

# **Between the ecological modernization of capitalism and the multi-crisis: how to build the eco-social transformation the world needs?**

The Global Working Group Beyond Development<sup>[1]</sup> met in a moment of increasing visibility of the climate emergency, the ongoing disruption of our societies by the COVID-19 pandemic, a growing trade war between China and the United States and increasing impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. At the same time, the world's richest keep growing richer, the legitimacy of political elites and institutions is fading around the world, and frontiers for resource extraction are expanding to maintain the imperial mode of living. The last few years brought further inequality and impoverishment, increased hunger due to disrupted food chains, growing influence of "fake news" and right-wing conspiracy theories, and deepened authoritarianism and militarization around the globe. The zoo genetic origins of the pandemic are the result of our predatory relationship with nature, whilst the speed and depth of the spread of the virus, as well as its consequences for economies around the world, were determined largely by the globalized character of our economies based on transnational production and distribution chains.

The pandemic had a highly unequal health and social impact in, for example, the United States, India or in Latin America, where racialized and impoverished people were affected far worse than the elites and middle classes, exacerbating inequality in our societies. This was further highlighted by

governments of rich countries and corporations prioritized trade rules on patents, which favour transnational pharmaceutical corporations, instead of saving lives resulting in a vaccine apartheid affecting particularly people in Africa and other poor countries).

All these phenomena confirm our hypothesis of a civilizational crisis at the core of our societies, economies and (geo)politics rooted in colonial, patriarchal and extractivist capitalism. The world seems to be entering a phase of multidimensional collapse, whilst political institutions seem unable or unwilling to stop it. Radical democratic and systemic ecosocial transformation is urgent and imperative, but the political conditions to achieve it are adverse. Although, the pandemic initially led to provoking debates about the need to revise our mode of living and was even categorized by Arundhati Roy as a potential “portal to another world” [\[2\]](#), economic recovery strategies after the period of lockdowns largely opted for well-known recipes of “disaster capitalism” using crisis as moments to push through structural adjustment and amplifying the frontiers of capital.

To face the climate crisis, particularly related to energy, the notion of transition has been embraced by a variety of powerful political and corporate actors, as inevitable change, but also as an opportunity for that change to be shaped along their interests. They seek to build a transition rooted in their geopolitical, corporate, and technocratic interests and approaches as an “ecological modernization of capitalism”, by reducing the use of fossil fuels, expanding renewable energies and generating profits from so-called “green economies”. Within this debate, the notion of “just transition” has emerged in response to the challenge to reconcile social-economic issues with the need of ecological transformation of our economies. Consequently, transition is happening, but its direction is under dispute. So far, nothing guarantees the current roll out of transition policies will be just, assure a

dignified life for all, and reinstate the necessary balance with nature.

Therefore, the fourth meeting of the Global Working Group interrogated existing projects, strategies and understandings of transition and the impacts and consequences of the transition politics being implemented. We also explored the resistances and horizons that can redirect transition towards the type of radical eco-social transformation capable of ensuring democracy, dignity and the sustainability of life for current and coming generations the group has proposed before.

Some of our guiding questions were:

- What is the hegemonic debate about transition in the US, EU and China, what forces and interests are behind it and what are its main goals?
- How can potential impacts of the green transition programs in the EU, US and China on regions of the global South be assessed in the context of persisting asymmetries in the world economy?
- What are existing counter-hegemonic proposals and actions within the global North and South which are aiming at a just transition/transitions? What chances do they have to prosper, and what are the dimensions of justice which are addressed in them?
- What kind of policies or practices in the global North could contribute to dismantle/challenge this asymmetric relation and free space of manoeuvre for the global Souths to build their own just transitions democratically?
- What changes in global rules of trade, finance, climate finance, debt, foreign investments, dispute settlements, corporate accountability, and what changes in the architecture and internal governance of international institutions, are needed for a just transition?
- How are movements around the globe shaping the politics

of transition? With what successes, challenges and difficulties?

- What kind of policies or practices in the global South could open space for more sovereignty and who are potential allies for this in the different world regions? What on-the-ground experiences and theories can fuel this debate?

As in earlier occasions, we decided to produce a collective text that reflects our conversation, and we have therefore not included references to and citations of the individual members of our group in the text, nor have we included extensive bibliographical references. We are very aware there are many differences between our perspectives and thoughts, both theoretical and political, as well as regarding the concrete necessities which emerge from the contexts in which we are living. However, we feel the dialogue between our differences enriched all of us and produced new knowledge and thinking that goes beyond our individual positions. In a sense, this final document is like a tapestry in which all our words and feelings have been woven together. We have tried to represent our discrepancies faithfully to open debates and new questions to allow our strategic debates and actions move forward.

## **II. MEETING IN SENEGAL, IN THE MIDST OF WAR, PANDEMIC AND COLLAPSE**

Our first meeting in three years was deeply informed by the historical moment, as well as by the dialogue with the African continent, its problems, struggles, and dreams. Our visit to Bargny in the outskirts of Dakar and to the Saloum Delta, a UNESCO world heritage site with beautiful protected marine areas and mangrove ecosystems, gave a very real context to our discussions on a just transition. We learned about the customary bio-cultural connections between these communities and the sea, the mangroves, and coastal habitats here,

sustaining the lives, economies and communities of hundreds of thousands of people on the Senegalese coast.

On both sites, we were informed by local communities about the acute impacts on the local economies based on small-scale fisheries and the transformation of fish products, caused by the climate emergency, coastal erosion, rising sea levels, water pollution, and overfishing by transnational trawlers. Local economies which provide a livelihood to hundreds of local communities in this area, including and especially women, are already deeply affected and threatened to be further destroyed.

