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FUTURE-READY YOUTH: HARNESSING THE DEMOGRAPHIC DIVIDEND FOR JUST TRANSITIONS

Message from the Desk of Senior Director, TERI

TERI is delighted to release the eighth edition of Vichaar-Vimarsh: Just Transition Newsletter. The theme, "Future-Ready Youth: Harnessing the Demographic Dividend for Just Transitions" underscores the vital role of youth as a key stakeholder in shaping a participatory, inclusive, and equitable transition away from coal-based industries.

As India navigates its path towards a sustainable and low-carbon energy future, it becomes imperative to empower young demography with the knowledge, skills, and opportunities needed to lead and benefit from this socio-economic transformation. Through this edition, we aim to highlight innovative perspectives, emerging research, and on-ground initiatives that empower youth to become active agents of change in building a just, resilient, and low-carbon economy.

We hope this issue fosters meaningful dialogue, renewed commitment and collective action towards a future where the aspirations and agency of youth become the cornerstone of a just transition that truly leaves no one behind.

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INTEGRATING MARGINALIZED YOUTH IN THE JUST URBAN TRANSITION: A PATHWAY TO INCLUSIVE CLIMATE ACTION

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Labourers resting next to coal used to fire bricks in the background in Jharia, Jharkhand

Introduction

To battle the adverse effect of climate change, a shift from extractive "brown" industries to sustainable "green" (Stark, A et al., 2023) is need of the hour, as 'it could replace the highly polluted, dangerous, grey economy with an environmentally friendly, healthy, green economy' (Ehresman & Okereke, 2015, as cited Wang & Lo, 2021). Just Transition is conceptualized to make it fair and inclusive (Stark et al., 2023), within which intersect these five major topics, i.e., (1) just transition as a labour-oriented concept, (2) just transition as an integrated framework for justice, (3) just transition as a theory of socio-technical transition, (4) just transition as a governance strategy, and (5) just transition as public perception (Wang & Lo, 2021). A clear gap evident in the above categorization is the intersection of 'just transition' with 'the urban' (Hughes & Hoffman, 2020), and where cities are defined not only as geographical territories but as important stakeholders in the climate conversation.

Indian cities, as Kashwan (2025) notes, were designed to facilitate trade and commerce and protect the health and wealth of the colonial elite, pushing the majority of the urban population to the margins. Today, this is being maintained with caste and religious segregation and informal settlement reproducing marginalization and exclusion prevalent in rural India (Kashwan, 2025). Subsequently, the role of the urban poor — who constitute around 25% of India's urban population (Census, 2011) and live in informal settlements — remains unclear in this transitory development, specifically in planning and decision-making.

TRANSITION IN INDIA MUST EXPLICITLY FOCUS ON URBAN JUST TRANSITION, PARTICULARLY ON THE NEEDS OF YOUTH AND MARGINALISED COMMUNITIES, MOVING BEYOND TECHNOCRATIC SUSTAINABLE TRANSITION MODELS TO DEFINE A JUST TRANSITION

At the forefront of these transitions are workers, youth, and communities whose livelihoods depend on transitioning sectors. Given that, a transition-induced migration is a reality, as a shift from coal to renewable energy sources — people would move to cities in search of new opportunities (Dsouza & Singhal, 2021) and 'especially by younger people in search of better livelihoods' (Sterrett, 2016). These 'involuntary' migrations exacerbate growing poverty and inequalities in those urban areas; therefore, the government needs to take a more interventionist governance style (Stevis and Felli, 2015, as cited in Stark et al., 2023). Therefore, this article argues that transition in India must explicitly focus on urban just transition, particularly on the needs of youth and marginalized communities, moving beyond technocratic sustainable transition models to define a just transition as a set of principles "that build economic and political power to shift from an extractive economy to a regenerative economy." (Climate Justice Alliance, n.d.) and to counter structural inequalities.

