

What is a 'just' transition to net zero—and why is Australia struggling to get there?

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Australia's net-zero transition is struggling. Despite the government's efforts, announced last week, to revive flagging investment in renewable energy, greenhouse gas emissions from existing industry are still [rising](#).

Yet under the Paris Agreement, Australia must adopt [even more ambitious targets](#) for 2035.

At the same time, governments in Australia and overseas are facing rising community opposition to the rollout of clean energy infrastructure needed for a net zero transition. Such opposition is being [exploited by right-wing parties](#) for electoral gain.

But that pressure only underscores what the Australian government must do. To lift its climate game, it needs a mission-oriented, whole-of-government approach, built on what is known as a "[just transition](#)".

The two main elements of a just transition

A just transition requires both distributive justice and procedural justice. Distributive justice means policies that ensure a fair distribution of the economic burdens and benefits of the climate transition, along with protections for low-income people.

Procedural justice includes—but goes beyond—engaging with workers directly impacted by the decline of fossil fuel production. It means going beyond engagement with stakeholders that mainly represent incumbent industries.

A just transition would give all of Australia's communities a chance to not only take part in discussions about the costs and benefits of different approaches to net zero, but also to have a say in designing climate policies that directly affect them.

The success of the net zero transition may depend on the government's willingness to use the expertise of local communities in finding solutions for the lands and waters they know best.

The Labor government [signed](#) the [Just Transition Declaration](#) at last year's [COP27 global climate summit](#) at Sharm el-Sheikh. The declaration spells out this idea in its second principle: "the development of effective, nationally coherent, locally driven and delivered just transition plans within countries is dependent on effective and inclusive social dialogue."

Yet the Albanese government's net-zero strategy has no explicit commitment to a just transition. Instead, its piecemeal strategy lacks integration and avoids tackling the essential phase-out of fossil fuels.

Many government bodies—but is there a plan?

In May the government announced it would establish a statutory [Net Zero Authority](#) "to ensure the workers, industries and communities that have powered Australia for generations can seize the opportunities of Australia's net zero transformation."

The authority is expected to "help investors and companies to engage with net zero transformation opportunities," to help regions and communities attract new investment in clean energy, and to assist workers in the transition away from emissions-intensive industries.

To design the legislation to create the Net Zero Authority and to "immediately kick-start" its work, in July the government set up an interim body known as the [Net Zero Economic Agency](#), located in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet.

The agency is chaired by former Labor climate change minister Greg Combet and supported by a ten-member [advisory board](#). The mining industry and mining unions are well represented, holding three seats. However, many key stakeholders, including environmental and climate NGOs and the social welfare sector, are not represented.

At the same time, climate minister Chris Bowen has established a [Net Zero Taskforce](#) in the Department of Climate Change, Energy, Environment and Water to advise on the 2035 emissions reduction target and the plan to reach net zero emissions by 2050.

Guided by the advice of the Climate Change Authority, the taskforce will develop [six sectoral decarbonisation plans](#) in:

- electricity and energy
- industry
- resources
- the built environment
- agriculture and land
- transport.

How the work of all these bodies fits together is unclear. An overarching Net Zero National Cabinet Committee, as suggested by the Grattan Institute's Tony Wood, could provide the necessary coordination, as long as it is guided by an integrated strategy for a net zero just transition.

Yet a just transition is not mentioned on government websites relating to the [interim agency](#) and the [taskforce](#), other than to say that they will engage with communities, industry, First Nations, and unions, with an emphasis on affected workers in regions. There is no earmarked funding, institutional innovation, or capacity building to enable inclusive dialogues across communities and society.

Lessons in dialogue at home and overseas

The Net Zero Authority is well positioned to coordinate and fund such dialogues, which are best approached from a perspective geared towards [systemic change](#).

As the [Sydney Policy Lab](#) has found in its community "listening campaign" on the climate transition in [Geelong](#), the authority's transition planning will lack support if it ignores the issues (such as secure housing and affordable living) communities most worry about.

Such approaches have already met with considerable success elsewhere. In Denmark, [an OECD study](#) found social dialogues have been a significant factor in the country's successful transition to wind power. It now accounts for [a major share](#) of Denmark's energy output.

And in Sweden, the government's Innovation Agency, [Vinnova](#), has recently developed highly collaborative processes for redesigning energy, food and other systems to achieve net zero and other goals.

Far from slowing the transition, a commitment to inclusive dialogue will secure it by building the social license for change, while ensuring some measure of accountability for the injustices of the fossil fuel era.

The more inclusive the dialogue, the better the government will be able to minimise political backlash as decarbonisation accelerates.

A national net zero summit

To reach these outcomes will need significant coordination between federal, state and local governments, and across [government](#) departments.

To jumpstart this process, and building on the success of [regional summits](#), a national summit should be convened to explore the perspectives and initiatives of a wide range of stakeholders. That means not just unions and workers (as important as they may be) but also [climate](#) and energy NGOs, local governments and historically marginalised communities.

A net zero summit would place the perspectives of policy elites and incumbent interests in dialogue with the diverse demands of citizens. It must include Indigenous communities, on whose lands much of the [renewable energy](#) infrastructure is likely to be built and critical minerals likely to be extracted.

Debate at the summit cannot be perfunctory. It must provide ample space for many voices. The goal is to discover, propose and fund a net zero transition in ways that don't unduly privilege the needs of investors and companies, but instead champion the wisdom and solutions of local communities.

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