We heard about the discovery of significant offshore deposits of oil and gas off the coasts of Senegal, also in proximity to the Saloum Delta. The exploitation of these deposits enabled by the European countries' technical and financial support is promoted by the Senegalese government as a major opportunity to get a cash injection for its grand projects scheme and is welcomed by mainstream media and a significant part of the population as an opportunity for the country to "develop".

The foreseeable consequences are the extreme degradation of the coastal eco-systems and the further impoverishment of thousands of people depending on them for their livelihoods. Based on our experiences and expertise, we see these "development" plans for Senegal as the creation of new sacrifice zones, where peoples, bodies, and cultures are sacrificed in the name of the illusion of extractivist development, despite widespread evidence of its negative impacts in other parts of the global South.

The promotion of extractivism as a catalyst of positive accelerated development is not new. Africa has witnessed a long history of rapacious extractivism and ecocidal large-scale commercial farms that were always sold as 'good for development'. The hegemonic imperialist agenda of the 18-20th centuries transformed Africa into the world's plantation and

mine, i.e., purveyor-in-chief of raw materials. The neocolonial project of the 1970s and 80s further entrenched Africa's extroverted models and today, as the world seeks to transition to low-carbon energy sources, there is a clear trend toward green colonialism that replicates the unjust economic models of the past.

Contemporary African societies are the product of colonialism, racism and extractivism that created societies and economies based on dispossession, slavery, apartheid, and widespread violence. Colonial power keeps being reproduced daily through military presence and intervention, transnational corporations, as well as the continuous political, economic and financial interventions of the former colonial powers. Africa is the region in the world where the continuities of colonial power are most evident and most violent. It is also a region where the dramatic impacts of the climate emergency are clearly visible in the forms of desertification, wildfires, coastal erosion, extreme weather, sea rise levels, and the expulsion of thousands and thousands of forced migrants, as we directly witnessed in Senegal.

We also witnessed resilience and resistance in Senegal, giving continuity to a history of struggle, Pan-African projects of liberation, and of peoples seeking self-determination throughout the African continent for decades and centuries. In Bargny, a coal power plant was stopped by local organizing. Citizen's mobilization has demanded a deeper democracy and social justice in Senegal. And local communities organize to sustain their lives through fishing and agricultural economies despite the impacts we have described.

That said, high-level government action is determined to push through extractivist projects in the country and around the continent under the guise of development, a move that is applauded by segments of the country's poor. As was said in our meeting, although "the colonial master was replaced by local masters" they maintained the same ontology of power,

violence, and domination, and consolidated a political economy based on extractivism and ecocide.

### *Meeting in times of collapse and war*

Whilst our dialogues were embedded in these African realities and perspectives, they were also situated in a specific historical context. We met after two years in which the COVID-19 pandemic had struck the world as a truly global health, social, economic, and political crisis.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has deepened these crises even more, adding additional layers of food and energy crisis due to the widespread dependence on Ukraine and Russia for the production of grain, fertilizers and gas, disrupted by the impacts of the war and the sanctions on Russia. The combination of the pandemic, the war, the American-Chinese trade war and speculation with food and commodities disrupted supply chains around the world, causing further impoverishment, hunger and social exclusion for hundreds of millions of people. It also made visible to several industrialized countries how vulnerable and risky the current organization of global trade and the excessive dependence on production in China are. As a consequence, securing global supply chains, especially for critical raw materials, has become a priority agenda.

Furthermore, the concrete impacts of the climate emergency, in the form of floods, droughts, heatwaves and a more general disturbance of the cycles of nature are intensifying rapidly, with their strongest consequences for the same groups of marginalized -and often racialized- peoples, as well as for women. However, the global energy crisis is expected to affect even richer countries, with more long-term negative effects cascading down continuously to those most affected already. Against this background, the emergence of popular protests against rising food and energy prices, but also against inequality, corruption, and political mismanagement, is no

surprise. Massive mobilizations in countries such as Sri Lanka, Belarus, Kazakhstan, India, Colombia, Chile, Peru, and Ecuador have denounced the consequences of the current economic model over the last years.

At the same time, (extreme)-right-wing movements have gained terrain in elections and on the streets around the world. Despite their familiar anti-elitist discourses, when in power -as in the US, Brazil and India- these movements have implemented policies in favour of big capital, while simultaneously attacking previous human rights victories of women, indigenous, peasant, and LGTBIQ+ movements. The new authoritarian right and neo-fascist movements are directly seeking to channel the discomfort of the popular classes with the current system. They are also increasingly using political violence (in the US, Brazil and India, for example), and encouraging mistrust in any kind of institutions, including science and politics.

Despite the symptoms of ecological collapse in many places of the world, the expansion of capital and extractivism keeps accelerating, including the expansion of offshore extractive projects, plans for extraction in the North- and South pole, or even in Space. We see a consolidation of the imperial mode of living, which implies that people's everyday practices, societal logics, individual and collective identities in the Global North (but also in the Global South's elites and growing middle classes), rely heavily on the unlimited appropriation of resources; a disproportionate claim on global and local ecosystems; and cheap labour from elsewhere.

In short, we met in a moment of perfect storm and deep shifts in our socio-political landscapes, where nothing less than the sustainability and dignity of life themselves are at stake. This reality makes transition inevitable, as ample political and corporate sectors are now acknowledging. However, socio-political struggles will determine if transitions will be orderly or disruptive, market-led or shaped by the people from

below, and if they will focus mainly on energy transition, or will achieve a complete reorganization of our societies.

## **II. BETWEEN ECO-SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION AND JUST TRANSITION**

From its origins, the Global Working Group has been very aware that language is never neutral, and that the concepts we use are loaded with history and power and should therefore be carefully analysed. This is particularly the case for *buzz words* that appear in challenging political contexts to indicate the direction of travel for social, political, and economical programs. How do these concepts emerge? Who promotes them? What interests are inscribed in a term? are some of the questions proposed.

