



# BUILDING EQUITY & ALIGNMENT FOR IMPACT

## **Just Transition Forum, February 26-28, 2018**

*Organizing New Economies to Serve People and Planet*

### **INTRODUCTION**

At the founding meeting of the BEA Initiative in July 2013, a group of 25 grassroots, four philanthropy and four “big green” representatives came together with a simple mission: to sit together for three days and figure out how to unite the broader environmental movement by breaking down barriers between sectors, aligning political vision and strategies in a bottom-up and principled manner, and sharing resources equitably across the sectors. Since then BEA has expanded, both in terms of people and in the types of the work we engage in. But the basic ideas remain, and are perhaps best realized through the convening of the BEA Forum. This is a space where we have been most successful at both building relationships, fostering political alignment and strategizing pathways for concrete collaboration.

Since convening the Clean Power Plan (CPP) Forum in October 2016, BEA leaders have received continual feedback from numerous funders that this was one of the most successful manifestations of BEA to date, illustrating the BEA’s unique competency in bringing together very divergent groups and movement actors and creating a safe, productive space for them to cultivate affinity and common cause.

And, following the sweeping cuts to environmental protection (and the CPP) by the Trump administration just a few months later, the importance of the BEA Forum remains tantamount to the future health, unity and eventual success of our movements.

For the next Forum, we propose finding alignment and building strategy on Just Transition. This is critical for all the reasons described in the proposal below, but also because Just Transition is truly a product of grassroots organizing, still unattached to any policy arena or political administration, and therein lies its resilience.

## **BACKGROUND**

Since the 1980s, Just Transition has been a dynamic and evolving discourse between labor unions and environmental justice groups, who, while organizing to phase out industries that harm workers, community health and the planet, see the need to build economic alternatives rooted in community self-determination, and with concrete pathways for workers and families to access sustainable, equitable livelihoods.

Over the last decade, due to the growth of a strong, globally-networked climate justice movement, Just Transition has become central to national and international policy arenas. Through efforts led by international trade unions and grassroots social movements, the term was eventually popularized and included in the preamble of the 2015 Paris Accord. While this inclusion (like most of the Accord) is non-binding, it was a benchmark that launched Just Transition across the lexicon of climate change philanthropy, international NGOs, think tanks, green business and policy initiatives.

After the 2016 U.S. elections, when several U.S. funders met to discuss philanthropic priorities in anticipation of the Trump administration's rollbacks of environmental and climate change laws, they identified Just Transition as one of their top three, the other two being frontline community organizing and working with climate change conservatives. Several of these funders have since initiated "roundtables" and "strategic conversations," exploring the potential for Just Transition frameworks to guide the formation of more aggressive climate action plans. While labor and environmental justice movements have historically pushed to popularize Just Transition, this emerging trend raises three real concerns and threats.

## **ENGAGING THE MAINSTREAMING OF JUST TRANSITION**

### **A new way to disguise business as usual**

This newfound and rapidly-expanding philanthropic interest in Just Transition poses both opportunities and threats for movements working in the field. First, as it's mainstreamed, the term runs a real risk of being watered-down to the point of meaninglessness. Along with the popularization of a fundamentally grassroots concept comes the risk of turning it into a buzzword (like "sustainable development," "green growth," "green economy," "green jobs") whose scope is restricted to policy and trade circles, disconnected from the everyday realities of those first and most impacted on the frontlines of the world's social, economic and ecological crises. Instead of being rooted in a systems change approach, Just Transition's multifaceted strategy inclusive of culture, community control, and racial and gender justice, could be reduced to job

creation, green technology, and carbon metrics alone – basically, a new way to disguise business as usual.

### **Exclusion of grassroots movements and community accountability**

Successful implementation of Just Transition is rooted in the grassroots. The additional danger of this cooptation is that it will obstruct, discourage and undermine the very social movements who have historically moved Just Transition forward, and remain essential to its realization. So far, at least a couple of the U.S. & European roundtables convened to date have not included the grassroots, EJ groups who served to birth, develop and popularize this framework, and instead brought together national and international environmental policy groups that have had virtually no history of working in this area. This traditional, status quo approach creates a serious hurdle for pursuing equity and alignment.

### **Encouraging more investment in false, corporate schemes**

Mainstreaming Just Transition could enable the further proliferation of corporate investment strategies like “clean coal”, biofuels, forest conservation offsets, pollution pricing and pollution trading to expand their markets, under the guise of job creation and carbon reduction. Just Transition must not turn into a rhetorical tool to justify neo-colonial policies that effectively fill the pockets of a few on the backs of the many, bulldozing over fundamental transformations to our global systems, among our last hopes of an equitable, healthy, and livable world.

