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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Framing just transition: The case of sustainable food system transition in Finland

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## Abstract

Justice in sustainability transitions requires states to design transition policies that ‘leave no-one behind’. Emphasising fairness, however, may entail slowing or scaling down the impetus of sustainability transition. To examine this risk empirically, we analysed how stakeholders frame justice in deliberating policy measures needed to support just transition in agricultural land use and dietary changes, the cornerstones of building healthier and climate friendlier food systems in Finland. The results show that justice frames focus on the potential impacts of transition, largely ignore global scale, and prioritise social justice claims at the cost of environmental ambition. To create just and environmentally effective policies, policymakers need to consider justice at the level of policy-mixes combining environmental and social policies. Furthermore, they need to acknowledge systemic injustices present in existing systems while striving towards just transition.

## KEYWORDS

environmental policy, food system, frame analysis, just transition, radical transformations, sustainability transitions

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Just transition is a buzzword in climate and environmental policymaking, broadly referring to achieving a socially just sustainability transition leaving no one behind as societies move towards lower-carbon production and consumption practices (European Commission, 2019; Williams & Doyon 2019). A just transition recognises that achieving timely reductions in climate emissions inevitably results in losses to be accounted for and prevented, alleviated, or compensated, when severe enough. Just transition is a worthy objective of sustainability transitions, yet diverse interpretations and related utilisation in political arenas entail a risk of slowing or watering down the transition because the rhetoric of justice attracts so many claims from various stakeholders, including privileged groups. Thus, it is important to better understand the political nature of the concept

and examine its implications for environmental policymaking (Healy & Barry, 2017; Jenkins et al., 2020).

The need for just transition reflects the problems of democratic governance in responding to environmental challenges (Fischer, 2017). Creating legitimate and simultaneously effective climate policies challenges governments struggling to please the electorate. By incorporating justice elements into policies, governments may succeed in advancing more ambitious climate targets (cf. Cha, 2020). However, views are highly ambiguous and diverse on what justice is about, whom it concerns and on what scale. Certain interpretations of justice in the policy contexts may even lead to downplaying the climate targets themselves (Fischer et al., 2023; Gürtler et al., 2021; Heffron & McCauley, 2022). Such is the double-edged sword of the idea and political implementation of just transition. On the one hand, the idea of just transition can strengthen the legitimacy of climate policies and

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facilitate creating timely and more socially attuned climate policies. On the other, certain interpretations of just transition can be utilised to maintain the status quo and the privileges provided by current societal structures.

This means that just transition can help develop sustainability policies able to steer broad structural reforms to mend the root causes of environmental degradation tied to global wealth inequalities, growth-orientation in economies, and economic power (Barry, 2021; Ciplet, 2022; Newell & Mulvaney, 2013). Thus, just transition may achieve strong sustainability and sustainability transformation (Bonnendahl et al., 2022; Eckersley, 2021; Stevis & Felli, 2020). However, the notion of just transition may merge smoothly with green growth by combining technological progress with harm-alleviating (social-democratic) state policies (Clarke & Lipsig-Mummé, 2020). Consequently, the scope of transition as realised by actual policies may end up being closer to weak sustainability and ecological modernisation than broader transformation capable of addressing structural inequalities underlying the environmental crisis (Eckersley, 2021; Galgóczi, 2020; Harrahill & Douglas, 2019). Going beyond transition, arguments appealing to just transition may even be used to further the interests of privileged groups, with the side effect of suppressing transition (Fischer et al., 2023).

The different interpretations of justice can yield vastly different policy and justice outcomes (Wood & Roelich, 2020). Understanding the impact of the different interpretations on environmental policy-making and on achieving sustainability transformation necessitates the empirical examination of different interpretations and their context-specific implications to policymaking. Research on just transition related frames, discourses and narratives has been energy- and technology-oriented (e.g., Kalt, 2021; Mayer, 2018; Normann & Tellmann, 2021; Weller, 2019). In this article, we examine justice framings in the less studied context of food system transitions, also going beyond the focus on workers and employment effects. Our analysis focuses on Finland, where reducing emissions from agricultural peatlands and adopting plant-based diets are the most promising pathways for greenhouse gas emission reductions yet require major changes in current production and consumption practices (Lehtonen et al., 2022). We ask how food system stakeholders frame their justice claims in this context and what these claims imply for sustainability transitions and environmental policymaking. To support our analysis, we draw on current just transitions research to create a novel analytical framework of no/weak/strong sustainability and transformative potential of just transitions. Our results confirm the risk of no or weak sustainability, where justice framings may delay the transition and dismissal of strong structural reforms.

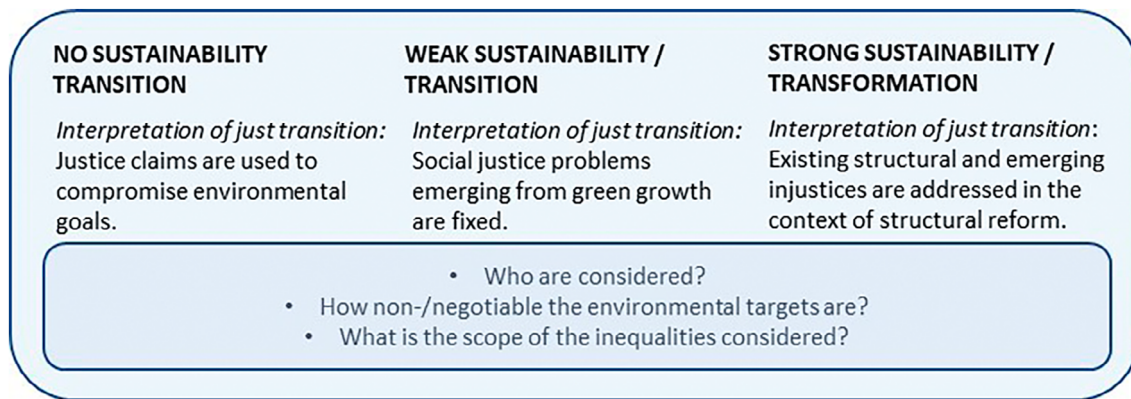
## 2 | JUST TRANSITION AND ENVIRONMENTAL POLICYMAKING

We understand just transition following the common relational, three-dimensional conceptualisation based on environmental justice scholarship (Schlosberg, 2013; Tribaldos & Kortetmäki, 2022; Williams &

