition in Africa

OPERATIONALISING A JUST TRANSITION IN AFRICA

TRANSLATING JUST ENERGY TRANSITIONS INTO TANGIBLE BENEFITS FOR COAL-DEPENDENT COMMUNITIES

South Africa's Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP) promises substantial renewable-energy investment and a national green jobs boost. However, evidence from the Mpumalanga Province, where the largest percentage of coal deposits that fuel the economy, shows that headline job numbers do not automatically translate into local, durable poverty reduction in coal-host communities. A primary qualitative study conducted in affected Mpumalanga towns combined with two systematic reviews of national and regional evidence by Dr Takudzwa Musekiwa (Centre for the Advancement of Scholarship, University of Pretoria) reveals four structural problems: (1) many green jobs are short-term construction roles rather than long-term employment; (2) major skills mismatches prevent local workers, and especially women, from accessing higher-quality jobs; (3) weak municipal finance and fragmented procurement allow value leakage outside affected towns; and (4) projects are sometimes sited away from coal towns, producing spatial mismatch.

These dynamics risk reinforcing existing inequality unless the province deliberately designs measures to capture value locally. This brief outlines an integrated Implementation Package with immediate, short- and medium-term actions to ensure a just and inclusive transition in coal, or fossil fuel producing regions, to prevent economic displacement and maximise local development benefits. It proposes a series of timebound, and actionable measures cobining governance, finance, skills development, and monitoring measures to translate transition investments into tangible social and economic outcomes, that are both impactful and sustainable. Key elements include strengthening community oversight and accountability, linking project approvals and procurement to local employment and inclusion outcomes such as local-content clauses, supporting local businesses through targeted financing such as finance windows for local SMEs, and investing in competency-based training aligned with labour market needs.

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KEY MESSAGES

1 PLACE-BASED JUST ENERGY TRANSITION IMPLEMENTATION PACKAGE

Adopt and adequately resource an integrated, place-based Just Energy Transition Implementation Package to ensure the transition delivers measurable social and economic benefits in affected communities.

2 FINANCE, INCENTIVES & PROCUREMENT ON EMPLOYMENT & INCLUSION TARGETS

Condition transition-related finance, incentives and procurement on clear, verifiable local employment and inclusion targets so that workers and marginalised groups in host communities benefit directly from new investments.

3 TVET SYSTEMS & EMPLOYER-LINKED HIRING PATHWAYS

Invest in competency-based TVET systems and employer-linked hiring pathways, with explicit gender targets, to cultivate a skilled local workforce aligned with emerging transition-related sectors.

4 COMMUNITY OVERSIGHT UNIT & A CENTRALISED IMPACT-MONITORING SYSTEM

Establish an independent Community Oversight Unit and a centralised impact-monitoring system to track jobs, wages and household poverty outcomes, strengthen accountability, and support evidence-based policy adjustment.

CONTEXT | WHY THIS MATTERS

Mpumalanga is the backbone of the economy supplying 82% of South Africa's coal. Many of the communities in the region face pronounced poverty and job insecurity and economic vulnerability, making them more exposed to disruptions due to the transition to Green Energy. Without deliberate design, the transition may produce national aggregate gains while leaving coal-host communities behind or worse off by exacerbating poverty. Ensuring coal-host communities' benefit is essential, not only for economic justice but for social stability, poverty reduction and sustained support for the transition to green energy. A just and well-managed transition is therefore essential for aligning South Africa's climate goals with social and economic imperatives, ensuring that the shift to clean energy strengthens rather than undermines vulnerable communities.

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RESEARCH OVERVIEW | WHAT WAS DONE & WHY IT MATTERS

This policy brief synthesises evidence from three complementary streams:

- **Primary qualitative research** on Mpumalanga coal-host communities. The qualitative data reveals lived experience, perceptions of risk and opportunity, barriers to local hiring, gendered constraints, and community priorities for compensation and skills training.
- **Two PRISMA-guided systematic reviews:** These reviews examined peer-reviewed studies, government and NGO reports, project evaluations and modelling studies relevant to Just Energy Transition Partnerships (JETP) and renewable-project impacts in South Africa. The reviews identify recurring empirical patterns and tested interventions, and highlight gaps in implementation evidence.
- **Cross-synthesis:** The qualitative and systematic evidence were cross-referenced to ensure recommendations are both evidence-based and grounded in local realities.

