



## Consensus or cheap talk? The discursive politics of South Africa's just energy transition

Charlotte Sophia Bez, Thomas Klug, Giacomo Raederscheidt & Jan Christoph Steckel


**To cite this article:** Charlotte Sophia Bez, Thomas Klug, Giacomo Raederscheidt & Jan Christoph Steckel (21 May 2026): Consensus or cheap talk? The discursive politics of South Africa's just energy transition, *Environmental Politics*, DOI: [10.1080/09644016.2026.2670828](https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2026.2670828)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2026.2670828>



© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.




[View supplementary material](#) 



Published online: 21 May 2026.



[Submit your article to this journal](#) 



Article views: 203







[View related articles](#) 



[View Crossmark data](#) 

# Consensus or cheap talk? The discursive politics of South Africa's just energy transition

Charlotte Sophia Bez <sup>a,b</sup>, Thomas Klug <sup>a</sup>, Giacomo Raederscheidt <sup>c</sup>  
and Jan Christoph Steckel <sup>a,d</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Climate Economics and Policy - MCC Berlin, Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research (PIK), Potsdam, Germany; <sup>b</sup>Tishman Environment and Design Center, The New School for Social Research, NYC, USA; <sup>c</sup>Faculty of Economics and Social Sciences, University of Potsdam, Potsdam, Germany; <sup>d</sup>School of Social Sciences and Technology, Technical University of Munich, Munich, Germany

## ABSTRACT

The just transition concept has been hypothesised to serve as a unifying framework for designing socially accepted fossil fuel phaseout policies. Whether the concept actually moves actors towards political consensus remains contested. Using South Africa as an example and leveraging text-as-data approaches, we map public debate of just transitions and examine whether introduction of the Just Transition Framework and Just Energy Transition Partnership re-orient or reinforces existing actor positions. We analyse nearly 2,300 South African news articles published between 2008 and 2023. We then deconstruct just transition narratives, which are classified into three distinct political stances: skeptics, realists, and opportunists. We find that while just transition policies foster a common commitment to climate and social concerns, they do not resolve underlying political tensions. More generally, our analysis demonstrates how observable changes in discursive shifts can indicate feasibility conditions within policy formulation stages.


**ARTICLE HISTORY** Received 21 August 2025; Accepted 3 May 2026

**KEYWORDS** Just transitions; news media; South Africa; text as data; discursive politics; pre-decisional policy arena

## 1. Introduction

As a political concept, just transitions are highly contested, being subject to competing interpretations, normative disagreements, and uneven applications across contexts (Stark *et al.* 2023). Contestation around just transitions

**CONTACT** Thomas Klug  [thomas.klug@pik-potsdam.de](mailto:thomas.klug@pik-potsdam.de)

 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2026.2670828>

© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

has challenged early conceptualisations of the just transition as a unifying framework for policy design (García-García *et al.* 2020, Bookbinder 2024), and as just transitions have been adopted by an increasing variety of social and political actors globally, diverging interpretations and imaginaries of justice and energy transition pathways have often left existing tensions unresolved (Fischer *et al.* 2025).

Debates over just transitions are especially vigorous in contexts undergoing industrial decline and phaseout, particularly where organised social and labour movements exist. South Africa thus offers a particularly compelling case for studying the discursive contestation of just transitions. In addition to phaseout considerations of its ageing coal sector, the country is also facing simultaneous and recurrent energy, social, and economic crises shaping national climate policy discourse and justice debates.

In light of these challenges, South Africa signed the Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP), with the International Partners Group (IPG) – comprising the governments of the US, UK, Germany, and others. This agreement mobilised an initial US\$8.5 billion to expedite coal plant retirement and catalyse investment in renewable technologies. The JETP was formulated with direct acknowledgement of entrenched domestic energy politics and to gain support from coal workers. The JETP agreement thereby aims to facilitate a just transition in South Africa by: i) decarbonising the electricity system; ii) protecting vulnerable workers and communities; and iii) developing new low carbon economic opportunities (South African Government 2022).

In parallel, South Africa's Presidential Climate Commission produced the Just Transition (JT) Framework in 2022 with inclusion of various civil society groups. It established principles for managing coal phaseout and worker compensation, and signalled state commitment for a just transition (Cole *et al.* 2025). The JT Framework emphasises multiple justice dimensions and the risks and urgency of addressing the climate crisis. It asserts that a total of US\$250 billion is required over the next three decades to finance South Africa's energy transition. The Framework argues that a just transition must pay attention to the various justice dimensions and should focus on i) climate resilience and adaptation; ii) decent work and poverty eradication; iii) inclusion and equal opportunities for marginalised South Africans (women, youth, disabled people); and iv) democratic and decentralised ownership of natural resources (including energy) (Collins 2022).

Such policies did not emerge in a vacuum, but from a national context where debates over just energy transitions have been defined questions around climate change, energy crisis, and livelihood impacts (Mohr 2025).

In this article, we examine the discourse on just energy transitions in South African news media. We focus on national news outlets, which represent a central platform for facilitating the exchange of arguments and

perspectives between established and emerging actors (Markard *et al.* 2023). Our dataset consists of around 2,300 articles sourced from the LexisNexis database. We develop a multifaceted analytical approach that integrates qualitative and computational techniques. First, we use qualitative coding to identify narratives and actor categories. Then, we develop a data-driven classification of actor stances (skeptics, realists, and opportunists), applying machine learning to operationalise these positions and trace their evolution over time. This allows us to systematically map and compare how actors (including trade unions, private companies, and political figures) define and position themselves in relation to the just transition. Few studies analyse how competing interpretations of the just transition are constructed and contested simultaneously across actor groups within media discourse.

By acknowledging the diversity in discursive constructions of just transition, we analyse how actors signal value alignment or divergence and use the framing as a vehicle for advancing particular policy aims. While we do not claim that discourse alone determines the boundaries of political debate, examining how positions are articulated in public discourse allows us to assess whether just transition policies foster political consensus or instead reproduce underlying tensions.

In this article, we offer evidence towards a limited *just transition consensus* in South Africa characterised by shared recognition of climate action and transition-affected workers and communities. The just transitions debate, and corresponding Just Transition Framework and JETP Agreement, highlight how key tensions remain unresolved. We highlight these differences via a taxonomy of just transition opportunists, realists, and skeptics. By classifying just transition stances of key national actors, we find that the adoption of just transitions beyond civil society renders the concept vulnerable to co-optation by fossil vested interests and to serve as a proxy for varying political agendas. We argue that these interpretations of just transition depart from civil society's initial and current conceptualisations, risking political backlash and abandonment of just transitions as a unifying frame.

The article is structured as follows. [Section 2](#) situates our study within the broader literature on just transitions, discursive performativity, and South African political economy. [Section 3](#) concisely describes the data and methods (see Online Methods for details). [Section 4](#) presents evidence for a *just transition consensus*, classifies divergence into skeptics, realists, and opportunists, and applies this scheme with machine learning to track discourse shifts over time, and finally validating these findings using structural topic modelling. [Section 5](#) examines how just transition functions as a contested discursive concept in South African energy debates and draws lessons for international climate cooperation instruments like the JETP. It further conceptualises this debate as a pre-decisional policy arena. We also acknowledge several limitations of our study. Finally, [Section 6](#) concludes.

## 2. Literature review

News media shape public beliefs, political agendas, and the salience of policies (Otieno *et al.* 2013, Osička *et al.* 2020). Newspapers hence play a central role by framing transition issues, legitimizing interventions, and amplifying actor interests (Sovacool and Brisbois 2019, Husu 2022). Drawing on theories of discursive power and governmentality (Schmidt 2008), power operates through the production of knowledge and norms that define legitimate policy pathways. Media discourse therefore provides a compelling lens to examine how social and political actors interpret just transitions, and their role in consensus-building and policymaking. Only recently have studies begun studying just transition discourses in national news media (Koukouzas *et al.* 2025, Walters *et al.* 2025), though these studies do not examine the role of media as a site of discursive performance and struggle in just transition governance.

