



The just transition illusion: Power, discourse, and the politics of global sustainable development governance (2018–2025)

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ABSTRACT

Background: The concept of just transition (JT) originated within the global labor movement as a framework for social justice integral to climate mitigation and was subsequently institutionalized within global sustainable development governance. During 2018–2025, the JT concept was broadly adopted by multilateral bodies, including the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the International Labour Organization (ILO), the G20, and the World Bank. This extensive adoption, however, is posited to generate a just transition illusion, wherein the language of justice is employed to legitimize a transition process that preserves extant economic structures and power asymmetries. **Methods:** Employing a qualitative research design and critical discourse analysis (CDA) theory, as developed by Norman Fairclough, this study analyzes key policy documents from climate politics, economic/financial governance, and normative/labor institutions. **Findings:** The findings reveal that hegemonic actors have systematically co-opted the JT discourse through two discursive strategies: depoliticization and financialization. At the textual level, depoliticization is achieved through softening modality, evidenced by the lexical insertion of "orderly" in UNFCCC decisions, and technologization of discourse in the World Bank's taxonomy frameworks. At the social practice level, this co-optation is reflected by a shift in discursive authority from the ILO's tripartite dimension toward technocratic structures endorsed by the G20 and the World Bank. This demonstrates the success of market hegemony in defining JT as an investment risk management strategy rather than a genuine demand for structural justice. **Conclusion:** This article contributes by dissecting linguistic mechanisms underpinning the cross-institutional co-optation of JT. **Novelty/Originality of this article:** This research emphasizes the necessity for Global South policymakers to repoliticize the JT concept, demand inter-state justice, and transcend technical solutions promulgated by global governance.

KEYWORDS: critical discourse analysis; depoliticization; financialization; just transition; power asymmetry.

1. Introduction

The global necessity for transitioning toward low-carbon and climate-resilient economies is widely acknowledged. Nevertheless, this acknowledgment is intrinsically linked to a critical recognition that aggressive climate mitigation measures entail significant socio-economic impacts, particularly for sectors and communities that are heavily reliant on fossil fuels or carbon-intensive industries, as stated by United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC, 2024). The just transition (JT) concept emerged

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as an explicit response to this challenge. It traces its roots to labor and trade union movements in North America during the 1990s, where activists demanded compensation and social security provisions for workers facing job displacement due to environmental policies, as stated by the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS, 2020).

The significance of the just transition has dramatically evolved from a mere activist demand to a fundamental pillar of international climate governance. This trajectory culminated with the adoption of the Paris Agreement in 2015, where the concept was formally enshrined within the Agreement's Preamble. This inclusion signaled an official international acknowledgment that climate mitigation efforts must be executed in a manner that is "fair and inclusive" for all affected parties, specifically noting the need to create decent work opportunities and ensuring that "no one is left behind," a position referencing the 2015 International Labor Organization (ILO) definition (CSIS, 2020; ILO, 2023). Consequently, JT transcended its original scope as a purely labor rights framework and became institutionalized, adopted by key multilateral bodies that collectively shape the architecture of global sustainable development.

The phase of institutionalization for the just transition concept, spanning the 2018–2025 period, demonstrates an accelerated rate of adoption by various organizations, each possessing differing degrees of hegemonic power. ILO, regarded as the original custodian of the concept, reinforced its foundational mandate through a 2023 Resolution that vigorously calls for social dialogue and the protection of decent work standards. Meanwhile, the UNFCCC, as the highest climate political forum, saw the ILO championing just transition as a main topic, culminating in the launch of the United Arab Emirates just transition work programme during the 28th Conference of the Parties (COP28) in 2023 (G20, 2023; G20 Bali, 2022; World Bank, 2024). However, the most profound transformation in the JT discourse occurred with the active engagement of powerful economic and financial actors. The G20 group, representing the world's largest economies and major emitters, explicitly incorporated just transition into their official declarations, deliberately connecting it with concepts like green growth and macroeconomic stability. Concurrently, the World Bank took strategic action by developing the Just coal transition taxonomy and, crucially, began identifying just transition as a quantifiable financial risk (just transition risk). This concerted shift fundamentally relocated just transition away from the domain of transformative labor activism and placed it squarely within a market-driven, managerial, and technocratic framework (Calice, 2025; World Bank, 2024).

