Governing the global just transition from fossil fuels to clean energy

Towards mutually reinforcing just transition corridors in Europe and Africa

DISCUSSION PAPER – JULY 2026

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This discussion paper arose from an open dialogue between researchers from Europe and Africa, including exchanges during a FEPS online seminar organised with the support of PACJA in February 2026. It is meant to spark a cross-continental debate about just transition pathways. It does not necessarily reflect the views of Prototopia and PACJA.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the context of growing calls for the adoption of national fossil fuel phase-out road maps and with COP32 in Ethiopia on the horizon, the relationship between the EU and the African continent needs to evolve to champion a global just transition. This discussion paper, complementing the FEPS policy brief "Governing the global just transition from fossil fuels to clean energy", proposes to **frame the EU-African Union (AU) partnership around the objective of co-designing and advancing "just transition corridors" as the backbone of global transition governance**.

The EU-AU relationship must leave behind its current asymmetries. A collaborative effort based on coordinated just transition corridors offers a shared framework to navigate these asymmetries and move the EU-AU partnership towards a coherent governance space leveraging each other's strengths to accelerate a shared, equitable transition. The discussion paper explores three elements to operationalise such a partnership: **national just transition road maps; effective financial instruments; and restoring the EU's credibility as a just transition partner**.

1. INTRODUCTION

The world is off-track for meeting the goals of the Paris Agreement, and the window to limit warming to 1.5 °C is rapidly closing. COP30 in Belém left a contradictory legacy. On one hand, the Brazilian presidency successfully elevated the just transition issue and delivered a UN-level just transition blueprint – the Belém Action Mechanism – creating a formal space to integrate social, labour and equity dimensions across the climate action landscape. On the other hand, explicit language on fossil fuel phase-out was expunged from the final text, watering down the progress made at COP28 and deferring the elaboration of a global fossil fuel phase-out road map in the face of resistance from major oil-producer states. The result is a governance gap: **just transition is recognised in principle, but the transition itself is left without clear end dates, accountable milestones and equitable effort-sharing rules, in line with the principles of Common but Differentiated Responsibilities and Respective Capabilities (CBDR-RC)**. With no progress on the means of implementation, the risk is apparent that COP30 decisions could remain under-resourced and politically marginal.

Despite the COP30 blockage, a growing number of countries are calling for the adoption of national fossil fuel phase-out road maps and met at the first International Conference on Transitioning Away from Fossil Fuels in April 2026. **In this context and with COP32 in Ethiopia on the horizon, the relationship between the EU and the African continent needs to evolve to champion a global just transition.** A justice-based partnership between the two regional blocks can represent a decisive strategic lever for shifting global climate negotiations towards outcomes that can genuinely deliver for people, justice and the planet.

This discussion paper, complementing the FEPS policy brief "[Governing the global just transition from fossil fuels to clean energy]", proposes to **frame the EU-African Union (AU) partnership around the objective of co-designing and advancing "just transition corridors" as the backbone of global transition governance**. It first raises key questions to address in the current Europe-Africa state of play. Then, it briefly presents the concept of just transition corridors and its implementation in the context of the EU-Africa relationship. Finally, it highlights three key elements to operationalise an EU-AU partnership based on mutually reinforcing just transition corridors: nationally determined road maps; effective financing instruments; and restored EU credibility.

2. FROM ASYMMETRIC RELATIONS TO A PARTNERSHIP LEVERAGING EACH OTHER'S STRENGTHS

The contrast between European and African transition needs is too deep to be glossed over by generic references to a shared climate ambition. Acknowledging this contrast constitutes an essential first step in discussing how the EU-Africa relationship can support a global just transition.

On the European side, the transition is anchored in the European Green Deal and remains largely territorial and finance-driven. The EU Just Transition Mechanism targets regions, workers and communities affected by energy shifts with public funding, guarantees and specialised funds, aiming to manage structural change in coal-dependent and other carbon-intensive areas. Its primary horizon is decarbonising economies that are already relatively wealthy and energy-secure, with domestic socio-economic cohesion as the core political objective.