Earlier, just transitions scholarship hypothesised that just transitions could resolve such struggles by acting as a mediating framework for policy design (see e.g. Stevis and Felli 2015, Winkler 2020), by transplanting justice frameworks, like the ‘Triumvirate Tenets’ of environmental justice – which include Distributional justice (fair distribution of costs and benefits across all affected groups), Recognition justice (identification and recognition of affected groups), and Procedural justice (inclusiveness or fairness of the process) – into debates around phaseout politics (McCauley *et al.* 2013, Stark *et al.* 2023). Just transitions have therefore transcended mere distributional concerns about ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ in the energy transition, opening deeper questions about social injustices and relations. Meanwhile, the so-called ‘conceptual elasticity’ of just transitions has led to its adoption by various social and political actors with different, and sometimes competing, interests in transitions governance (Newell and Mulvaney 2013). Apart from justice as a site of contestation, just transitions as an ideological frame leaves unresolved debates of phaseout governance, accommodating a variety of policy agendas. These risks were initially described by Stevis and Felli (2015), and more recent studies have argued that the proliferation of the concept may yield perverse outcomes, such as political stalemates, co-optation by vested interests, and social backlash. This hinders its realisation as a unifying or transformative concept (Harry *et al.* 2024, Fischer *et al.* 2025).

South Africa has become a well-studied context for debates around just transitions, as evidenced by recent systematic and bibliometric reviews (Mirzania *et al.* 2023, Stark *et al.* 2023). Determining the fate of South Africa’s ageing coal-fired power plants – a geographically specific sector that employs many workers and has powerful incumbent actors – has made just transitions a prime locus for debate. Historically, the coal sector

also served as a key site of post-apartheid economic redistribution, with few other major industries in coal regions to substitute (Baker *et al.* 2014, Hanto *et al.* 2022). Just transitions discourse was first adopted by trade unions and trade union federations like the ‘Congress of South African Trade Unions’ (COSATU), focusing on labour relations and job impacts of industrial decline from global decarbonisation demands. Cleavages within unions over job protectionism versus green transformation emerged early on (Cock 2019).

In South Africa, prominent trade unions and federations like the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) and COSATU have adopted more transformative proposals for a just transition, embracing the opportunities of socially owned renewable energy systems and advocating for broader social change. However, the absence of transition policies following the closure of five major coal-fired power plants in 2017 (Strambo *et al.* 2019) has placed unions and their members under significant pressure (Cock 2019, Kalt 2022). Recently, mining unions like the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and NUMSA have taken a more defensive stance regarding the energy transition, advocating for job protection and expressing skepticism towards transition proposals that are perceived as ‘neoliberal,’ such as green job creation (Cock 2019, Kalt 2022). These shifts demonstrate how stances towards just transition are not necessarily static, and can respond to policy developments and job losses.

Industry actors also represent key agents of resistance to industrial transformation. This transformation is characterised by a Minerals-Energy Complex, in which the coal sector plays a significant socio-economic role, and is supported by powerful incumbent actors, like the vertically integrated electricity utility, Eskom. This limits the state’s ability to steer industrial policy (Baker *et al.* 2014, Hanto *et al.* 2022, Bookbinder 2024, Bez *et al.* 2025). Eskom, the state-owned electricity utility, is heavily politically entangled, and relies on routine government bailouts to remain financially solvent (Bowman 2020). In response to decarbonisation pressures, incumbent actors like Eskom, mining companies, and certain parts of the government promote a ‘balanced’ green growth logic, while still considering coal power essential for economic growth and emphasising the downsides of phasing it out (Wilgosh *et al.* 2022, Busch *et al.* 2023).

Heretofore, studies on the (re-)interpretation of just transitions by national actors in South Africa have focused on a specific set of actors (e.g. workers and unions, in the case of Cock (2019); Rätzzel *et al.* (2018); Kalt (2022) or mining-affected communities in the case of Mohlakoana *et al.* (2023); Barnes (2022)). However, these studies have not systematically examined how just transitions discourses respond to policy events such as the introduction of the JETP or JTF. There exists comparatively less research on how competing definitions of just transition are reified in national

policymaking, including the aims of less prominent actors (though important politically) within the private sector, the political elite, and the environmental movement (Wang and Lo 2021).

Recent scholarship in the field of International Political Economy demonstrates how just transition framings risk being co-opted by fossil fuel vested interests to hinder the phase-out of fossil fuels (Goods 2022, Harry *et al.* 2024), despite the appearance of a *just transition consensus*. The concept of a just transition is particularly vulnerable to co-optation, echoing long-standing debates over jobs versus environmental protection (Ciplet and Harrison 2020, Bez 2025) or energy security. In the South African context, just transitions may too thus be discursively captured by incumbent actors within the Minerals-Energy Complex, and instrumentalised to maintain political influence and resist structural change, maintaining significant influence over South African energy policy thereby (Hanto *et al.* 2022, Bez *et al.* 2025).

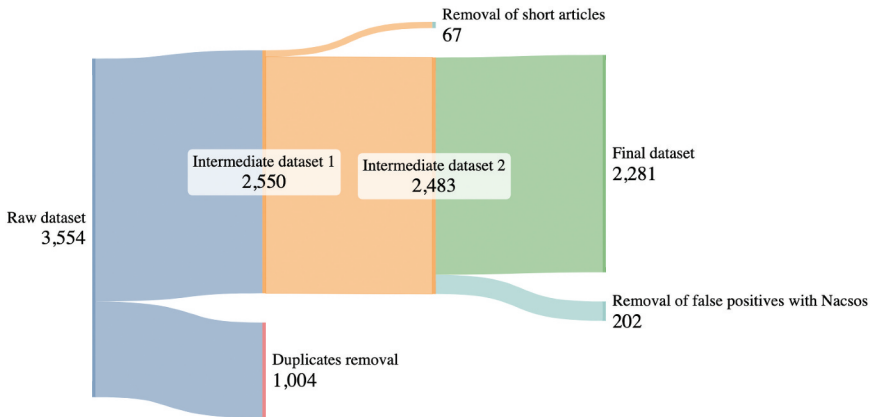
These dynamics challenge the assumption that just transitions can operate as a stable consensus-building framework in transition politics (see also Winkler 2020). In line with Fischer *et al.* (2025), we therefore treat *just transition* not primarily as a policy framework but as a site of discursive struggle through which actors seek to legitimise and advance their existing interests and strategies. Analysing such struggles requires attention to how energy issues are framed and how dominant and counter-discourses compete for visibility (Wagner 2018). To empirically capture these dynamics, we build on work integrating computational text analysis with qualitative policy research (Isoaho *et al.* 2021).

### 3. Methods

A full description of the methods are included in the Online Methods. The following section therefore provides a concise overview of the methods approach to guide the reader.

We analyse 2,281 English-language newspaper articles from South Africa retrieved from the LexisNexis Academic database, identified through a structured search for ‘just transition (s)’ or ‘just energy transition(s)’ in articles published since 2008. After extracting full texts and metadata, we removed duplicates using a 99% similarity threshold, filtered false positives, and excluded documents shorter than 70 words. Figure 1 summarises the preprocessing workflow and resulting dataset size. See Subsection A.1 for full details.

