



Journalist Fellowship Paper

Just Transition: How not to mess up the most important climate story of the decade

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Preface

This report was prepared by News24's climate editor, Lameez Omarjee. It is the product of a three-month industry-sponsored fellowship at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, funded by Media24.

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Introduction

Back in 2021, on the sidelines of the United Nations Climate Summit COP26, South Africa entered into a [world-first climate pact with wealthy nations](#) – namely the United Kingdom, the United States, Germany, France and the European Union.¹ The International Partners Group (IPG), as they are known, pledged \$8.5 billion to assist South Africa in meeting its climate commitments by reducing greenhouse gas emissions in its energy sector. That involves decommissioning coal power stations and shifting to renewable energy sources.

A key facet of the landmark billion-dollar deal was that the energy transition had to be “just”. In other words: affected workers and communities would not be disadvantaged by the shift and could also share in the benefits of a low-carbon economy. The “just transition” clause has a [dual purpose](#) of not only addressing climate and environmental concerns but also matters of social justice.²

Importantly, this pact put into practice one of [the aims of the Paris Agreement](#): developed nations committing to support developing nations in achieving their climate goals.³ Since 2021, other developing nations – such as [Vietnam, Indonesia and Senegal](#) – have entered into similar just energy transition partnerships.⁴

For justice-hungry South Africa, the exciting thing about being first was the opportunity to lay out a blueprint for what a just transition could look like – solving a whole host of problems it hadn’t been able to fix before. The drawback? Mistakes would inevitably be uncovered along the way.

¹ Mason, J., Shalal, A. and Rumney, E. (2021) ‘South Africa to get \$8.5 bln from U.S., EU and UK to speed up shift from coal’, *Reuters*, 2 November. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/business/environment/us-eu-others-will-invest-speed-safricas-transition-clean-energy-biden-2021-11-02/> (Accessed: 14 November 2024).

² Stark, A., Gale, F. and Murphy-Gregory, H. (2023) ‘Just transitions’ meanings: A systematic review’, *Society & Natural Resources*, 36(10), pp. 1277–1297. doi:10.1080/08941920.2023.2207166.

³ United Nations Climate Change (no date) Key aspects of the Paris Agreement. Available at: <https://unfccc.int/most-requested/key-aspects-of-the-paris-agreement> (Accessed: 14 November 2024).

⁴ The Rockefeller Foundation (2024) *Scaling the JETP model: Prospects and pathways for action*. Available at: <https://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/report/scaling-the-jetp-model-prospects-and-pathways-for-action/> (Accessed: 29 October 2024).

As a journalist who has been following developments of South Africa's just transition, the experience is no different. You're at the forefront of reporting on history-making economic policy – the kind of stuff that will influence a nation's future development path, with massive implications for generations to come.

But you're covering novel ideas that require a depth of expertise that no journalism school has prepared you for. Mistakes will be made: from how we interrogate complex science and policy, to how we relay the information in a digestible format under tight news deadlines.

During my fellowship at the Reuters Institute, I set out to uncover blind spots in my own coverage with the hope of preparing journalists facing a similar challenge. Instead of asking editors and journalists about their approaches to reporting on the just transition, I turned to nine researchers, policymakers, development practitioners, those advising government, and communication professionals within government. I asked them to weigh in on the gaps they found in South African media coverage that may be harmful or helpful to the work they're doing.

I also asked what they thought needed to change in journalists' approach to the topic. I did eventually reach out to journalists – those who, like me, have also had to report on the complex beat that is climate change – to give a critical view on how the recommendations would practically play out in newsrooms.

My hope is that this project will help newsrooms think differently about how they approach the decade's most important story about climate action.

What is a just transition?

The just transition is a concept that emerged out of a U.S. labour movement that began in the 1970s, [focused on protecting workers' rights](#) amid environmental policy that challenged polluting and extractive industries like mining. According to the United Nations International Labour Organization, a just transition should “maximise benefits and minimise hardships” for workers and communities in the shift to a low-carbon and climate-resilient economy.

As more countries take steps to reduce greenhouse gas emissions that are accelerating climate change, [the concept of a just transition has gained traction](#).⁵ Depending on who you ask, it also concerns addressing racial and indigenous justice, food security, and the preservation of culture and tradition. There is no universally agreed definition or approach.⁶ So, a just transition will look different depending on the context of each country that pursues it.