On the other side, Africa faces a seemingly impossible equation that current COP decisions have not resolved: how to leap-frog into a green economy and achieve a climate-resilient development pathway that eradicates poverty and creates decent jobs for Africa's youth. The imperatives of climate justice dictate for African countries, still dependent on gas and other fossil fuels, to be granted the finance, regulatory space and access to technology required to power the continent's green and just industrialisation while ensuring universal energy access. Countries across the continent are still grappling with energy poverty, with over 630 million people living without electricity. Any transition model that overlooks this reality is unlikely to gain political traction. **Transition pathways, therefore, need to be rooted in African socio-economic contexts, not "copy-pasted" from templates built for high-income economies.**

Another central question for the global just transition is **whether the asymmetrical EU-AU relationship can evolve from its current pattern, where Africa is mainly treated as a provider of raw materials and a recipient of conditioned finance**. Within this pattern, value addition and green industrial gains would continue to concentrate in Europe and other richer economies, while African countries remain locked into supplying raw inputs, under constrained colonial and patronising policy and legal frames. Europe's unilateral sectoral, environmental and trade measures – such as deforestation rules, supply-chain due diligence and the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) – epitomise power inequity and provide a clear demonstration of this danger. Unless they explicitly take into account the differentiated responsibilities and development priorities of African countries, these instruments risk externalising transition costs onto African producers and workers. Any serious partnership between the EU and African countries must start by addressing this asymmetry rather than disguise it.

The EU-Africa relationship must also be forward looking. By 2050, according to macroeconomic models available, the EU and the African continent should be converging in terms of their respective share of global GDP. The EU-27 could account for roughly 8-10% of world GDP by 2050, while an integrated and fast-growing Africa could reach a similar order of magnitude, bringing a combined EU-Africa share into the 15-20% range of global GDP.[1] Their combined forces would also include several of the world's most strategic sea lanes, a major share of strategically important ecosystems (especially African forests and biodiversity), and a disproportionately high share of reserves and supply of green-transition minerals (especially on the African side).

In the context of a global resource-based rivalry, the key question here is how the two blocks could perform if they leveraged each other's strengths through a genuine transition partnership that pursued ambitious sustainable development goals such as the Agenda 2063 of the African Union, the UN's Agenda 2030 and individual countries' national development blueprints, while protecting ecosystems. For Africa, this partnership would support its leap-frogging to a green economy thanks to a rapidly growing workforce and dynamic private sector. It would also require acquiring the capacity to process some of its abundant critical raw materials, making the most of its vast renewable energy potential (including solar, wind and geothermal), and protecting major carbon sinks in forests and other ecosystems. For the EU, a genuine partnership would involve mobilising a deep investment capacity, advanced green technology and innovation ecosystems, and privileged access to large, high-value markets. For synergies to emerge, **the EU and African institutions must act as co-architects of a renewed partnership, based on an equal voice in decision-making and a fair sharing of benefits along value chains**.

3. TOWARDS MUTUALLY REINFORCING JUST TRANSITION CORRIDORS

A collaborative effort based on coordinated just transition corridors would offer a **shared framework to navigate current asymmetries and move the EU-AU partnership from fragmented deals towards a coherent governance space in which both continents use their respective assets to accelerate a shared, equitable transition**. Just transition corridors define the legitimate space for transition pathways through four non-negotiable boundaries: scientific thresholds for a 1.5 °C carbon budget; legal obligations; social floors; and first-best policies (see Figure 1).[2]

Briefly, these boundaries[3] can be explained as follows:

1. **Scientific thresholds**: respecting science-based planetary boundaries and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and International Energy Agency (IEA) carbon budgets means that any credible pathway must plan for a simultaneous fossil fuel phase-out and renewable energy phase-in, avoiding the historical pattern of cumulative "add-on" energy transitions that increase total energy use without eliminating fossil fuels.

2. **Legal compliance**: the 2025 Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice (ICJ), which was adopted by the UN, confirms that states have legally binding obligations rooted in intergenerational equity. These obligations constrain their freedom to continue expanding fossil fuel production and subsidies.