We employ a mixed-methods design, combining qualitative coding with computational text-as-data techniques, to analyse just transition discourse in South Africa. We first qualitatively code a randomised subset of newspaper articles – validated as representative through topic modelling – to identify



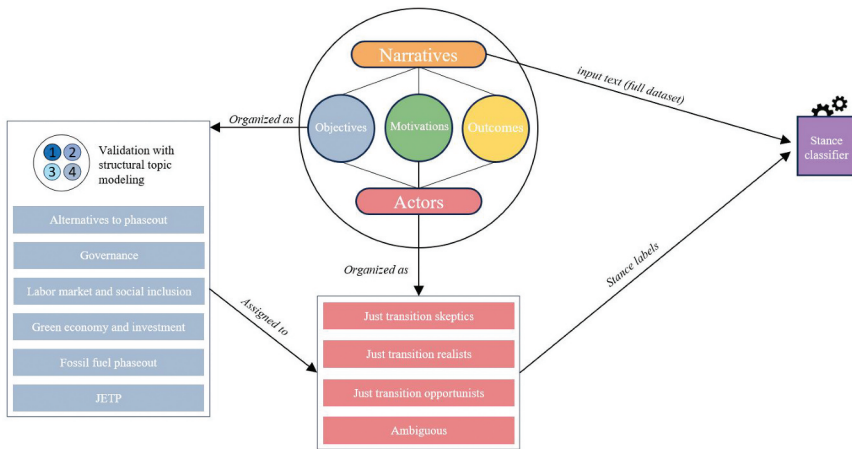
**Figure 1.** Sankey graph illustrating the reduction of the dataset as part of preprocessing.

motivations, objectives, and outcomes, which allows us to distinguish three political stances: skeptics, realists, and opportunists. These stance categories are then used to train a supervised machine-learning classifier applied to the full corpus to trace the relative and absolute salience of stances over time, with findings subsequently validated using structural topic modelling. [Figure 2](#) summarises the analytical framework, including the six thematic objective domains, the stance typology, and the sequential integration of qualitative and computational methods. Full details on the mixed-methods research design are provided in the Online Methods (Subsection 1.2)

### 3.1. Qualitative coding

The first stage of our analysis uses qualitative coding to classify just transition discourse. A randomised subset of 150 articles was uploaded to MAXQDA and systematically coded by two researchers. Within this subset, text segments were coded according to five categories central to the debate on a just transition in South Africa: overarching narratives, motivations or context, objectives, and imagined outcomes. Additional codes were used to link narratives to specific actors (e.g. President Ramaphosa, the Minister of Mineral and Petroleum Resources Gwede Mantashe, Eskom workers), as well as to anticipated challenges and the role of the international community. A complete list of coded actors is provided in Table B1 in Appendix B.

In total, we qualitatively coded 805 codes. Objective codes were subsequently grouped into six thematic domains (shown in blue in [Figure 2](#)). Our analysis focused on intersections between codes – such as actors and objectives – which were examined within each theme to synthesise the dominant discourses and key actors discussed in [Section 4](#).



**Figure 2.** Conceptual overview of mixed-method research design and analytical stages. First, we qualitatively coded a subset of just transition narratives to identify objectives, motivations, and outcomes (in circle; see Section 3.1). The objectives codes are organised into six main themes, relating to alternatives to phaseout, governance, labour market and social inclusion, green economy and investment, fossil fuel phaseout, and the JETP (in blue). These codes inform the construction of three political stance categories: skeptics, realists, and opportunists (in red), under which we describe actors in the national debate. We then use these stance categories in a supervised machine learning model (in purple) to classify narrative snippets from the entire dataset (Section 3.2). Finally, the objectives codes are validated via STM (Section 3.3).

### 3.2. Stance classification

This subsection applies a machine-learning stance classifier to just transition discourse using the skeptics, realists, and opportunists framework shown in red in Figure 2 and defined in Table 1. Stance classification allows us to scale the manually developed coding scheme to the full

**Table 1.** Definitions of each just transition stance used for stance classification.

<i>Just transition skeptics</i>	Skeptics express doubt or opposition to phasing out fossil fuels, emphasising the downsides of transition by citing economic risks, job losses, or energy security concerns. They argue that a rapid transition away from fossil fuels may not be feasible or beneficial.
<i>Just transition realists</i>	Realists focus on the practical aspects and conditions required for a successful just transition. They acknowledge the need for careful planning, financial resources, policy support, and coordination to ensure the transition is effective.
<i>Just transition opportunists</i>	Opportunists frame the just transition as an opportunity for economic growth, job creation, and social benefits. They highlight the potential advantages of shifting to a low-carbon economy, emphasizing its positive impact on society and the environment.
<i>Ambiguous</i>	Ambiguous stances do not take a clear stance on the just transition. They present facts, policies, or general statements without expressing support, criticism, or a specific vision of how the transition should unfold.

dataset in a consistent and replicable manner (see Burnham 2025, for guidance). Narrative snippets mentioning the ‘just transition’ are assigned a stance based on linguistic features learned from the hand-coded data, enabling efficient classification at scale. This approach strengthens the validity of our qualitative findings and allows us to track changes in stance prevalence over time using publication-date metadata. Full details including snippet construction, model specification, training data, and validation are provided in the Online Methods (Subsection 1.3).

### 3.3. Topic modelling

To validate the themes and actors emerging from the qualitative analysis, we apply a structural topic model (STM) to the full corpus of 2,281 articles. STM is a well-established unsupervised text-as-data method that identifies latent topics based on word co-occurrence patterns and links them probabilistically to documents. We use STM as a validation tool rather than a primary discovery method, assessing whether the dominant themes emerging from qualitative coding are reflected in the corpus-wide topic structure. Full details on preprocessing, model selection, and validation procedures are provided in the Online Methods (Subsection 1.4).

## 4. Results

In this section, we begin by presenting the dimensions of just transition discourses based on the qualitative analysis, including evidence for alignment around a *just transition consensus*, and divergence along three main stances: just transition skeptics, opportunists and realists. Second, we apply this classification scheme using machine learning to understand how certain policy events influence the frequency of just transitions discourse and proportion of stances over time. Lastly, we present a validation of our qualitative findings using structural topic modelling.

### 4.1. Dimensions of the just transition discourse

In the following subsections we describe the dimensions of just transition discourse where there is relative alignment in the news media and where we identify divergence. Just transitions discourses diverge along three main stances: skeptics, realists, and opportunists (see Table 1). Newspaper articles are cited as footnotes in this section, with a full reference list available in Table C1 and unreferenced (but coded) articles available in Table C2 in Appendix C.

#### 4.1.1. Evidence for a just transition consensus

Actors express a shared vision of decarbonisation, social protection, and economic development in South Africa's just transition discourse. Distributional justice, specifically, is acknowledged by nearly all actors. For instance, civil society and government actors tend to highlight impacts of climate change on poor and marginalised communities<sup>1,2,3,4</sup> while unions place greater emphasis on the labour impacts of transition.<sup>5,6,7</sup> Eskom, business associations, and multinational energy companies often reference South Africa's Low Emission Development Strategy goal of net zero by 2050,<sup>8,9,10,11</sup> and business actors express concerns of the financial risks posed by climate change.<sup>12,13</sup> Ramaphosa and his Cabinet reinforce a vision of achieving a low carbon, climate resilient economy and acknowledge the impacts of climate-related events like flooding and water scarcity.<sup>3,14,15,16,17,4</sup> Energy security is mentioned by all actors, and especially emphasised as a motivation for just transition by academic, ministerial, and business actors.<sup>4,18,19,20</sup> Lastly, visions of a renewable-based energy system and fossil fuel phaseout are raised by environmental organisations<sup>18,21,1</sup> and government and businesses often refer to just transition in terms of green industrialisation.<sup>22,23,3</sup> Thus, anticipated outcomes of just transition are rather coherent with the belief that a just transition will result in a structurally transformed lower carbon economy with attention to vulnerable groups, reflecting a *just transition consensus*.

#### 4.1.2. Just transition skeptics

Just transition skeptics represent those actors with diverging views from more mainstream understandings of just transition. Skeptics often cast doubt on the urgency of an energy transition, while promoting alternatives to a total phaseout of fossil fuels. Skeptics likewise hold critical perspectives on the JETP, and its coal phaseout targets. They argue that only an incremental and carefully managed energy transition can guarantee energy and economic security. These actors advocate for investment in alternative energies and technologies such as 'clean coal', carbon management, natural gas, and nuclear, along with improvements to mine safety. Prominent skeptics of just transition include the Minister of Mineral and Petroleum Resources Gwede Mantashe, mining unions, and fossil fuel corporations.