The expansive adoption and application of the just transition concept, while presenting a positive façade, necessitate critical examination regarding its conceptual integrity. Does just transition retain its transformative, justice-based character, or has it been co-opted (absorbed and diluted) into a managerial instrument that subtly serves entrenched economic hegemony, primarily benefiting the Global North and financial capital? This phenomenon serves as the initial step in formulating the hypothesis regarding the just transition illusion (JT illusion). The urgency of this research stems from the understanding that universal justice rhetoric concerning just transition risks concealing the underlying reality of global power asymmetry. The climate transition process, inherently political and redistributive, is highly susceptible to depoliticization, a strategy wherein structural conflicts are systematically reframed as manageable technical issues (Newell, 2025; Schulz & Siriwardane, 2015). Amidst the formal commitment to just transition, global power asymmetry (particularly North-South tension and neoliberal pressure) has effectively depoliticized the radical core of the concept (Alarcon et al., 2022). Based on this observation, the just transition illusion is hypothesized to emerge when the language of justice is appropriated by hegemonic actors, not with the intention of achieving structural transformation, but rather to justify a transition path that maintains existing economic structures and preserves unjust distributions of responsibility. This shift in focus is deeply felt in the issue of justice. Just transition initially concentrated on intra-state justice: the distribution of impacts within a single nation, particularly addressing displaced fossil fuel workers. However, this concentration strategically obscures the greater demands of inter-

state justice—namely, adherence to the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities (CBDR-RC) and the fulfillment of climate finance obligations owed by the Global North to the Global South (Atteridge et al., 2022; Johansson, 2023; Stark et al., 2023).

Prior academic studies focusing on just transition have largely concentrated on policy dimensions or political economy alone. Leading academic studies that have analyzed JT in the last five years tend to be divided into the following main focuses; 1) Focus on political economy and distribution (the 'what' and 'why'): The majority of research focuses on distributive and political economy dimensions. For instance, the study by (Pai & Zerriffi, 2021) conducted a systematic review of key JT elements for fossil fuel workers, highlighting the importance of distributive, procedural, and restorative justice as the conceptual foundation of JT. Meanwhile, (Barry & Healy, 2017) analyzed the political economy of JT, exploring procedural aspects and energy distribution, and how to manage potential contradictions in simultaneously pursuing energy and climate justice; 2) Strategic focus and incentives: Another approach is strategic analysis. For example, a study by Aklin (2024) analyzed the political case for JT using game theory (ultimatum games) to understand the strategic relationship between governments and fossil fuel workers. The focus is on worker compensation as a mechanism to accelerate the clean energy transition; 3) Focus on the invisible dimension of injustice in global energy transition efforts: This study, conducted by Chigbu et al. (2025), found that structural barriers embedded within just transition policies and global energy governance frameworks produce a form of silent violence (SV) that disproportionately harms marginalized communities. This research argues that silent violence (SV) is not accidental but a governance-enabled outcome.

Despite the provision of a robust empirical foundation regarding 'what' should be implemented (retraining, regional development) and 'how' costs are distributed in the energy transition, most of this literature tends to treat existing policy language as a given, without systematically dissecting how the language itself is deployed by hegemonic actors to alter, soften, or absorb radical demands for justice. This deficiency confirms that cross-institutional critical discourse analysis (CDA) studies focusing on discourse and power asymmetry remain rare, and this constitutes the main research gap addressed by this article. This research contributes by utilizing detailed Faircloughian CDA to expose how specific linguistic choices within the textual dimension function as ideological tools affecting the dimension of social practice. This analysis comparatively dissects the contestation of meaning regarding just transition among three significantly different institutional clusters (political, economic, labor) in the 2018–2025 period, an approach that is crucial yet still rare in the CDA literature on climate governance (Avelino et al., 2024; Pai et al., 2020). The study synchronously analyzes how the definitional power over just transition shifts—from the dialogue- and rights-based approach of the ILO toward the taxonomy- and financialization-based approaches of the World Bank and G20 (Stark et al., 2023). Exposing the discursive mechanisms that facilitate this shift is key to understanding the new ways in which the neoliberal agenda is integrated into sustainability governance. By linking linguistic devices (such as softening modality and technologization) with the structure of global financial power, this research provides a rigorous analytical framework for testing the promises of future sustainable development governance.