KEY FINDINGS

The following key findings and critical insights emerged from the research process:

- Quantity vs quality: Renewable projects generate many temporary construction jobs, but permanent operations & maintenance (O&M) roles are far fewer. Without specific measures, the bulk of employment benefits are short-lived and accrue to non-local contractors.
- Skills and access gaps exclude local workers: Existing TVET offerings are often misaligned with employer needs (curricula, practical competencies, certification). Short, non-portable training courses fail to create pathways into sustainable jobs. Gendered barriers such as care obligations, travel costs and workplace cultures further limit women's participation.
- Spatial mismatch of project location: When projects are sited distant from coal towns, local residents cannot access these jobs, and commuting costs and household disruption increase.
- Small, participatory pilots demonstrate potential: Where local procurement, community governance and deliberate training were implemented together (for example, small solar pilots coupled with apprenticeships), welfare gains and local employment outcomes improved, demonstrating feasibility when interventions are combined.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS | ENSURING JUST TRANSITION PARTNERSHIPS DELIVER LOCAL BENEFITS

The central policy implication is that JETP outcomes are contingent—not guaranteed. Without intentional design choices that tie investment to local labour markets and local value chains, aggregate job projections will not deliver local poverty reduction. Investments, therefore, risk bypassing local workers, local enterprises, and vulnerable communities. To unlock meaningful, place-based benefits, JETPs must be designed and implemented with explicit mechanisms that link investment to local labour markets and value chains. Two core levers can change outcomes: (a) contractual design and financing (procurement rules, blended finance and local-content clauses) to change developer incentives; and (b) local capacity and connectivity (skills, transport, local enterprise support and community governance) to enable local people to capture jobs and contracts.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

A successful and inclusive Just Energy Transition in Mpumalanga requires a set of practical, non-exclusionary interventions that expand economic opportunities for coal-affected communities while protecting the rights of all workers. This includes:

Conditioning project approvals on transparent **Community Impact Plans and Local-Hiring Plans** with measurable, time-bound targets for skills transfer, SME subcontracting and local participation—while explicitly prohibiting discriminatory or exclusionary hiring practices.

Strengthening employer-linked TVET pathways, where training curricula are co-designed with industry and tied to guaranteed interviews or apprenticeships, ensuring residents can realistically access emerging green-economy jobs.

Expanding SME and community-enterprise support through **blended finance, technical assistance and supplier-development programmes** that help local businesses become competitive contractors in renewable energy value chains.

Implementing transparent procurement rules that promote local value capture through local-content plans, apprenticeship quotas and SME-friendly contract lots, without restricting fair competition or mobility.

Reducing participation barriers by deploying mobile training hubs, providing transport stipends and childcare, and offering flexible training schedules that include women, youth and caregivers.

Supporting displaced coal workers through retraining vouchers, transition stipends and targeted job-placement support linked to accredited programmes and real re-employment pathways.

Improving spatial access to opportunities by integrating transport solutions, siting workforce hubs strategically, and ensuring connectivity between communities and new energy projects.

Promoting community ownership models, including equity stakes and benefit-sharing funds with strong governance safeguards, to secure long-term local value from new energy investments.

Protecting the rights of migrant and non-local workers through enforcing fair recruitment standards, guaranteeing portable benefits, and establishing ongoing labour-rights monitoring.

Strengthening accountability by fully operationalising an **Independent Community Oversight Unit** and establishing a centralised impact database that tracks jobs, wages, procurement patterns, gender outcomes and poverty indicators.

Piloting integrated interventions in select coal-host towns, rigorously evaluate their results, and scale only the most effective models using blended finance, transparent reporting and performance-based contractual incentives.

CONCLUSION

Mpumalanga's Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP) implementation demonstrates that achieving real and lasting benefits for communities requires more than just high-level job targets. Sustainable, local economic renewal demands deliberate policy design that and embeds conditional finance, employer-linked skills training, local finance for SMEs, and independent oversight. The integrated Implementation Package set out here converts evidence from local qualitative research and systematic reviews into pragmatic, time-bound steps that can deliver durable, inclusive benefits for coal-host communities.

As African countries pursue their own just transitions, Mpumalanga's experience offers key lessons: local benefits do not emerge automatically; they must be engineered through targeted investment, accountable institutions, and community-centred planning. This case provides a blueprint for how African policymakers can localise transition gains, protect vulnerable workers, and ensure that clean-energy shifts support regional development priorities, and not undermine them.

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The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent those of the IDRC or its Board of Governors, or of the entities delivering OJTA. OJTA's research consortium comprises SouthSouthNorth, the Africa Research & Impact Network and the University of Pretoria. For more information and further guidance on using this material, please contact: info@southsouthnorth.org