DELIBERATION ISSUE GUIDE

SUSTAINING A THRIVING WORLD

Conflict Engagement and Resolution Initiative (CERI)
Josef Korbel School of Global and Public Affairs
University of Denver

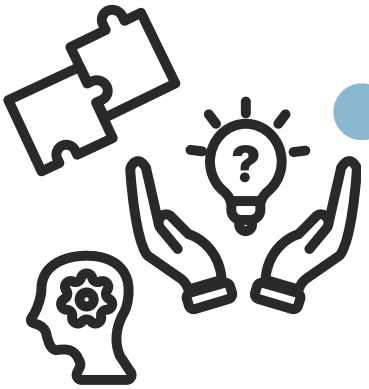
Conflict Engagement & Resolution Initiative
UNIVERSITY OF DENVER

What is Deliberation?

In a deliberation, people gather to discuss possible approaches to complex problems.

Participants bring their unique values and goals, recognizing how each person's experience may inform their analysis of approaches to a problem.

Deliberation is not about finding a "solution," but rather exploring various potential strategies, weighing costs and benefits, and building connections with other participants.



The Deliberation Process

Deliberations are flexible, but they follow a general pattern that helps to keep conversation flowing and ensures that all approaches are considered.

Introduction	Connect to Issue	Consider Each Option	Review and Reflect
Review Ground Rules. Introduce the Issue.	Ask people to describe how the issue affects them, their families, or friends.	Consider each option one at a time. Allow equal time for each. What is attractive? What are the drawbacks?	Review the conversation as a group. What areas of common ground are apparent? What tensions or tradeoffs were most difficult? Who else do we need to hear from?

Stages of Deliberation. Adapted from: National Issue Forums. *Immigration: Who should we welcome? What should be do?* National Issue Forums. (2020)

Ground Rules

Consider all approaches carefully.	**Seek to build a respectful atmosphere.**	**Listen to understand.**	**It's okay to disagree, but do so with curiosity, not hostility.**	**Be brief and allow others to participate. No one should dominate.**	**Consider national and local actions that we can take.**

About this Issue Guide

Environmental challenges raise fundamental questions about what it means for the world to truly thrive, from meeting basic needs to ensuring long-term well-being for people and ecosystems. This guide explores competing perspectives on how to balance environmental protection, economic growth, community decision-making, and just transitions. It is designed to encourage thoughtful discussion about how societies can navigate tradeoffs and define a thriving future in a complex and changing world.

The four approaches summarized here reflect different perspectives on how to respond to environmental challenges and what it means to build a world that thrives. Each approach highlights distinct priorities, values, and tradeoffs. In practice, communities, governments, and institutions often draw on more than one approach, combining strategies to respond to changing environmental conditions, economic pressures, and social needs. Environmental decision-making evolves as new scientific knowledge, technological developments, and social priorities reshape how societies understand sustainability, development, and well-being. As these changes occur, long-standing assumptions about growth, environmental protection, and equity are often reconsidered. In a time of environmental uncertainty and global change, it is especially important for societies to reflect carefully on how they define and pursue a thriving world. Across contexts, communities and decision-makers face shared questions, even when their answers may differ:

- What does it mean for people and the planet to truly thrive?
- Who gets to thrive? How should we weigh the well-being of people alongside plants, animals, and other species now and in the future?
- Should we prioritize immediate human needs and economic opportunity or long-term sustainability? Who gets to decide?
- What role should economic growth, jobs, and stability play in creating a thriving world?
- Who should have the power to make decisions about land, resources, and development?
- How can communities become more resilient while also being treated equitably?
- What does a “just transition” look like? Should transitions toward sustainability happen quickly or gradually, and who bears the costs and risks of those choices?

The development of this guide involved research into policy analysis, reviews of news sources and social media, and analysis of scholarly research. Several perspectives could be identified on the question of sustaining a thriving world; four are presented here. Considering these approaches together can help participants better understand the complexity of the issue and reflect on what matters most as we work toward a thriving future for all.

Introduction

What makes a thriving world?

People have different ideas about what it means for the world to thrive. Some believe protecting nature should come first, focusing on reducing pollution, conserving resources, and protecting wildlife. Others argue that human progress matters most and that economic growth and new technology can improve lives and help solve global problems. Some believe change should happen more slowly and equitably with attention paid so that vulnerable groups, such as low-income families, workers, and Indigenous communities, are not left behind. Others stress that local communities retain the ability to decide what thriving means for themselves.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs
Source: McLeod, 2025.
https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html

These perspectives shape how people answer an important question: what does a thriving world look like, and how do we balance the trade-offs? Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs helps illustrate the distinction between different perspectives on how we foster a thriving world.[1] A planet that provides food, water, shelter, safety, and even healthy ecosystems may be habitable, but thriving involves more than survival. Higher-order needs such as belonging, dignity, cultural expression, and purpose depend on economic security as well as healthy social and ecological systems. From this perspective, several conditions shape not just whether people can live, but how well they can live. In this sense, thriving can be understood by having the conditions to reach each of these levels. These ideas about human well-being have developed throughout history alongside broader theories of progress and its challenges.

Ideas about what it means to thrive have shifted significantly over time. In pre-industrial societies, economic life was largely organized around agriculture, and widespread rural poverty and unstable growing conditions pushed many people to seek new opportunities. The Industrial Revolution promised a better life through wage labor, technological innovation, and urban growth. In places like Britain and the United States, industrialization became synonymous with progress and national strength. Yet the rapid move to cities also produced overcrowding, unsafe working conditions, polluted air and water, and stark class inequalities.[2] These social and environmental costs were often framed as temporary or necessary sacrifices on the path toward prosperity.

This reinforced a broader belief that economic growth should come first, with social and environmental concerns addressed later. Technological innovation was widely celebrated as progress, and scientific expertise often supported industrial expansion. By the late 1960s and 1970s, however, this assumption was increasingly questioned. Environmental movements along with other forms of labor organizing, and community-based activism challenged the idea that environmental and social harms were acceptable or temporary costs of development.[3] Rachel Carson's book, *Silent Spring*, drew attention to the biodiversity and health tradeoffs of pesticides, while Wangarĩ Maathai's Green Belt Movement in Kenya (pictured above) helped communities plant millions of trees to address deforestation and improve livelihoods.[4]

Alternative voices and priorities continued to surface over time, including arguments that environmental quality, worker safety, and human well-being were central to what it meant to live well. A green movement strengthened in Europe, fueled by the 1972 United Nations Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment, which represented growing global concern of environmental issues such as deforestation, pollution of air, water, and oceans, depletion of natural resources, and nuclear testing, and led to the founding of the United Nations Environment Programme.[5] Around the same time in the United States, policies such as the Clean Air Act and the Occupational Safety and Health Act reflected early attempts to integrate environmental protection, labor rights, and community well-being into governance.[6] Then, in the 1980s, the concept of a just transition emerged from U.S. trade unions highlighting that shifts to cleaner energy or sustainable economies should support workers and also protect communities, local economies, and cultural traditions.[7]

World leaders meet during the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, Sweden. Source: Pressens Bild/AFP/Getty Images

Building on these earlier ideas, society's understanding of what it means to thrive continued to change moving into the new century. While economic growth remains important, challenges such as climate change, social inequality, and ecological limits highlight that additional strategies are needed to support communities and a thriving world. New approaches focus on innovation, sustainability, resilience, and just transitions, aiming to simultaneously balance environmental health, social equity, and economic stability.[8]

These approaches recognize that new technologies, including artificial intelligence (AI), can both create new environmental challenges and offer tools for solutions.[8] International agreements, such as the 2015 Paris Climate Accords, which was one of the most complex international negotiations in modern history, demonstrate how different perspectives and priorities had to be reconciled.

