

Cooperating towards a more Just Transition in the High North

What is a Just Transition and how does it relate to the High North....?

Just Transition has become a widely used term in the context of the pressing climate emergency and the need for a swift transition to a sustainable and carbon-neutral society but undertaken in a more just and inclusive manner. At a [workshop on the Role of Territorial Cooperation in Supporting Just Transition](#), hosted by the European Policies Research Centre (EPRC) in partnership with the Centre for Sustainable Development (C4SD) of the University of Strathclyde and the Arctic Centre of the University of Lapland, the use of the concept in relation to territorial cooperation and the High North¹ was explored.

On the one hand, the Just Transition concept should be easy to relate to developments in the High North, which is directly and immediately impacted by the effect of climate change and pollution. On the other hand, the term is closely associated with interventions linked to change in coal mining regions in the heart of Europe and, in particular, to the work of the EU's Just Transition Fund.

As was explored at the Workshop, definitions of Just Transition vary. The concept has its roots in debates around the North American Trade Union movement in the late 20th century and the term is now widely used in different contexts. There is still '*a real lack of clarity of what is meant by Just Transition*' explained Rebecca Ford of the University of Strathclyde during her presentation at the Workshop. Further adaptation and fine-tuning of the concept, approaches and issues reflect changing circumstances. '*We are now seeing a wider interpretation of the term*' continued Ford and also called for the need to embed Just Transition in the broader net zero agenda and strategies.

A territorial perspective adds another dimension to the discussion of Just Transition. High North communities in the extremely remote, sparsely-populated, rural and island areas, face particularly unique and complex



challenges in relation to pursuing and experiencing Just Transition. These are linked to issues such as geographical isolation, demographic trends (e.g. ageing, out-migration) and limited economic opportunities, including often a higher dependency on fossil-fuel intensive sectors. Delivering Just Transition in these areas entails therefore specific challenges, including the importance of engaging and understanding the needs of the indigenous population groups such as the Sámi. Interestingly, it is the Sámi, who encapsulate their values, practices and holistic understanding of the interlinkages between people and nature/environment in a single word - *árbediehtu* - as was noted by Kairi Pääsuke of the County Administrative Board of Norrbotten at the Workshop.



What has territorial cooperation got to do with Just Transition....?

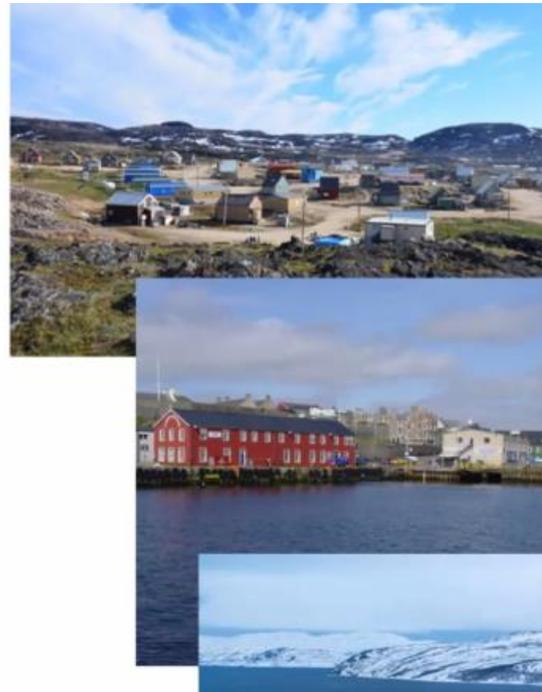
Rebecca Ford also concluded (drawing on her previous work, e.g. on the [Align project](#)) that groups need to work together to deliver Just Transition, and that there is a need to have a longer term vision to policies and strategies. These recommendations resonate well with the needs of the remote and sparsely-populated communities of the High North where delivering Just Transition alone can be challenging. Territorial cooperation has value and an important role to play in addressing these challenges.

Working together with other regions and countries can be crucial as a means to build critical mass, to maximise impact and influence, and to share learning and good practices. The Workshop highlighted that there are already many very relevant Just Transition actions being delivered in cooperation initiatives involving countries and regions of the High North. Amongst the EU's Interreg programmes in the High North, for example, the Northern Periphery and the Arctic (NPA) and the Nord programmes have addressed the theme of Just Transition. While these programmes do not make an explicit reference to Just Transition or 'label' their projects as addressing the theme, they have implemented actions which contribute to the wider objectives of Just Transition. As highlighted by Kirsti Mijnhijmer of the NPA Programme during her presentation, Just Transition has been included in various innovation, renewable energy and capacity building projects of the NPA Programme. Furthermore, the Nord Programme has a specific relevance for wider community engagement with its specific focus on the Sámi communities. More generally, cooperation has for a long time been a natural part of the wider ambitions of the High North (and takes place at different levels, ranging from the Arctic Council cooperation to more localised cooperation initiatives) and Just Transition is one of the many areas considered to benefit from a cooperative approach. As highlighted by Adam Stepien of the Arctic Centre of the University of Lapland, work of the Arctic Council has covered themes such as environmental impact assessment, promotion of low-carbon development pathways, and the assessment of social and environmental changes in the region. However, Russia's ongoing attack against Ukraine, and the international response, have an impact on international cooperation in the Arctic. This raises questions about whether and how links between Arctic states can be maintained in the future and, in turn, whether new thinking and new approaches to Arctic cooperation may now be required – a point emphasised by Stefan Kirchner of the Arctic Centre of the University of Lapland during the Workshop discussions.

The Workshop highlighted the role territorial cooperation is already playing in supporting Just Transition. This role, however, can be overlooked because: actions may have taken place 'before their time'; and Just Transition actions have become associated with large-scale programmes and funds making specific territorial and local actions potentially less visible. This Workshop highlighted the value of this contribution and the importance of efforts to continue this work. In the face of significant obstacles, most recently the severing of formal cooperation links with Russian partners, territorial cooperation efforts and enthusiasm persist, and the roots of territorial cooperation are well embedded and resilient. Nevertheless, territorial cooperation needs resources, it takes time and it should not be taken for granted, particularly in the current

dynamic context when cooperation and collaboration between trusted partners is key to managing change and Just Transition in the future.

- **Practical Actions**
- **Clear benefits for remote and rural communities**
- **Policies & interventions tailored to local contexts**
- **Value of cooperation – engagement and action**
- **Requires knowledge, skills development & capacity-building**
- **Need external support and engagement**



Further information on the project on the role of Territorial Cooperation in supporting Just Transition, which was funded by the Arctic Connections Fund of the Scottish Government, is available at: <https://eprc-strath.org/our-events/workshop-on-the-role-of-territorial-cooperation-in-supporting-just-transition/>

Notes

¹ High North is used in tandem to represent the wider Arctic/northern peripheral neighbourhood in this project. The High North is a term strongly linked to the Norwegian geopolitical and socioeconomic view of the north/Arctic.