Doyon, 2019) and the work of Nancy Fraser (2010) comprising distributional, procedural and recognition justice. They refer respectively to the distribution of benefits and burdens, fair decision-making and participation opportunities, and respect for socio-cultural diversity, correspondingly. The dimensions are interlinked: for example, misrecognition through institutionalised value hierarchies reproduces oppressive patterns across socio-cultural, ethnic, or other 'differentiating' attributes that then serve political exclusion and the dismissal of inequalities suffered by misrecognised groups (Fraser, 2010). While the dimensions point out focal matters related to justice, the relational view enables a plurivocal understanding of justice (Coulson & Milbourne, 2021; Kaljonen et al., 2021) regarding the contents of these matters, measures for justice, and thresholds for what justice as equality is understood to require. This invariably relates justice at least partially, to stakeholders' contextual understanding of justice.

Evidently, stakeholders can have different understandings on what is just. To justify their perspective, they select and emphasise some aspects of reality, thereby *framing* their issue in a certain manner (Entman, 1993; Rein & Schön, 1996) compatible with their worldviews and interests. Frames also contain a moral element used to establish why a particular solution is the right thing to do, and policy frames include a suggestion for how to resolve the issue (Entman, 1993). Frames create particularised understandings of a situation and any issue can evoke many, partially conflicting and competing, frames. The frames of the most powerful actors usually predominate, creating the 'normal' way an issue is understood. Dominant frames set the policy agenda limiting the range of potential actions and outcomes. Thus, framing is also exercise of power (Snow et al., 2014) and can be used to override the perspectives of groups with fewer participatory resources (e.g., Schlosberg, 2013).

The framing of just transition influences the understanding of what policies should do about it. Thus, frames influence the degree of transition the policies strive for in relation to weak and strong sustainability (Neumeyer, 2003). Weak sustainability maintains the possibility to solve environmental crisis within the current economic structures by creating win-win solutions accommodating economic and environmental sustainability. Strong sustainability demands more radical change: transforming current production and consumption systems. In transitions studies a similar distinction has been proposed between sustainability transitions and transformations (Eckersley, 2021; Stirling, 2015). We argue here that different framings of just transition can be placed on a similar continuum, with the addition of 'no sustainability transition' at the opposite extremity to strong sustainability transformation (Figure 1). While the core reasons behind no-transition, transition or transformation are related to the growth- and profit- orientation of the economic system, and the power-relations related inertia about changing them (Béné, 2022; Clapp et al., 2018; Eckersley, 2021; Hatzisavvidou, 2020), the continuum shows how justice-related argumentation can be used to support different kinds of transitions. The key questions for understanding the continuum are: (1) who are considered in the context of justice, (2) how non-/negotiable the environmental targets are, and (3) what is the scope of the inequalities considered. Below we address each of these



**FIGURE 1** The key aspects of just transition framings in relation to transition.

points and then use the frame analysis in the context of Finnish food system to test the framework.

The understanding of whom the just transition involves is rooted in the Labour Union origins of the just transition concept (Stevis & Felli, 2020). Policy initiatives tend to limit justice to concern only the workers affected (Krawchenko & Gordon, 2021). In coal transitions, this may mean focusing on saving jobs and compensating the impacts of transition to worker groups benefitting from coal mining (Gürtler & Herberg, 2021; LaBelle et al., 2023; Schwartzman 2021). The sole focus on workers and jobs frames just transition as a ‘jobs vs. environment’ issue (Evans & Phelan, 2016; Kalt, 2021), where emphases may fluctuate between social and ecological goals (Snell, 2018). An extreme emphasis on jobs and income may lead to rejecting the idea of just transition: workers see no hope for justice in the coal transition because they cannot maintain the high income provided by their current jobs (Cha, 2020). Job-focused framings may also lead to policies supporting transition within fossil fuels, ‘greening’ the production instead of abandoning fossil fuels (Cha, 2020; Normann & Tellmann, 2021). The degree to which the sustainability transition itself is amenable to job and income-related justice framings matters (Gürtler et al., 2021). The weak sustainability transition sees justice as achievable by compromising on environmental ambition.

Just transition frames commonly compare the current situation to the losses the envisioned change brings about. Past inequalities from coal production or previous changes therein, such as privatisation, are considered less (Gürtler & Herberg, 2021; Weller, 2019). A focus on the present can, however, lead to exacerbation of previous inequalities suffered by others in the local community (Schwartzman, 2021). Gürtler and Herberg (2021) highlight the need to better account for the historical and cultural context in the coal regions to avoid overemphasis on claims emerging from incumbent privileged positions framing justice to concern a very small group of people. Broadening the scope to include past inequalities in addition to the transition-originating inequalities could strengthen sustainability transition and the environmental outcomes achieved (see also Ciple, 2022).

Whereas worker-focused just transition often considers only a few perspectives related to work and production, broader attention makes citizens and consumers visible in transition by addressing, for

example, access to energy and energy production impacts on local communities (Fuller & McCauley, 2016; Newell & Mulvaney, 2013). Similarly, food justice raises right to food and good nutrition as focal additions (Kaljonen et al., 2021; Maughan et al., 2020), expanding the subjects considered (Moragues-Faus, 2017). According to Clapp et al. (2018), current global food injustices make structural reforms necessary for advancing transformation. These extensions imply potential to create more radical and just transformations. Examples of more structural changes are emerging. Regarding restorative justice, transition policy thinking has created openings towards novel policy mixes, which expedite innovations and cater for the different interests and demands of different actors (Sanz-Hernández et al., 2020), eventually pushing towards more structural change.

In this study, we take the different sustainabilities (Figure 1) as our starting point and consider how they play out in the context of just food system transition related framings. Rather than focusing on workers, we contemplate justice from a systemic perspective and analyse how food system actors frame justice in the context of transition policies in Finland. We consider the implications of this for environmental policymaking in the context of just transition.