Sustainability has been defined as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."[9] The UN's Sustainable Development Goals, adopted in 2015, recognize that environmental, social, and economic challenges are connected and must be addressed together. These goals, along with national and local sustainability initiatives, reflect both these tradeoffs and attempts at their integration, acknowledging that thriving communities depend on protecting ecosystems, supporting economies and ensuring access to basic needs for all people.[10] The SDGs provide a shared framework to guide decisions and actions. They help ensure that when tradeoffs happen—such as between economic growth and environmental protection—important priorities are not overlooked.

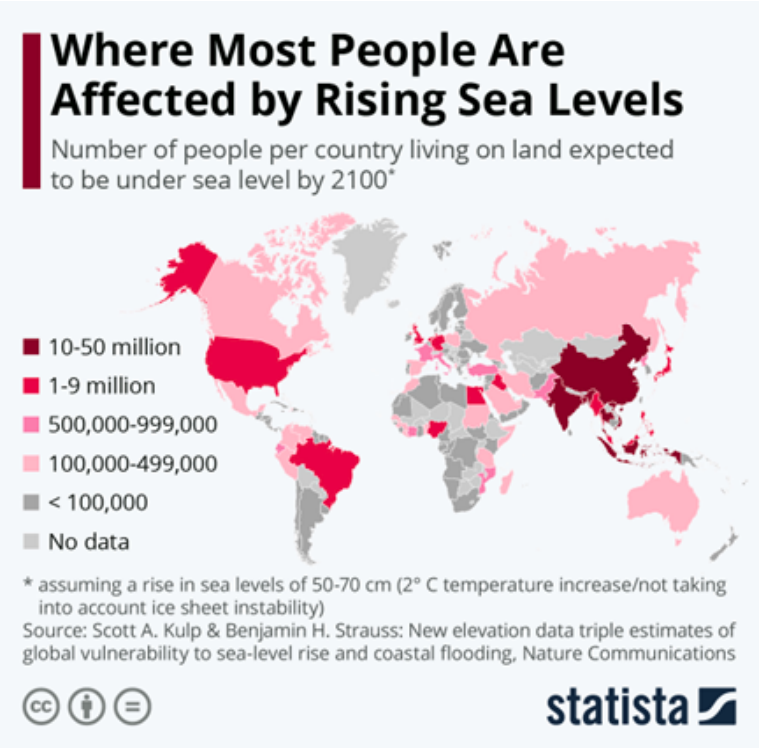
Sustainable Development Goals, Source: United Nations, 2015.

Despite growing agreement that environmental health, economic stability, and social well-being are interconnected, people continue to disagree about how to balance these priorities. Different approaches emphasize different values, risks, and opportunities. Some prioritize rapid innovation and economic expansion, while others focus on ecological protection, equity, or community leadership. Each approach offers potential benefits but also involves tradeoffs or drawbacks. No one approach is "right". This issue guide helps us explore several approaches to fostering a thriving world, highlighting the values behind them and the tensions we must navigate.

Approach 1: Protect the Planet's Life-Support System

This approach argues that a habitable planet is one where all living things - humans, animals, and plants - can thrive, with access to the planetary resources needed for current and future generations. However, a range of ongoing human activities is threatening Earth's long-term ability to support life. The good news is that many of these threats can be reduced through smarter laws, cleaner technologies, and changes in how people produce and consume goods.

Clean air and water are fundamental to life, yet nearly the entire global population (99%) is exposed to unsafe air quality.[11] Pollution from burning fossil fuels in transportation, industry, and energy production releases greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide and methane, as well as particulate matter and other pollutants that form smog. Exposure to air pollution is linked to respiratory diseases like asthma, various cancers, and neurological conditions such as dementia.[12] Acid rain affects the chemistry of lakes, rivers, and streams, killing fish and vegetation and disrupting ecosystems.[13] Reducing air pollution requires limiting emissions from factories, vehicles, and power plants and transitioning to cleaner energy sources like wind and solar power.

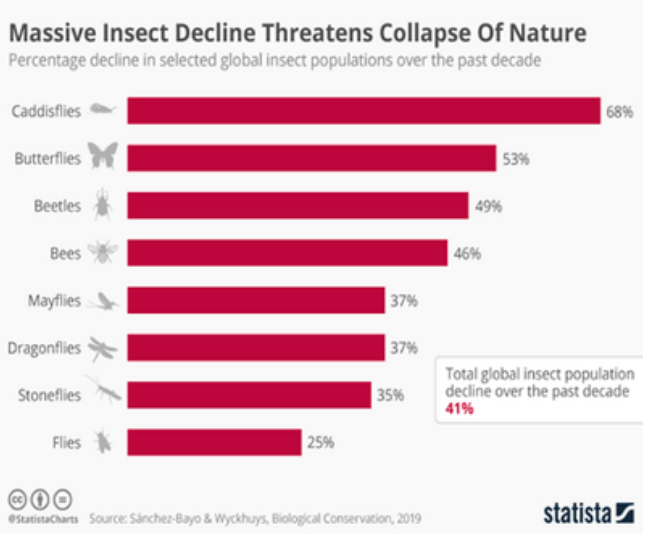


Water quality is also under threat due to rapid expansion and underregulated industrial activity, agriculture, and military operations.[14] Addressing this water pollution is essential to reduce waterborne illnesses and save millions of lives and billions of dollars in medical costs and lost economic activity.[15] Governments and communities can protect water by regulating industrial waste, reducing agricultural runoff, improving wastewater treatment, and using water more efficiently.

Human-caused climate change further threatens Earth's ability to sustain life. Rising temperatures, disrupted rainfall patterns, and more frequent and intense extreme weather events such as floods, droughts, wildfires, and hurricanes affect access to food, water, and shelter. In fact, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change estimates that 3.3 to 3.6 billion people live in areas highly vulnerable to climate. For example, sea level rise is expected to damage infrastructure, contaminate freshwater sources, destroy coastal habitats, and displace communities.