To ensure South African energy security and a diversified energy mix, fossil fuel companies and members of Ramaphosa's Cabinet have called for new investments in nuclear energy, liquefied natural gas, 'clean coal', and upstream petroleum industry development, to foster a 'responsible transition.'<sup>24,25,15,26,8,27</sup> Coal companies like Exxaro also point to the slow speed of historical energy transitions as a reason to take South Africa's transition gradually.<sup>8,28</sup> Concerns of energy security are raised in parallel with 'right to development' narratives, emphasising South Africa's sovereign

right to exploit its natural resources to economically develop.<sup>16,29,30,19</sup> Gwede Mantashe and some mining companies (like Bushveld Minerals) argue that South Africans should capitalise on their mineral resources instead of exporting them.<sup>31,32,15</sup> Meanwhile, some multinational extractives companies like South<sup>32</sup> and Anglo-American have argued for transferring ownership of fossil infrastructures to South African mining operators.<sup>11</sup>

Extractives companies have made careful and sometimes contradictory statements regarding their commitments to coal phaseout. Glencore, one of South Africa's largest coal companies, pledged to run down its coal mines and cap coal production, while simultaneously stating that coal mines should be operate until they are out of reserves.<sup>27,11</sup> Public statements from Glencore, Exxaro, and Seriti acknowledge South Africa's NDC target of net zero emissions by 2050 and express support for the role of renewables in decarbonising South Africa's power sector.<sup>11,8,10,28,45</sup> For example, Exxaro describes a future where coal is not completely phased out: 'A decrease in the share of coal in the global energy mix is predicted in the long-term, but this doesn't mean that it will no longer be a source of energy. It will remain relevant in the production of electricity in SA for the foreseeable future' (para 10).<sup>10</sup>

Proponents of continued coal use exist within government, most notably Minister Mantashe, the former General Secretary of the National Union of Mineworkers. Mantashe frequently appeals to historical injustices, for example: "On the just transition, Mantashe said it must aid development and address historical inequalities, not undermine, and exacerbate them. 'We must not be ambivalent about the just energy transition debate. The assumed pendulum swing, or what others call "accelerated transition", intent on replacing one system with another in a flash, is both irrational and dangerous,' [Mantashe] said" (para 12).<sup>29</sup> Hence, Mantashe and pro-coal industry actors refer to distributional injustices, opposing a rapid coal phaseout, and creating implicit tension with parts of government and civil society advocating for decarbonisation and green transformation.

With respect to climate finance and the JETP, government ministers, representatives from Eskom, and union federations like COSATU and the National Union of Mineworkers appeal to restorative and distributional injustices, and argue that South Africa should not further its dependence on foreign financing at the expense of worker livelihoods.<sup>33,34,35,6</sup> Some fossil fuel industry actors (namely those from the oil and gas sector) echo civil society concerns of reliance on foreign assistance, and contend that the JETP will hurt South Africa's oil and gas developments and fail to address endemic socioeconomic inequalities and energy insecurity.<sup>15,34,8</sup> Simultaneously, Minister Mantashe, Minister of Finance Enoch Godongwana, President Ramaphosa and civil society actors emphasise the historical responsibility of developed nations (such as those financing the JETP) to unconditionally

fund South Africa's just energy transition, given their overall contributions to climate change, thus making more explicit appeals to global and restorative justice.<sup>29,3,36,5,37</sup> Meanwhile, critics of the deal, like the Minister of Electricity and Energy Kgosientsho Ramokgopa have echoed rhetoric used by Mantashe, reiterating 'that we can't be guinea pigs who shut down firms for intermittent capacity while load-shedding and calling it transitioning' (para 8).<sup>33</sup>

#### 4.1.3. *Just transition opportunists*

Opportunists feature prominently in the just transitions discourse, viewing the just transition as an opportunity for South Africa's low-carbon transformation, and driving objectives of fossil fuel phaseout, green economic investment, and broad support for the JETP. Opportunists exist across civil society, government, and the private sector, and believe that a just transition is incumbent on fossil fuel phaseout while emphasising opportunities for economic development and environmental protection.

Environmental justice organisations describe a just transition via divestment from fossil fuels and advocate for moratoriums on new coal-to-liquid and nuclear power plants and halting seismic fossil fuel exploration.<sup>38,19,39</sup> These organisations make demands for restorative justice following the negative health and environmental impacts of coal mining on communities.<sup>40,41,42</sup> Fossil fuel phaseout is also supported by President Ramaphosa and his Presidential Climate Commission, which has pushed to decommission coal plants, especially those at the end of their operational life.<sup>43,44</sup>

Phasing in new energy generation receives broader attention across actors than discussions about phaseout, circumventing issues of (in)justice or phaseout timelines. More specifically, investment in renewables aligns with the interests of other private sector, government, and international civil society actors who view the just transition as an opportunity for phasing in green technologies and diversifying the South African energy mix. Commonly mentioned opportunities for green investment include renewables, green hydrogen, mineral value chains, electric vehicles, sustainable aviation fuels, and grid improvements as pathways towards just transition.<sup>3,46,47,48,14,32,49,30,9,37,50</sup>

Specifically, Ramaphosa's Cabinet, business associations, financial consultancies, and clean energy companies emphasise the ability of new green sectors to create jobs and foster economic growth.<sup>50,3,51,46,9,52,49,53</sup> Green hydrogen is one such investment frontier that is mentioned by investors,<sup>9</sup> energy companies like Sasol,<sup>47</sup> and President Ramaphosa. Calls for green investment coincide with calls to improve South Africa's grid infrastructure by business and academic actors, in part to accommodate increasing renewable power capacity.<sup>9,37,20</sup> Mining industry representatives emphasise the potential of emerging mineral value chains,<sup>31,32</sup> while international civil

society organisations like Greenpeace and African Climate Foundation advocate for increased investments in renewable energy.<sup>54,40,21,41</sup>

Just transition opportunists perceive the JETP as a chance to provide South Africa's green transition with a critical infusion of finance and as supporting the country's commitment to climate action. This perspective is endorsed by President Ramaphosa and Finance Minister Godongwana, who describe the JETP as representing South Africa's commitments to climate action and positioning the country to become a global leader on the just energy transition.<sup>44,55</sup> Actors in the financial sector (e.g. Intellidex, Busa, NBI) meanwhile put forth estimates for the amount of financing necessary to enable a just transition and meet Paris Agreement targets, while arguing that national net zero targets can signal and attract more international climate finance.<sup>9,56</sup>

#### 4.1.4. *Just transition realists*

Just transition realists maintain the necessity of a just transition, but believe implementation will be challenging, highlighting practical governance and institutional constraints. Realists thus drive objectives on governance aspects, labour impacts and inclusion, and contribute towards the debate on the JETP. Civil society actors, particularly trade unions, along with government and private sector representatives, fear that workers will face vulnerabilities and exclusion in the transition, emphasising attention towards distributional and procedural justice.<sup>7,35,18,6,57,44,58,59,53,8</sup> They hence advocate for worker protections, reskilling in green industries, employment opportunities for women and young people, and rights for informal mining workers.<sup>58,44,60,8,53,61,62,63,18</sup>