### 3 | THE FINNISH CASE STUDY

To explore how justice is framed in food system transition in Finland and to develop policies to support just transition, we organised a series of policy dialogue workshops and focus groups for food system actors. When we started the policy dialogue process, the concept of just transition was relatively new in Finland and had not been considered in the context of food system. The discussions in policy dialogue, hence, offer an ample opportunity to examine how the introduction of justice thinking is adopted by food system stakeholders and what kinds of policies they consider important for enabling just transition. While the analysis of the policy dialogue discussions does not focus on actual ongoing policy processes, it indicates how food system stakeholders understand and apply the idea of just transition with implications for actual policy processes in Finland, and elsewhere.

### 3.1 | Peatlands and diets

The key climate change mitigation areas debated in the policy dialogue workshops involved the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions from cultivated peatlands, shifting towards more plant-based diets, and technological innovation-oriented changes in agriculture and food industries (Kaljonen et al. 2022). These so-called transition pathways were designed by an interdisciplinary research group and intended to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from the Finnish food systems, while ensuring food security. In this article, we concentrate on carbon emission reductions from peatlands and dietary change because they have the greatest potential for reducing emissions (Kaljonen et al. 2022) and are both subjects of intense political debate and discussion in Finland. The other two pathways concentrating on technological innovations are excluded from the analysis since they were more speculative regarding the implied changes and emission reduction potential.

More than half of the agricultural greenhouse gas emissions in Finland originate from cultivated peatlands encompassing only 10 per cent of the cultivated land (Kekkonen et al., 2019). These peatlands are mostly in the western and northern parts of Finland, where intensive livestock production is also concentrated. Peatlands are mostly used to produce fodder for livestock, but some are also used for grain production. The need to continue and even expand the cultivation of peatlands is related to livestock fodder production and manure management (Huttunen, 2015). To reduce emissions from the peatlands, the key is to exclude peatlands from agricultural production and restore their water level to halt the degradation of peat (Kekkonen et al., 2019). Smaller emission reductions can be obtained by shifting from annual to perennial crops, by leaving the fields as set-aside areas, by forestation or by wet grassland cultivation (ibid.). None of these solutions is simple, entailing considerable challenges as regards justice. Some farms only have access to peatlands, and they may have invested heavily in cattle farming encouraged by the current agricultural policies (Puupponen et al., 2022). Regulating peatland use will directly affect farmers (Lehtonen et al., 2022).

Farmers are also affected by the shift towards more plant-based diets (Huan-Niemi et al., 2020) that is a necessary constituent of low-carbon transitions in industrial food systems (Springmann et al., 2018). As elsewhere in Europe, meat and dairy are prominent in the Finnish diets (Valsta et al., 2022) and even halving meat consumption would have significant emission reduction potential (Huan-Niemi et al., 2020). Dietary shift will require significant changes in supply chains and cultivated crops, consequently affecting the employment and work within agriculture and food industry (Kaljonen et al., 2021). The shift will also impact consumers by changing dietary habits that are interlinked with socio-cultural valuations, conceptions of eating well, and the capacities of individuals to change their practices while ensuring good nutrition (Kaljonen et al., 2021). Significant gender disparities in consumption of and attitudes to red and processed meat (Sares-Jäske et al., 2022) imply that dietary shifts will affect different consumer groups very differently.

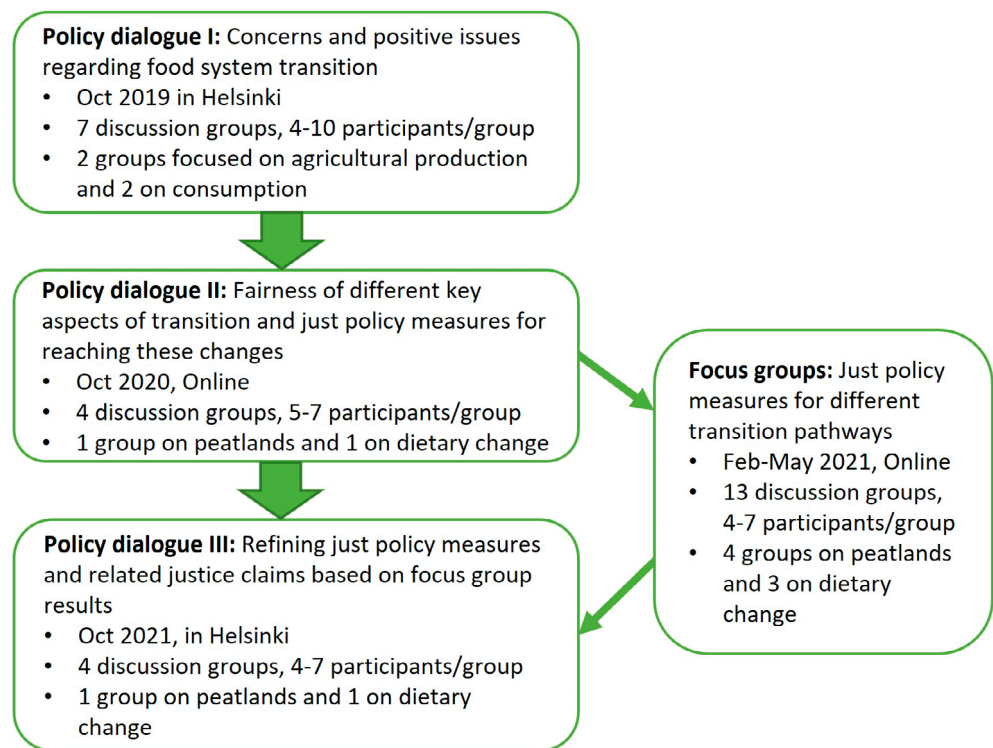
### 3.2 | Workshop process and analysis

We built the content of policy dialogue workshops and focus groups to proceed stepwise (Figure 2). The first workshop had a broad food system approach aiming to identify diverse concerns and hopes related to greenhouse gas emission reductions in the food system. In the subsequent workshops we focused the discussions on justice issues prevalent in the specific pathways and policy measures needed to support just transition. Findings from the previous workshops guided subsequent workshops.