Failure to challenge the just transition Illusion will exacerbate injustice under the umbrella of sustainable development. Sustainable development governance, as manifested in the sustainable development goals (SDGs), is often criticized for being overly managerial and depoliticizing. Critics contend that the focus on quantification and epistemic infrastructures diverts attention from the structural roots of the problem. When the concept of transition becomes the focus of governance, the resulting analysis is often apolitical, asocial, ahistorical, and amaterial—separated from deeper power relations and the historical context of state power formation (Biermann et al., 2023; Eskelinen, 2021; Newell, 2025; Tichenor et al., 2022; World Bank, 2025).

The use of CDA in this context is highly relevant. Norman Fairclough posits that domination and exploitation are sustained culturally and ideologically, and language serves as the primary domain of ideology and the arena for power contestation (Ato, 2025). If the dominant just transition discourse fails to challenge and replace the existing power structures that reproduce injustice, it will not yield transformative change. Conversely, it functions as a legitimizing tool (a new opium, borrowing the critique of environmental depoliticization), which placates radical demands while ensuring the continuation of business as usual under the guise of sustainability (Anshelm & Haikola, 2018; Avelino et al., 2024; Calice, 2025). Therefore, this research argues that to comprehend the JT illusion, it is imperative to move beyond mere policy content and analyze how language and discourse themselves are used as instruments to manage the potential conflict inherent in the energy and climate transition, especially concerning who has the power to speak and who is excluded from decision-making (Boss et al., 2023).

Referring to the political urgency and the analytical void that have been outlined, this research does not merely argue that climate transition is a political matter—a fact widely acknowledged in critical literature. Instead, the central concern driving this entire study is a critical question regarding JT's conceptual integrity and practical efficacy within global governance: To what extent has the adoption of the just transition concept by hegemonic actors within the sustainable development governance framework (2018–2025) served as a discursive strategy to depoliticize demands for structural justice, thereby generating the JT illusion which legitimizes Global North power asymmetry? This problem statement directly prompts the need to move beyond mere normative policy analysis. Through the lens of Norman Fairclough's CDA, we specifically investigate how language, as the primary domain of ideology and power contestation, is used to deliberately alter the meaning of JT. The novelty of this research is found in its precise dissection of deliberate linguistic mechanisms across key cross-institutional documents: from the lexical insertion that prioritizes market "order" in UNFCCC decisions, to the neoliberal normalization achieved through the G20's green growth narratives, culminating in the World Bank's technologization of social conflict into financial risk. By contrasting this market-driven discourse with the rights-based discourse maintained by the ILO, this study aims to contribute rigorous empirical and theoretical insights, revealing how the rhetoric of justice acts as a 'curtain' for the *status quo* and emphasizing why the repoliticization of JT is an absolute prerequisite for achieving true, successful transition.

2. Methods

This research utilizes a qualitative design, focusing on in-depth textual analysis of key global governance documents. This choice is predicated on the view that written language constitutes a form of social practice that simultaneously shapes and is shaped by underlying power relations, ideologies, and existing social realities. To precisely identify how the just transition concept has undergone a change in meaning and been subject to co-optation, the most appropriate methodology is critical discourse analysis (CDA), which systematically examines the argumentation deployed by powerful parties responsible for producing authoritative discourse (Ato, 2025; Fairclough, 1992).