Understanding the Urban Landscape

Urban regions, in particular, are hotspots of economic activity — are responsible for about 75 per cent of the world's energy consumption (UN, 2021), and approximately 70% of global CO_2 emissions (IPCC, 2022) — and have to be prepared to accommodate the demands of such a shift in a just and inclusive manner. According to the World Bank, currently, 4.4 billion people — just over half the world's population live in cities, and the urban population is expected to double by 2050, when nearly 7 out of every 10 people will call cities home (World Bank, n.d.).

Cities are transitioning to low-carbon spaces by emphasizing green infrastructure development, innovative resource management, promoting green technologies, and adopting transportation alternatives. Cities, then, will experience both a transition in their composition and constitution. Transitioning thus requires deconstructing of urban, which is a complex process, hence it needs a multi-dimensional framework that encompasses urban form (including density, transportation, and built infrastructures), informality (converging with housing, work, waste management, and transportation), and formality (covering sectors of industry, housing, transportation, and energy use), as this approach recognizes that urban development cannot be understood through single-sector analysis but requires integrated frameworks accounting for complex interactions between physical form, economic systems, and governance structures (Cities Alliance, 2021; Roy, 2005).

The governance complexities in cities must be taken into consideration, not just by local governments (such as municipalities), but also by subnational and national governments (including various ministries), as well as non-elected administrative structures (like development authorities), which play an important role in the governance and management of cities. Nevertheless, one of the significant gaps in much-discussed governance is that it rarely documents or articulating the process of governance model development or selection, the degree of participation of stakeholders or the effectiveness of the process and impacts on policy and outcomes (Stark et al., 2023).

Cities are uniquely and profoundly impacted by climate change, extreme weather events, and shifts in resources. Water scarcity, sea-level rise, and heatwaves pose significant threats to city dwellers worldwide. However, cities in low- and middle-income countries are ten times more likely to be affected by flooding and droughts than those in high-income countries (UN-Habitat, 2024). Not only are these impacts felt most strongly in the Global

South, but within cities, the most marginalized are the most affected — as 'cities can also exacerbate social and spatial injustices and disparities, driven by multiple intersecting factors such as race, class, gender, and ethnicity (Pottinger-Glass et al., 2023) caste and religious segregation (Kashwan, 2025). Increasing research and scholarship emphasise the argument for, and the operationalization of, transitions both globally (Wang & Lo, 2021) and in India (Tandon & Mitra, 2021).

As per Economic Survey 2023–24, it is expected that by 2030, more than 40 percent of India's population will live in urban areas (PIB, 2024) making India home to one of the world's largest (600 millions) urban populations (World Bank, 2024), which is projected to contribute 75 per cent of total GDP (Coalition for Urban Transitions, 2019). India is projected to be one of the most vulnerable countries to climate change (Revi, 2008; Yenneti et al., 2016, cited in Kashwan, 2025), and this vulnerability is exacerbated by increasing urbanization accompanied by rising vulnerability (Gogoi et al., 2023). This requires interrogating the contours of 'just urban transition', which moves beyond mere 'sustainable transition', both of which are relevant and necessary for Indian cities. It further indicates potential entry points for influencing just urban transitions (JUT) at the levels of research, policy, and practice, as well as its implications for youth.

Youth in Just Transition

Indian National Youth Policy defines people aged 15–29 as youth. According to the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (2024), India has a median age of 28, with 65% of the population under the age of 35. However, Chatterjee & Swarnakar (2023) argue that youth is best understood as a transitional stage, particularly in employment, where education, social norms, and individual goals shape young people's movement within labour markets. Therefore, it presents both the most significant challenge and the most promising opportunity in the country's transition towards a sustainable, low-carbon economy.