3. **Social floors**: building on the sustainable development goals and approaches such as Kate Raworth's "doughnut" and the "egalitarian sufficiency" agenda,[4] just transition corridors must guarantee a safe and just space in which minimum standards for decent living are achieved and inequality is tackled, not exacerbated.

4. **First-best policies**: transition instruments should directly address the structural drivers of poverty and inequality while delivering mitigation, as illustrated by Indonesia's fuel subsidy reform that paired subsidy removal with targeted social protection instead of weakening climate ambition.

To operationalise just transition corridors, national just transition road maps must be defined based on **justice principles, especially effort- and benefit-sharing rules**. This means taking into account historical responsibility and financial and institutional capacity, the degree of economic dependence on fossil revenues and diversification opportunities, the social utility of fossil-based services and the availability of affordable alternatives, environmental and social impacts of production, and institutional and ownership structures (see the policy brief "Governing the global just transition from fossil fuels to clean energy" for more details on each point).

Mutually reinforcing just transition corridors between Europe and Africa would aim at the following:

- committing to time-bound fossil fuel phase-down road maps, with differentiated timelines in line with equity and CBDR-RC, to create predictability for investors;
- enabling Africa's green and just leap-frogging through predictable publicly mobilised and concessional finance, lowering of the cost of capital for renewable deployment, technology transfer and market access for green energy, products and services; and
- building cross-continental value chains (e.g., in batteries, critical minerals and nature-based solutions) under rules that require local processing, decent work, and strong social and environmental safeguards, rather than replicating extractive patterns.

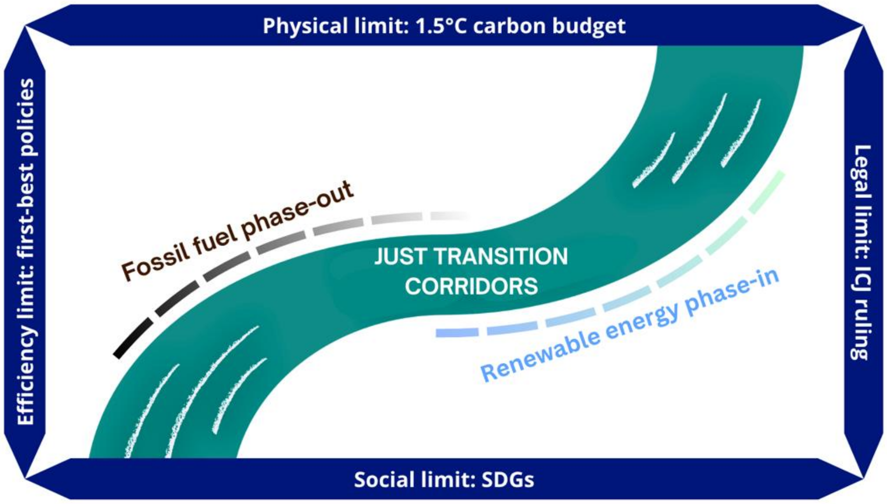

Figure 1. The four non-negotiable boundaries that define just transition corridors. Source: Charveriat and Leturcq (2025).

4. Operationalising an EU-AU partnership based on just transition corridors

Nationally differentiated just transition road maps

National just transition road maps constitute a **key and concrete instrument to define just transition corridors, allowing necessary transformations to be planned in a just and equitable manner**. They can become a cornerstone for an ambitious and just EU-AU partnership. The road maps would specify, for each participating country, renewable energy scale-up plans, differentiated fossil fuel phase-out schedules based on CBDR-RC,[5] renewable and efficiency milestones, social floor commitments and biodiversity safeguards, as well as financing needs.

While consistent with scientific thresholds, like the global carbon budget, and ICJ legal duties, the road maps would be calibrated to national circumstances. For African countries, this means acknowledging that 15 of them are fossil fuel producers, while 19 are not. Therefore, **equitable pathways will differ**: producers may require more extensive diversification support and targeted finance for managing stranded assets and worker transitions, while non-producers may emphasise affordable access to renewables and industrial development.