By 2050, up to one billion people could be living in low-lying coastal areas at risk of permanent displacement. In the US, one in six threatened or endangered species is already vulnerable to rising seas.[16] To address these growing risks, countries around the world have adopted the Paris Agreement, committing to limit global temperature rise to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels through climate mitigation, that is, reducing greenhouse gas emissions from human activities. Countries with the resources to do so are also developing climate adaptation, strengthening human and natural systems to better withstand climate impacts.

Economic development, population growth, deforestation, mining, industrial agriculture, invasive species, and climate change are also accelerating species extinction rates.[17] This loss of biodiversity has direct consequences for humans, as ecosystems provide essential services such as pollination, clean air and water, fertile soil, climate regulation, and natural medicines.[18] The global decline of insects such as bees, driven by habitat loss and chemical exposure, threatens long-term food security.[19] Protecting biodiversity means conserving habitats, setting aside protected areas, restoring damaged ecosystems and human-nature relationships, and reducing activities that destroy wildlife populations.



Environmental degradation also increases the risk of disease outbreaks. The World Health Organization estimates that in the 21st century, approximately 75% of emerging infectious diseases have originated in regions experiencing habitat destruction, land-use change, or removal of natural buffers.[20] Climate change is also expanding the range of mosquito-borne diseases such as malaria, putting new populations at risk.[21] Preventing future outbreaks requires protecting natural habitats, reducing pollution, and planning communities in ways that limit the risk of disease transfer between humans and wildlife. Together, these threats emerging from current activities raise urgent questions about how societies should act to protect all life on Earth. This approach prioritizes protecting the planet's life-support systems to ensure that current and future generations can thrive.

What Should We Do?

1. Enshrine protections for nature in legal systems and strengthen regulations.
Legal protections can recognize the rights of nature and make harming the environment illegal. Communities can strengthen enforcement of protections. Ecosystems, species, or natural features such as rivers and forests can be given legal standing, allowing them to be defended in court. Rights of nature initiatives have expanded globally under Indigenous leadership, challenging anthropocentric (human-centered) worldviews.

2. Reduce consumption of natural resources.
Human societies depend on limited resources, which are both renewable, such as water and forests, and nonrenewable, such as critical minerals, oil, and natural gas. However, extracting and using these planetary resources without care, limits, or attention to inequities often causes environmental harm and threatens human thriving and biodiversity.

3. Transition energy systems to renewable sources.
According to the UN, the energy sector, specifically the use of fossil fuels, was the leading contributor to greenhouse gas emissions in 2023. Large-scale adoption of renewable energy sources such as wind, solar, hydroelectric, and geothermal power is needed to avoid the most severe impacts of climate change and reach the required net-zero emissions by 2050.

4. Set goals that preserve ecosystems and foster conservation of species.
Protecting biodiversity requires setting clear conservation and restoration goals. These goals aim to halt biodiversity loss, restore ecosystem function, and place nature on a path to recovery for the benefit of both people and the planet.[22] In 2022, countries participating in the Convention on Biological Diversity agreed to protect 30% of Earth's land and oceans and restore 30% of degraded ecosystems by 2030.

5. Prioritize adaptation to climate change.
The climate impacts of past practices will continue beyond any new reduction of global emissions.[23] Thus, thriving societies must learn to live with and respond to climate change. Adaptation strategies include regenerative approaches to actively restoring and improving ecosystems through nature-based solutions, strengthening infrastructure, and, in some cases, relocating communities.[24]

6. Increase environmental education.
Addressing environmental challenges requires an informed public. Environmental literacy helps people understand how human actions affect Earth's systems and enables communities to evaluate evidence-based solutions.[25] Investing in environmental education can cultivate current and future generations of environmental stewards.

Tradeoffs and Drawbacks

1. Legal change is uneven and uncertain.
Environmental protections based on legal reforms depend heavily on political will and enforcement. International environmental law lacks strong enforcement mechanisms, and adoption of rights-of-nature frameworks varies widely across countries and regions. Progress may be slow, inconsistent, or reversed due to political shifts.

2. Development that prioritizes the planet may conflict with immediate human needs.
Transitioning industries and energy systems can be socially and economically costly. Converting energy grids, transportation systems, and industrial processes requires time, resources, and political commitment. Critics argue that focusing too heavily on environmental goals that protect the planet may divert attention from urgent human needs such as poverty reduction, economic development, and access to basic services.

3. Responsibility and cost-sharing for climate change is unequal.
Climate mitigation and adaptation require significant financial resources, raising difficult questions about who should pay. Industrialized countries have grown to their current status through decades of fossil-fuel industrialization, are currently emitting the most greenhouse gases, and have the greatest capacity to contribute resources in the fight against climate change. Meanwhile, developing countries often face the most severe impacts of climate change. Disagreements persist over whether wealthier nations should bear greater responsibility and how financial burdens should be distributed fairly.

4. Prioritizing sustainable industries and phasing out environmentally harmful industries has economic consequences.
Industries such as oil, gas, mining, and industrial agriculture provide jobs and revenue for many communities and governments. Phasing out these industries will significantly affect economies around the world. For example, global efforts to cut back on oil consumption and transition to renewables could drastically reduce revenues for oil-producing nations, increasing poverty and instability if economic alternatives are not developed proactively.[26]

5. Change is uncomfortable and will be resisted.
Efforts to protect the planet's life-support systems require significant changes in how individuals live, how businesses operate, and how governments set policies. These changes can be uncomfortable, costly, or perceived as threatening to ways of life, sparking resistance.

Approach 2: Prioritize Economic Growth and Stability

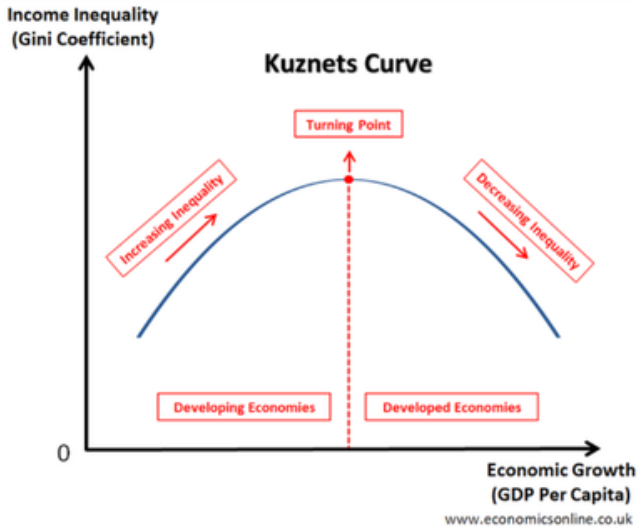
Historically, economic expansion has been paired with remarkable improvements in human well-being, from rising life expectancy to the reduction of global poverty. Supporters argue that during early industrialization, corporate growth and capital accumulation generate jobs, wages, and new markets that lift people out of poverty and create opportunities for economic stability. In this view, when corporations expand, investment increases, employment rises, and individuals gain the chance to improve their standard of living. Other goals, such as environmental protection, can then be better served.

