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Author(s): Kortetmäki, T.

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6. What is (not) the point of just transition in food systems?

T. Kortetmäki

Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy, University of Jyväskylä, P.O. Box 35, 40014 Jyväskylä, Finland; teea.kortetmaki@jyu.fi

Abstract

Food systems are confronted with a low-carbon transition challenge. The need for significant emission reductions in industrial food systems implies significant systemic transformations in food production, processing, and consumption. The wide-reaching impacts of such transformations have evoked public discussion and academic research on just transition in food systems. The undisputable legitimacy of the idea of just transition makes it an attractive concept for all food system actors who might be affected by low-carbon transition policies in direct and indirect ways. Some of the claims that are being made are warranted claims for justice, some merely defend the achieved privileges and benefits. In addition, existing food injustices have evoked suggestions that just transition must be about making the food system overall just and sustainable. All these calls complexify low-carbon transition. How to make sense of these partly conflicting claims for justice and just transition in food systems?

Keywords: justice, climate mitigation, food system transformations, trade-offs

Introduction

The importance and urgency of climate change mitigation and adaptation reside at the heart of any approach to climate justice. Vulnerable communities, who have had very little to do with causing climate change, will face many of the climate change driven harms first or in the most severe forms. They are also often less capable of adapting to climate change because they benefitted so little from the economic growth that increased the wealth and adaptive resources of the high-emitting communities. Polluters gained a double benefit. Thus, mitigating climate change and supporting the less resourced communities in adaptation are high-priority tasks in justice agendas. Moreover, unless mitigation action is taken, climate change proceeds all the time aggravating climate injustices. The pressure for urgent and effective mitigation concerns food systems very much because the IPCC estimates food system activities to contribute 21-37% to human-caused emissions. It means that sufficient overall global emission reductions will require significant actions in food systems, especially in the industrialized countries.

The above characterization evokes ‘the first call’ for justice regarding climate change. Now, this call – due to its transformative impacts on societal activities in the high-emitting countries – has become increasingly equipped with ‘the secondary call’: the call for *just transition*, making the low-carbon transition processes just. Just transition claims originate from labour environmentalism but have widened to cover the socio-economic impacts of decarbonisation, first for energy transitions (e.g. Morena *et al.*, 2020), and more recently within food system transitions as well (Kaljonen *et al.*, 2021; Tribaldos and Kortetmäki, 2022). The concept of just transition has been adopted so quickly into the sustainability transition studies and political agendas that more theoretical and philosophical takes on the matter have remained in margin. This is unfortunate, since the concept is gaining momentum and attracting numerous competing interpretations. Promoting just transition is impossible if there is no clarified understanding of what it actually means and how to make sense of, and choose between, the competing demands. In the worst case, the messy battlefield for just transition may water down mitigation, rendering the low-carbon transition into non-transition.

Food issues pose some of the most demanding questions for conceptualizing just transition: unlike energy systems, where changing the production mode rarely influences end user experiences, food system transformations have much more complex and visible outcomes on our plates. Various ways of producing, preparing, serving, and eating food are linked not only to human needs and health but also to livelihoods, social and cultural traditions and other practices. What we eat, where and how and with whom, and what happens in supply chains before the food reaches our plates, influence humans and their well-being in numerous ways. What can food system oriented ethics, then, say about the relationship between the two calls for justice – one made for urgent and strong climate action also in food systems, another one urging that climate actions themselves must be just to all parties?

To address this question, I first map out concerns that have been raised in food system transitions literature and public discussions regarding just low-carbon transition processes in food systems. After that, I will construct an ethics-based set of arguments to propose what can and what cannot be the point of just transition, in relation to the call for effective climate mitigation and climate justice. Last, I reflect upon issues that will need further theoretical and/or empirical clarification, and conclude with a short sum-up.

Steaks at stake

Philosophical takes on justice and equality have shown that reasoning with the help of imaginary examples can be useful but also take reasoning to side-tracks where the point of equality is forgotten (Anderson, 1999). If justice theorizing is to have relevance in the world, it should advance seeing and addressing the existing forms of oppression and evaluating which actions make societies more or less just. Thus, instead of relying on imaginary thought experiments, I begin by roughly mapping the territory of the claims for just transition for ethicists to explore. This mapping is not exhaustive but rather demonstrates the diversity of stakes that have been raised as potentially relevant with relation to the justice aspects of food system transitions (Kaljonen *et al.*, 2021; Tribaldos and Kortetmäki, 2022).

Table 1. Concerns for just transition in food systems (a rough mapping of diverse issues).