The policy dialogue workshops operated at a national level, while the focus groups were aimed at regional food system actors. In the first policy dialogue workshop, we first introduced participants to the idea of just transition at a very general level, presenting distributive, recognitive, and procedural dimensions. Participants were thus reminded of the diversity of issues to be considered in just transition. Participants were then asked to contemplate their justice related concerns about the food system transition and what they deemed successful and valuable in the current food system. Each group focused on a specific aspect of the food system, such as agricultural production or consumption. In the second policy dialogue, we presented the transition pathways and asked participants to identify policy means that could help to achieve the main goals of the pathways. For peatlands this entailed taking most peatlands out of agricultural production and for dietary change a third reduction in meat and dairy consumption. After identifying potential policy means, participants discussed their justice related implications. In the focus groups, the policy measures and their justice implications were further discussed. We offered participants the same information about the transition pathways and asked them to discuss how the transition pathway affects the fairness of the food system and what policies could promote the changes fairly. In the third policy dialogue, we introduced the core policy measures identified in the previous discussions and their justice-related reasoning then asked participants to consider the findings and add missing perspectives. In all workshops and focus groups each discussant group focused on one transition pathway.

Starting from the second workshop, the discussions were explicitly framed to address justice and the justice implications of the pathways and the policies. To facilitate the consideration of justice, we provided the participants with a simplified list of just transition principles composed on the basis of philosophical work on justice and the justice literature. The principles included: (1) right to sufficient and nutritious food, (2) just food-chain structures, (3) global fairness, (4) ecological integrity, (5) just processes, (6) access to relevant information and (7) respectful pluralism and esteem recognition (Tribaldos & Kortetmäki, 2022). The list was presented as a preliminary guide to help to identify justice related issues and to remind the participants about the plurality of justice dimensions. The facilitators did not actively use the list to raise certain issues to the discussion. Rather, the utilisation of the list was left to the participants, and we wanted to understand which justice issues were most important and how they were used to ponder transition policy measures.

**FIGURE 2** The organised workshops and focus groups.



The invited participants were identified on an organisational basis by the authors. We aimed to recruit a diverse set of food system related actors from various organisations from the public and private sectors and civil society. In the national level dialogue, participants included government officials from various ministries, farmers, and representatives of farmers' organisations; representatives of the food industry, retail, and food services; and NGOs representing different food system related and environmental issues. Individual experts also participated in the discussions. The focus group participants were more regional and local actors, with a broad representation of food system activities and representing stakeholders with direct interest on the topics discussed. Despite best efforts, we were unable to attract for instance NGOs representing immigrants or disabled people. It is important to bear in mind this structure of participants in the interpretation of our results. The frames presented in this article, reflect the key food system actors' framings of just transition, potentially overriding other frames present in society.

The research was undertaken in accordance with the ethical requirements of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity. Ethical approval was not required because the data were not sensitive in nature. Each focus group and workshop discussion lasted around 2 h. All discussions were recorded and transcribed.

Our method of analysis was theory-guided frame analysis (Entman, 1993; Rein & Schön, 1996). We understand frames following Entman's (1993) conceptualisation of a fully developed policy frame, which includes four elements: (1) problem definition, (2) causal interpretation, (3) moral dimension and (4) proposed solution. The problem definition identifies what the issue is about, and the causal interpretation explains why the issue is so defined, i.e. it explains the need to

see the issue in a particular light. The moral dimension covers arguments for why a particular action is the right thing to do and, finally, the proposed solution states what should be done about the matter. We moreover pay particular attention to the spatial and temporal boundaries of framings (van Lieshout et al., 2012; Weller, 2019). We see temporal and geographical scales as strategic choices by which a particular problem definition is rendered relevant, and why certain actors highlighted as more important than others.

We conducted the analysis using qualitative analysis software NVivo and interpretations were checked by two authors. We started by reading through the data and coding all justice claims, namely what is regarded as just or unjust in relation to reducing the climate impacts of Finnish diets and agricultural peatlands. Simultaneously we coded all proposed solutions: what kinds of policies are deemed just or how their fairness could be improved. Regarding the first policy dialogue workshop, we coded only explicit mentions of justice or fairness. From the second policy dialogue workshop onwards, the participants were explicitly tasked to discuss justice implications, hence no explicit reference to justice was required in the analysis. In the second round of analysis, we clustered the individual findings based on similar argumentation related to justice by focusing on the four frame elements that could be identified from the arguments (Tables 1 and 2). We interpreted the similar utilisation of the elements to constitute the subject-based frames separately under diets and peatlands. The analysis of the elements helped to differentiate between the core arguments and move the analysis beyond merely summarising discussion points. While some of the arguments used in the frames partially overlapped, they all focused on specific aspects of the issue and emphasised different justice-related outcomes, thereby warranting

**TABLE 1** Justice frames in peatland discussion.

	Finnish food production	Farmers' rights and equality	Diverse farmers
What is justice primarily about?	Functioning of the Finnish food system. Food production in Finland should not be endangered.	Equal treatment of farms, respecting their property rights and right to livelihood. Livelihoods on actively food producing farms must not be endangered.	Enabling climate actions for various kinds of farmers and farms. Livelihoods on diverse farms and in rural areas.
Causal interpretation (why is it so?)	Peatlands are relevant for food production in Finland due to their regional concentration and climatic factors.	Peatlands are an important source of livelihood for many active farms.	Peatlands are an important source of livelihood for diverse farmers and related communities.
Moral claims	Responsibility to produce food in Finland, currently high environmental standards – immoral to rely on importing food.	Property rights should be respected. Active and efficient food production should be rewarded. Equality between farmers.	Farmers, rural communities, and their role in the society should be respected. No farmer should be left behind due to different capacities.
Solutions for changing the current use of peatlands	Solutions retaining the level of food produced in Finland and supporting efficient food production and emission reductions.	Solutions respecting farmers' work and rewarding for their results in efficient food production and emission reductions.	Solutions recognising differences between farmers and facilitating their abilities to adapt to sustainability demands.