From this perspective, prioritizing economic growth and technological innovation is not merely compatible with human flourishing but essential to it. Societies that secure reliable energy, infrastructure, and material stability are better positioned to invest in research, strengthen institutions, and respond to large-scale challenges. Rather than framing development as a threat, this approach treats prosperity as the engine that generates solutions. Economic stagnation, by contrast, is seen as weakening social systems, limiting opportunity, and reducing the capacity to address future risks.

The Environmental Kuznets Curve is often referenced, which suggests that pollution increases during early industrialization but declines once societies become wealthier and invest in cleaner systems, as seen on the next page.[27] As societies become wealthier and more stable, they are better equipped to address large-scale challenges through innovation and institutional capacity. From this perspective, limiting development is risky because constraining growth could reduce opportunity, slow poverty reduction, and destabilize societies that depend on expanding markets and employment.

Some prominent political leaders argue that environmental goals should not come before people's needs. They criticize approaches they see as "putting the Earth above people," saying that humans have the right and responsibility to use natural resources to improve life, not to treat nature as something that can never be utilized.[28] Blocking resource use because of emissions concerns ignores human creativity and slows down development in ways that hurt working families while giving more power to the government, as carbon emissions will happen regardless.[29]

Recent policy proposals reflect this view by calling for fewer environmental regulations, expanded energy production, and a stronger focus on economic growth as the path to national stability.[30] Essentially, maintaining everyday comfort and meeting economic needs matter more than making major lifestyle changes. Providing for the development of all, including those with less means, should be the priority.



Technology is central to this approach, and innovation flourishes best in environments with fewer regulations and greater market freedom. Grounded in a long-standing belief in human ingenuity, this perspective argues that technological advancement expands what societies can achieve and drives long-term prosperity. Innovation strengthens energy systems, increases productivity, and improves global living standards, creating the stability needed to address a wide range of challenges.[31]

Although climate change is a serious concern, this approach maintains that it is not the only or even the primary global crisis facing humanity. Poverty, energy insecurity, public health threats, and geopolitical instability also demand urgent attention. For this reason, proponents argue that economic growth and technological innovation should remain the priority, since they expand society's capacity to address multiple risks at once. Artificial intelligence is already being used to monitor methane emissions, detect leaks, track deforestation, and optimize power grids.[32] Historical trends suggest that growth and cleaner outcomes can coexist: between 1990 and 2020, U.S. GDP grew by around 110 percent while emissions declined by approximately 15 percent.[33]

At the global level, development is closely tied to environmental improvement. Over 80 percent of people in low-income countries lack access to clean air, safe water, and healthy land, and economic growth expands the institutional and financial capacity to address these conditions.[34] Meanwhile, global investment in clean energy reached $1.8 trillion in 2023, driven largely by economic growth and market expansion.[35] Together, these patterns show that strong economies are better equipped to confront environmental challenges while also reducing poverty and strengthening global stability.

In sum, the world should focus on expanding prosperity, investing in technology, and building resilient, advanced societies. The tools to protect the planet do not emerge from limitation or fear, but from confidence in human capability, investment in innovation, and a continued commitment to growth.

What Should We Do?

1. Strengthen the economy.
The first priority should be focusing on the economy. This means creating jobs, supporting businesses, improving infrastructure, and increasing productivity. A strong economy raises wages, attracts investment, and provides governments around the world with the money needed to fund schools, healthcare, and research. When people have stable jobs and reliable income, societies are better able to handle challenges of all kinds.

2. Invest in technology and innovation.
Governments and businesses should invest in scientific research, artificial intelligence, modern energy systems, and new industries. Innovation helps companies work more efficiently, lower costs, and create better products. It also improves living standards and keeps countries competitive in the global economy. Some new technologies can also reduce pollution as a side benefit. The main goal, however, is to expand economic opportunities and strengthen long-term prosperity.

3. Keep everyday life affordable and stable.
Restrictions on industry or rapid economic shifts can raise prices for food, housing, transportation, and utilities. This approach argues that maintaining affordable goods and services is essential for social stability and economic security. The future depends on bettering everyday life for workers, small businesses, and consumers.

4. Make regulations support growth, not block it.
Regulations should protect public welfare, but they should not unnecessarily slow down new projects or business expansion. Streamlining permits and encouraging private investment can help modernize industries and strengthen economic performance. The goal is to create conditions where businesses can innovate, grow, and contribute to national prosperity.

Tradeoffs and Drawbacks

1. The environment could get worse before it gets better.
Weakening environmental protections can allow pollution and climate risks to reach dangerous levels before solutions arrive. Companies might take advantage of looser rules, causing harm to public health, water, air, and land. Those most vulnerable to climate change could face the greatest and longest-lasting consequences.

2. Big companies may benefit more than local communities.
Economic growth does not always help everyone equally. Large companies may gain the most from looser rules, while local communities see fewer benefits. New factories or resource projects can create jobs, but they can also cause pollution or health problems. If profits are not shared or reinvested in communities, a few companies end up with most of the power, while ordinary people and the environment may suffer.

3. Short-term growth could create long-term problems.
Rapid growth without careful planning can hurt both communities and the environment. Systems built today can lock societies into ways of doing things that are hard and expensive to change later. Focusing only on short-term profits or comfort may create bigger problems for the future. For growth to work, it has to be managed responsibly and with long-term thinking.

4. Slower growth does not mean failure.
GDP and fast expansion are not the only ways to measure success. Quality of life, equity, and resilience also matter. From this perspective, focusing only on fast growth can overlook other ways society can prosper and meet people's needs.

5. Technology has the potential to help us solve problems, but it is not guaranteed.
Technological innovation can support economic growth and help address environmental challenges, but there is no guarantee it will solve them. New technologies may take time to develop, be too costly to scale, or create unintended consequences. Relying too heavily on future breakthroughs can delay necessary changes in policy, behavior, and consumption, while environmental harm continues.

Approach 3: Center Local Community Decision-Making

This approach says that a livable and flourishing planet depends on giving communities real power over decisions that affect their land, jobs, and way of life. It views local and tribal communities as key decision-makers in environmental and economic issues. Supporters believe policies work best when they are shaped by the people who feel their effects every day, rather than being set only by distant governments or large institutions. From this point of view, sustainability is not just about protecting nature, but it is also about who gets to make decisions and who deals with the consequences.

Supporters also point out that communities are not all the same. A policy that works in a big city might be harmful in a rural farming area, a tribal nation, or a town that depends on fossil fuel jobs. When policies ignore these differences, they can hurt local economies, weaken cultural traditions, and repeat past patterns where outside groups took resources without including local people in decisions. This approach focuses on community sovereignty, meaning the ability of local and indigenous governments to protect jobs, set land-use and environmental rules, approve or reject major projects, and make sure communities benefit from development on their land.