Mining unions fear job losses from unmitigated coal plant closures, emphasising that the just transition should not prioritise climate or sustainability goals over worker livelihoods.<sup>7,35,18,6,57</sup> Many unions depict a relatively technology-neutral vision of just transition that improves worker's material conditions via improved mine safety and formalisation of artisanal miners.<sup>5,35,18</sup> COSATU described their stance on job protectionism by stating: 'The central executive committee emphasised the importance of creating new "green jobs" before we can accept cuts in existing jobs' (para 14).<sup>5</sup> Various civil society actors, government ministers, and President Ramaphosa have promoted job creation and re-skilling programs for workers.<sup>3,60,63,8,61,64,23</sup> Organisations advocating for mining workers' rights (such as the National Association of Artisanal Miners) and other civil society organisations (such as groundWork) simultaneously underscore the need for procedural justice for affected workers and communities to be included in just transition planning and policy design.<sup>2,18</sup>

Just transition realists comprise economic and policy experts in government (especially the Ministry of Finance), academia, and business. They

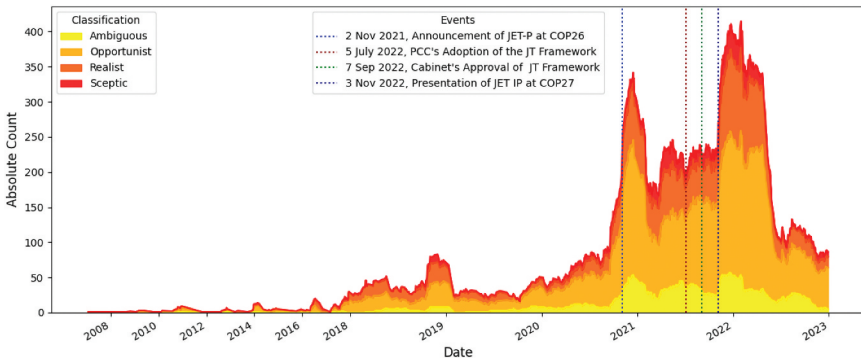
outline the need for various governance reforms to achieve just transitions, including fiscal reforms (including management of Eskom's debt), green industrial policies, and coordination between government and private investors.<sup>65,25,3,56,22,66</sup> A regional head at Enel Green Power states: 'the main challenge at the heart of the energy transition remains a need for massive investments . . . We need strong political commitments from government to encourage the private sector' (para 5).<sup>53</sup>

Nearly all social actors, including civil society organisations (such as Khuthala and groundWork), academic experts, and private firms point to the need for strong political commitment to implement a just transition and earn back the trust of the public and private sector.<sup>68,69,37,18,53,56</sup> In addition to calls for greater political leadership, *realists* advocate for specific governance approaches, with Transform RSA calling for an industrialisation strategy for manufacturing leveraging South Africa's Integrated Resource Plan,<sup>22</sup> and private sector actors urging reforms to the Renewable Energy Independent Power Producer Procurement Programme (REIPPPP) and liberalisation of the electricity market.<sup>52,56,70</sup>

Governance and labour concerns persist within debates around climate finance and the JETP among just transition realists.<sup>35,6,71</sup> As described above, trade unions raise distributional justice concerns over who benefits from JETP financing, echoed by a NUMSA spokesperson who states that 'only the banks and international finance capital are celebrating because they will profit at our expense' (para 18).<sup>6</sup> President Ramaphosa and Finance Minister Godongwana<sup>3</sup> have publicly urged donor nations to offer a larger share of grant funding in the JETP Agreement, as opposed to loans, with Ramaphosa stating that the country would reject any deal that undermined the public fiscus and national developmental goals.<sup>30,16</sup> Meanwhile, academic experts highlight that JETP funding will be insufficient to significantly disrupt the country's political economy of coal, naming lack of political economy of coal, naming lack of political will as the largest barrier to transformation.<sup>69</sup>

## 4.2. *Just transitions discourse over time*

Actor stances on just transition are not necessarily static, but can shift over time in response to key policy events. We illustrate the relative frequencies of actor stances towards the just transition in a stacked area plot in [Figure 3](#) between 2008 and 2023 (see Table B0 in Appendix B for a frequency distribution of stances per year). The stance classifications – skeptic (red), realist (dark orange), opportunist (light orange), and ambiguous (yellow) – represent distinct perspectives on the just transition. The four vertical dotted lines mark key milestones in South Africa's JET policy development. The first line, in



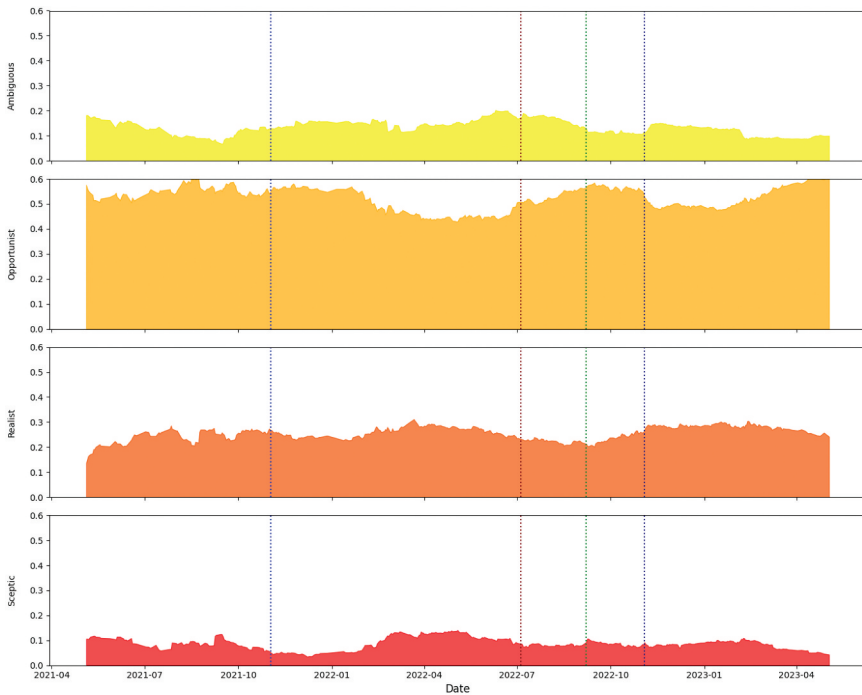
**Figure 3.** Absolute salience of stances toward the just transition, 2008–2023. Earlier years until 2018 are compressed on the x-axis to reduce the left tail of the distribution. The four vertical lines mark key policy events: the announcement of the JETP at COP26 (dotted blue line), the Presidential climate Commission’s adoption of the jt Framework (dotted red line), the Cabinet’s approval of the jt framework (dotted green line), and the beginning of COP27 which featured the announcement of the just energy transition investment plan (dotted dark blue line).

blue, corresponds to the announcement of the Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP) at the UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) in Glasgow on 2 November 2021. The second, in red, marks the Presidential Climate Commission’s adoption of the Just Transition (JT) Framework on 5 July 2022. The third, in green, indicates the South African Cabinet’s approval of the same framework on 7 September 2022. The fourth vertical line, in dark blue, represents the presentation of South Africa’s Just Energy Transition Investment Plan (JET-IP) on 3 November 2022 during COP27 in Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt.

This graph illustrates two significant spikes in discourse intensity, aligning with the periods surrounding COP26 and COP27. These peaks reflect moments of heightened engagement, particularly as political and policy milestones brought the topic into sharper public and media focus. While these peaks reflect increased engagement with just transitions discourse, we are especially interested in how the relative salience of stances changes.

Aggregating classifications over the period 2008 to 2023, approximately 58% of statements are classified as opportunist, followed by 20% as realist, 14% as sceptic, and 8% as ambiguous. These aggregate figures offer a broad overview of attitudinal prevalence. We now turn to salience shift over time.

Figure 4 illustrates the relative distribution of just transition stance classifications over time and disaggregated by category (refer to Figure 3 for legend). In this figure, the y-axis represents the proportional share of each classification, allowing comparability across periods, as we are also interested



**Figure 4.** Relative salience of stances toward the just transition, disaggregated by classification. The vertical lines mark key policy events, as presented in the event legend in [Figure 3](#).

in the relative salience of stances. The visualisation highlights potential shifts in stance salience around the key events discussed above.