**TABLE 2** Justice frames in the dietary change discussion.

	Food security	Consumer capabilities	Respect, collaboration and scientific knowledge
What is justice primarily about?	Focus on maintaining the affordability of food and decent farming livelihoods.	Focus on consumers and their access to sustainable and healthy food.	Focus on mutual respect, understanding of differences and trying to find a middle way based on scientific knowledge about sustainable eating.
Causal interpretation (why is it so?)	Diets and food consumption influence health and livelihoods.	Different consumers have different capabilities for moving towards more plant-based eating.	Polarised discussion about diets implies a risk of injustices and hampers the transition.
Moral claims	Healthy food needs to be available and affordable for all.	All consumers need to be able to consume sustainable and healthy food, without their lives being made difficult.	Polarisation aggravates problems and makes finding a solution difficult – unfair blaming of others and disrespectful behaviour are wrong.
Solutions for just dietary change	The change towards plant-based diets needs to be moderate and enable food production in Finland. This requires collaboration in the food chain and increased valuing of food.	Consumers need support to enable better choices: nudging, provision of information. The change demands need to be adjusted to different consumers' capabilities.	Increasing collaboration among the food system actors and emphasis on producing reliable information on the impacts of food production.

their presentation as separate frames rather than merely different facets of the same frame. We also looked for changes in argumentation related to the different phases of data collection but ended up identifying similar basic frames from all discussions with no significant changes.

After identifying the frames related to the mitigation of climate impacts from peatlands and diets, we considered the frames identified in terms of the relevant scales and system boundaries. These include who are considered as relevant when discussing justice, the inclusion of existing inequalities, and the relation to environmental policy targets (Figure 1). This final step helped us to assess the

frames in terms of just transition and consider the policy implications.

## 4 | JUST FOOD SYSTEM TRANSITION FRAMES

### 4.1 | Peatlands

The food system stakeholders mainly discussed the needed changes for agricultural peatland use under three interlinked frames: (1) Finnish

food production, (2) farmers' rights and equality, and (3) diverse farmers (Table 1). *The Finnish food production* frame contemplated the peatland question in the context of the wider food system and food security, while the *farmers' rights and equality* and *diverse farmers* frames approached the matter from the perspective of different farmers.

#### 4.1.1 | Finnish food production

In the *Finnish food production* frame, national security of supply was the core issue of justice in the context of peatlands: *'The basic principle is that you have to take responsibility for your food production locally and regionally'*. Peatlands were seen as *'an incredibly important part of our food production'* and necessary for domestic food production due to their special importance in regions with strong dairy production. Dairy production was understood as the cornerstone of Finnish food production due to Northern climatic conditions. This frame included moral claims about the responsibility of domestic food provision for the Finnish population. It also argued for the environmental superiority of Finnish food production, also questioning food imports in environmental terms: *'we should not restrict domestic food production just because it produces emissions and then import food that has produced more emissions'*.

The emphasis on maintaining an adequate level of food production in Finland meant that regulations and considerable reduction of the utilisation of peatlands was deemed neither necessary nor just. Instead, a focus on particular peatlands with marginal role in food production was proposed: *'Small field parcels that have been cleared long ago and are surrounded by forests, should be reforested for sure'*. Also, various kinds of fallows could be restored. Those subsidies were supported that facilitate voluntary emission reductions while encouraging efficient food production, such as co-operative schemes among farmers that help change peatland cultivation to lower-emission uses such as permanent grass production. The frame acknowledged that a radical change in the functioning of the agricultural subsidies and food system functioning could resolve the peatland issue particularly criticising the current subsidy system, which allocates subsidies based on area under cultivation, not on how much food is actually produced: *'We could remove those extra hectares and we could allocate that 1.5 billion subsidy money to those farmers who actually produce food in this country'*. The extra hectares referred to agricultural peatlands not used for efficient food production. These proposed changes still emphasised efficient food production and the changes were deemed very difficult due to the existing EU policy structures.

#### 4.1.2 | Farmers' rights and quality

The *farmers' rights and equality* frame focused on farming livelihoods and perceived justice in the peatland case as concerning farmers' rights and equal treatment. It was emphasised that peatlands are

farmers' property and *'farmers should have the right to decide what they do with their fields'*. While greenhouse gas emissions from peatlands were acknowledged, it was seen as *'more important to ensure that farmers get along and their farming is profitable'*. Statements like *'what if "the lottery" has given you only peatlands'* emphasised that farmland is usually inherited, and the farmer has little influence on the soil type available. Hence, peatland regulation was seen to both violate farmers' rights and treat farms unequally. Thus, in the frame strong peatland regulation was considered categorically unjust.

Instead, the resolution should focus on rewarding farmers on their merits in producing food and achieving emission reductions and not through the current system, where subsidies are based mainly on the land area: *'It would be really great if the support policies would actually reward farmers for environmental effects and food production'*. The emphasis on individual rights and freedoms also implied embracing market solutions and farmers were seen as needing to adjust to changes in consumption: *'We need to produce food that is acceptable to consumers. Yes, there should be freedom, but... the production must meet certain criteria and standards to be allowed to exist'*. Hence, if consumers rejected food from peatlands, farmers should not produce it. The market orientation, however, implied that the impetus for abandoning peatlands should follow market logic so that peatland emissions would be reflected in food prices and changing consumption patterns would make farming on peatlands unprofitable.

#### 4.1.3 | Diverse farmers

The frame *diverse farmers* took a broader perspective on farming than a focus on food production. While justice regarding peatland use was seen mainly as a livelihoods issue, the livelihood was not perceived as being fairly guaranteed by rewarding food production alone. Instead, farms of all types should be considered: *'all farms are unique'*, *'equally valuable'* and *'the farm as a whole should be taken into account'*. The focus was on enabling climate actions for different kinds of farmers and farming practices whose diversity should be better understood: *'Policy measures and related discussion should involve farmers more heavily and look for their possibilities to act differently'*. Proposed solutions included support for enhancing farmers' knowledge and know-how and developing ways to reduce emissions for different farms. The frame also emphasised the role of public discussion and increased recognition for farmers' work and differences in them and in their farms, instead of blaming them for emissions.