An example of local sovereignty is Acequias in the Southwestern U.S. These centuries-old, community-managed irrigation systems are collectively governed by local members for water distribution, maintenance, and use. Supporters of the New Mexico Acequia Association hold signs that read “El Agua es la Vida / Water is Life.” Source: New Mexico Acequia Association, n.d.

In the past, many communities have felt that environmental policies were done to them instead of with them. Fossil fuel regions going through energy transitions, Indigenous nations facing mining or land development, and rural communities dealing with renewable energy projects often say they are left out of decision-making. Research shows that when people do not have real consent or veto power, projects can feel unfair and lead to resistance instead of cooperation.[36] Because of this, community decision-making is seen as important not only for fairness, but also for making policies last and actually work.

Community sovereignty, including tribal sovereignty, is also closely connected to identity and culture. Jobs and systems such as farming, fishing, oil & gas, and mining are not just sources of income, but they are also central to community self-determination. One example is the Dakota Pipeline, a large oil pipeline that was strongly protested by the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe.[37] The dispute highlighted conflicts over tribal sovereignty, environmental risk, and federal infrastructure approval processes, becoming a national example of tensions between local consent and energy development.

This approach does not oppose or support environmental protection. Instead, it says environmental goals should be reached through local decision-making that respects consent, culture, and community control. For example, the Land Back movement in the United States returns ancestral lands to Native American tribes and recognizes their experience as long-time land stewards.[38] One of the longest-running protest sites for Indigenous Peoples' rights is the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in Canberra, Australia, which was established in 1972 outside the Old Parliament House in response to the Prime Minister deciding that Aboriginal Peoples would have to lease land from the government, and the state would control mineral rights of ancestral territories.[39]

Supporters of this approach believe economic development is possible, as long as it helps communities thrive instead of causing harm. In this framework, a flourishing planet is one where communities have real power over their land, resources, and futures. This approach also does not reject economic development, if done in a way that brings thriving and not harm. A flourishing planet, supporters argue, is one where communities retain meaningful power over their land, resources, and futures

The 50th anniversary of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in Canberra. Source: Common Ground, 2025.

What Should We Do?

1. Protect communities' livelihoods and cultural industries.
Protect the jobs, traditions, and industries that shape local life. Farming, fishing, water-sharing systems like acequias, and long-standing energy or mining work are more than just jobs—they are part of a community's identity and history. Policies should help these livelihoods continue or adapt, instead of forcing communities to abandon them with one-size-fits-all rules.[40]

2. Expand local authority over land use and environmental policy.
Give local governments more power to make decisions about land use and environmental protection. Communities should decide what kind of development they allow and what environmental standards fit their needs. Some may choose strong protections, while others may accept more risk to protect jobs or lower costs. Supporters say local control leads to more realistic and enforceable policies.[41]

3. Require community consent before major energy, environmental, or infrastructure projects.
Large energy, environmental, or infrastructure projects should not move forward without clear community approval. Public votes, meetings, or agreements with local or tribal governments give communities real power over decisions that affect their land, health, and future. This helps ensure projects reflect the will of the people most impacted.

4. Guarantee direct community benefits from resource development.
When resources are used on community land, local people should receive clear benefits. These can include shared profits, local jobs, community ownership, or funding for schools, healthcare, clean water, and infrastructure. Seeing real benefits helps communities better weigh environmental and economic tradeoffs.[42]

Tradeoffs and Drawbacks

1. Local choices may preserve harmful or declining industries.
Local control can allow industries that harm health or the environment to continue. Protecting dangerous or dying industries may delay necessary change and lock communities into unsustainable paths, making future transitions more difficult and costly.[43]

2. Communities have unequal power and capacity to manage complex environmental challenges.
Not all communities have the same resources, expertise, or time to organize. Some have skilled staff and funding to advocate for and manage clean water, air quality, or climate risks, while others do not. Without support from higher levels of government, local decision-making may fall short on challenges like climate change or extreme weather.[44]

3. Community-level decision-making can create inconsistent environmental protections.
When each community sets its own standards, protections can vary widely. Pollution or resource extraction may simply move from one place to another instead of being reduced. This lack of coordination can make broader environmental progress harder to achieve.[45]

4. Power imbalances within communities can undermine fair representation.
Local control does not always mean equal voices. Powerful groups, such as industry leaders or wealthy landowners, may dominate decisions to capture benefits for themselves. This can silence low-income residents, Indigenous communities, or those facing health risks, reinforcing inequality instead of reducing it.

5. Community decision-making may still not address the needs of the most vulnerable.
Even when decision-making is local and inclusive, the needs of the most vulnerable may not be fully met. Communities may prioritize broadly shared benefits over targeted support for those facing the greatest risks, such as low-income residents, marginalized groups, or those most affected by environmental harm. Without intentional efforts and additional resources, some people may continue to face disproportionate burdens despite more localized control.

Approach 4: Slow Transitions and Prioritize the Most Vulnerable

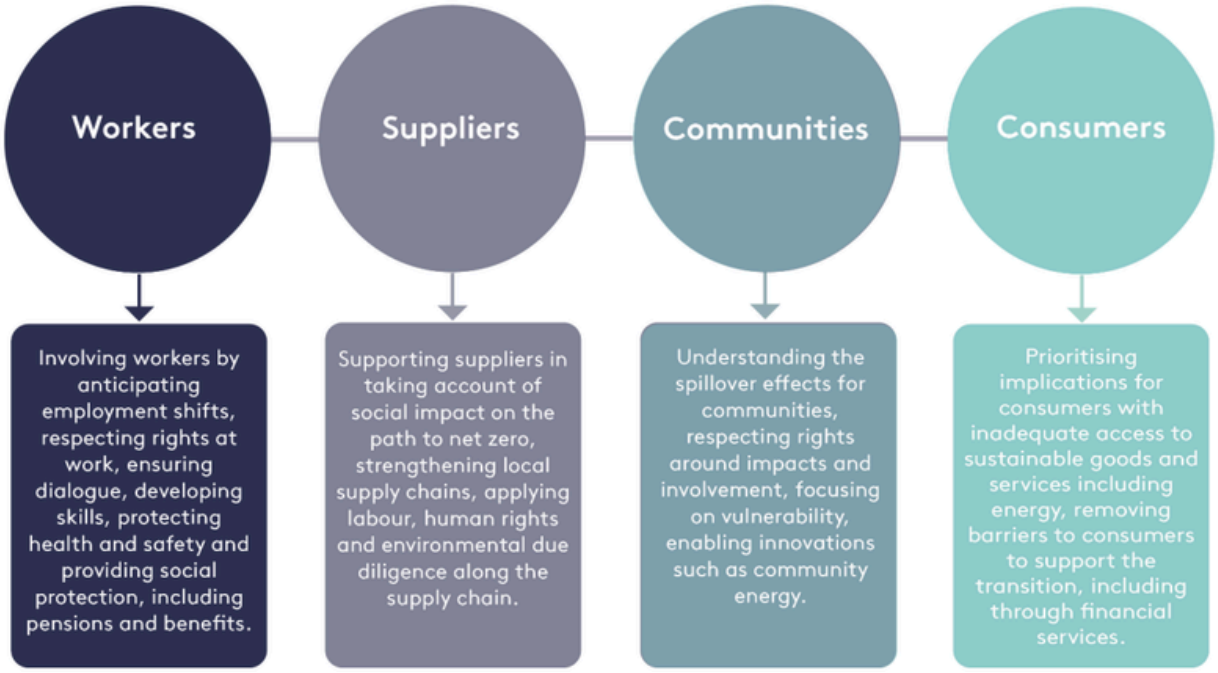
This approach prioritizes slowing the pace of economic and environmental transitions, arguing that the world should not rush toward goals if doing so harms the very people and places we want to protect. This perspective, often called a **just transition**, puts two things first: (1) protecting vulnerable people whose jobs, health, or cultures depend on industries in decline, and (2) avoiding sudden shocks to local economies and environments that create new harms while trying to fix old ones.