The data corpus was selected based on its direct relevance to the formation and institutionalization of the just transition concept within the critical time frame of 2018–2025. This period encompasses the peak adoption of JT across major bodies post-Paris Agreement and precedes the critical 2025 deadline for nationally determined contributions (NDCs), making it an optimal window for mapping the contestation of discourse. The data utilized consists of secondary, official documents published by governments or leading international institutions, reflecting the voices of authority in global governance. The data corpus is categorized into three distinct clusters, each representing a primary arena where the definitional power over just transition is contested: the UNFCCC/Climate Politics Cluster, which focuses on efforts to integrate just transition into the climate framework,

including the COP28/CMA5 (Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Paris Agreement, 5th session) decisions concerning the global stocktake (GST) and the United Arab Emirates just transition work programme (UNFCC, 2023); the economic/financial cluster, which centers on the financialization and managerialization of just transition, with documents analyzed including G20 leaders' declarations (Bali 2022, New Delhi 2023, Rio de Janeiro 2024) referencing green and just transitions (Calice & Demekas, 2024; G20, 2023; G20 Bali, 2022), and World Bank policy documents (Calice, 2025; World Bank, 2024), such as the just coal transition taxonomy (2024) and policy research working papers discussing the financial risk of just transition; and the normative/labor cluster, which focuses on the original normative basis of JT, utilizing the International Labour Organization (ILO) Resolution from the 111th Session (2023) and the Guidelines for a just transition (2015) (ILO, 2015, 2023).

The CDA implemented in this research follows Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model, which views discourse as a social practice comprising: (1) text (the linguistic dimension), (2) discursive practice (the dimension of text production, distribution, and consumption), and (3) social practice (the dimension of structural power and ideology).

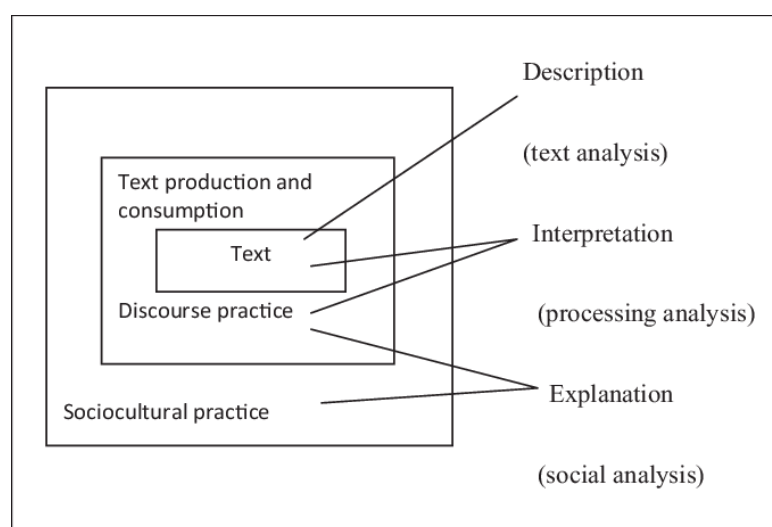


Fig. 1. Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model of critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1995)

The initial phase involves a detailed linguistic analysis of the corpus documents. The main focus is on identifying dominant rhetorical devices, grammatical patterns, and lexical choices (Fairclough, 2013b). Lexical choice and framing involves identifying specific keyword usage. For example, analyzing how just transition is consistently paired with market-related lexical items such as green jobs, skill development, or just transition risk. The analysis maps how the framing of the JT discourse shifts from being a labor rights issue to a problem of market competency or risk management. Modality analysis notes that modality is a crucial indicator of commitment and power within discourse. This analysis compares the usage of words expressing strong obligation (deontic modality—e.g., 'must', 'shall', 'commit') with language that softens commitment (softening modality—e.g., 'should', 'call for', 'encourage', 'recognize'). The use of softening modality by hegemonic actors can function as a rhetorical mechanism to accommodate demands for justice while simultaneously avoiding financially binding implementation obligations.