Therefore, our collective discussion started with a critical interrogation of the notion of transition itself, to assess if a term being used in so many different spaces and ways is useful for our engagement with multidimensional transformation, or if it sends us in an opposite direction. At least, four different, sometimes overlapping perspectives were present in our internal debate:

1. Some members of the group state that **the term transition itself encapsulates us in the frameworks of the *status quo*** and could lead us to theories of social change we do not believe in, as **it is a language inherited from western, modern and capitalist thinking.**

For example, the dominant notions of energy are the product of the industrial revolution, aimed at building an equivalent that helps organize labour and inputs for capital. In daily life in many world regions, people do not refer to 'energy' in this sense, but to daily life communitarian practices like cooking or collectively maintaining water canals that go against the frameworks and measurements of capital's 'energy'

and are harder to commodify. The technocratic and economic conception of energy shapes transition in terms of the specific modern temporalities and measurements of capital, instead of the temporalities of indigenous cultures, of ecosystems and of the planet itself, which require a holistic understanding of energy. Another example for the problematic legacy of the term is how transition was used to describe the trajectory of eastern European countries from the soviet block to the capitalist semi-periphery.

- Another critical perspective would state that **the contents of a just transition are the same demands movements have been fighting for over a long time.** This perspective therefore asks: is transition simply the continuity of our existing struggles? If so, to what extent do we need to reframe them as just transition, or should we just persist in the discourses and concepts we have been using so far?

Both critical stances, provoke the question: what are the counternarratives to the hegemonic language of transition? What languages of valuation are social movements and resisting communities using to counter economic discourses? What should the temporalities of transition look like, to break with modern, capitalist technocratic temporalities? How can we talk about transition from the vantage point of non-western ontologies, around the notion of Pachamama, for instance?

- Other members stated that **the notion of transition has a long history in social movements, left wing organizing and radical thinking, as well as in anti-colonial struggles** in various parts of the world. They identify **the risk of conservative and capitalist forces capturing the notion of transition and mobilizing it for their interests**, now that it has won terrain due to grassroots organizing and mobilizing, and to the necessity to

respond to the climate emergency. Additionally, progressive liberal discourse can reframe radical community-based perspectives through funding strategies, campaigning, and media access to build “acceptable” and moderate notions of transition, which do not question the root causes of the crisis we are facing.

- A fourth, but related perspective states that regardless of its origins, **the acknowledgement of the need of societal change by a variety of significant political and economic actors contained in the concept of transition represents a political opportunity** to influence policies on a far broader scale and provoke a broader public debate with bigger influence in politics and society. The idea here is that having Europe, the UK or other powerful political actors implementing a more transformational transition politics than foreseen, would be positive in terms of the changes the world needs. This position says that to influence these debates, we do need to engage with the languages, logics, and temporalities of the status quo in a dialectical way.

The tension between perspectives more critical of the use of the term ‘just transition’ itself and others, insisting more on disputing its contents and directions, was present throughout the meeting, both in conceptual and strategic terms. Unresolved questions include: do we need other concepts than transition to talk about the transformations we want to see, or can we shape transition politics by pushing more radical notions and contents into them? Another shared concern in the group is: to what extent can the language of transition connect with and be useful to the grassroots level and to our own commitment to radical ecosocial transformation? The grassroots produce languages of their own which are often not integrated in the concepts ending up in the centre of

political and strategic debates.

In any case, in earlier meetings, the *Global Working Group Beyond Development* has built the idea of multi-dimensional democratic eco-social transformation as its main horizon<sup>[3]</sup>, integrating five key processes of social change as required to strengthen justice, dignity, democracy, and the sustainability of life: i) decolonization; ii) dismantling capitalism; and iii) patriarchy; iv) ending racism and casteism; and v) turning predatory relations with Nature into effectively sustainable ones.

Therefore, in our meeting we engaged with the notion of “just transitions” on the grounds of this commitment to a radical “eco-social transformation” based on programs and strategies to leave our present mode of living, as it is leading us to the collapse of eco-systems and societies as we know them. Any “just transition” should therefore allow us to reorganize our economies, politics, daily life, and ways of relating to nature in a radically different way, to assure justice, dignity, democracy and the sustainability of life and nature for our and future generations.

### **III. HEGEMONIC POLITICS AND VISIONS OF TRANSITION**

The global context of geopolitical dispute, increasing impacts of the climate emergency and the COVID-19 pandemic have accelerated commitments to the necessity of transition towards a more sustainable economy and society, as even the most powerful governments and corporate sectors acknowledge it is inevitable. However, the policies and economies implemented under the mainstream label of transition will not foster justice and dignity for all, nor restore balance and harmony with nature. The current reality of energy transition, for example, shows that although sources of renewable energy are expanding, this has not led to a substantial reduction in the

use of traditional energy sources, so far.