A concern that transition may impact	Clarifying remarks
Injustices related to the vital aspects of food security	Related to food as a biological need for a healthy and active life
Injustices related to the non-vital aspects of food security	Cultural appropriateness of food, some non-vital nutritional issues
Disproportionate burdens imposed by dietary transition policies	Depends on the present diet and capacities to alter one's diet in satisfactory ways
Job / livelihood losses	E.g. discontinuation of farming because of inability to transform production to meet the new requirements
Disproportionate sharing of economic benefits and burdens from transition	E.g. whether climate action imposes costs that are unbearable for small entrepreneurs
Disproportionate sharing of environmental benefits and burdens from transition	Externalized environmental impacts without adequate compensation
Environmental / ecological quality harms	Degraded soil, water, or air quality; biodiversity
Injustice to animals	Quantifying instrumentalization; decreased welfare (livestock → poultry transition)
Procedural injustices in decision-making	Non-inclusive political processes
Socio-cultural disrespect / ignorance of particular groups or views (justice as misrecognition)	Socio-cultural domination of certain discourses and the devaluation of others

Section 1

It is easy to see that the idea of ‘just transition’ brings in numerous claims and (often competing) ideas about what just transition must cover to be just. This creates a need to clarify the aims and meaning of just transition. As a complex normative question that concerns resolving the real-world problems, this is a task of applied ethics.

What is the point of transition?

Answering to what just transition must accomplish or avoid, we must distinguish two questions: the point of the transition itself, and the point of making that transition just. The latter question also invites further considerations about the nature of justice in this specific context. I will now address these two questions.

- §1. For the purposes of conceptual cohesion with the established literature, I understand just transition as denoting justice in the context of low-carbon transition processes. (This does not mean that other environmental impacts would not be important.)
- §2. The need for low-carbon transition is grounded on existential concerns. If sufficient climate change mitigation fails, avoiding dangerous climate change is (according to the best available knowledge) very likely unavoidable. The only exception for the avoidability may be the utilization of large-scale solar radiation management, which poses other existential risks that cannot be fully managed or reversed if realized. Thus, it can be assumed that successful transition as effective and rapid reduction of GHG emissions is necessary for avoiding dangerous climate change.
- §3a. Non-transition, insufficient climate change mitigation, would threaten a range of human rights (e.g. right to life, water and sanitation, food, health, and self-determination) (OHCHR).
- §3b. Non-transition would also constitute significant food injustices by aggravating problems related to food availability and supply stability; food safety; utilization (nutritional values of heat-sensitive crops); and by unequalizing the access to food (due to the rising food prices) and food system related livelihood opportunities.
- §4. Thus, non-transition constitutes the greatest climate injustice and – likely – the most fundamental food injustices as well, when longer timescales are considered.
- §5. Because food system activities constitute a significant share of GHG emissions, failure in food system emission reductions could alone prevent avoiding non-transition in overall terms.
- §6. Thus, low-carbon transition in food systems is required to avoid the greatest climate injustice (overall non-transition). It is the task of empirical research to determine where the critical threshold between transition and non-transition is.

What cannot be the point of just transition?

The above said has implications on what cannot or should not be the point of just transition.

- §1. Because non-transition likely represents the greatest possible injustices, the point of ‘just transition’ cannot be any idea that involves watering down the likelihood of achieving transition as sufficient emission mitigation needed to avoid dangerous climate change. This also concerns the most fundamental food justice issues related to food security.
- §2. Thus, the urgency and importance of transition creates a hierarchy between the objectives, transition itself and making the transition processes just (or more just).
- §3. Consequently, those claims for justice in transition processes that may undermine achieving transition in the first place are unwarranted: they are calling for short-term alleviation of lesser injustices at the cost of worsening greater injustices.

Skipping the 'avoid' from avoid-mitigate-compensate hierarchies

Because non-transition constitutes the greatest injustice to the greatest number of humans and nonhumans in the long term by very likely leading to dangerous climate change, there is a hierarchy between the objectives: activities that aim to make the low-carbon transition in food systems just (or more just) cannot undermine achieving sufficient emission reductions in a sufficiently short time span.

This implies that just transition does not adhere to the 'mitigation hierarchy' (avoid-mitigate-compensate) that has become established with relation to GHG emissions and environmental harms. The reason is that adhering to such hierarchy could either delay action and/or direct attention in 'just', yet ineffective, mitigation measures, watering down the aim to achieve sufficient emission reductions in the first place. A simplified example would be the suggestion to rely only on food education, grassroots citizen initiatives, and food choice nudging to promote food system transitions. (This is not to say that such policies could not play a *part* in transition policy sets.) Such measures have been very modest in effectiveness so relying on them will cause greater food injustices in the long run. If they, unexpectedly, turned out suddenly much more efficient than before, a rapid consumption-driven low-carbon transition without public governance could also generate numerous other food injustices to farmers and other food system actors (Kortetmäki, 2019). Thus, the goal of just transition requires governing the transition. Because achieving sufficient mitigation is known to be very demanding in food systems anyway, considerations about justice in that process must not assume that avoiding all unjust impacts or inequalities would be possible while meeting mitigation demands. Acknowledging that harm cannot be fully avoided and agreeing about appropriate compensation for it might be the least unjust way to transform food systems.