One of significant implication of Transition on youth is observed in the World Youth Report (2018) by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affair (UN DESA), which states that 'the significant challenges is that greening process takes the dirtiest, most precarious, and least decent work away from people in poverty but often leaves them with no work at all and increased costs for cleaner fuels.' For India, this is alarming, as the informal economy dominates the country's labour market, with

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88.8% of employment being informal, representing over 450 million workers (ILO, 2024 (A), with youth being the predominant contributors. Subsequently, informality is a mode of employment meant to exploit and marginalize the labour, especially people belonging to SCs and ST categories (Breman, 2016). Additionally, they lack legal recognition, social protection, and access to decision-making, making them disproportionately vulnerable to climate risks and economic disruptions (OECD, 2024).

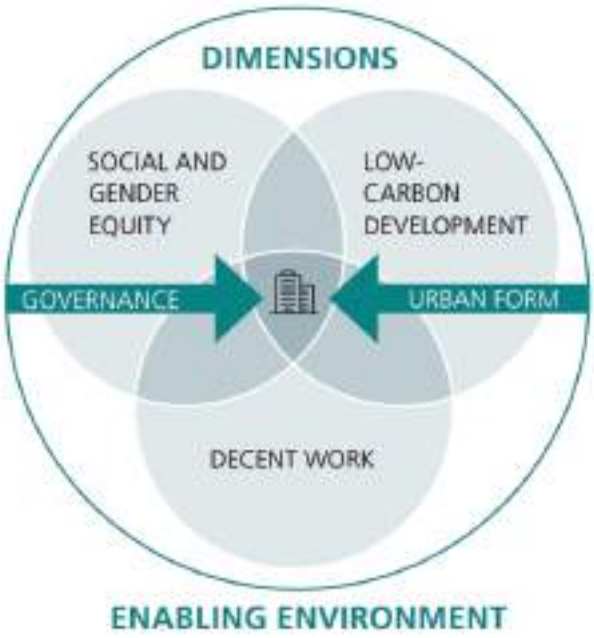
Correspondingly, participation of youth in addressing climate change is a significant challenge due to participation bias based on socio-economic status (not extending beyond formal education background), a general lack of awareness about climate change (gaps in educational curricula and perception constraints), and climate action being top-down (Driver & Shankar, 2024).

Conceptualizing Just Urban Transitions in India with a Focus on Youth

India's just transition policy and planning, which have primarily focused on the coal and power sector, need a shift to include all other sectors impacted by fossil fuels (Bhushan & Banerjee, 2023). Additionally, Indian cities' transitory process of development needs to be reconsidered, as urban development in the past has been a major focus with the conceptualization of smart cities and digital cities, which lacks a justice framework and 'delinked the focus of transition from workers, instead placing focus on the role of the technological shift and private influence (Pottinger-Glass et al., 2023). Applying a justice lens involves addressing the three interlinked dimensions of justice—distributional, recognitional, and procedural (Stark et al., 2023)—through practical measures such as industrial restructuring, technological innovation, and poverty reduction. These approaches help advance social and environmental justice outcomes within and across nations (Wang & Lo, 2021).

The closest framework to address the above-noted challenge is captured by the Glass-Potter et al. (2023) framework. With three dimensions, which encompass the urban sustainability framework. Decent Work is used instead of economies to emphasize workers as individuals who make up the economy. Given India's demography, the majority of workers are young, and emerging (green) skills gaps are evident that existing government policies must address through greening of labour markets with skilling, upskilling or reskilling of workers (ILO, 2022). The framework also adequately considers the intersections between equity, economy, and the environment.

A framework for just urban transition



India has a well-developed affirmative action policy aimed at empowering youth and promoting social harmony, which, if implemented effectively, can contribute significantly to both environmental and economic benefits (ILO, 2024 (B). The complexities of urban form and governance are significant; however just transition policy making is often town down missing needs of the most affected groups (TERI, 2023); therefore, city-level governance structures must institutionalize participatory processes such as community advisory panels, youth groups, multi-stakeholder climate forums and ensure inclusive participation of affected communities (especially from informal settlements) to establish transparent monitoring and evaluation frameworks that make the decision-making process more transparent, inclusive, and evidence-driven.

