

Setting the local scene for just transition. The modus operandi of the intermediary organisations.

The context

The participatory approach to local and regional socio-economic transitions, particularly in the context of just transitions aimed at meeting climate objectives, has gained significant traction in recent years. This approach emphasizes the importance of inclusive decision-making processes that engage diverse stakeholders, ensuring that the voices of marginalized groups are heard and considered. As highlighted by Boss et al., inclusive decision-making must be an integral part of the just transition process, rather than a mere checkbox activity. This ongoing engagement fosters a deeper understanding of the socio-economic impacts of climate policies and enhances community resilience during transitions (Boss et al., 2023). Moreover, the concept of just transition itself is multifaceted, encompassing technical, social justice, and spatial dimensions, as discussed by Moodie et al. (Moodie et al., 2021). This framework not only addresses the need for technological advancements but also emphasizes the importance of protecting vulnerable populations and tailoring policies to local contexts.

The integration of participatory modelling techniques can enhance public understanding of socio-environmental dynamics, as noted by Gray et al. (2017). By involving stakeholders in the modelling process, communities can better grasp the complexities of socio-economic transitions and the rationale behind policy decisions. This participatory modelling not only aids in decision-making but also empowers communities to actively engage in the transition process, thereby fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility towards achieving climate objectives. The authors suggest a four-dimensional framework (4P) that includes (1) the Purpose for selecting a PM approach (the why); (2) the Process by which the public was involved in model building or evaluation (the how); (3) the Partnerships formed (the who); and (4) the Products that resulted from these efforts (the what); as a way to describe the collaborative activities.

The collaborative framework is essential for ensuring that the transition does not disproportionately burden specific communities, particularly those reliant on traditional industries. The European Union's Just Transition Fund (JTF) aims to promote social justice while implementing the European Green Deal, although they face challenges related to narrow objectives and the need for broader engagement (Crespy & Munta, 2023). The implementation of JTF is increasingly recognized as a critical mechanism for facilitating socio-economic transitions that are equitable and sustainable. However, the scope of its intervention is ringfenced to investments or actions aimed at jobseekers. (Regulation, 2021) While "soft" bottom-up initiatives might play a pivotal role, as they empower local communities to actively participate in facing challenges that affect their lives, they can only be funded as "other activities in the areas of education and social inclusion" (Regulation, 2021).

Navigating towards successful society involvement in change is a very complex issue, with many drivers and triggers. Polko et al. (2025) highlight the notions of place-based leadership and bridging social capital. Nowakowska et al. argue that a more open and inclusive place-based approach is essential for formulating and implementing transition policies that align with local needs and aspirations (Nowakowska et al. 2021). Research also indicates the need for the integration of bottom-up initiatives with broader governance frameworks. Grassroots-led regeneration and social entrepreneurship can

challenge the limitations of top-down approaches, providing nuanced, locally tailored solutions that address specific community needs (Li et al., 2024). Having in mind the need for ensuring that the JTF not only meets national objectives but also responds to the unique socio-economic conditions of local populations, the importance of mutual learning among citizens and key city actors, which can foster innovative governance processes that are responsive to local contexts, shall also be pinpointed (Simmons et al., 2018). Moreover, by drawing on ancestral knowledge, local leaders can create strategies that resonate with community values and historical contexts, thereby enhancing the legitimacy and acceptance of transition initiatives. This aspect is particularly relevant in coal-dependent regions, where the legacy of past industries can inform contemporary leadership practices and community engagement strategies (Topaloglou, 2020).

Intermediary organisations play a vital role in facilitating local transitions, particularly in the context of the JTF and broader socio-economic transformations. They can facilitate knowledge exchange and capacity building among local actors. Kanda et al. (2020), quoting the other authors, note that intermediaries can articulate new visions and expectations, initiate policy processes, and serve as impartial voices for emerging networks. This role is particularly important in sustainability transitions, where diverse stakeholders must collaborate to achieve common goals. By providing technical advice and connecting different actor groups, intermediaries can help diffuse innovative practices and technologies, thereby accelerating the transition to sustainable socio-economic systems (Fischer & Newig, 2016). Moreover, intermediaries can enhance the legitimacy of local initiatives by fostering meaningful engagement with communities (Schubert et al., 2024).

Objective and contribution

The Polish industrial region of Silesia, the largest recipient of the JTF, is implementing its Territorial Just Transition Plan, which is supported by EU funding. Within the framework of the TJTP, financial resources have been allocated to support bottom-up community initiatives. This has enabled local partners from the nearly 4 million people territory to submit their proposals. The study aims to understand their motivations and expectations regarding the role of their projects in community engagement and the transition away from the coal-based economy.

The main research question is: How do the intermediary organisations (IO) envision the role of bottom-up initiatives in the just transition of the major European coal region (Silesia)?

Spanned across the Gray's 4P framework the main RQ can be decomposed into:

- (1) What factors motivate IOs to apply for funding?
- (2) How do IOs conceptualise transition, and what is its translation to the situation in their localities?
- (3) What evidence was used by IOs to devise projects?
- (4) Who and what is the focus of particular IOs' projects?
- (5) What incentives do the IOs intend to use to attract residents to the project?
- (6) How do the IOs perceive the impact of the projects for the local community?

The paper will contribute to a more profound comprehension of the mechanisms underpinning the establishment of bottom-up, local just transition projects. It will decipher the patterns that can be utilised by stakeholders across Europe. However, for the authors, it will also enable further research on whether the envisioned future becomes reality.

Methods and data used

The present study encompasses 68 projects that were granted in Silesia in 2024. A thorough analysis of publicly available data on the scope, target groups and budgets of these projects has been

conducted. At present, individual direct interviews (IDIs) are being conducted with the IOs, with the objective of obtaining at least 20 insightful talks. Based on the results of the IDIs, the survey will be disseminated to all 68 grant holders with the aim of cross-checking the opinions derived from the interviews. The IDIs will be subjected to grounded theory methods, and the survey results will be analysed using qualitative and quantitative approaches.

Tentative results and conclusions

Halfway through the in-depth interviews (IDIs), an emerging pattern suggests that IOs predominantly rely on their prior experience and tacit knowledge of the community when designing their projects. A key challenge they identify is the limited appeal of the just transition narrative, which is often perceived by society as either unengaging or controversial. Many residents view the transition as a top-down process, leading to a lack of urgency or motivation to participate actively. In response, several IOs prioritize recognition justice, leveraging existing socio-economic structures to gradually introduce new approaches that align with both current and future climate policies. Their projects are expected to foster a better understanding of the transition within the community, though often in a subtle manner, embedding the narrative “between the lines” to avoid discouraging residents. However, IOs remain sceptical about the direct impact of these initiatives on key economic aspects such as the labour market, entrepreneurship, or broader economic restructuring, indicating a cautious approach to measuring tangible socio-economic change.

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