Visual inspection of the disaggregated distributions depicting the relative salience of actor classifications from April 2021 to mid-2023 reveals several patterns. Sceptics, while consistently the smallest group, display the highest volatility. Their share drops sharply after COP26, rebounds in early 2022, and then declines following COP27 up until the most recent dates available – suggesting reactive rather than sustained engagement. A recent example from the literature supporting increased skepticism is Mukanjari *et al.* (2023), who find that the JETP announcement led to a decline in coal firm valuations, indicating that the policy attracted investor attention and led to a short-term shift away from coal. Opportunists dominate overall but show a dip after the adoption of the JT Framework in July 2022, possibly reflecting recalibration in response to formalised policy. Their share rises again around COP27, indicating renewed enthusiasm with high-level announcements. Ambiguous discourse peaks mid-2022, around Cabinet approval of the JT Framework, before declining after the JET-IP launch. This may reflect heightened

discourse about policies, as the investment plan clarified priorities – such as renewable energy, green hydrogen, and the economic transition of coal regions. Realists trend upward through 2021 and early 2022, stabilising thereafter. Unlike other groups, they exhibit relatively steady engagement, suggesting sustained policy-oriented framings amid shifting political moments.

Apart from these findings, [Figure 4](#) indicates relative stability in stance shares over time. This observation points to actors having established positions on the just transition that persist despite external policy interventions. The relative lack of large-scale shifts suggests that while key events at COP26 and COP27 may trigger some short-lived fluctuations, the broader patterns of engagement remain structurally entrenched. This aligns with theories of issue polarisation, where stances become more established over time (Levin *et al.* 2021).

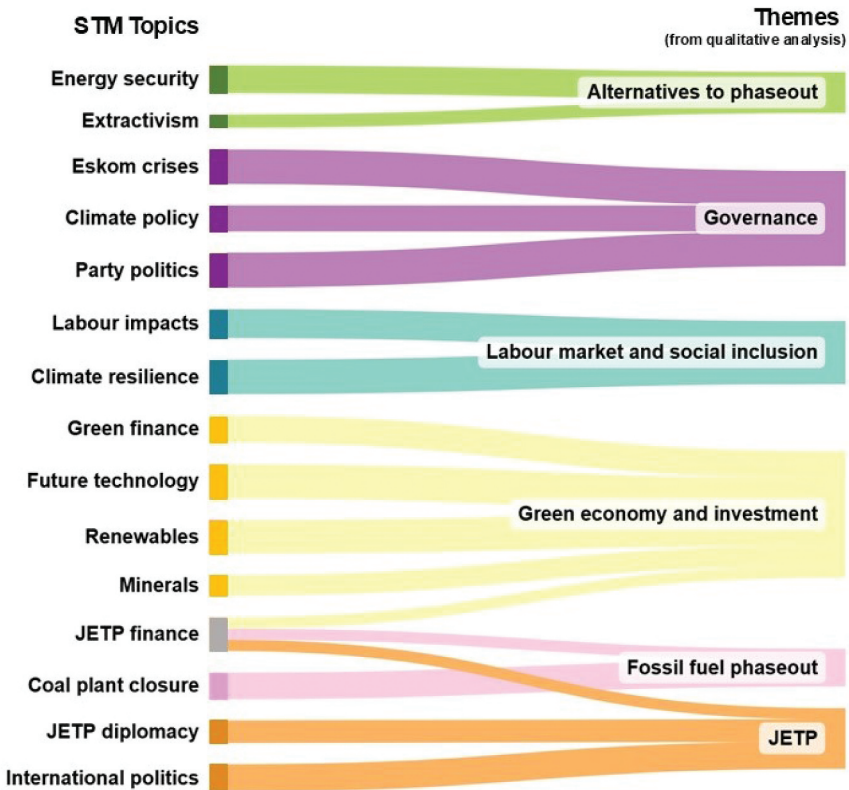
### 4.3. Validation through topic modelling

As a final robustness check to ensure no salient topics were omitted from our qualitative analysis (later used to guide the stance classification), we compare our findings with a topic model of the entire dataset. The topic model produces aggregated lists of frequently co-occurring words (see Table B2), which can be mapped onto the themes that emerged from our qualitative analysis (Alternatives to phaseout, Governance, Labour market and social inclusion, Green economy and investment, Fossil fuel phaseout, and the JETP). [Figure 5](#) illustrates how the computer-generated topics were mapped onto the qualitative themes.

All topics can be mapped to a single theme with the exception of the JETP finance topic, which cuts across the themes green economy and investment, fossil fuel phaseout, and JETP. This figure also provides a visual indication of the relative size of the different topics (left side) and themes (right side). Visibly, the theme of green economy and investment prevails in the news media discourse, followed by governance, with fossil fuel phaseout and alternatives to phaseout comprising the smallest share.

## 5. Discussion

In this article, we explore the extent to which just transition serves as a common narrative frame that actors use to advance their pre-existing positions and interests in energy policy debates. Much like the diffusion of the *decarbonisation consensus* (Bringel and Svampa 2024), emergence of a *just transition consensus* can be understood through the lens of how discourses are constructed and performed in media. South African news media offers a compelling case to study the performativity of just transition



**Figure 5.** Sankey graph to depict clustering of computer-generated topics into qualitatively coded themes. The width of the flows represent the relative share of topics in the news media, according to the structural topic modelling (STM) output.

discourses, given the diverse stances towards just transitions, the labour movement's responsive reorientation around the concept, and its unique position as the first Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP) recipient country.

We find that the concept of just transition in South Africa implies broad rhetorical agreement to take action on climate change and acknowledge distributional injustices associated with transition (namely affected coal workers and communities) across actors. This is supported by the JT Framework, which claims to have achieved consensus around a commitment to the overall principle of just transitions and around which actors are considered vulnerable to energy transitions (e.g. including affected youth, unemployed, and women) (Collins 2022).

Despite this, there also exists clear tension between the desired objectives, pace, and governance approaches by key actors, which explains why the just transition alone does not serve as a unifying policy frame in South Africa.

This is underscored by a lack of shared policy aims and understanding of how the just transition should ultimately *address* aspects of procedural, distributional, and restorative justice.

Civil society demands are widely reflected in the JT Framework, and political cleavages over policy aims of just transition are perhaps best exemplified by the distinction between the JT Framework and JETP Agreement. We find that the JETP has inflated certain perspectives in the national just transition discourse, in fact, marginalising certain debates on justice, social welfare, and climate resilience. This crowding out is corroborated by the thematic distributions in [Figure 5](#) and peaks in discourse surrounding major policy events illustrated in [Figure 3](#).

National JETP discourse is characterised by the rapid emergence of green growth narratives from many business, government, and international actors. Such opportunist discourses highlighting the potential for green industrialisation are most often advanced by those actors with most proximity to power and capital, which mirrors Harry *et al.* (2024)'s argument that capital-aligned interests possess an overriding commitment to accumulation rather than decarbonisation, *per se*. Primary critics include many of the same skeptics of the just transition itself, such as ministers in charge of energy, fossil fuel companies, trade unions, and energy sector workers, who argue that agreements with international partners should not prioritise climate mitigation targets over the livelihoods of coal workers.

Meanwhile, concerns of job security and transition pacing have been taken up by the fossil fuel industry to create a political alignment with labour that is dubiously consensual. Legitimate concerns over distributional justice are echoed by industry, but for the preservation of coal extraction, not the improvement of worker livelihoods. The persistence of skepticism among actors with vested interests in the coal value chain, while not altogether surprising, can be further interrogated through the lens of performativity of the just transition discourse. In this case, fossil incumbents acknowledge the necessity of a just transition to a low-carbon economy (signalling their alignment with a *just transition consensus*) but stress that it should be slow or carefully managed, highlighting potential risks, e.g. on industry, workers, and the economy. This is in line with Mildemberger (2020); Harry *et al.* (2024), arguing that extractive companies emphasise the need for gradual transitions, technological readiness, or social stability as reasons to postpone structural change. This behaviour may be understood as climate delay, which highlights how incumbent fossil actors increasingly shift their strategies from outright climate denial to more subtle forms of obstruction (Lamb *et al.* 2020).