While the initial stages of South Africa’s just transition puts the focus on energy sector interventions, the full transition demands an economy-wide transformation that addresses the country’s persistent challenges of unemployment, inequality and poverty.

It’s an [all-of-society approach](#), outlined in the framework set out by the Presidential Climate Commission (PCC). The PCC, appointed in 2020, coordinated consultations with stakeholders from labour, business, government, civil society and academia, among others to find a common vision.⁷ That vision involved:

[...] Seizing the opportunities and managing the risks associated with climate change, with an overarching goal of improving the

⁵ de Ruyter, A. and Bentley, G. (2024) ‘Enabling a just transition’, Contemporary Social Science, 19(1–3), pp. 1–20. doi:10.1080/21582041.2024.2360953.

⁶ See footnote 2.

⁷ Presidential Climate Commission (2022) *A Framework for a Just Transition in South Africa*. Available at: https://pcccommissionflo.imgix.net/uploads/images/22_PAPER_Framework-for-a-Just-Transition_revised_242.pdf (Accessed: November 2024).

lives and livelihoods of ALL South Africans, particularly those most impacted.”

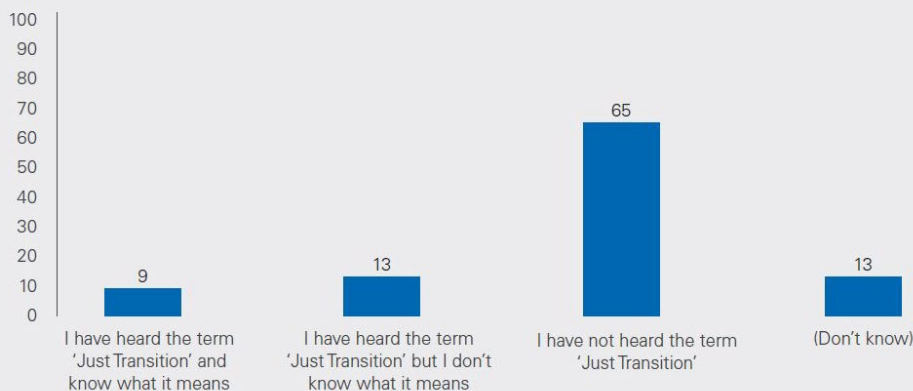
It’s about more than a transition to low-carbon energy technologies to meet climate commitments; it’s also about improving the quality of people’s lives by unlocking economic opportunities and improving both environmental and health impacts.

According to Lebogang Mulaisi, executive manager responsible for policy and research at the PCC, this vital link was never made clear in media coverage. A survey of public understanding commissioned by the PCC validates Mulaisi’s claim:

What the audience understands

In 2023, the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) surveyed 3,500 South Africans for the PCC. It found only [9% of those surveyed](#) had heard the term “just transition” and knew what it meant.⁸ The vast majority – 65% of those surveyed – had never heard of the term, and 13% had heard the term but did not understand what it meant.

Figure 11: Knowledge of the term ‘Just Transition’ (%)



Credit: HSRC South African Social Attitudes Survey 2023

There was more awareness about the concept as it relates to the energy sector: 41% had heard “a little bit” about the idea of transitioning away from coal and toward other forms of energy, with 22% indicating they had heard a “quite a bit” or “a lot” about it. Still, nearly a quarter (23%) of respondents had never heard of the concept.

⁸ Roberts, B., Struwig, J. and Zondi, T. (2024) *Public Perceptions and Attitudes to climate change and the just transition in South Africa*. Presidential Climate Commission. Available at: <https://www.climatecommission.org.za/publications/public-perceptions-and-attitudes-relating-to-climate-change-and-the-just-transition-in-south-africa> (Accessed: October 2024).

Is Mulaisi’s assertion that news media are responsible for awareness of just transition efforts fair? [A 2023 online survey](#) of people from eight countries (representing both perspectives from the global North and global South but excluding South Africa) found most people get their information about climate change from news media.⁹ The just transition, as a key aspect of climate action, falls within the broader category of climate change news.

Waqas Ejaz, co-author of the study and postdoctoral research fellow at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (RISJ), told me: “We know from what we research that media is the main source of information when it comes to climate change.” However, when editors are asked about interest in climate reporting, they report there is little audience engagement in these stories.