Points that need clarification

The reasoning above suggests certain negative boundary conditions by stating what just transition cannot be about. What can be said, and on what basis, on those claims for justice in transition processes which do not undermine the prospects for achieving transition in the first place? I identify that answering this question will call for clarifying at least four points.

- §1. Type. Determination of what kinds of harms can constitute injustices in food system transition, as distinguished from other concerns that are not about justice but about food ethics and values more generally. This work has been carried out to a relatively comprehensive extent (Tribaldos and Kortetmäki, 2022).
- §2a. Threshold. Determination of the magnitude where certain type of harm becomes unjust. Thresholds for food system related harms, while partly hinted in the above mentioned set of just transition criteria, have not (to my knowledge) been addressed in detail anywhere.
- §2b. Counterfactual reference point. Determination of the point of comparison against which a transition-induced harm can be argued as unjust. For example, if 'business as usual' anyway decreases farms' profitability by 20% over the next decade, is the transition unjust if climate policies will decrease their profitability by 10%? One of the philosophically challenging questions is to determine when and how much these counterfactual reference points matter.
- §3a. Overall threshold. What and how much must a transition do to be just? This also relates to asking whether 'just transition' should be understood as denoting an ideal (unachievable) benchmark to assess whether actual transitions are more or less just, or whether just transition should denote a non-ideal conception of minimum justice that should be achieved.

Section 1

Types and thresholds

It is important to distinguish claims that qualify as warranted concerns of justice from those that defend other interests or achieved privileges upheld by the present, unsustainable and unjust food systems. A preliminary distinction has been proposed for food system transitions (Tribaldos and Kortetmäki, 2022). The central tenet is that since justice is about equality, claims for justice should be generalizable for all actors in a similar position. From this viewpoint, claims concerning human rights and the satisfaction of basic needs – including the vital aspects of food security – qualify as high-priority claims for justice (meaning that they win in the cases of conflicting claims). The ‘type of harm’ question is also relevant for the socio-cultural disputes (Kaljonen *et al.*, 2021), reflected in ‘bean vs beef’ debates that are frequent in just transition discussions. The idea of equality implies that practices that could be upheld only by privileged groups cannot be claimed to merit protection in the name of justice. The present Western levels of meat consumption exemplify such a practice: in any sufficient mitigation scenario, the dominant Western diets could be upheld only by a small privileged minority. There is no related right meriting protection in the name of just transition, and the cultural appropriateness aspect of food security will raise numerous questions that need ethical clarification in the context of sustainability transitions.

Many burdens (e.g. economic costs) become unjust only after a certain threshold. A common way to determine a justice-related threshold for evaluating such burdens focuses on whether burdens impact on the equal opportunity of individuals to achieve well-being, defined as the possibility to satisfy basic needs (Kortetmäki and Järvelä, 2021). This is akin to the minimum social justice approaches where justice is defined in terms of its minimum requirements. Climate justice literature has asked in this respect: Does the impact X cause any individuals or groups to fall below the threshold of harm? (Wallimann-Helmer *et al.*, 2018). This is a complex question in practice though. It is possible that climate food policies drop some individuals below the threshold of harm by making some foods unaffordable to low-income groups. However, such harm can be compensated by social support measures that bring the impacted individuals above the threshold. In that case, climate policies for food do not create new injustices in overall terms; the transition remains just due to supporting social policy.

The upshot: what is the point of just transition?

Some more general concluding remarks are at place. There is no just transition if there is no transition. The importance of securing effective and rapid emission reductions sets the limits to justice considerations in just transition: striving for just transition must not undermine transition itself. Thinking about food related matters amplifies this remark. Thus, the point of just transition is to find the way in which sufficient transition (GHG emission reductions to avoid dangerous climate change) can be made more just. One could say that the point is to realize the transition ‘as justly as possible’. Some argue, in this spirit, that the transition should be made an all-encompassing just transformation process that makes food systems overall just and sustainable. I acknowledge the importance of numerous non-climatic issues yet my conviction is that the time runs out for transition if all concerns are brought on the same table. Low-carbon transition is, in its urgency, a sort of ‘meta-goal’ for other justice claims: if dangerous climate change is not avoided, many other claims for justice will be meaningless in the future.

Transition aims at protecting the fundamental, vital human interests. It is unfair to demand anyone to sacrifice vital interests for the sake of others being able to avoid sacrificing their trivial interests (Shue, 2014). This sets the basic order for these matters. To determine what this means concretely is a matter of interdisciplinary work. Empirical scientists can identify actions that sufficiently reduce food system emissions. Social scientists help in understanding the societal feasibility of such options, given the material, economic and structural constraints and path dependencies that limit quickly realizable

actions. This information comprises the 'menu' of the different ways to reduce food system emissions and philosophers can help in evaluating which one of these ways is the most just.

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