The case of South Africa highlights the importance of designing phaseout policies with broad social inclusion, while identifying co-optation and assimilation of just transitions by vested or foreign interests as a risk to political

trust and future usefulness of the concept to serve as a consensus-building tool. A lack of state commitment to justice principles, such as those outlined in the JT Framework, can produce social backlash and unforeseen policy reactions, such as trade union reorientation of just transition advocacy towards job protectionism and more recent opposition to the JETP (Cock 2019, McNamara 2024). Climate policies and financing deals that aim to foster socially accepted just transitions should therefore ensure that the interests of civil society are not sidelined and be wary of vested interests. Extending beyond South Africa, one of our key results cautions that externally driven just transition policies may entrench domestic positions, leaving key policy disagreements unresolved. This finding has implications for just transitions policy design and other JETP recipient countries, e.g. Indonesia, Vietnam, and Senegal, as well as international climate finance in general.

Conceptually, our approach explores the configuration of what we term a ‘pre-decisional policy arena’, or the discursive and political space in which the feasibility of policy change is shaped before formal decisions are taken. We argue that news discourse can provide a useful empirical lens into this space, as actor stances can signal how far specific policy frameworks become normalised, contested, or constrained. Our proposed systematic analysis of the discursive patterns of the JT can therefore be scaled and applied to other policy domains. By detecting discursive shifts surrounding policy proposals, we point to an *observable indicator* of changing political feasibility conditions within the policy formulation stage.

Methodologically, our analysis is subject to several limitations. Although LexisNexis is widely used in news analyses (Buntain *et al.* 2023), relying on a single provider may bias coverage toward certain outlets. To assess how strongly our findings on just transition stances are driven by the composition of outlets in the dataset, we provide an additional outlet-level analysis, see Figure A7 in Appendix B. It shows that most outlets contain content across all four stances, albeit in varying relative composition. Second, our English search query excludes potential content in other commonly spoken languages in South Africa such as Zulu, Xhosa, and Afrikaans. However, given the post-colonial usage of English as the predominant language in national policy debates (and Anglo-American origins of the just transition concept), we do not believe that such a limitation would alter the outcomes and main findings of our analysis. Indeed, significant news content could not be found in LexisNexis when translating ‘just transition’ into the aforementioned languages. Likewise, we are interested in discourses in national news media, over local or regional sources, since these are more likely to feed into national policy debates. Lastly, text-as-data methods like topic modelling and stance classification can oversimplify context and tone, and risk confirmation bias (Isoaho *et al.* 2021, Müller-Hansen *et al.* 2022). To mitigate these potential limitations as much as possible, we have taken extensive

steps to validate our models and findings iteratively. This validation includes complementing quantitative approaches with manual article coding and independent assessment of model outputs.

## 6. Conclusion

This mixed-method study investigates the contested nature of just transitions discourse by integrating natural language processing tools and qualitative analysis. By introducing a framework of skeptical, opportunist and realist stances towards just transitions, we develop a methodology to dynamically trace how discourses evolve and respond to political developments. Taken further, this can culminate in a tool to assess how discursive dynamics shape the conditions under which policy change becomes politically feasible.

Taking South Africa as an example, we find that a broad rhetorical consensus coexists with deep and persistent divisions over its process, justice and policy priorities, and pace. Just transition operates as a hegemonic frame that structures the public discourse on transition politics. It does not, however, contribute to resolving underlying conflicts of distribution, coal phase-out, or resource control. International climate finance instruments, such as the JETP, can consolidate actors around a shared vocabulary of just transition that recognises the need for climate action and social protection, while simultaneously opening new possibilities for co-optation by incumbent interests or assimilation into green growth agendas. South Africa's experience reveals how the just transition concept can both open and constrain political space: while it broadens participation, it also risks fostering political backlash, where calls for justice become diluted and sidelined in the pursuit of green investment or by non-transformative visions that preserve the status quo.

## Acknowledgments

The authors gratefully acknowledge the valuable feedback received at the FossilExit Colloquium at TU Berlin in 2023, the ESEE 2024 conference, the EfD 2024 Annual Meeting, the ECPR General Conference 2024, the seminar participants at the UMass Amherst College of Social & Behavioral Sciences in April 2025, and the Green Colonialism Conference and Green Sacrifice at UPF Barcelona in 2025. We also thank Ananya Ganesh and Almut Mohr for in-depth conversations; and the three reviewers for their very helpful feedback.

## Author contributions

CRedit: **Charlotte Sophia Bez:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Software, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Thomas Klug:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis,

Investigation, Methodology, Software, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Giacomo Raederscheidt**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Validation, Visualization; **Jan Christoph Steckel**: Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

The work was supported by the Werner Siemens Foundation through the CERES project; and by the German Ministry for Economic Corporation and Development (BMZ) through the TRANSFORM project.

## ORCID

Charlotte Sophia Bez  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7851-6010>

Thomas Klug  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2793-5634>

Giacomo Raederscheidt  <http://orcid.org/0009-0003-2681-6788>

Jan Christoph Steckel  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5325-9214>

## Data availability statement

The full-text dataset cannot be made available due to the copyright restrictions of the newspaper article provider. However, we provide in the supplementary materials a list of the referenced newspaper articles used in the qualitative analysis (see footnote citations in the main text).

## References

- Baker, L., Newell, P., and Phillips, J., 2014. The political economy of energy transitions: the case of South Africa. *New Political Economy*, 19 (6), 791–818. doi:10.1080/13563467.2013.849674
- Barnes, J., 2022. Divergent desires for the just transition in South Africa: an assemblage analysis. *Political Geography*, 97, 102655. doi:10.1016/j.polgeo.2022.102655
- Bez, C.S., 2025. Conceptualising the environmental dimension of left-behind places. *Ecological Economics*, 228, 108448. doi:10.1016/j.ecolecon.2024.108448
- Bez, C.S., Raederscheidt, G., and Steckel, J.C., 2025. Dirty talk: media discourse and the struggle over South Africa's coal transition. *Energy Research & Social Science*, 130, 104398. doi:10.1016/j.erss.2025.104398
- Bookbinder, R., 2024. Politicising energy transitions: the political economy of reducing dependence on coal in South Africa's minerals energy complex. *Environmental Politics*, 34 (6), 1–22. doi:10.1080/09644016.2024.2429918
- Bowman, A., 2020. Parastatals and economic transformation in South Africa: the political economy of the Eskom crisis. *African Affairs*, 119 (476), 395–431. doi:10.1093/afraf/adaa013