Scholars of just transition emphasize that climate policy is not only about achieving decarbonization, but about how that transformation unfolds. A just transition must integrate climate, energy, and environmental justice, ensuring fairness in both outcomes and processes.[46] Scholars also stress the importance of temporality, arguing that transitions unfold over time, and effective policy must account for differences in community capacity, governance structures, and social vulnerability.[47]

Underlying this approach are the two closely related concepts of procedural and distributional justice. Procedural justice focuses on how decisions are made, who participates, whose voices are heard, and who holds power over transition pathways. Distributional justice asks who benefits and who bears the costs of environmental change.

Together, these concepts ground the meaning of "just." A transition cannot be considered just if affected communities, including workers, suppliers, communities, and consumers, are excluded from decision-making or forced to absorb disproportionate costs, as pictured in the figure on the top of the next page. Renewable energy projects can cause resentment when communities feel decisions are forced without their meaningful participation.

Workshop on advocating for a just energy transition in Africa, organized by the Southern African Faith Communities' Environment Institute (SAFCEI) and Natural Justice. Source: Natural Justice, 2024.



Source: Making Transition Plans Just (Grantham Research Institute, 2022)

For Indigenous communities in particular, advocates argue that just transitions must include respect for tribal sovereignty and Land Back claims. Without sovereignty-centered governance, climate transitions risk reproducing colonial dynamics under the banner of environmental progress.[48]

The Climate Action Network (CAN) International launched the Just Transition Rising campaign to support communities and workers whose lives and livelihoods are directly impacted by the transition away from fossil fuels. The campaign operates on the premise that justice must lead emissions reduction negotiations between countries at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change's (UNFCCC) annual Conference of the Parties (COP).[49]

Source: Climate Action Network of South Asia, n.d.

At the heart of this approach lies a central dilemma: How can societies reduce environmental harm while protecting workers, communities, and cultures and without repeating the injustices of past economic transitions? Supporters of just transitions argue that ignoring this tension risks political backlash, social instability, and the erosion of public trust. Rather than treating justice as a secondary concern, this approach insists that the pace, process, and distribution of change are as important as the environmental outcomes themselves.

What Should We Do?

1. Set phased, legally binding transition milestones.
A just transition requires a timeline that balances urgency with stability. Short-term goals should focus on planning, community protection, and prevent sudden closures. Long-term commitment would plant full decarbonization and remediate legacy environmental harms. Each phase should include public accountability reports to prevent political backsliding.

2. Create a "Just Transition Fund."
This fund would pay for training programs, relocation support, healthcare services, mine or plant cleanup and small business development.[50] Without guaranteed long-term financial support, transitions risk reproducing extractive inequalities.[51]

3. Initiate environmental cleanup and health protections up front.
Immediate environmental repair protects communities that have carried the health burdens of extraction. Requiring companies to post remediation bonds ensures cleanup funds are set aside before shutdowns and prevents companies from abandoning sites. Communities near extractive industries face long-term respiratory, water quality and cancer risks, making health screenings and long-term monitoring essential.[52]

4. Implement targeted economic diversification.
Economic diversification ensures communities do not move from dependence on one extractive industry to another. Targeted investments should build on local strengths like ecotourism, sustainable agriculture, forest stewardship, or community manufacturing. Small business tax credits and start up grants can help locally enterprises keep wealth.

5. Enable monitoring, transparency, and measurable metrics.
Transparent monitoring systems are critical to evaluating whether a transition is genuinely just. Annual public dashboards can track job creation, job losses, cleanup milestones, health outcomes, and spending. Independent oversight bodies prevent corruption. Transparency builds trust and provides early warning signs to correct injustices.

6. Stop elite interests from taking priority.
Renewable energy projects can cause resentment when communities feel decisions are forced without participation.[53] This exclusion is not accidental but structured, specifically in places shaped by colonial land dispossession or corporate dominance.[54]

Tradeoffs and Drawbacks

1. Slower climate progress vs. social protection.
Moving slowly allows time for retraining, infrastructure development and community-driven planning, but it may also delay emissions reductions. Critics argue that phased transitions extend the lifespan of polluting infrastructure and increase long-term climate risks, from extreme weather to ecosystem collapse. The tradeoff is political, ethical, and affects future generations.

2. Political conflict arises when resource constraints expose who bears the cost of a just transition.
Funding a just transition is expensive, and debates over who should bear the cost often generate political conflict. Retraining programs, small-business support, environmental remediation, and long-term health monitoring all require sustained funding. When costs are put on taxpayers in unaffected regions, public support for climate policy can diminish, and the corporations responsible for pollution attempt to avoid accountability altogether.[55]

3. There will be uneven outcomes across time and space.
Even when just transition policies are well intentioned, they can unintentionally deepen regional inequalities if resources are not distributed equitably. Wealthier or politically influential regions often attract new investment, retraining programs, and infrastructure more easily, while rural, remote or historically marginalized areas struggle to diversify their economies. Research on energy transitions in American coal communities shows that without deliberate equity-based planning, benefits tend to flow toward areas that already have economic and political advantages.[56]

4. Potential to reinforce existing power structures and inequality.
Just transitions risk reinforcing existing power structures rather than dismantling them. If decision-making authority remains concentrated among corporate actors, large landowners, or political elites, transition policies can reproduce the same inequalities created by extractive economies. Research shows that local elites may capture transition benefits like development contracts or land access, while workers, Indigenous communities, and low-income residents remain excluded.[57]

Acknowledgements

This Guide was developed in 2025-26 by graduate student staff of the University of Denver's Conflict Engagement and Resolution Initiative (CERI) (du.edu/conflict-resolution), inspired by past guides produced by the National Issues Forum Institute and by CERI in 2024-25. It was written by Leslie Carvalho, Maddi Schink, and Ruhama Solomon under the supervision of Dr. Tamra Pearson d'Estrée. Creation of this Issue Guide was supported in part by a grant from the University of Denver's Free Expression & Pluralism Initiative.