The survey also found that respondents believe newsrooms are influential when it comes to public views and understanding of climate change, as well as driving action: “Nearly two thirds of respondents believe that news media play a significant role in influencing climate change decisions, actions by large businesses, government policies, and public attitudes...”.

Prof. Rasmus Kleis Nielsen of the Department of Communication of the University of Copenhagen and senior research associate at RISJ, noted fatigue and defeatism among audiences when it comes to the climate crisis. “It is a complicated story, there is a lot of news fatigue around it,” he told fellows during a seminar at RISJ.

At the same time, Nielsen pointed out that data from surveyed countries shows an “overwhelming majority” of the public recognise the scientific consensus on human-caused climate change and understand it is an existential threat. This wasn’t always the case. Getting people to engage and understand the issue may be hard, but it’s not impossible. “The challenges are very significant, but we should count our successes and draw inspiration from those. It’s not impossible to do those things,” said Nielsen.

What then, are the challenges we face in getting the just transition story right?

⁹ Ejaz, W., Mukherjee, M. and Fletcher, R. (2023) *Climate Change News Audiences: Analysis of News Use and Attitudes in Eight Countries*. Reuters Institute. Available at: https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2023-11/Ejaz_et_al_Climate_Change_News_Audiences.pdf (Accessed: November 2024).

The challenges to getting the just transition story right

My conversations with researchers, policymakers, and development practitioners, about gaps in our just transition coverage can be distilled into four categories of challenges that journalists face. These are: the complexity of the transition, under-resourced newsrooms, misinformation about the transition, and imprecise labelling of transition efforts that lead to inaccurate or limited interrogation of efforts.

1. The complexity of the transition

Getting to grips with what a just transition is and how to communicate it in a way that is relatable to audiences is a major challenge – seeing as it can mean different things to different stakeholders.

In South Africa it is largely associated with the shift from fossil fuels (coal) to renewable energy (like solar PV and wind power generation). This has also created room for the spread of misinformation, with some stakeholders associating just transition with the closure of coal power stations – and the detrimental consequences of that, such as job losses, explained Mulaisi.

“The transition is seen as this boogey man, and we are completely ignoring all of the opportunities,” she said. A connection between the just transition and industrial development – and the benefits that come with that – has not been made. “I don't think we're really getting through to people that this means a better life for all. We could make the linkages much better,” said Mulaisi.

So much understanding of the transition is limited to the shifts in the energy sector, without any regard to the elements of justice. Jesse Burton, senior researcher at the University of Cape Town, pointed out that the just transition is incorrectly believed to be bringing about job losses and leaving communities behind. This is because there is a view that the energy transition and the just transition are the same thing.

If you're confused at this point – it's because you're getting a taste of the complexity of the just transition.

There's a lack of appreciation for the complexity, and it shows in media coverage, when there is an oversimplification of the issue, said Emily Tyler, climate lead at consultancy Meridian Economics.

Journalists have such a hard task because I think, at the moment, our world is so complex and yet people want simple sound bites.

Generally, a just transition should mean justice for communities living in the areas surrounding high-emitting facilities. And that comes with trade-offs, which needs to be carefully captured in reporting, explained Tyler. For example, closing down power stations does justice for the environment and air quality, affecting the health of the surrounding communities and region. But it won't do justice for employment.

2. Under-resourced newsrooms

Not only is this story technically complicated, but given daily newsroom pressures, journalists have to produce stories within tight deadlines, leaving room for errors and omissions in stories – the latter of which can leave a lot of damage.

“I also think a lot of the information that you need to write about is buried in these long documents,” said Burton. Journalists in most modern newsrooms probably aren't given the time and space to go through long documents and interrogate the information before having to file a story.

The lack of resources in newsrooms is leaving a gaping hole in the quality of reporting, said Julia Taylor, a researcher at Wits University. “Journalists also need to be paid enough so that they can go and spend time to understand what's going on,” she said.

“Newsrooms have the responsibility to be following current policy developments. And climate policy is changing quickly. But it's hard to prioritise when you have low budgets and low-paid staff. Ideally newsrooms should be getting more money in order to do that better.”

News diary demands trump outcomes-based reporting

Another criticism is that there is less intention by journalists to have outcomes-based reporting. This is because they're more focused on meeting

targets such as delivering a story for the daily news diary, said a government official, who spoke to me on condition of anonymity (referred to hereafter as G.O.).

“Everyone is just doing their job to comply with their contracts, not necessarily because they’re trying to make a difference or understand the responsibility that is bestowed upon them within this role.”