Part of the corporate elites have entered the debate on transition in recent years through a paradigmatic strategy that seeks to define the contents and understandings of transition, so that they can control its policies. For now, hegemonic discourses propose a corporation-led and technocratic ecological modernization of capitalism to meet the climate crisis. The notion of a “just transition” can easily fit in such discourses, as the comprehension of the International Labour Organization shows: “A just transition means greening the economy in a way that is as fair and inclusive as possible to everyone concerned, creating decent work opportunities and leaving no one behind. A just transition involves maximizing the social and economic opportunities of climate action, while minimizing and carefully managing any challenges”.[\[4\]](#)

The sustainable development and green economy discourses that insist only on technological solutions to the climate crisis or put market-based solutions at the centre of transition, still uphold the idea of unlimited economic growth, thereby failing to acknowledge the depth and root causes of the civilizational crisis and ecological collapse we are facing. An absolute reduction of the global social metabolism is inevitable today, and this cannot be achieved with economic growth. But instead, such visions lead to the employment of “false solutions” that promise to address the climate crisis, but do not actually tackle its root causes, while many times even deepening impacts on those most affected territories and peoples, as we will see later. Some well-known false solutions are carbon trade or the promotion of alternative energy sources that in fact require dirty energy to be generated.[\[5\]](#)

However, this paradigm of ecological modernization is spread and sustained by ample sectors of political and mediatic power, who set the tone and frame the global debate on the type of transition that is needed. Mainstream media use

national governments, business sectors and related think tanks as their main sources and marginalize more radical perspectives. The UN system, increasingly prone to collaborations with transnational corporations, is one source of those false solutions in spite of increasingly critical reports of the IPCC, which themselves are, too, moderated by political negotiation.

At the same time, a kind of global Constitution of Capital which severely prevents systemic change has been shaped through the logics of Free Trade and its institutions. It prioritizes the rights of corporations over those of people or nature and forces States, especially in the Global South, into further opening their economies and territories to the appropriation by transnational capital, often against the general interest of their own citizenship. Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) may include sets of standards regarding sustainable development, intellectual property rights, environmental and human rights. But even if they do so, it is to favour European and American control over Global South economies, and at the same time to limit eco-social transformation through the privatization of international law in favour of capital.

On the ground, we can see how corporate sectors are shaping transition politics, enabled by “multi-stakeholder” approaches promoted by governments, multilateral and even development aid agencies, following the logic that corporations are “subjects of rights” just the same as people(s). These actors seek to give private businesses a seat at tables where they do not really belong, for example, in local decision-making processes about the future of specific eco-systems or indigenous or peasant territories, or in the design of conservation policies. Private actors of various kinds, like Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) or the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, are now shaping real transition strategies on the ground, by acquiring control over

land and natural goods, and conditioning local policies.

At the same time, the direction transition policies my take is deeply conditioned by the geopolitical disputes between, particularly, the United States, China and the European Union. The geopolitics of transition, includes disputes over:

- i. **the leadership in technological innovation and the control of intellectual property** needed for transition, to be able to lead a growing multi-billion-dollar market, as the green economy has become a new space for capital accumulation.
- ii. **the access to, and control over critical natural goods needed either for transition** itself (rare earth minerals, pharmaceuticals, etc.), or **to ensure resilience against environmental collapse** (water, food, etc.). Critical raw materials and products are needed for the green and digital transition, especially for strategic sectors such as digital technologies, renewable energy, electric mobility, defence, and aerospace.
- iii. **the leadership in and capacity to shape the international frameworks that will guide transition.**

The geopolitics of transition also imply a re-actualization of the international division of labour and nature between the global Norths and Souths: the Souths being compelled to provide raw materials for renewable technologies, but also forest land for carbon compensation projects, to receive the new waste resulting from renewable technologies and digitalization, and to buy the new technologies from where they are developed in the Norths. As such, these disputes also imply the expansion of political influence and territorial control to other parts of the world, constituting new forms of colonisation in the name of transition.

**US, EU and China's transition politics**

In their internal politics, China, the US, and the EU are opting for different strategies, as was analysed in the preparatory papers to the meeting.[\[6\]](#) Although environmental justice and the climate crisis are becoming a more important political issue in the USA, particularly for the younger generations, at the same time, the hegemony of the “American way of life” based on consumption is still unbroken. Thus, proposals for transition in the US were intentionally designed in more general terms, strongly relying on technocratic solutions, and eluding a more global vision, for example, regarding the role of the US Army. They rather sought internal legitimacy stating that the US should be a global leader for innovation. At the same time, Joe Biden’s initial initiatives to regain some global leadership on the issue of climate justice have been compromised by domestic politics and recent supreme court decisions.

A more radical perspective on transition started in the USA in the radical left (Trotskyist, Green Party and Black, Latinx and Indigenous liberation movements) years ago, but gained political momentum through the growing influence of the Democratic socialists within the Democratic party. Alexandra Ocasio Cortez positioned the proposal of a Green New Deal, which was criticized by parts of the radical left, insofar as it left unquestioned the racist legacy of the New Deal that excluded farm workers and domestic workers, mostly Latinx, Black and migrant men and Black women. Moreover, the political momentum for the Green New Deal to move forward has already faded, as it was too easily associated with socialism by conservatives, and liberals did not want to appear as too radical.

In the case of China, the transition toward a “socialist eco-civilization” is a serious goal for its internal development policies and goals. Their strategy is based on learning through action, by the upscaling and mainstreaming of pilot experiments carried out on a local level, directed by 5-year

development plans. Under Xi Jinping the current aim is socialist modernization, which clearly includes a transition directed towards the “decarbonization of development”, and in theory a more modern and democratic leadership. At the same time, the foreign policies, and geopolitics of China, for example around the Belt and Road Initiative, clearly create environmental costs outside China, and undermine already fragile ecological and social regulations around the world. On a structural level, the Chinese excess of capital and its need for natural resources imply the need for growth and global expansion. Within the Chinese leadership, there are more ample political debates on ecosocial transition than we might see from the outside.

The EU Green Deal as well as the *Fit for 55* European transition plans possibly constitute the most ambitious and serious process, which goes beyond simple greenwashing. It aims at an ecological, digital and socio-economic transition, and has assigned substantial budgets for its implementation. At the same time, it also remains rooted in a technocratic vision and in a domestic approach, which limits the depth of transformation and increases the risks of false solutions which will impact negatively in the Global South. Movements are therefore still engaging and trying to influence its contents. Movements in the global South criticize it for lack of recognition of historical and continuing struggles that confront both climate change and imperialism simultaneously. It also needs to genuinely incorporate southern demands like debt cancellation and climate reparations, which are at the heart of the global climate justice movement discourse.