The second phase concentrates on the processes by which texts are produced, distributed, and interpreted (Fairclough, 2013b). Intertextuality, how one text references or absorbs meaning from another, is particularly critical here. Intertextuality and Shift in Authority analyzes how the just transition concept is absorbed from the normative discourse of the ILO (which emphasizes social dialogue and tripartism as primary discursive practices) into the financial discourse of the World Bank (which stresses taxonomies and

due diligence). This change in context fundamentally transforms the meaning of just transition. In the technologization of discourse, Fairclough notes that contemporary discourse increasingly reflects and regulates itself, often through technocratic instruments. The dominant discursive practice within the G20 and the World Bank exhibits a marked shift away from tripartite negotiation (political) toward the formulation of taxonomies, risk assessments, and benchmarking (technocratic). This indicates the marginalization of participatory discursive practices in defining the implementation of just transition.

The third and final phase connects the identified textual patterns and discursive practices to the broader structures of ideology and power within global governance (Fairclough, 2013b, 2013a). This connection is the essence of CDA, aiming to reveal how discourse contributes to the perpetuation of inequality and hegemony. Power Behind Discourse analyzes how the discourses function to legitimize the financial hegemonic interests of the Global North and neoliberal ideology. For example, how the inclusion of just transition within the green growth framework, dominated by the G20 and the World Bank, diverts attention from demands for radical redistribution toward market-based solutions. Depoliticization as an ideological strategy explains how the managerial and technocratic just transition discourse works to eliminate the political dimension of conflict (i.e., who must pay and who must lead), converting it into a problem manageable by technical means, thereby preserving the status quo of power asymmetry.

The credibility of this qualitative research is supported by the use of an established theoretical framework (Fairclough's CDA) and a data corpus sourced from authoritative international official documents. In its presentation, the diction utilized is scholarly and academic, focusing on careful denotative meaning to avoid ambiguity or misinterpretation. Cohesion and coherence between paragraphs are maintained to ensure a rigorous flow of argumentation and facilitate international reader comprehension (Koteyko & Atanasova, 2016). The writing style is presented professionally yet communicatively, reflecting the in-depth analytical process conducted by the researcher (Bacon, 2013; Newcastle University, 2025; Oshima & Hogue, 2007).

3. Results and Discussion

The critical discourse analysis conducted on key global governance documents between 2018 and 2025 confirms the presence of a systematic co-optation process applied to the just transition concept. This process, which forms the JT illusion, can be characterized by hegemonic efforts aimed at softening, normalizing, and technicalizing demands for structural justice, thereby diverting attention from the underlying power asymmetries inherent in the global climate transition. This research found that the power behind discourse (structural power), manifested through major financial and political institutions, successfully defined just transition as an economic risk management strategy, rather than the project of redistributive and procedural justice widely anticipated by communities.

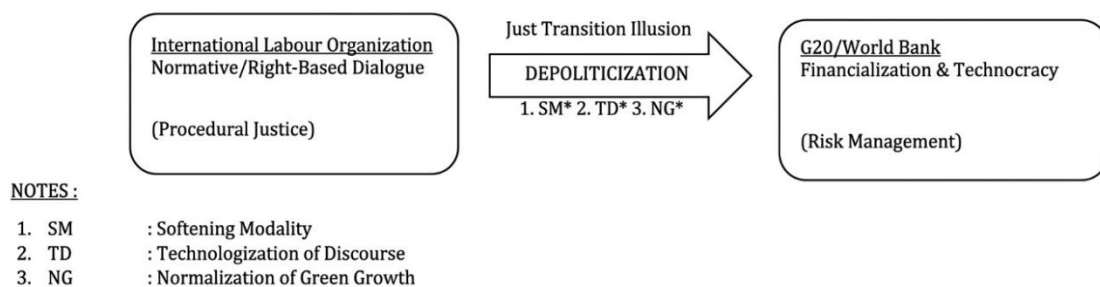


Fig. 2. The contested space of just transition: Shifting definitional authority (2018-2025)

3.1 The mechanism of the just transition illusion

To delineate the mechanisms behind the JT illusion, the table below presents a comparative synthesis of key findings across the three institutional clusters (climate politics, economic/financial, and normative/labor). This synthesis demonstrates that just transition has been recontextualized, shifting from a rights-based demand (ILO) to a concept driven by market forces and technocracy (UNFCCC, G20, World Bank).