- Bringel, B. and Svampa, M., 2024. Energy transition and the new shape of green colonialism: the emergence of the decarbonisation consensus. In: A. Magnelli, F. Maia and P. H. Martins, eds. *Dependency theories in Latin America*. 1st ed. London: Routledge, 242–258.
- Buntain, N., Liebler, C.M., and Webster, K., 2023. Database use, database discrepancies: Implications for content analyses of news. *Newspaper Research Journal*, 44 (4), 07395329231155193. doi:10.1177/07395329231155193
- Burnham, M., 2025. Stance detection: a practical guide to classifying political beliefs in text. *Political Science Research and Methods*, 13 (3), 611–628. doi:10.1017/psrm.2024.35
- Busch, H., et al., 2023. Mining coal while digging for justice: investigating justice claims against a coal-phase out in five countries. *Extractive Industries and Society*, 15, 101275. doi:10.1016/j.exis.2023.101275
- Ciplet, D. and Harrison, J.L., 2020. Transition tensions: mapping conflicts in movements for a just and sustainable transition. *Environmental Politics*, 29 (3), 435–456. doi:10.1080/09644016.2019.1595883
- Cock, J., 2019. Resistance to coal inequalities and the possibilities of a just transition in South Africa. *Development Southern Africa*, 36 (6), 860–873. doi:10.1080/0376835X.2019.1660859
- Cole, M.J., Canpolat, E., and Sijapati, B., 2025. Profiling risk in South Africa's just transition: who is left behind? *Energy Research and Social Science*, 129, 104351. doi:10.1016/j.erss.2025.104351
- Collins, S., ed. 2022 *A framework for a just transition in South Africa*. South Africa: Presidential Climate Commission.
- Fischer, A., et al., 2025. Will the transition ever be just? Three sites of discursive struggle over justice in transition governance. *Environmental Policy & Governance*, 35 (6), 1152–1163. doi:10.1002/eet.70028
- García-García, P., Carpintero, Ó., and Buendía, L., 2020. Just energy transitions to low carbon economies: a review of the concept and its effects on labour and income. *Energy Research and Social Science*, 70, 101664. doi:10.1016/j.erss.2020.101664
- Goods, C., 2022. How business challenges climate transformation: an exploration of just transition and industry associations in Australia. *Review of International Political Economy*, 29 (6), 2112–2134. doi:10.1080/09692290.2021.1956994
- Hanto, J., et al., 2022. South Africa's energy transition—unraveling its political economy. *Energy for Sustainable Development*, 69, 164–178. doi:10.1016/j.esd.2022.06.006
- Harry, S.J., Maltby, T., and Szulecki, K., 2024. Contesting just transitions: climate delay and the contradictions of labour environmentalism. *Political Geography*, 112, 103114. doi:10.1016/j.polgeo.2024.103114
- Husu, H.-M., 2022. Rethinking incumbency: utilising Bourdieu's field, capital, and habitus to explain energy transitions. *Energy Research and Social Science*, 93, 102825. doi:10.1016/j.erss.2022.102825
- Isoaho, K., Gritsenko, D., and Mäkelä, E., 2021. Topic modeling and text analysis for qualitative policy research. *Policy Studies Journal*, 49 (1), 300–324. doi:10.1111/psj.12343
- Kalt, T., 2022. Agents of transition or defenders of the status quo? Trade union strategies in green transitions. *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 64 (4), 499–521. doi:10.1177/00221856211051794

- Koukouzas, N., *et al.*, 2025. Energy transition in Greece: a regional and national media analysis. *Energies*, 18 (17), 4595. doi:10.3390/en18174595
- Lamb, W.F., *et al.*, 2020. Discourses of climate delay. *Global Sustainability*, 3, e17. doi:10.1017/sus.2020.13
- Levin, S.A., Milner, H.V., and Perrings, C., 2021. The dynamics of political polarization. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 118 (50). doi:10.1073/pnas.2116950118
- Markard, J., Isoaho, K., and Widdel, L., 2023. Discourses around decline: comparing the debates on coal phase-out in the UK, Germany and Finland. In: *Technologies in decline: Socio-technical approaches to discontinuation and destabilisation*. 1st ed. Routledge, 119–144.
- McCauley, D.A., *et al.*, 2013. Advancing energy justice: The triumvirate of tenets. *International Energy Law Review*, 32 (3), 107–110.
- McNamara, T., 2024. Imperialism and social movement unionism in South African responses to the just transition. *Dialectical Anthropology*, 48 (2), 221–241. doi:10.1007/s10624-024-09722-2
- Mildenberger, M., 2020. *Carbon captured: how business and labor control climate politics*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Mirzania, P., *et al.*, 2023. Barriers to powering past coal: implications for a just energy transition in South Africa. *Energy Research and Social Science*, 101, 103122. doi:10.1016/j.erss.2023.103122
- Mohlakoana, N., *et al.*, 2023. Varieties of just transition: public support in South Africa's Mpumalanga coal community for different policy options. *PLOS Climate*, 2 (5), e0000205. doi:10.1371/journal.pclm.0000205
- Mohr, A., 2025. Transition or not? Assessing competing narratives in South Africa's just energy transition. *Energy Research and Social Science*, 125, 104099. doi:10.1016/j.erss.2025.104099
- Mukanjari, S., Sterner, T., and Gelo, D., 2023. Not just a transition. In: *The economics of a just and equitable climate transition EAERE pre-conference workshop*, Limassol, Cyprus.
- Müller-Hansen, F., *et al.*, 2022. The German coal debate on Twitter: reactions to a corporate policy process. *Energy Policy*, 169, 113178. doi:10.1016/j.enpol.2022.113178
- Newell, P. and Mulvaney, D., 2013. The political economy of the 'just transition'. *The Geographical Journal*, 179 (2), 132–140. doi:10.1111/geoj.12008
- Osička, J., *et al.*, 2020. What's next for the European coal heartland? Exploring the future of coal as presented in German, Polish and Czech press. *Energy Research and Social Science*, 61, 101316. doi:10.1016/j.erss.2019.101316
- Otieno, C., Spada, H., and Renkl, A., 2013. Effects of news frames on perceived risk, emotions, and learning. *PLOS ONE*, 8 (11), e79696. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0079696
- Rätzl, N., Cock, J., and Uzzell, D., 2018. Beyond the nature–labour divide: Trade union responses to climate change in South Africa. *Globalizations*, 15 (4), 504–519. doi:10.1080/14747731.2018.1454678
- Schmidt, V.A., 2008. Discursive institutionalism: the explanatory power of ideas and discourse. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 11 (1), 303–326. doi:10.1146/annurev.polisci.11.060606.135342
- South African Government, 2022. South Africa's just energy transition investment plan 2023-2027. Technical report. Pretoria, South Africa, Presidential Climate Commission. Accessed: 2026-03-10.

- Sovacool, B.K. and Brisbois, M.-C., 2019. Elite power in low-carbon transitions: a critical and interdisciplinary review. *Energy Research and Social Science*, 57, 101242. doi:[10.1016/j.erss.2019.101242](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2019.101242)
- Stark, A., Gale, F., and Murphy-Gregory, H., 2023. Just transitions' meanings: a systematic review. *Society and Natural Resources*, 36 (10), 1277–1297. doi:[10.1080/08941920.2023.2207166](https://doi.org/10.1080/08941920.2023.2207166)
- Stavis, D. and Felli, R., 2015. Global labour unions and just transition to a green economy. *International Environmental Agreements: Politics, Law and Economics*, 15 (1), 29–43. doi:[10.1007/s10784-014-9266-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10784-014-9266-1)
- Strambo, C., Burton, J., and Atteridge, A., 2019. *The end of coal? Planning a “just transition” in South Africa*. Stockholm: Stockholm Environment Institute.
- Wagner, A., 2018. The role of media influence in shaping public energy dialogues. In: *The Oxford handbook of energy and society*. Vol. 1, 381.
- Walters, R., et al., 2025. Headlining justice from coalfields to clean futures: how the Australian newsprint media frames a just energy transition. *Energy Research and Social Science*, 125, 104131. doi:[10.1016/j.erss.2025.104131](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2025.104131)
- Wang, X. and Lo, K., 2021. Just transition: a conceptual review. *Energy Research and Social Science*, 82, 102291. doi:[10.1016/j.erss.2021.102291](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2021.102291)
- Wilgosh, B., Sorman, A.H., and Barcena, I., 2022. When two movements collide: learning from labour and environmental struggles for future just transitions. *Futures*, 137, 102903. doi:[10.1016/j.futures.2022.102903](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2022.102903)
- Winkler, H., 2020. Towards a theory of just transition: a neo-Gramscian understanding of how to shift development pathways to zero poverty and zero carbon. *Energy Research and Social Science*, 70, 101789. doi:[10.1016/j.erss.2020.101789](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2020.101789)