Climate change, a complex beat – can’t compete with general news items that can be delivered daily.

Difficulty accessing credible experts

Added to that is the struggle to find an independent expert who can weigh in on a complicated matter – within a news deadline, often for TV and radio shows. The time pressures and demands of a newsroom aren’t always conducive to gathering input from researchers.

“If they don't get someone who’s an actual expert or an academic or who has an independent view, then they end up with lobbyists, which also create a very skewed public discourse around energy,” said Burton.

Similarly, a policy advisor who did not want to be named, raised concerns that journalists are speaking to the “wrong people.” These are often self-proclaimed “energy experts” who are conveniently available to drop a quote for a story.

3. Misinformation about the transition

A huge frustration for Mulaisi – and an impediment to efforts of the PCC to facilitate the just transition – is reports in “reputable publications” that are “just not true.” This often comes in the form of quotes from influential members of society, including government officials, that are not fact-checked by journalists.

Mulaisi recognises the news value in running with rhetoric that catches headlines, but it’s important for journalists to juxtapose false or misleading statements with factual information and context.

That’s basic journalism practice.

Here it is fair to call out the harm of the daily newsroom churn, especially if it is compromising the quality of reporting. Maybe the better option for newsrooms is to hold off on publishing or broadcasting an incomplete story, especially when there is a lot at stake.

As Mulaisi puts it:

Our transition to a low-carbon [future] is a ‘make it or break it’ for the South African economy. And this is why we need more truth in the system as opposed to misinformation.

Blessing Manale, head of communications and outreach at the PCC, believes it is the responsibility of journalists to call out government officials for not knowing enough and spreading misinformation. Journalists hide behind “objective reporting” by simply providing contrasting views, when in fact they should be more explicit about someone being wrong.

“Call a dumbass, a dumbass,” he said. “Challenge them to read, to verify facts and to learn where they are less informed.”

Journalists should be adding truth to the system, and not contributing to the spread of misinformation. But that is becoming harder in newsrooms without specialised or beat reporters.

Disappearance of beats and specialised journalism

Having journalists on dedicated beats, meant they got to know the issues of a particular subject really well, said Nick Hedley, editor of news and analysis platform Progress Playbook. But the media industry has taken a knock globally and, in South Africa, beats have somewhat disappeared in most newsrooms.

“That means that there has been more opportunity for politicians to get disinformation to take hold in the media, because unfortunately people don’t understand their beats well enough. That’s not a reflection on journalists; it’s just a reflection on the [media] industry,” said Hedley.

The newsrooms that are getting communication on climate science and the just transition increasingly right are those with dedicated beat reporters, he added. His sentiments were echoed by G.O., who also raised concerns that the lack of specialised reporting is proving to be a stumbling block to safeguard against the spread of misinformation.¹⁰

“People don’t have beats anymore. Newsrooms are designed that everyone must do everything... There’s nothing substantial you can get from that.”

Lack of transparency by decisionmakers

Another contributing factor of the spread of misinformation is the lack of transparency by government communicators. “There is a lot of red tape in making information accessible to the media, particularly in what should not necessarily be sensitive areas,” said Manale.

Manale, who has held various communication roles within government, said there is a lot of bureaucracy when it comes to politicians agreeing what journalists should be told. This can be harmful to getting the correct information out in the public domain. “Information that is supposed to empower journalists is protected with tooth and nail.”

Funded disinformation and underfunded literacy

Manale also warned that there are peddlers of disinformation – especially those with commercial interests in the fossil fuel and nuclear industry. These peddlers have the funding to do real damage. It’s a fight simply too big for newsrooms to take on alone.

In contrast there isn’t enough funding available to build just transition literacy either. “There is a major decline of money for engagement and communication,” said Manale. There is a need to fund fellowships, and other training and capacity building exercises for journalists to improve their reporting on the just transition. Equally, there is a need for wider public stakeholder engagements to educate communities. “Everyone is looking for money to balance the story [about the just transition],” he said.

¹⁰ Misinformation refers to the spreading of false information unintentionally - often because the person spreading it is ill-informed. Disinformation is the intentional spread of false information, it is deliberately misleading.

A failed just transition or just misinformation?

In South Africa, a huge amount of misinformation was spread by politicians and at least one coal mining executive about the just transition project at Komati, a coal power station that was decommissioned in 2022.