Another recent framework which captures urban nuances is by Eadson et al. (2025), which proposed a "3D framework" that includes three axes: justice domains (distributive, procedural, recognition), dimensions of change (spatial, temporal, sectoral), and depth of transition (extent of systemic change). Norman's (2023) 10 essential actions for urban planning in response to climate change add substance to Eadson's framework, which encompasses a wide range of issues, from mapping climate risks to incorporating indigenous knowledge and practices for climate-resilient plans for the future.

Considering these framework and above discuss challenges Youth for Unity and Voluntary Action (YUVA), a Mumbai based NGO has pioneered Community Climate Action Plan (CCAP) — led by youth from the community including spatial mapping, focus group discussions (FGDs), key informant interviews (KIIs), the methodology demonstrates how legal invisibility becomes a mechanism of exclusion from climate adaptation and planning, deepening both chronic and climate-induced precarity (Nuggehalli & Parmar, 2025; Goswami A. & Parmar D., 2024; Drive B. & Shankar V., 2024).

Image 3.2: Youth mapping climate risk

Moreover, to develop a climate reliance city active citizen consultant and stakeholder participation is a must, which YUVA achieve through 'Climate Parishad', where diverse stakeholders including urban poor communities, farmers, civic officials, experts, and community groups came together to map vulnerabilities and propose solutions to the event examined the city's increasing exposure to floods, heat waves, and ecological degradation' (Sah, 2025).

Image 3.3: Community engagement on understanding city landscape

This framework can be refined and strengthened by subjecting it to deliberation at multiple levels with a diverse range of stakeholders across global, national, and subnational levels. Additionally, it is timely for civil society actors and academic institutions to collaborate in further refining, reconceptualizing, and reimaging this framework to meet the needs of Indian cities.

Conclusion

India's urban climate agenda, as it advances towards a green economy, offers an opportunity to align economic growth with social inclusion. This transition has the potential to generate decent work while ensuring that no one is left behind (ILO, 2022). However, realizing this vision requires that policies on 'green skills' move beyond generic employment creation to focus on targeted education and vocational pathways. Green jobs often demand higher levels of technical and cognitive skills, and unless deliberate strategies are adopted, the benefits of greening may exclude the people most at risk. Vulnerable youth, particularly those outside formal education and training systems, need financial and institutional support to manage the short-term costs of transition (UN DESA, 2018). Consequently, integrating equity into the design of green economy policies, by addressing structural inequalities and recognising climate justice as both social and caste justice (Kashwan, 2025), is fundamental to achieving transformative outcomes.

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To make climate action both effective and equitable, policy approaches must move beyond siloed, technocratic interventions. Collaborative frameworks involving city governments, youth groups, and marginalized communities are essential to embed inclusivity in urban climate governance. A strategic policy development that integrates youth participation is particularly urgent, given that up to 35% of India's GDP could be eroded by 2050 (Stiell, 2025), potentially lowering living standards for nearly half of its population (World Bank, 2018). In this context, the ILO's (2016) framework for a Just Transition provides a valuable guide for coherence across nine policy domains, i.e., macroeconomic management, industrial and sectoral development, enterprise growth, skills formation, occupational safety and health, social protection, active labour market measures, labour rights, and social dialogue. Embedding youth participation across these domains is vital to ensure that transition processes are both informed by, consulted with and responsive to the realities of young people.

The Just Urban Transition (JUT) framework reinforces this imperative by positioning youth as agents of structural and systemic transformation. By creating urban spaces that are casteless, gender-just, and participatory, the JUT approach enables climate action that is both socially rooted and forward-looking. Yet, operationalizing this vision requires deeper empirical engagement and sustained research. As Hughes and Hoffman (2020) argue, "[G]iven the increasing centrality of cities to lives and livelihoods around the world, the growing inequality in our cities, and the real and potential leadership of city governments on climate change, the JUT agenda is critical and timely."

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A young boy sitting on sacks of pilfered coal in Giridih, Jharkhand.

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