Endnotes

1. Maslow, Abraham. “A Theory of Human Motivation.” Psychological Review, Psychological Review, 1943, psychclassics.yorku.ca/Maslow/motivation.htm.
2. O’Connell, Katie. “Industrialization, Migration to Cities, and Social Reform – Sustainable Urban Development.” Sustainable-Urban-Development.com, 15 June 2023, sustainable-urban-development.com/city-planning/history-of-planning/industrialization-migration-to-cities-and-social-reform/.
3. “Environmental Politics in the United States, 1955–1985.” Beauty, Health, and Permanence, 16 July 1987, https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511664106. Accessed 1 May 2023.; Lineberry, Cate. “How Rachel Carson’s “Silent Spring” Awakened the World to Environmental Peril | HISTORY.” HISTORY, 20 Apr. 2022, www.history.com/articles/rachel-carson-silent-spring-impact-environmental-movement.
4. “Wangari Maathai - Green Belt Movement.” 2025. Green Belt Movement. March 6, 2025. https://www.greenbeltmovement.org/wangari-maathai/
5. United Nations. “United Nations Conference on the Environment, Stockholm 1972.” United Nations, 16 June 1972, www.un.org/en/conferences/environment/stockholm1972.
6. Lattanzio, Richard K. “Clean Air Act: A Summary of the Act and Its Major Requirements.” Congress.gov, 2022, www.congress.gov/crs-product/RL30853.; United States Department of Labor. “OSH Act of 1970.” Occupational Safety and Health Administration, www.osha.gov/laws-regs/oshact/completeoshact.
7. Spanne, Autumn. “Just Transition: History, Principles, and Examples.” Treehugger, 21 June 2021, www.treehugger.com/just-transition-history-principles-and-examples-5190469.
8. “How Artificial Intelligence Is Helping Tackle Environmental Challenges.” UNEP, 7 Nov. 2022, www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/how-artificial-intelligence-helping-tackle-environmental-challenges.
9. UN Brundtland Commission, 1987.
10. “Sustainable Development Goals.” United Nations, 2025, sdgs.un.org/.
11. World Health Organization
12. National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences. 2024. “Air Pollution and Your Health.” National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences. August 6, 2024. https://www.niehs.nih.gov/health/topics/agents/air-pollution.
13. Effects of Acid Rain. Environmental Protection Agency. February 19, 2026. https://www.epa.gov/acidrain/effects-acid-rain.
14. “Global Urbanisation Identified as the Landscape Change Most Responsible for Water-Quality Deterioration over Last 20 Years.” 2025. Environment. January 16, 2025. https://environment.ec.europa.eu/news/global-urbanisation-identified-landscape-change-most-responsible-water-quality-deterioration-over-2025-01-16_en.
15. “What If Everyone on Earth Had Easy Access to Clean Water?” 2011. HowStuffWorks. July 21, 2011. https://science.howstuffworks.com/science-vs-myth/what-if/what-if-access-to-clean-water.html.
16. “Deadly Waters How Rising Seas Threaten 233 Endangered Species.” 2013. https://www.biologicaldiversity.org/campaigns/sea_level_rise/pdfs/Sea_Level_Rise_Report_2013_web.pdf
17. “The Sixth Mass Extinction Explained.” 2025. World Wildlife Fund. 2025. https://www.worldwildlife.org/resources/explainers/what-is-the-sixth-mass-extinction-and-what-can-we-do-about-it/.
18. Brunet, Johanne. 2019. “Pollinator Decline: Implications for Food Security & Environment” Scientia. June 26, 2019. https://www.scientia.global/pollinator-decline-implications-for-food-security-environment/.
19. The National Wildlife Federation. 2025. “Ecosystem Services.” National Wildlife Federation. 2025. https://www.nwf.org/Educational-Resources/Wildlife-Guide/Understanding-Conservation/Ecosystem-Services.
20. Lawler, Odette K, Hannah L Allan, Peter W J Baxter, Romi Castagnino, Marina Corella Tor, Leah E Dann, Joshua Hungerford, et al. 2021. “The COVID-19 Pandemic Is Intricately Linked to Biodiversity Loss and Ecosystem Health.” The Lancet. Planetary Health 5 (11): e840–50. https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196(21)00258-8.; World Health Organization. 2020. “Zoonoses.” World Health Organization. July 29, 2020. https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/zoonoses.
21. Gizaw, Zemichael, Eunice Salubi, Alain Pietroniro, and Corinne J Schuster-Wallace. 2024. “Impacts of Climate Change on Water-Related Mosquito-Borne Diseases in Temperate Regions: A Systematic Review of Literature and Meta-Analysis.” Acta Tropica 258 (October): 107324–24. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.actatropica.2024.107324.
22. Convention on Biological Diversity. 2022. “2030 Targets (with Guidance Notes).” 2022. https://www.cbd.int/gbf/targets.