At the same time, EU FTA strategies aim at consolidating its global leadership for technological innovation for transition, as well as assuring access to critical raw materials in Asia, Africa and Latin America. More comprehensive FTAs, especially the Energy Charter Treaty, deter climate actions as they empower corporations to sue governments that are taken on

climate action like phasing out fossil fuels use or banning mining and fracking.

Our quick review of the hegemonic transition proposals shows how they are shaped by corporate and technocratic narratives and trapped in the capitalist growth imperative, while relying on (neo-)colonial power-structures. The “solutions” they propose will only bring relief to a small part of the globalized world and harm others in environmental, social, and cultural terms, thus exposing themselves as false solutions. Even on the side of progressive elites, we see an exaggerated trust in institutional processes and technocratic solutions, and a distrust toward anti-capitalist proposals and grassroots radical organizing. Within our movements, NGOization or eurocentrism, and more widely progressive liberal engagement can lead to moderating logics.

At the same time, it is within multilateral institutional spaces and in national policies that decisions are being made with huge implications for the protection of critical ecosystems, the expansion of extractives, the protection of indigenous and peasant territories, the distribution of climate funds, the support to renewable and alternative energy sources and the implementation of transition politics, among many other things that either limit or enable socio-ecological destruction in our contemporary world system. A central discussion within the working group therefore focused on how to engage with these institutional processes, which, at least in the short term, cannot simply be ignored.

Simultaneously, forces of the far right even call into question the need for any transition at all, denying the very existence of global warming and ecological crisis, and pointing out that transition policies could have negative impacts on the living standards of popular classes in the global North. All of this constitutes a complex political scenario, with evident consequences for the Global South.

## IV. IMPACTS ON THE GLOBAL SOUTH

As we have seen, the currently existing and hegemonic programs for transition are determined by geopolitical disputes for its leadership, and by corporate, technocratic, and financialized approaches. As such, they not only fail to provide real solutions for the climate emergency, but at the same time consolidate a colonial and instrumental way of relating to the Global South (and to marginalized territories and populations within the three main world powers): 1) as the warehouse of the world (particularly so for specific raw materials like balsa and lithium that are required for the transition), 2) as a dumpsite for waste to externalize negative impacts of their “green”, grey or brown economies, 3) as an area of opportunity for carbon emission compensation, and as 4) a market to sell ‘clean’ technologies.

Our discussion included several analyses of how hegemonic projects of “green” transition are false solutions that end up impacting territories in the Global South. Despite aiming at contributing to the supposed decarbonization of the Global North economies, they intensify the global climate emergency:

- China’s energy transition requires *balsa wood for wind turbine blades*, coming from the Ecuadorian Amazon, which leads to social conflict and affects indigenous territories, generating human and nature rights violations. Seen from the vantage point of Ecuadorian grassroots and indigenous communities, China’s decarbonization and transition strategy becomes a driver for deforestation and dispossession of indigenous territories, in the name of transition.
- In the case of *lithium*, the rare mineral is a strategic element for high capacity and fast charging batteries required to the energy transition. Its extraction from the arid salt flats in Chile, Bolivia, Argentina and

Peru requires unsustainable amounts of water, competing with the water use of indigenous communities.

- In Northern Africa, the push for renewable energy for export to Europe is leading to the loss of food production, livelihood sovereignty as well as national sovereignty, as mining, oil and gas tend to be controlled by States, whilst renewable energy projects are being promoted by transnational companies with financial guarantees of national governments (e.g. the Ouarzazate Solar Plant).[\[7\]](#) For example, the second generation Desertec proposal: a European energy system based on 50% renewable electricity and 50% green hydrogen by 2050, which would include *large scale green hydrogen imported* from the Sahara, which has been framed as “empty land” and a new energy El Dorado, to be put in value for the energy transition.
- The trend toward *fortress conservation*: militarized nature reserves and protected areas are being installed around the globe, expelling native indigenous and peasant peoples from these areas and from their traditional livelihoods for the sake of “conservation” of biodiversity and as carbon sinks”. Although it is known that indigenous self-government of their territories on the basis of recognized collective territorial rights is the most effective strategy to preserve biodiversity, fortress conservation remains the principal approach to nature and biodiversity preservation in the hegemonic transition approaches.[\[8\]](#)
- *Plantations carried out to meet nationally determined decarbonization commitments as carbon sink* are often on community commons and in violation of their customary rights including of forest-based food systems. Green energy projects are exempt from environmental and social impacts in most countries, consequently, are allowed on large stretches of lands which are community commons as well as culturally conserved areas by violating local rights and access to these lands and resources.

- *To meet national decarbonization commitments, monoculture plantations are often imposed on common community lands, in violation of customary rights and jeopardizing livelihoods based on forests. Similarly, green energy projects are often allowed to be built on community land or culturally conserved areas, violating local rights, as their environmental and social impacts are not taken into account.*

All these examples show ways in which the sources of energy might change, but the system of unlimited growth, accumulation through dispossession, and overexploitation of nature remains intact. They show how hegemonic transition is leading to a green and renewed colonialism, which disarms national sovereignty and territorial self-determination of indigenous or peasant peoples to bring new territories and natural goods under corporate control or into market relations under western dominion. These logics of green land grabbing and green capitalist accumulation use the same narratives that historically have justified the commodification of nature, the expansion of sacrifice zones for “development” and the accumulation through dispossession, as the example of the Sahara as an El Dorado for renewable energy shows.