Table 1. Comparative synthesis of three institutional clusters against the JT illusion

Institutional cluster	Key actor	Primary discursive mechanism	Revealed hegemonic ideology	Answer to the JT illusion
Climate politics	UNFCCC (COP28)	Softening modality (restrained commitment); prioritization of 'orderly'	Hegemony of market stability; limitation of global north obligations	Justice discourse is accommodated but constrained by the prerequisite of financial non-disruption.
Economic/financial	G20, World Bank	Normalization of green growth; financialization (risk/taxonomy); technologization	Environmental neoliberalism; technocracy	JT is transformed from a demand for structural justice into a strategy for risk management and investment opportunity.
Normative/labor	ILO	Affirmation of social dialogue; rights-based language (tripartism)	Social democracy/procedural justice	Normative discourse is marginalized from mainstream macro-economic/financial dialogue, demonstrating asymmetry of definitional power.

This synthetic table clearly visualizes the contestation of meaning and the shift in discursive dominance. The JT illusion is fundamentally rooted in the social practice in which entities with substantial power in discourse (such as financial institutions and the G20 economic alliance) manage to transform a concept with radical potential into an instrument for perpetuating their existing power structures (Alarcon et al., 2022). This co-optation has been documented in critical studies regarding just transition in the Global South, where the concept, though normatively appealing, risks being co-opted to obfuscate demands for greater redistribution (Schulz & Siriwardane, 2015). According to Fairclough's CDA framework, this process occurs when a dominant discourse successfully normalizes specific power relations through language. In this context, the concurrent normalization of green growth (G20) and the technologization of risk (World Bank) function as interconnected ideological strategies designed to depoliticize the climate transition. Depoliticization is a critical technique in global sustainable development governance, whereby inherent structural conflicts are strategically converted into technical problems that can be measured, managed, and controlled.

3.2 Softened transition discourse: Restraint and the hegemony of stability in the UNFCCC

In the following discussion, we will discuss these discursive mechanisms in detail, explicitly linking them back to the problem statement: How the language of justice (just transition) is utilized to legitimize an unjust transition. The formal adoption of JT by the main climate political body, the UNFCCC, notably within the global stocktake (GST) decisions at COP28 in 2023, reveals systematic attempts to soften radical commitments.

Textual evidence from the GST decision shows a key quote demonstrating the effort to soften commitment:

"...list also includes accelerating efforts towards the phase-down of unabated coal power, phasing out inefficient fossil fuel subsidies, and other measures that drive the transition away from fossil fuels in energy systems, in a just, orderly and equitable manner, with developed countries continuing to take the lead." (UNFCCC, 2023)

The insertion of the lexical item "orderly" is highly significant in the analysis. Ideologically (social practice), this term functions as a softening modality that deliberately restrains the urgent and potentially transformative nature of justice (Newell, 2025). Justice, in the context of climate transition, often necessitates rapid, redistributive actions that may induce "short-term turbulence". By prioritizing "order," the discourse subtly elevates market stability and pre-existing economic interests—which primarily align with the interests of the Global North as the dominant financial actors—above the demands for justice that might require swift, disruptive change.