## **THE URGENT & TIMELY NEED FOR A JUST TRANSITION FORUM**

The 2016 BEA Forum on the Clean Power Plan was one of the most successful efforts in recent years to bridge the political gap between big NGOs, EJ and grassroots groups, and funders in the climate and energy policy arena. It reaffirmed BEA’s ability to facilitate alignment and relational trust through strategic dialogue and peer-to-peer learning.

With the emergence of Just Transition as a “strategic framework” for structural change, we are faced with an enormous opportunity to apply the BEA Forum process to both advance critical political alignment amongst not only grassroots groups, policy groups and funders, but also with another important social movement actor that has not been successfully engaged by the U.S. environmental movement to date – the House of Labor. Where EJ and labor movements have cultivated deep, relational ties and common cause over the past three decades, this work has not been adequately

resourced, and we have not witnessed an authentic translation of such solidarity and mutuality in the national green jobs policy discourse or NGO coalitions until now.

### **Building Political Power between Workers & Communities**

With the rise of the right, and its reinforcement of neo-liberal (deregulated, corporate and market-driven) economic policies, we need to highlight and support the movements that are organizing political power around transformational change objectives. We need to build greater resource support for present-day organizing efforts that are led by visionary opposition to the status quo, much like the early organizers of the Just Transition movement. And in doing so, we need to highlight the stories of the workers and communities who are on the frontlines of the ecological crisis and at the forefront of systemic change.

Discussions are already underway between the international unions and frontline EJ communities, where a visionary articulation of change, and associated communications strategies, are being cultivated bottom-up in 8-10 different regions across the nation. While these efforts have been led by members of the Climate Justice Alliance, the Just Transition Alliance and key trade unions, such intersectional visioning need to be supported across a much broader landscape, wherever a city or state government can invest and provide policy support for Just Transition strategies for transformational change. Taking advantage of the present surge of city and state leadership moving forward on climate despite Trump's efforts to pull out of the Paris Accord, we could galvanize a movement of workers and communities to develop an infrastructure plan that reduces pollution, creates local jobs and helps us achieve emissions reduction targets in a coordinated fashion.

### **Grounding Climate & Energy Policy in Local, Democratic Priorities**

What we have learned from the Clean Power Plan and Paris Climate Accord is that in order to be impactful or effective, climate policy strategies need to be rooted in the development of community-based, economic models that are not only carbon-free, but also just, equitable and toxics-free. This requires an organizing approach that is fundamentally rooted in deepening democratic practice. It requires an approach that aggregates political power through broadening the arenas of political consensus to be more inclusive, starting with those communities and unions most impacted.

And while such a bottom-up effort may have not been widely attempted in modern U.S. history, recent campaigns like that of "Feel the Bern" have certainly proven that a broad, public appetite exists for engaging such participatory processes. At the end of the day, if we are to think past the current political challenges and start cultivating strategies for

durable policy shifts for climate, environmental justice and a sustainable economy, then developing protocols that allow national policy groups and coalitions to be guided by popular grassroots mandates will be key to our long-term success.

### **Shifting Investments to Concrete Community Solutions**

The very real potential of applying Just Transition as a strategy framework is in applying it locally, community by community, to the cultivation of real solutions on the ground. Presently, the deepest cuts that society can make to greenhouse gas emissions are in fact those that require local governments to address local, systemic issues of economic equity and social justice. For example – implementing plans for public transportation infrastructure, food sovereignty, zero waste, affordable community housing, community-choice energy – are not only avenues for the quickest and deepest emission cuts, but also opportunities for the largest job creation investments. It is at these local investment levels that we can ensure the balance of power serves to keep these pathways just.

Hence, a strategic priority for visionary funders should be to ensure that philanthropic support for Just Transition continues to be rooted in the communities and groups that not only require it most, but ones that are engaging in concrete solutions on the ground. Moving from efforts to shift philanthropic capital away from fossil fuel investments, and towards the creation of community-controlled, non-extractive investments, will be key in ensuring the long-range sustenance of such translocal change strategies.

What may be most encouraging about mainstreaming Just Transition through such a bottom-up, translocal approach is that this opens the door for systemic change thinking to become mainstream as well, especially if national and international institutions not only embrace a participatory, democratic process that remains the hallmark of a Just Transition framework, but start to shift resource support and investments in this direction.

For these reasons, the Just Transition Forum Planning Team has identified the following Goals for this Forum. To facilitate a dynamic, multisector discourse aimed at aligning:

- *Visionary, systemic change narratives that unite workers and communities*
- *Guidance for climate and energy policy strategies rooted in local democratic priorities*
- *Organizing strategies to shift investments to economies that serve people and planet*