### 4.2 | Diets

Concerns about dietary change towards more plant-based diets resembled the peatland discussion regarding food security and farmers' livelihoods, yet the issue was mostly approached from the perspective of consumption. We distinguished three interlinked frames: (1) *Food security*, (2) *consumer capabilities*, and (3) *respect, collaboration and scientific knowledge* (Table 2).





#### 4.2.1 | Food security

The *food security* frame depicted justice in the dietary change as concerning the affordability of food, combined with decent livelihoods from food production in Finland. Concern for livelihoods was often connected to the concern for national security of supply, where animal production was perceived important: *'This much blamed cattle breeding, unfortunately, is the most stable and climate-secure source of important protein. If we only depended on plant production, we would soon be hungry here'*. Thus, the security of supply argument was used to challenge the ability to fairly move towards plant-based diets if this meant reducing animal-based domestic food production.

However, the core issues in dietary change concerned food prices and the distribution of the price and costs among food chain actors, which is a problem in the current Finnish food system. The frame highlighted that animal products are cheaper than many plant-based alternatives, posing a risk for the affordability of dietary change for consumers: *'Everyone can afford meat... if you buy the same amount of energy by buying vegetables, then you spend more money on food than if you buy, say, a package of sausages'*. On the other hand, food was even considered too cheap and farmers' share of retail prices was deemed insufficient to enable more environmentally friendly production: *'On average, we spend a very small part of our income on food. If we want responsibly produced food, that farmers make investments on their farms for the environment, each of them has a price tag... we need to be prepared to pay more to farmers'*.

The proposed solution was sharing the costs of climate-friendly production and the risks related to creating new ways of producing, alongside increasing the appreciation of food so that people (those who can afford it) would be willing to spend more on food. The core question was: *'how to create models between farmers, food companies and the state that enable risk sharing?'*. In practice, finding concrete ways to balance the costs and risks was challenging and led to general suggestions for more collaboration and caution regarding the level of change actually needed in people's diets and Finnish food production.

#### 4.2.2 | Consumer capabilities

The *consumer capabilities* frame narrowed justice down to consumers' access to healthy and sustainable food, ignoring producers. The core concern was how to enable more sustainable eating among consumers with varying abilities to change their diets: imposing strict demands on consumers was deemed unjust. Consumers cannot be expected to make significant efforts or experience more difficulties in life due to the changes: *'We need to make it easy for the consumer to make [sustainable] choices'*. The change should be adjusted to current practices and certain groups, such as the elderly, should be excluded from transition demands to assure adequate nutrition: *'Food services for the elderly, I wouldn't change much there, the most important thing is that they have a good life for the rest of their years and they get familiar food'*. Hence, the dietary change should be steered with caution focusing on nudging consumer behaviour in food services and

supermarkets, developing new products, and providing information and guidance, showing how new alternatives can be integrated into different food habits. Strict regulations and steering, for instance fiscally, was framed as unjust.

#### 4.2.3 | Respect and collaboration

Justice in dietary change was also approached as a matter of respecting different perspectives. The frame addressed the tendency for polarised discussion around diets, which leads to unjustified blaming of different actors and unnecessary anxiety around food choices for sensitive people. Livestock farmers were identified as having been unjustly criticised in the current discussion: *'You have to be very careful in the discussions, because farmers and meat producers very easily feel that they are being attacked, even though that's not the intention'*. Also, consumers' varying capacities to change their eating habits were referred to. *'Regarding justice, especially in food-related discussions, it would be really necessary to take into account of people's different capacities and, mental health challenges for instance'*.

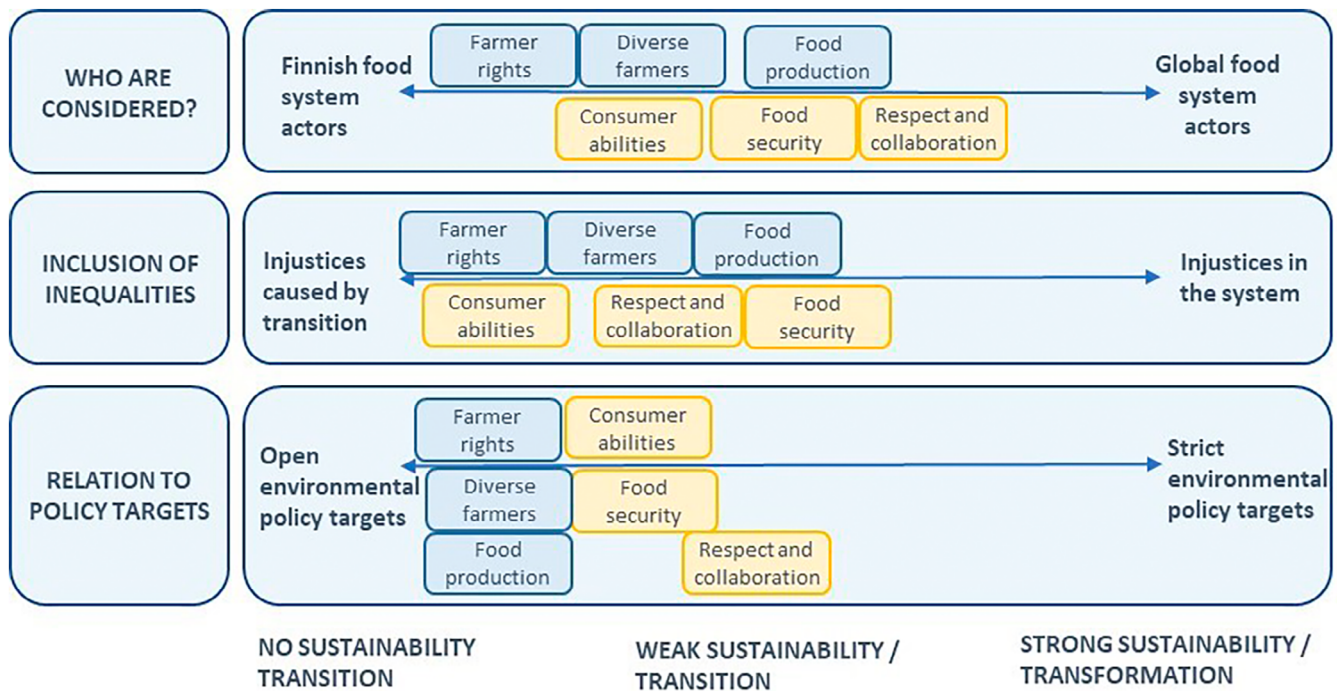
According to the frame, the polarised discussion hampered the necessary changes and prevented arriving at a solution. Instead, it was emphasised that dietary change needs to be discussed more moderately and respecting different perspectives so as to include everyone in the change. For instance, emission calculations made by different food system actors *'shouldn't be attacked with so much criticism'* in public discussion, but approached more constructively. The creation of solutions was seen to require mutually respectful collaboration among the food system actors. Nevertheless, preliminary information and insufficiently evaluated initial solutions were seen to be needed to get the change started.