The nation's public power utility, Eskom, put plans in place to repurpose Komati so that it could continue to operate with renewables like solar, wind and battery technologies, among other interventions.

But the decommissioning was [labelled a “disaster”](#) by the former Minister of Energy, who claimed a number of jobs at the power station were lost.¹¹ In reality, Eskom had its staff at Komati [redeployed to other power stations](#).¹² The people whose livelihoods were affected [were contract workers providing various services](#), and formal and informal traders around the power station.¹³

There was also an incorrect view that the Komati just transition programme was connected to the Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP) South Africa entered into with wealthy nations. Komati's just transition programme was not funded through the JETP but [by the World Bank](#).¹⁴

Claims about the “failed just transition”, however, were accepted and republished by major publications. The narrative quickly cemented, Hedley explained.

Context was also left out in storytelling. This includes the fact that the decommissioning started several years earlier, owing to multiple factors. Key among them being that the plant had reached the end of its operational life and [legally could not continue](#)

¹¹ Omarjee, L. (2023a) ‘COP28 | Mantashe: Komati decommissioning was a “disaster”’, *News24*, 7 December. Available at: https://www.news24.com/fin24/climate_future/news/cop28-mantashe-komati-decommissioning-was-a-disaster-20231207 (Accessed: 16 November 2024).

¹² Omarjee, L. (2023b) ‘Eskom hits back after Mantashe claims: No 'permanent' jobs lost in Komati decommissioning’, *News24*, 13 June. Available at: https://www.news24.com/fin24/climate_future/energy/eskom-hits-back-after-mantashe-claims-no-permanent-jobs-lost-in-komati-decommissioning-20230613 (Accessed: 16 November 2024).

¹³ Steyn, L. (2023) ‘Bracing for impact: all eyes on whether Komati's 'just' transition will flop or fly’, *News24*, 6 July 2023. Available at: <https://www.news24.com/fin24/economy/bracing-for-impact-all-eyes-on-whether-komatis-just-transition-will-flop-or-fly-20230706> (Accessed: 25 November 2024).

¹⁴ Omarjee, L. (2022) ‘Komati turnaround will cost close to R8bn, and the World Bank may foot most of the bill’, *News24*, 25 October. Available at: https://www.news24.com/fin24/climate_future/solutions/komati-turnaround-will-cost-close-to-r8bn-and-the-world-bank-may-foot-most-of-the-bill-20221025 (Accessed: 16 November 2024).

[functioning](#).¹⁵ It was also not economically viable to continue running the plant as a coal power station.

While regression in economic activity in the area was blamed on the transition at Komati, an often neglected fact is that the decline stems from a [nearby coal mine, Optimum](#) entering into business rescue in prior years.¹⁶

Another missing piece of the puzzle was the role of local and provincial government in ensuring the transition is just. A lot of blame was placed on Eskom when there were other players responsible for the continuation of service delivery and economic activity in the area.

While the justness of the process at Komati should rightfully be scrutinised, there are false narratives about it that are being used to make a case against a just transition. This example shows how media coverage of false narratives, without proper contextualisation, has been harmful.

4. Poor labelling and limited interrogation of the transition

As in the Komati case study above, journalists must critically assess what politicians and other influential people say about the just transition on public platforms. But we also have to examine whether the transitions underway are in fact just.

Taylor said she believes a lot of activity in the public and private spheres is mislabelled as “just transition”. “A lot of stakeholders are using [the term] ‘just transition’ to describe what is happening now. But we all know that’s not what’s happening... I would argue there is a lack of justice,” said Taylor.

The role of the journalist is to interrogate if there is justice in the energy transition. Taylor explained that there is a tendency to assume that renewable energy is good. This may be true for the reduction of carbon emissions, but not necessarily for everything, she said.

¹⁵ Leshoro, D. (2022) ‘Power is cheap, so we waste it – De Ruyter’, *City Press*, 9 October. Available at: <https://www.news24.com/citypress/business/power-is-cheap-so-we-waste-it-de-ruyter-20221007> (Accessed: 16 November 2024).

¹⁶ Steyn, L. (2024) ‘Ditched workers want jobs back as new owner takes over besieged Optimum Coal Mine’, 22 April, *News24*. Available at: <https://www.news24.com/fin24/companies/ditched-workers-want-jobs-back-as-new-owner-takes-over-besieged-optimum-coal-mine-20240422> (Accessed: 16 November 2024).