These historical logics now find a new legitimation in the narrative of (just) transition. It is a huge political challenge to reveal their negative impacts and to propose a convincing alternative. The revision of the impacts of transition in the global south therefore imposes the following questions: can transitions be carried out without plunder and colonialism of the south? What adjustments need to be made to the hegemonic transition proposals to make this possible? Or what elements should be used to build a genuinely different proposal for transition, which is globally just and ample enough to respond to the ecological and civilizational crisis we have described?

## V. ALTERNATIVE CONCEPTIONS OF TRANSITION AND ECO-SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

In our dialogue we mapped out the resistances and alternatives to hegemonic transitions, including some presented in this publication. Water dams and mining projects are being stopped through mobilization around the globe. Strategic litigation is forcing governments to adopt bolder transition strategies. And people are organizing transition from below, going far beyond the hegemonic models, by implementing community based renewable energy projects, or by assuring food, nutrition and seed-sovereignty through biodiversity-based ecological agriculture, as in Bangladesh and in India.

These practices of resistance and of alternatives for radical eco-social transformation, have inspired other proposals for radical eco-social transformation. Three examples of platforms who promote such different narratives are the Latin American *Pacto Ecosocial and Intercultural del Sur* (Ecosocial and Intercultural Pact of the South) and the *Climate Justice Platform in Africa*, or the Latin American and Caribbean Platform for Climate Justice (PLACJC).

Through the Latin American *Pacto Ecosocial e Intercultural del Sur*, its promoters wanted to present a Global South based horizon for transition, which should critique the (neo-)colonial and racist dimensions of existing transition platforms born in the Global North. The *Pacto* rebuilds a regional vision on the future, based on different movement proposals, strongly inspired by indigenous, environmentalist and feminist movements, of which the activist thinkers that formulated the proposal are direct participants or close collaborators. The *Pacto* consists of a narrative of nine proposals that connect social and environmental justice, and directly denounce patriarchy, coloniality of power and racism as drivers of the civilizational crisis.[\[9\]](#) The text is

presented as a work in progress, which can be discussed, complemented, and localized, but also can translate to concrete proposals and campaigns on local, national or regional levels.

In Africa, the Climate Justice Platform for Africa has built a narrative that frames climate justice in anti-capitalist, anti-colonial, anti-racist, anti-patriarchal, and anti-extractivist terms. By rejecting these patterns of power that have affected Africa so much, at the same time it proposes a horizon for justice in the region. The Alliance aspires to be an inclusive space, which by now is uniting a variety of movements and peoples, from peasant, fisherman and even hunters to urban activists. It is an extremely holistic campaign that poses the need to transform our societies completely. In Latin America, the PLACJC promotes similar actions that criticizes the hegemonic language guiding policies in the face of the climate crisis, as well also the false solutions framed in the energy transition.

These and many other manifestos have been under construction for a very long time in feminist, environmentalist, indigenous, anti-racist, black, anti-capitalist, peasant, and other movements. Their common understanding is that our current economic system and political processes do not allow the type of eco-social transformation the world needs. A systemic, multidimensional and holistic transition needs to radically transform our political and economic system, our modes of production and consumption, our relations with nature and our visions of a good and dignified life. According to our conversations, based on the discussions in our movements, we identified some of the central transformations which are needed for a genuine just transition:

1. A **radical transformation of hegemonic culture**, rooted in colonialism, patriarchy, systemic racism and capitalism, cantered around individual advancement, competition,

consumption, profit and unlimited economic growth, towards a culture that centres society on notions of interdependence, mutual care, and solidarity between all humans and with nature. This would anchor society in other notions of dignity and a good life based on communitarian wellbeing and balance with other life forms and nature as such. Among other things, this would require mass media, social networks, arts, and education to commit to creating narratives and subjectivities directed towards an eco-social transformation.

- To allow interdependence, care and life to constitute the centre of society, **our economies need to be brought back under democratic control, and at the service of our collective wellbeing.** This requires:
  - the **redistribution of wealth** between countries and regions, as well as within our countries, transforming the current imperial mode of living, built upon patterns and aspirations of unlimited accumulation.
  - **dismantling the corporate capture of the State and of international institutions,** as well as the privatization of international law. A binding treaty for businesses to comply with human rights would be a crucial step to regulate and discipline capital, demanding respect for human rights, the rights of nature and of future generations.
  - the **democratization and socialization of property rights** away from private and individual towards cooperative and collective, communitarian, and even municipal, like user-owned and associative water systems.
  - Building, preserving and strengthening resilient and independent local and regional economies cantered on **self-sufficiency, short value chains and food, health and energy sovereignty.**
  - All this would have to be enabled by **alternative financing mechanisms, which democratize and diversify**

**finance**, and create space for a diversity of forms of exchange and provision of the goods which are needed to live well in each context.

- It also requires the **recognition and valuing of care work** in general, and of the role women, and particularly racialized women, play in the reproduction of life in our societies.
- An **alternative economic language and values** directed at collective wellbeing, will have to replace the hegemonic narratives of benefits and unlimited economic growth, at the centre of decision making.
- **Transforming the imperial mode of living in a culture and society directed to the reproduction of dignified life for all and the care for nature** requires an economy that limits overconsumption and recycles what has been extracted and produced instead of new extractions. The current overproduction of goods, culture of waste and the externalization of the destructive impact of our economy on human life and nature, should be replaced by production processes guided by social justice and equity, the rights of nature and the limits imposed by the balances in our eco-systems.

A just transition requires breaking away from current globalized and industrialized food systems that foster monocultural agriculture, industrial cattle production and industrial fishing that destroy biodiversity and eco-systems. Instead, **family and community-based, diverse, peasant agricultural production, fishery and pastoral food production, and agroecological practices connected to shorter distribution chains and localized markets** should be the basis of a more sustainable global food system.