## 5 | IMPLICATIONS OF THE JUSTICE FRAMES

### 5.1 | No, weak, or strong sustainability?

The frames identified connect to the aspects outlined in the context of justice framings related to coal transition and policies (Figure 3). In the discussions analysed, the frames often complement one another rather than presenting markedly conflicting alternative framings. Despite their differences, the frames concentrate on the weak and no sustainability end of the continuum rather than manifesting strong sustainability.

Regarding *who are considered*, the frames emphasise Finnish farmers and consumers as the core groups for consideration in just transition. These actors are also identified as the ones most needing to change their practices and needing help to do so. Other food system actors receive less attention: they were seen as enablers and partially also responsible for producing more just outcomes for consumers and farmers. This echoes the current focus of Finnish food policies (Puupponen et al., 2023). In this respect, the emphasis is also



**FIGURE 3** The just transition frames in comparison to no/weak/strong sustainability. The closer the frame is to a particular end of an axis the more it displays the particular understanding of the subjects, inequalities, and environmental policy targets considered.

broader than in many coal transition related framings focusing only on workers (Gürtler & Herberg, 2021; LaBelle et al., 2023; Schwartzman, 2021). Our study design was also broader, involving diverse stakeholders and explicitly targeting consumption and production.

The considerations of actors remain mostly at national or lower levels, similar to energy transitions. Food system actors outside Finland are not framed as directly relevant for just transition. A slightly globally more inclusive understanding of recipients of justice was presented in the first workshops, which were less policy solution oriented and discussed general justice questions related to food system transition. In the subsequent workshops and focus groups, global scale was basically not mentioned except to justify the continuing of farming on peatlands (*food production* frame) and concerns about the profitability of domestic food production, which was considered environmentally superior to imported food (*distribution in the food system* frame). The national focus and its priority over global impacts can also be a value choice in the context of just transition. This has been reflected in the case of coal transition, related to the focus on domestic jobs (e.g., Kalt, 2021; Snell, 2018).

Considering the inclusion of past versus envisioned injustices, the frames focus on potential injustices the anticipated transitions might invoke. However, the *farmers' rights* and *food system* frames in particular identified some existing injustices which were seen to hinder more sustainable food production. These include the dominant position of the commercial sector and the poor position of farmers in the food system, also well acknowledged globally (Béné, 2022; Clapp, 2021; Gottlieb & Joshi, 2010). These disparities are seen to hinder the adoption of more sustainable production methods, but they are not raised

as the core issues to be resolved in the context of a just food system transition, directing the focus to more incremental improvements in the current food production and consumption system and vaguer demands for more collaboration instead of seeking solutions to structural problems (see also LaBelle et al., 2023). Similar prevalence of ecomodernist framings focusing on technical improvements in the current system has also been noted to prevent for the envisaging of a broader just transition in the urban context (Hagbert et al., 2020). As climate action is not the cause of the structural food system injustices, it may seem simpler to leave the structural problems unaddressed and focus on the additional potential burdens of climate action. However, as studies on the coal transition have shown, this may impede reaching of a fair outcome (Gürtler & Herberg, 2021; Schwartzman, 2021).

In relation to environmental policy targets, the suggested policy solutions concentrate on bringing about soft transition and avoiding any potentially unjust policy impacts rather than strictly ensuring that the transition takes place. Thus, environmental targets are open to compromises in order to reach a just transition. While the frames suggest partially different solutions, none of them are very effective in fostering the transition. The frames with narrower understanding of the relevant recipients of justice (*farmers' rights*, *food production* and *food system*) provide moderate solutions emphasising gradual change and the ability of farmers (and consumers) to adjust to such changes. These frames consider only the adjustment of 'real' food producers, enabling more efficient solutions for other farmers and their peatlands. This approach is common in the jobs-focused just transition frames (e.g., Kalt, 2021). Approaches that identify diverse needs and capacities (*diverse farmers* and *consumer abilities*) consider the risks of



transition and identify measures that can help to ensure that no-one is left behind (c.f. Hagbert et al., 2020). However, in all frames, justice argumentation is commonly used to downplay the need for the transition itself.

Thus, the frames make the transition itself more difficult as the justice considerations reject the suggested policy solutions that could achieve the transition happen. This manifested especially in deeming strict regulations unjust. For instance, using legislative measures to regulate peatland use was deemed unjust, and only soft measures and nudging were considered just to foster dietary change. Emission reductions are based on voluntary action and on collaborative and market-based solutions. In line with this, earlier studies on environmental justice perceptions have indicated that when individual freedom and choice are emphasised, strict regulation becomes unfeasible and market-based solutions appear as the most just (Harrison, 2014). Furthermore, the open nature of the transition goals has been shown to hamper the identification of efficient climate solutions when justice is simultaneously pursued (Gürtler et al., 2021). In our data, this is connected to the contestation of the need for sustainability transition in the Finnish food system. Although this contestation did not constitute a major frame, its influence is apparent in the proposed solutions questioning both reducing peatland use and reducing meat and dairy consumption and production. When such contestation connects to strong claims of narrowly understood social justice (this was especially apparent in the *food system* and *farmer rights* frames), environmental requirements are easily relaxed.