Journalists should be interrogating the justice delivered in terms of energy prices, income inequality, job quality and gender equality.

It's not just a question of whether it is just; there's also room to ask whether there's actually a transition underway. A true transition would involve something phasing out and then being replaced by something else. Given South Africa's energy security challenges, there's mainly been an expansion of energy supply, for example through the deployment of renewables. As Taylor pointed out, coal is being phased out over a period of 20 years. So, the transition is only really going to happen very slowly over time – and not overnight, which is what our reporting often implies.

“Unpacking these words that we often are just taking for granted and use quite freely, is important,” Taylor said.

The untold stories of the just transition

Taylor conducted 22 interviews in three small towns to [assess the effectiveness of the energy transition](#) in the Northern Cape, South Africa. She found that energy transition there has not resulted in an improvement of energy access, nor bolstered livelihoods as expected. In its current form, the energy transition will fall short of delivering justice for workers, communities and will not address gender inequality.¹⁷

Her 2023 research paper was not picked up by mainstream news publications in South Africa, even though it would have contributed to public understanding of a just transition, along with other emerging research.

There are more stories about the just transition that need to be told:

- The prevalence of energy poverty, driven by unaffordable electricity prices.
- Gender inequality in the energy sector's workforce.
- What we're getting right about the transition, and other progress points.
- Scrutinising the bodies tasked with implementing the just transition.
- Putting the spotlight on community involvement in decision making and benefit sharing.
- The moral injury experienced by social development practitioners who have to assist communities undergoing a transition.

¹⁷ Taylor, J. (2023) 'Just an energy transition? A gendered analysis of energy transition in Northern Cape, South Africa', *Agenda*, 37(3), pp. 76–89. doi:10.1080/10130950.2023.2240855.

- Evaluating claims about the role of nuclear, green hydrogen and gas technologies in the transition.
- The transition of other sectors in the South African economy.

This is by no means an exhaustive list. Journalists need to dig deeper.

Hedley agreed that there hasn't been much scrutiny of the just transition, nor the JETP with wealthy nations. From the outside looking in, nothing's been happening on the ground. There needs to be more focus on what's actually been happening – but this might require investigative journalism to breakthrough the gatekeeping of information by both the South African government and the IPG.

“If journalists had more resources and time, we could be following up more, or going to places and speaking to people on the ground and doing a bit more investigative work,” Hedley said. “But we don't have those resources. So maybe our investigative journalists need to actually get into the space. They haven't really yet.”

Taylor agreed there is a gap in investigative journalism when it comes to climate reporting. Not enough journalists with time to do more on-the-ground fact finding, means we can't scrutinise claims – one of the most important things a journalist does.

Taylor said partnerships between academia, civil society and journalists is important to overcome this gap. “We do need to highlight these things to reporters... I think it's a shared responsibility.”

How to fix it

Limited understanding of the just transition is leading to its oversimplification in reporting, coupled with a lack of scrutiny by reporters. Moreover, there's minimal (if any) contextualisation of a complex issue, owing to a lack of transparency, which makes it easy for misinformation to take hold.

This is happening because newsrooms are under-resourced, causing beats and specialised reporting to fall away. Journalists are forced to know a little about everything, and lack the scope to develop in-depth knowledge in niche topics.

In the face of this, they must contend with limited transparency, political misinformation, funded disinformation, and rampant use of jargon and spin.

All of this harms our reporting, damages public understanding, and makes effective implementation of the just transition more difficult.

But there is a way forward. It begins with better collaboration.

Background briefings or bust

It's not just the responsibility of journalists to make sure that the public have access to the truth about the just transition. "We all have to lift our weight," said Mulaisi. "I do think we do need to look at having a dedicated session with journalists, where we can just brief them on some especially contentious issues, and help differentiate between what's true and just not," she added.

Academics have a social obligation to help journalists understand complex issues too, said Burton. "It's something we've thought about a lot. We just don't know how to fund it."

The background briefing – not to be confused with a press conference – would create a space that brings together journalists, researchers, experts, and policymakers for a series of briefings on key topics around important transition milestones. These briefings are not about getting a story, but about getting the stories that follow right. For journalists, they should provide an opportunity to ask stupid questions more than once, to build key contacts with future sources, and gain technical knowledge.

It's an idea that demands an investment of time from all involved – one that will require the support of a newsroom editor to release their journalist.