National road maps would also be based on the justice principles explained above. For example, a faster phase-out would be expected from high-income, less dependent fossil fuel producing countries with strong institutions, while more time and support would be provided for countries with budgets, employment and export earnings that remain heavily tied to fossil sectors. Joint EU-AU work could also develop **methodologies for sequencing fossil assets according to their carbon intensity and local impacts, ensuring that the most polluting and socially harmful fields are prioritised for early closure**. Crucially, just transition road maps must be developed through **genuinely inclusive processes**. The EU-AU cooperation can support national dialogues, citizen assemblies and multi-stakeholder platforms to embed recognitional and procedural justice in those road maps, ensuring that women, youth, Indigenous peoples and affected communities have a voice, and that tenure security and governance of commons are addressed.

Effective financing instruments

Even the best-designed corridors and road maps will remain aspirational without a **transformation of the**

financial architecture that currently starves African transitions of affordable capital. Africa receives less than 3% of global renewable energy investment and faces a cost of capital roughly three times the global average due to sovereign risk, currency risk, shallow capital markets and weak utilities.[6] At the same time, climate finance remains well below the levels needed to meet the new collectively quantified goal, and loss and damage resources are embryonic. By COP32, an ambitious EU-AU partnership based on a common vision for mutually reinforcing just transition corridors should aim to deliver two major shifts:

1) EU-AU cooperation should **back African-led initiatives that enhance agency and structural bargaining power**. These include, for example, the Addis Ababa Declaration on justice and green industrialisation adopted at the Second Africa Climate Summit, efforts to establish an Africa-owned credit-rating agency to tackle bias in sovereign ratings, and Mission 300 to scale up distributed renewable solutions and support local manufacturing and service ecosystems.
2) The EU-AU partnership should **anchor public and private finance in clearly defined just transition objectives**. Public funding flows should be tied to nationally defined just transition corridor milestones (such as plant closures with differentiated timelines in line with CBDR-RC, new renewable capacity, social protection coverage for affected workers, community-owned energy projects and adaptation measures), rather than to generic investment volumes.

These shifts can be advanced in the context of UNFCCC negotiations, where the EU and AU could jointly advocate for the following:

- the Belém Just Transition Mechanism to become an **effective match-making facility** that links national just transition corridors and road maps to specific packages of finance, technology transfer and capacity building. The EU-AU partnership can be instrumental in shaping its governance, ensuring strong African representation and civil-society oversight, and in piloting corridor-based projects as part of an AU-EU specific match-making program that can be showcased in COP32; and
- the **full operationalisation of the Loss and Damage Fund and for more systematic use of debt relief and swaps** linked to just transition outcomes, as part of a broader reparative approach.

Restoring the EU's credibility as a just transition partner

Last but not least, **the EU's ability to shape a global just transition and to be a credible partner depends on aligning its own policies with the standards it seeks to promote**. The EU must "walk the talk" or face the risk of being seen as untrustworthy on the international stage. Policymakers will need to address three credibility gaps.

1) Internally, the EU must **clarify and strengthen its domestic transition corridor**. This implies adopting science-based fossil fuel exit timelines (e.g., exiting coal by 2030, gas by 2035 and oil by 2040 for the EU and other high-income producers) and rapidly phasing out fossil fuel subsidies that still amounted to around $1.1 trillion globally in 2023.[7]
2) The EU must present a **credible plan that goes beyond the limited scale and scope of the Global Gateway Africa-Europe Investment Package** to leverage its development and climate finance and green technology, enable Africa's green and just leap-frogging, and build cross-continental value chains that truly benefit workers and firms from Africa.
3) The EU must **address the external impacts of its own regulations and trade policies**. Creating an Integrated Forum on Climate and Trade, with strong participation from the AU and other partners, could help anticipate and mitigate negative spillovers from measures like CBAM, ensure that they are compatible with just transition corridors, and explore compensatory mechanisms or cooperative solutions.