The analysis of peatlands and dietary change related just transition frames in the Finnish food system has much in common with the understanding of just transition in the coal transition. The narrow understanding of considered groups distracts attention from discussing or resolving existing inequalities. Justice claims are also utilised to reduce the environmental ambition of the transition. This indicates that just transition arguments are not used as a driver of strong sustainability, but of weak or even no sustainability.

## 5.2 | Influence of the research framing

Our study introduced the concept of just transition for Finnish food system actors and examined how it was received and understood by them as they considered about policy means to promote just food system transition. This setting is reflected in the results in three respects: the conceptualisation of justice, the participants, and the task assigned to them.

The multi-dimensional conceptualisation of justice and the food system transition focused principles were presented to the participants. They acknowledged the principles but utilised them selectively emphasising the right to food and livelihoods. While this can be interpreted as a conscious expression of preference by the participants and used to support the claim about the risks involved in just transition (that they really want to frame justice narrowly), it may also relate to the fact that the facilitators did not actively prompt participants to thoroughly consider different principles, their relevance, and

implications. Had this been done, the discussions might have turned out differently.

The frames identified are based on data from discussions with stakeholders heavily involved in the current food system and therefore likely to feel or fear considerable losses of benefits if the system changes very much. Furthermore, the setting where strong incumbent system interests were present and linked to the issues of peatlands and dietary change may have affected participants' willingness to articulate more radically transformative ideas. While our approach was useful in addressing a whole system perspective, and is novel to just transitions studies as such, it might be useful to consider more explicitly other ways to involve wider societal interests in actual policymaking processes. This would entail including the 'less obvious' participants, such as disadvantaged and marginalised groups, actors whose economic interests are not directly at stake, and diverse perspectives to prevent the overrepresentation of the understandings possessed by the more capable, resourceful, and thus potentially more privileged, stakeholders. This could enable a more holistic consideration of various justice issues and also help to perceive injustices in the present system with potential to lead to more transformative policy proposals.

The participants were tasked with considering policies to support just transition. This and the focus on the issues of peatlands and diets implicitly narrowed the discussions to focus on policies with direct climate change mitigating impacts. The participants were slightly more ready to involve, for instance, global justice in the first policy dialogue workshops that discussed justice at the more general systems level. When discussions focused on concrete policy measures, the perspective narrowed. If the setting of our study had been broader and enabled more explicit consideration of a broader set of policies outside the food system, the discussants might also have been more willing to accept stricter policy measures to reduce emissions. The broader policies could have been, for instance, various social policy measures to alleviate the social impacts caused by the stricter policy measures and the discussion could have been more about different policy mixes to support just transition. If the focus is narrowly on designing emission mitigation policies, justice arguments are easily involved to dilute the goals of the environmental policies and the transition. One reason for this is that the tools in environmental policies do not generally include measures intended to alleviate their social and economic impacts.

Adopting a broader transdisciplinary perspective that incorporates more speculative methods such as the pedagogy of the oppressed, meditative and artistic practices, or the council of all beings (e.g., Carvalho & Riquito, 2022), could offer a way to address the identified issues related to the conceptualisation of justice, the participants, and the task assigned to them. This approach would entail a specific focus on facilitating participants to move beyond their current interest positions and to perceive and understand the positions and worldviews of others. Achieving justice, in this context, would involve diminishing the emphasis on consensus-seeking debates (see Blue et al., 2019) and placing greater attention on how the organisation of participation influences its outcomes (Chilvers & Kearnes, 2020).

The core idea behind just transition is decidedly laudable: just transition can be seen as part of the sustainability turn in environmental politics, which makes environmental policies more holistically concerned with equality and justice, not just the environment (Biermann, 2021; Klinsky et al., 2017), and claims for food justice in social movements are used as the driving force for structural changes (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011; Cadieux & Slocum, 2015; Gottlieb & Joshi, 2010). However, for just transition to be able to achieve its genuine goals, care must be taken when using stakeholder discussions as the basis of justice.

## 6 | CONCLUSIONS

Our results illustrate how the collective search for just transition may conceal structural problems and attune the finding of solutions to a level that jeopardises effective transition. This may result from focusing on the anticipated transition impacts, neglecting the global scale, or reproducing value hierarchies where socially concerned claims compromise environmental ambition or the loudest groups determine the focus of social justice. The outcome remains only partially just and dismisses the broader spectrum of justice in transitions. Paradoxically, while widening the justice considerations to diverse groups and communities is important, interpreting such claims narrowly or without critical reflection may further environmental compromises without creating space for transformative structural reconfigurations. Since both public discussions and empirical arenas of data collection may easily be dominated by the louder, privileged groups and their voices, there is a risk that simply documenting and systematising such collective views on just transitions may produce and strengthen those interpretations of just transition that serve to protect the achieved benefits and privilege or business as usual.

The problematic nature of the narrow interpretations of just transition does not mean that just transition itself is a flawed objective. It means, however, that critical attention is needed to be paid to research and political procedures where understanding of just transition is created or negotiated, going beyond the perceptions of the core or incumbent stakeholders regarding the impacts of the transition. Focusing on environmental policy impacts alone is insufficient for the same reason. Such perspectives on 'just transition' could work if transitioning societies were currently just. In reality, ingrained systemic injustices make designing perfectly just environmental policies very difficult. Environmental policies alone do not suffice to resolve existing injustices.

This leaves two potential ways to create just transition. First, policies improving social justice can be implemented as corrective measures to fixed climatic targets after first identifying effective policies to reduce emissions. This resembles the original idea of just transition promoted by labour unions but widens the 'affected groups' considered. We propose that this highlights the importance of designing broad policy mixes, beyond solely environmental policies, for just transition. Systemic injustices unrelated to the transition would largely prevail but the transition itself would be more just.

Alternatively, the focus could be on a comprehensive structural transformation to account and solve the existing structural unjust unsustainability at a deeper level. This means understanding justice as the driver of the transition rather than something ensured alongside it. From the perspective of policy planning, potential justice criteria would not be applied to the design of environmental policies as such but employed at a systemic level to analyse the existing injustices, including injustices related to environmental degradation across spatial and temporal scales. Consequently, policy solutions would be more comprehensive than the traditional understanding of environmental policy allows. This strategy would imply creating just transformation instead of transition.

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