Researchers are likely to support efforts that create a better understanding of their work. Failing to communicate to journalists means research might not get seen, or superficially and inaccurately reported. Tyler reckons one way to combat the resource issue on the academic side is to have research grants build in a component for media dissemination of the work, which includes the organisation of background briefings. “Every single public grant we get, we should include a journalists’ briefing. Once you get it funded, then you do it because you have to report to the funder and because you got the budget for it.”

Background briefings are also an opportunity for journalists to share their knowledge about the news cycle and audience interest, which will be helpful for researchers, policymakers and other development practitioners. It's not only about explaining to journalists what is important about the topic, but also for those in the just transition space to understand what is newsworthy – what people will read – and also what the limitations of a newsroom are.

A lone journalist could fairly easily check off all these boxes alone. So why arrange a time-intensive briefing that might include competitor outlets and has no guaranteed story in return?

The South African media landscape is diverse and robust – and we all need to get this story right. The second advantage of the briefing is that it allows top experts to speak to everyone at once, particularly in situations when individual requests cannot be tended to. Bringing together a variety of voices in a neutral space that it is not affiliated with any one stakeholder – government, independent researchers and civil society – will also ensure that narratives do not get preference over the truth.

Briefings should guarantee a transfer of high-quality expertise from a diverse range of qualified experts – not just spin from public officials. The point of this exercise is create a space for exchange: one where all journalists can efficiently improve their understanding of complex research and policy, and where scientists and policymakers can begin to understand what our audiences need and want to know about the transition.

Keep the conversations going with a network

To make background briefings feasible, there needs to be a network of South African journalists working together toward a common goal: improving the quality of their reporting in the public interest.

Journalists have, in the past, set up associations with the purpose of deepening understanding and addressing challenges they face within their beats, or within the greater media landscape. [The Oxford Climate Journalism Network](#) (OCJN), a programme of RISJ, is one such example where journalists and editors from newsrooms around the world have come together to exchange insights to improve climate reporting across a range of beats.¹⁸ This is based on the understanding that the climate crisis cuts across all sectors of society and at some point, every journalist will have to tell a climate story.

I was part of the second cohort of the programme and grew in my understanding of climate science through various meetings with experts made accessible to journalists through the network.

Following their participation in the OCJN's second cohort, environmental reporters Emmanuel Ameyaw and Abdullah Afedzi set up a local chapter in Ghana. "We thought that it was very important that we replicate something like that at the local level," said Afedzi. There was "strong interest" among Ghanaian journalists to learn more and report about a technical beat like climate change. Newsrooms in Ghana also struggle with a lack of beats or specialised reporting, warranting a need for training and capacity building among journalists, he explained.

Afedzi and Ameyaw said the network has helped journalists – particularly younger journalists – by sharing contacts with trusted experts. The network has also drawn on the expertise of organisations such as the University of Ghana and the Environmental Protection Agency.

Fellowship and training opportunities are shared with journalists, and they hosted a climate reporting workshop of their own which was attended by 45 journalists. They

¹⁸ Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (2022). *Oxford Climate Journalism Network*. Available at: <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/oxford-climate-journalism-network> (Accessed: 26 November 2024).

have given input on stories, provided mentorship and guided journalists writing grant proposals to raise funding for stories.

Since being launched in February 2023, there are now more than 150 members who meet virtually. For the most part, Afedzi and Ameyaw have relied on their own resources to pull it all together. They will need additional funding to scale, because the need is massive. “The survival of climate journalism in Africa, particularly, would be very much hinged on creating local networks,” said Ameyaw.

“If we want to boost the climate agenda in our storytelling, we need to really focus on collaboration. [Through] networks like this – peer-to-peer learning and supporting each other – because our entire existence as humans is heavily linked to climate change.”

Representative voices and rethinking sources

Journalists need to work on building relationships with professionals involved in the just transition as a means to fact check and verify information. But they shouldn't overlook another set of experts.

These are the people living in communities where the just transition matters most. “I think it's important to bring in different voices, particularly because of the focus on justice. We then need to also practice raising the voices that have been marginalised,” said Taylor.

We need to “rethink” who the experts are, Taylor said, and bring in different perspectives. For example, a journalist can do a report on deadly temperatures and rely on input from a climate scientist. But farmers feeling the impact of heatwaves also provide a credible perspective to the story. “I think it would be useful to try and incorporate those different voices,” said Taylor. This will require that newsrooms invest time and money to get journalists to those communities.