Endnotes

23. United Nations. 2015. “Paris Agreement.” https://unfccc.int/files/essential_background/convention/application/pdf/english_paris_agreement.pdf.
24. “Nature-Based Solutions.” n.d. https://www.unepfi.org/nature/nature/nature-based-solutions/;“Managed Retreat: An Introduction and Exploration of Policy Options.” 2024. American Meteorological Society. 2024. https://www.ametsoc.org/ams/policy/studies-analysis/managed-retreat-an-introduction-and-exploration-of-policy-options/; Some relocation examples are New York’s post–Hurricane Sandy buyout program, which compensated residents for leaving flood-prone areas to reduce future harm, and the Netherlands’ “Room for the River” program, which restores natural flood plains, moving infrastructure and people as needed.
25. North American Alliance for Environmental Education. n.d.
26. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated how drops in oil demand can sharply increase poverty in vulnerable countries, including Iran.
27. Tejvan Pettinger, "Environmental Kuznets curve", (Economics Help, Sep 11, 2025), https://www.economicshelp.org/blog/14337/environment/environmental-kuznets-curve/.
28. Russell Goldman, "In Michigan, Santorum Returns to Message of Energy and Manufacturing", (ABC News, Feb 20, 2012), https://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2012/02/in-michigan-santorum-returns-to-message-of-energy-and-manufacturing.
29. UPI, "Santorum: Obama 'elevates Earth above man'", (UPI, Feb 20, 2012), https://www.upi.com/Top_News/US/2012/02/20/Santorum-Obama-elevates-Earth-above-man/71471329738259/.
30. The Heritage Foundation, "Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise", (The Heritage Foundation, 2023), https://static.heritage.org/project2025/2025_MandateForLeadership_FULL.pdf.
31. David Gelles, "Bill Gates Says Climate Change 'Will Not Lead to Humanity's Demise'", (The New York Times, Oct 28, 2025), https://www.nytimes.com/2025/10/28/climate/bill-gates-climate-change-humanity.html.
32. UNEP, "How artificial intelligence is helping tackle environmental challenges", (UNEP, Nov 7, 2022), https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/how-artificial-intelligence-helping-tackle-environmental-challenges.
33. EPA, "Sources of Greenhouse Gas Emissions", (EPA, 2026), https://www.epa.gov/ghgemissions/sources-greenhouse-gas-emissions.
34. World Bank Group, "Protecting Nature Boosts Growth and Jobs, Shows New Report", (World Bank Group, Sep 1, 2025), https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2025/09/01/protecting-nature-boosts-growth-and-jobs-shows-new-report.
35. World Economic Forum, "85% of countries want a fast transition to clean energy – but how do we make it an equitable one too?", (World Economic Forum, Jul 30, 2024), https://www.weforum.org/stories/2024/07/fast-equitable-transition-clean-energy/.
36. Olson-Hazboun, Shawn K. 2018. “‘Why Are We Being Punished and They Are Being Rewarded?’ Views on Renewable Energy in Fossil Fuels-Based Communities of the U.S. West.” The Extractive Industries and Society 5 (3): 366–74. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.exis.2018.05.001.
37. Hu, Shelia. 2024. “The Dakota Access Pipeline: What You Need to Know.” Www.nrdc.org. NRDC. June 12, 2024. https://www.nrdc.org/stories/dakota-access-pipeline-what-you-need-know.
38. Robbins, Jim. 2021. “How Returning Lands to Native Tribes Is Helping Protect Nature.” Yale E360. Yale School of the Environment. June 3, 2021. https://e360.yale.edu/features/how-returning-lands-to-native-tribes-is-helping-protect-nature.
39. Creed, Minelle. 2020. “The Aboriginal Tent Embassy.” Common Ground. June 8, 2020. https://www.commonground.org.au/article/aboriginal-tent-embassy.
40. Communities from West Virginia in the United States to Northern England, for example, have built a sense of identity, pride, companionship and even art around the coal mining industry.
41. For example, in Colorado, a sweeping bill passed in 2019 amid a fracking boom transferred some of the power to oversee oil and gas developments from the state to local governments, allowing them to be more responsive to local priorities.
42. For example, in critical-mineral-rich countries in Africa, such as Morocco, industry investment in complementary urban infrastructure and roads around the Tanger Med Port unleashed economic development along the transportation and energy corridor, resulting in an environment for business creation and growth, including new high-quality jobs for locals.

Endnotes

43. Coal plants, for example, have been on the decline in the United States since the mid-2000s, retired as utilities switched to natural gas, wind, and solar sources of energy that are not only better for air and water quality in communities and growing cheaper, but avoid subjecting miners to the deadly black lung disease and releasing the same level of planet-warming gases.
44. "Climate Adaptation: Why Local Governments Cannot Do It Alone." 2024. OECD. 2024. https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/climate-adaptation-why-local-governments-cannot-do-it-alone_be90ac30-en.html.
45. The Colorado River is a clear example of the struggle to manage a transboundary issue. Seven states, 30 tribes, and Mexico have been unable to reach a consensus on how to distribute water use in the face of historically low water levels and severe drought in the Western U.S., but one actor's actions have clear implications for all other users.
46. McCauley, Darren, and Raphael Heffron. 2018. "Just Transition: Integrating Climate, Energy and Environmental Justice." Energy Policy 119 (August): 1–7. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.enpol.2018.04.014.
47. Delina, Laurence L, and Benjamin K Sovacool. 2018. "Of Temporality and Plurality: An Epistemic and Governance Agenda for Accelerating Just Transitions for Energy Access and Sustainable Development." Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability 34 (October): 1–6. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cosust.2018.05.016.
48. Evans, Geoff, and Liam Phelan. 2016. "Transition to a Post-Carbon Society: Linking Environmental Justice and Just Transition Discourses." Energy Policy 99 (1): 329–39. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.enpol.2016.05.003.
49. "Just Transition." 2025. Climate Action Network South Asia. 2025. https://cansouthasia.net/our-work/just-transition/.
50. "The Office of Just Transition | Department of Labor & Employment." n.d. Cdle.colorado.gov.https://cdle.colorado.gov/the-office-of-just-transition.
51. Evans, Geoff, and Liam Phelan. 2016. "Transition to a Post-Carbon Society: Linking Environmental Justice and Just Transition Discourses." Energy Policy 99 (1): 329–39. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.enpol.2016.05.003.
52. Upham, Dr Paul, Prof Benjamin Sovacool, and Dr Bipashyee Ghosh. 2022. "Just Transitions for Industrial Decarbonisation: A Framework for Innovation, Participation, and Justice." Renewable and Sustainable Energy Reviews 167 (October):112699.https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rser.2022.112699.; Jazeera, Al. 2024. "Leaders Make Push for Plastic Pollution Treaty at Talks in South Korea." Al Jazeera. November 26, 2024. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/11/26/leaders-make-final-push-for-plastic-pollution-treaty-at-talks-in-s-korea.
53. Olson-Hazboun, Shawn K., Peter D. Howe, and Anthony Leiserowitz. 2018. "The Influence of Extractive Activities on Public Support for Renewable Energy Policy." Energy Policy 123 (December): 117–26. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.enpol.2018.08.044.
54. Delina, Laurence L, and Benjamin K Sovacool. 2018. "Of Temporality and Plurality: An Epistemic and Governance Agenda for Accelerating Just Transitions for Energy Access and Sustainable Development." Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability 34 (October): 1–6. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cosust.2018.05.016.; McCauley, Darren, and Raphael Heffron. 2018. "Just Transition: Integrating Climate, Energy and Environmental Justice." Energy Policy 119 (August): 1–7. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.enpol.2018.04.014.
55. McCauley, Darren, and Raphael Heffron. 2018. "Just Transition: Integrating Climate, Energy and Environmental Justice." Energy Policy 119 (August): 1–7. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.enpol.2018.04.014.; Evans, Geoff, and Liam Phelan. 2016. "Transition to a Post-Carbon Society: Linking Environmental Justice and Just Transition Discourses." Energy Policy 99 (1): 329–39. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.enpol.2016.05.003.
56. Carley, Sanya, Tom P. Evans, and David M. Konisky. 2018. "Adaptation, Culture, and the Energy Transition in American Coal Country." Energy Research & Social Science 37 (March): 133–39. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2017.10.007.
57. Evans, Geoff, and Liam Phelan. 2016. "Transition to a Post-Carbon Society: Linking Environmental Justice and Just Transition Discourses." Energy Policy 99 (1): 329–39. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.enpol.2016.05.003.