- Although transition is not a question of technology

primarily, but of the transformation of our modes of living, this does require **technology and innovation to be put at the service of this way of life based on an ethics of care and interdependence**, breaking away also from the current colonial, patriarchal and capitalist intellectual property regime, which has proven to be criminal in the context of the Pandemic. This requires recuperating democratic control over the choice, production, goals, use and distribution of technology, integrating people affected by the material needs for technology, to be included in the decision and discussion process of its production.

- The need to meet the civilizational crisis to allow a just transition requires the **radical transformation of politics and public institutions** as we know them. The depth of the multi-crisis we are facing does require global coordination and decision making, but the current UN structures seems unfit for this purpose. We see the need to strengthen the democratic self-determination of communities, embedded in frameworks of **interdependence** between all humans, justice in all its dimensions, and limited by the **rights of nature and future generations**. This could allow the socialization of power and recuperation of genuine democracy, rooted in reconciling customary and locally embedded decision-making processes with public institutions that guard for interdependence, reciprocity and collective interests. In earlier conversations our group has reflected in far more detail on the challenges of dealing with the State and public institutions. [\[10\]](#)
- **New global relations and institutions based on solidarity, reciprocity and interdependence** need to be shaped, following the examples of global justice and

solidarity movements like the Via Campesina. Such processes need to transform the current global political architecture, which remains rooted in colonial and imperial domination, extractive capitalism and patriarchy. No just transition is feasible globally or in the Global South, without degrowth and radical eco-social transformation in the Global North. To assure the feasibility of an eco-social transformation it needs to happen at least at a regional level, which would allow for delinking and selective deglobalization, strengthening localized and regionalized food systems and economies.

- At the core of these transformations stands the need to transform current predatory relations between human society and nature. This requires **recuperating the understanding that humanity is a part of nature and of the earth**, as, among others, the notion of Pachamama shows. The recognition of rights of nature, as well as the rights of future generations as constitutive for all other rights, is fundamental. As is the community-based protection of biodiversity and free seeds, and of local eco-systems, breaking away from conservationist or corporate-led biodiversity strategies. Traditional and diverse knowledges need to be protected, not commodified, and be a guiding element in dialogical decision making and technological processes. Indigenous, peasant and other traditional people's rights, especially of their land, territories and knowledges are crucial to any eco-social transformation able to meet the climate emergency and multi-crisis, and should therefore be as central to politics, economics and technology.
- A just and democratic transition will not be possible

without an ambitious plan for the **payment of the historical colonial, social and ecological debt, in the form of reparations rooted in global justice.** This should imply the effective implementation of a system of compensation from the North to the South, in the face of unequal historical responsibility for the climate crisis and ecological collapse. This system must include a considerable economic and technological transfer, as well as a debt jubilee, but also the restitution of previously grabbed land and water, among some of the elements necessary to mitigate the ravages of the climate crisis and advance in the just and popular ecosocial transformation. These climate reparations should, among other things, be part of a process that includes maintaining fossil fuels in the ground.

## **VI. MOVING FORWARD BETWEEN THE COLLAPSE AND ECO-SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION: CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES**

Our assessment of current transition strategies shows that colonial capitalism and environmental racism are at their base, entrenching the same systems and relations of oppression we have talked about before, and amplifying already existing environmental and colonial debt. What is new is that now this happens in the name of a “green” transition and the fight against climate change, constituting a narrative which is far harder to challenge from a transformational perspective.

We understand that a genuine eco-social transformation needs to be guided by love, care and justice, and will affect our societies from the grassroots and our daily lives to political institutions and economies. Our discussion made us reaffirm our commitment to the systemic and democratic eco-social transformation we had been proposing so far. Simultaneously we are sceptical about most of the notions of just transition

that are being used by a wide variety of actors in the political spectrum responding to a similarly wide spectrum of interests. In our opinion a genuinely just transition implies breaking away from patriarchy, coloniality, systemic racism and extractive capitalism, which are at the roots of the problems we have identified. Many of the proposals for a just transition remain far away from such a radical horizon.

At the same time, clearly it will be the balance of forces that determines if the notions and concrete policies of transition will bring us closer to collapse, or if they will open up possibilities for an egalitarian world organized around ethics of care and balance, in favour of dignity for all, the sustainability of life and the rights of nature. In the Global North geopolitical interests and the imperial mode of living block radical transformations and make that hegemonic transition politics reaffirm the status quo.

In the Global South the narrative of “the right to development” and raising of living standards pose a complex debate in the face of persistent hunger, impoverishment and misery resulting from neocolonial geopolitics and economic status quo on the one side, but also huge inequalities in the global South itself. Without a doubt, radical redistribution of wealth, not only in terms of money, is needed to assure a dignified life for all. At the same time, the western development path has led to the ecological collapse underway and to multiple injustices, and thus should not guide the aspirations for a good life in our times. Whilst Degrowth is a necessary perspective for the Global North, what type of narrative captures the type of process needed in the Global South?

For now, the adverse political conditions in the world, oblige us to be mindful of two different temporalities and strategies that were mentioned in earlier meetings of the group. Eco-social destruction needs to be stopped as soon as possible, in as many places around the world as we can, through short term

actions, campaigns, advocacy and mobilization. At the same time, long term strategies for building deep-rooted alternatives to the status quo, which allow the dignified, continuous, democratic and harmonic reproduction of life, are crucial to shape our collective future. We could also state this in terms of the defensive struggles that protect rights, institutions, bodies, and territories from predatory patriarchal and colonial capitalism, and the offensive struggles that create the new worlds we want to see, as a prefigurative politics of the future.