G.O. said there is a simpler way to get this done: attending public stakeholder engagements on the just transition, and other climate policies. “[Journalists] would definitely have better stories because at those stakeholder engagements nobody's holding anything back... You would get to know better stakeholders instead of [only] relying on scientists at universities and officials,” G.O. said.

Stakeholder engagements can last for a few days: a lot of time for a newsroom to dedicate. But if the long-term gain is diversified sources that enrich reporting about the just transition, it may be a price worth paying.

It also matters who is telling the story: we should see the voices of more young journalists on this topic. These generations will be inheriting a country that is shaped by the just transition, so it makes sense for them to be telling stories from their perspectives, Mulaisi argued.

More representative voices, including reports in local languages and disseminated in community papers and radio, will make the topic more relevant to the audiences that need to be reached.

Several interviewees raised concerns about the “same white men” being quoted as experts on the just transition, when these “experts” are likely disconnected from communities where the transition is taking place. Women and people of colour who are doing hard work and probably know more about the topic, are being neglected in news coverage.

But this is not something you can pin on journalists alone. A policy advisor pointed out that a lot of young, black voices are holding back from speaking up, to avoid a target on their backs or limiting their careers. “There’s a whole lot of wisdom, insight, perspective and solutions we’re not accessing as a result of people being reluctant, and somewhat afraid to speak up.”

Media training and other forms of capacity building for professionals in these spaces also has to be addressed – that’s out of the hands of newsrooms.

Context is everything

Complex issues like the just transition and climate change require careful storytelling that won’t necessarily fit with the demands of traditional daily newsroom output. [A 2022 paper](#) about new ways of online storytelling points to providing more contextualising content, like explainers.¹⁹ However mainstream

¹⁹ Kulkarni, S., Thomas, R., Komorowski, M., & Lewis, J. (2022). Innovating Online Journalism: New Ways of Storytelling. *Journalism Practice*, 17(9), 1845–1863.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2021.2020675>

news coverage prioritises breaking or “moving” stories, and often neglects context, analysis and understanding, the authors said.

Journalists can’t afford to skip the context when reporting about the just transition, a topic that is evolving in its complexity. There are so many pieces in the puzzle of the transition that will be affected – and journalists haven’t begun to tell stories about them. On the labour front, for example, apart from permanent workers at coal power stations, we need to grasp the stories of contractual workers, transport and logistical service providers, informal traders around power stations, to name a few.

There’s a whole system view that journalists are not necessarily seeing. At the moment, journalists are only reporting on the parts they can see, said a policy advisor. “Just transition is creating a new world, transforming entire systems, how we consume, how we demand energy, how we access energy, how we grow our food, access food... All kinds of things are changing. I don’t know that journalists have gotten that,” said G.O..

Short-form reporting is doing the just transition a disservice.

Finally: newsrooms require context, too. Sub-editors and line editors should not be excluded from climate and just transition training, and everyone in the newsroom should have access to internal explainer documents that build their scientific literacy and prevent bad edits or poor headlines.

Ideally these documents should be updated when new information comes to light – and can ensure there is at least a base-level of understanding of the just transition throughout the newsroom.

Conclusion

There are a number of challenges that compromise the quality of reporting about the just transition. If journalists collaborate through a network to exchange ideas and pool resources in spaces like background briefings, they may gain a system view of the just transition and not just parts of it.

A South African Just Journalism (SAJJ) network would allow journalists a means to proactively engage with researchers, policy advisors and decision-makers, as well as community representatives and other stakeholders.

Outside of SAJJ, journalists can improve their storytelling about the just transition by including more representative voices, context, calling out misinformation and putting the investigative spotlight on aspects that have been under reported.

Newsrooms also need to be equipped to understand the intricacies of a just transition and editors should be encouraged to release their reporters to participate in training sessions and background briefings that will be invaluable to their storytelling.

All of this may require funding to coordinate. How effectively that can be done is a subject for more research.

I have been unable to test the effectiveness of hosting background briefings on the just transition. But setting up something like SAJJ would be a step towards the possible future coordination of these briefings, and would also build relationships between journalists, professionals and other stakeholders involved.

If you are a journalist, scientist or policymaker and you'd like to get involved in building understanding about the just transition, I'd love to hear from you. You can reach me on [this email address](#).

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