5. CONCLUSION

By COP32, governments in Europe and Africa have an opportunity to demonstrate that just transition is not a rhetorical fig leaf but a governance architecture with real consequences for a just fossil fuel exit, renewable expansion and social justice. An ambitious EU-AU partnership built around just transition corridors, co-created national road maps, reformed financial instruments and strengthened multilateral mechanisms could help tip global negotiations towards binding, equitable commitments on phase-out and phase-in, while advancing African development priorities and restoring trust in international climate cooperation.

Such coordinated cross-continental corridors could also become a turning point for the global transition by creating both an acceleration and a pull factor for other regions. **If two regions that together will account for a significant share of future global demand, population growth, biodiversity and green-transition minerals align around science-based fossil exit dates, ambitious renewable deployment, social floors and fair value-sharing, they would set a powerful benchmark for what "credible" national and regional transition plans look like.** By leveraging Europe's investment capacity, technology and market access alongside Africa's renewable and green industrialisation potential, raw materials, young workforce and dynamic private sector, coordinated EU-AU corridors would demonstrate that it is possible to combine rapid decarbonisation with sustainable development and green industrialisation, rather than trading one off against the other.

ENDNOTES

[1] Hawksworth, J. and D. Chan (2015) "The world in 2050: Will the shift in global economic power continue?" PricewaterhouseCoopers, February; "What will the global economy look like in 2050?" Capital Economics, 7 July 2022; "How the world economy could look in 2050: Asia takes the lead". Capital Economics, 23 February 2026; "Africa projected to be fourth largest economy by 2050". World Trade Organization, 4 November 2025.

[2] Charveriat, C. and P. Leturcq (2025) "Governing the global just transition from fossil fuels to clean energy". Policy brief. Foundation for European Progressive Studies, October.

[3] For further explanation, see: Charveriat, C. and P. Leturcq (2025) "Governing the global just transition from fossil fuels to clean energy".

[4] For the doughnut model, see Raworth, K. (2017) Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways To Think Like a 21st-Century Economist (London: Random House); Recordon, J., C. Gilloots, D. Brunner et al. (2025) "The doughnut framework: From theory to local applications in Switzerland – literature review & practical lessons". Journal of Cleaner Production, 505: 145440; for egalitarian sufficiency, see; Rodrigues, M. J. (ed.) (2024) A New Global Deal (Brussels: FEPS).

[5] While Agenda 2063 from the AU does define a net-zero target, it is important to note that the AU has not yet adopted a single, continent-wide fossil fuel phase-out date; instead, African countries are negotiating differentiated timelines in the context of global 1.5 °C pathways and calling for a just, well-financed transition away from fossil fuels. The notion of phase-out also needs further elaboration, which goes beyond the scope of this discussion. In the Net Zero Emissions scenario of the IEA, total demand for coal, oil and gas falls steeply, meaning that total fossil fuel use in 2050 is roughly one fifth of current levels.

[6] "Global landscape of energy transition finance 2025". IRENA, 2025; "High capital costs stalling clean energy investment across Africa". Clean Air Task Force; 23 October 2024.

[7] "OECD inventory of support measures for fossil fuels 2024". OECD, 21 November 2024.

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ABOUT PROTOTOPIA

Pro(to)topia is a not-for-profit think and do network dedicated to imagineering caring futures. Our vision is for people to live in green caring societies in which everyone can care for self, for others and for the rest of the living world. Céline Charveriat is the founder and director of Pro(to)topia Consulting, as well as an adjunct professor at the Paris School of International Affairs (PSIA). She is also the part-time programme director of the Vaerekraft Foundation (Norway).

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ABOUT THE PAN AFRICAN CLIMATE JUSTICA ALLIANCE (PACJA)

PACJA is a consortium of more than 2000 organisations from 54 African countries that brings together a diverse membership with Grassroots, Community-based organizations, Faith-based Organizations, Non-Governmental organizations, Trusts, Foundations, Indigenous Communities, Farmers and Pastoralist Groups with a shared vision to advance a people-centered, right-based, just and inclusive approach to address climate and environmental challenges facing humanity and the planet.

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