It is clear to us that in the face of limited and captured global and national political processes, eco-social transformation will have to be shaped from below, through processes of strengthening existing and facilitating newer deep democracy resistance against eco-social destruction and against the false solutions of hegemonic transitions, but also by building communities of care and concrete alternatives to the status quo through prefigurative politics. A lot of this is happening already. For example, mechanisms like mobilization and protest, strategic litigation, naming and shaming polluters, activist shareholding, boycotts, etc. are strategically trying to discipline capital and limit its impacts.

Local protection against commodification or extractivism is shaped by guarding and building sustainable economies and food systems, through agro-ecological production as in Bangladesh and many places in the world, or by building cooperativist economies that control land, properties and offer economic opportunities to historically marginalized communities as in Jackson, Mississippi or as in Venezuela by Cecososola. Local citizen-led energy transitions processes can show the ways ahead. One of our main challenges is strengthening solidarities and intersections between these movements and territories, to weave global resistances and mobilization to act together and stop the impacts from patriarchal, colonial

and extractivist capitalism.

But we, at least part of us, will also have to navigate existing institutions to move forward in small steps towards a just transition or at least limit socio-ecological destruction around the global. But also have to radically transform them, building new institutions that can truly assure global justice and solidarity for a just transition. This will include building new legal frameworks, to protect the rights of nature and of future generations, or to protect human rights in the face of corporate activities. But probably it will also require political imagination and power to recreate the current order in a very different way.

As such, one of the central debates in our group remains on the different strategies for eco-social transformation, and the role the State and other institutional spaces play within them. Positions range from claims to “inhabit” the state institutions in order to “use” them for change, to much more sceptical perspectives which state that before they can be transformative and not affirmative of the current unjust order, state institutions themselves must undergo a thorough transformation of decolonization and depatriarchalisation. There are also voices which propose that societies be transformed completely from outside the state, which has no possible role in this process.

A crucial challenge therefore is the relation between the more radical, confrontational and prefigurative strategies that break away from the transition led by international institutions and state policies to build a bottom up and autonomous just transition, and those strategies that advocate bold international and national transition policies, considering them necessary frameworks and enablers for the global eco-social transformation needed. Our discussions seem to suggest that both perspectives and strategies are necessary, at least in the short term.

However, the relationship between them is contentious, and the more moderate strategies and discourses are used to marginalize the more radical perspectives. Can this be different? Can radical and reformist strategies enable and strengthen each other? The strategic question for these perspectives would be: how to simultaneously maintain radical contents and perspectives on just transition, and influence the mainstream debate? Can potentially more reformist discourses and strategies be combined with more disruptive strategies and radical perspectives? How to resist the strategies for watering down our proposals and co-opt our struggles, either coming from corporate sectors, but also from liberal elites?

In any case, it is clear that many fights will have to be fought in many different places and ways around the globe, according to the proper conditions they face. Although transformations will share principles and horizons, at the same time they will be diverse, and heterogeneous, as they are being adapted to diverse cultures, eco-systems and otherwise diverse situations by the communities and movements building just transitions in practice. As such, they will necessarily be far more contradictory, heterogeneous and contingent processes, than the horizon for radical change we have presented so far.

A crucial element to consider here is that the pressures for more radical transitions will increase, as the impacts of the climate emergency become increasingly visible and dramatic. On the one hand, this will lead to wider eco-social conflict, and potentially more violent repression by the global elites, who will seek to assure their own future in the face of collapse. But on the other, it might open the opportunity to amplify the social base for just transitions, resistances, and alternatives, exponentially, as already seems to be happening in the younger generations. In many places in the world, we are in a moment of building power and strengthening our

organizations, to move forward with greater strength in the future. The horizon of eco-social transformation is a necessary perspective to do so.

---

[1] The present text is the result of a collective process of analysis, dialogue, and editing, based on the fourth meeting of the *Global Working Group Beyond Development* in the Senegalese Saloum delta, in May 2022. The text has been edited by Raphael Hoetmer with the support of Miriam Lang, Dorothy Guerrero, Mary Ann Manahan, Madhuresh Kumar, Neema Pathak Boome, Roland Nkwain, Aissatou Keita, Larry Lohman, Ivon Yanez, and Karin Gabbert.

[2] See: <https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca>

[3] See here: <https://beyonddevelopment.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Alternatives-in-a-world-of-crisis-2019-2nd-ed1.pdf>

[4] [https://www.ilo.org/empent/areas/social-finance/WCMS\\_825124/lang-en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/empent/areas/social-finance/WCMS_825124/lang-en/index.htm)

[5] An archive of false solutions can be found here: <https://foe.org/projects/false-solutions/>

[6] A critical analysis of the notions and proposals of Green New Deals can be found here: <https://www.rosalux.eu/en/article/1948.green-new-deals.html>

[7] See for a more extensive analysis: Hamza Hamouchene, *The struggle for energy democracy in the Maghreb* (2016) Accessible here: [https://www.rosalux.de/fileadmin/rls\\_uploads/pdfs/sonst\\_publicationen/Struggle\\_for\\_Energy\\_Democracy\\_in\\_Maghreb\\_ENG.pdf](https://www.rosalux.de/fileadmin/rls_uploads/pdfs/sonst_publicationen/Struggle_for_Energy_Democracy_in_Maghreb_ENG.pdf)

[8] See for example, the critique by the Special Rapporteur on Indigenous Peoples of the United Nations in the report: *Cornered by protected areas* available here: <https://www.corneredbypas.com/>. The Science Panel on the Amazon insists on the centrality of indigenous peoples, practices and knowledges as crucial to the protection of the Amazon: <https://www.theamazonwewant.org/>.

[9] See: <https://pactoeocosocialdelsur.com/>

[10] See: Global Working Group Beyond Development, *Alternatives in a World of Crisis* (Brussels 2018), 274-286