Further analysis of the GST documents highlights a pattern of *softening modality* regarding obligations directed at developed nations. Furthermore, concerning mitigation actions, the GST calls on Parties to take actions that are explicitly non-legally binding:

"The stocktake calls on Parties to take actions towards achieving, at a global scale, a tripling of renewable energy capacity and doubling energy efficiency improvements by 2030. The list also includes accelerating efforts towards the phase-down of unabated coal power, phasing out inefficient fossil fuel subsidies, and other measures..." (UNFCCC, 2023)

Although the GST acknowledges the need for a 43% emissions reduction by 2030, it only encourages and calls for efforts to phase down unabated coal and phase out inefficient fossil fuel subsidies, with developed countries continuing to take the lead. The language used here is advisory (softening modality), not a binding obligation (deontic modality). This rhetorical device effectively accommodates the discourse of justice (through the mention of an equitable transition) while preserving policy flexibility and autonomy for hegemonic actors (Anshelm & Haikola, 2018; Vanvik, 2024). Thus, the JT illusion within the UNFCCC framework is that, while the importance of justice is acknowledged, mechanisms are in place to ensure that justice will never fundamentally disrupt the economic stability that benefits established powers.

3.3 The global stocktake paradox: Failure to bridge intra-state and inter-state justice

The original focus of the JT discourse was rooted in intra-state justice: ensuring the protection of local communities and workers from mitigation policy impacts. However, within the geopolitical context of the UNFCCC, which is historically characterized by deep North-South division over funding and historical responsibility, this focus on intra-state justice strategically reinforces the JT illusion, as stated by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA, 2018).

Academic research indicates that the focus of JT has shifted from inter-state justice, advocated through the principles of equity and the community-based disaster risk reduction - resilient communities (CBDR-RC), to intra-state justice, focusing on specific social groups (Johansson, 2023). Power asymmetry arises from this shift in focus. By actively promoting and funding intra-state JT schemes (such as the just energy transition partnerships—JETPs), Global North countries rhetorically centralize attention on domestic issues (e.g., retraining coal miners in developing nations), while strategically mitigating the political pressure concerning the vastly larger collective financial obligations associated with inter-state justice, including financial transfers and climate debt compensation, which are core demands from the Global South (Azubuikea et al., 2024). If JT is exclusively or

predominantly implemented as an intra-state framework (focusing only on workers and communities) without concurrently addressing the grave imbalances in resources and capacity between nations, the concept effectively becomes a tool for diverting historical responsibility. Thus, far from functioning as an arena for repoliticization, JT risks becoming a constrained channel for managing and limiting more radical demands for global redistribution, thereby legitimizing geopolitical inequality.

3.4 The managerial turn: Depoliticization through financialization (G20 and World Bank)

The clearest manifestation of the JT illusion lies in the adoption of the concept by powerful financial and economic institutions, notably the G20 and the World Bank, which fundamentally transform JT from a demand for justice into a strategy for economic growth and risk management. G20 Declarations, including those from Bali (2022) and New Delhi (2023), consistently articulate JT not as a moral obligation but as a supporter of *long-term growth*. The quote from the G20 Bali Leaders' Declaration of 2022 clarifies this synthesis:

"We will make public investments and structural reforms, promote private investments, and strengthen multilateral trade and resilience of global supply chains, to support long-term growth, sustainable and inclusive, green and just transitions." (G20 Bali, 2022)

Normalizing JT within the green growth framework serves as a potent tool for legitimizing Green Capitalism and the broader neoliberal ideology. By incorporating JT into the macro-economic and investment agenda, the G20 converts the conflictual issue of cost distribution into an investment opportunity. This lexical strategy, which focuses on the potential for job creation (green jobs) and innovation, rhetorically sidelines the central issue of lost livelihoods and necessary compensation, which constitutes the original root problem of JT.

The G20's discursive practice of promising that economic growth will automatically resolve all associated justice issues is an effective neoliberal illusion (G20 Rio de Janeiro, 2024). Conflicts between corporate profits (especially from fossil fuel companies) and the rights of vulnerable communities are erased, replaced by narratives of inclusive, partnership-driven sustainable development (Aklin, 2024). This fulfills the CDA description of how neoliberal discourse consolidates power through the normalization of narratives that marginalize structural critique. The World Bank, through the formulation of the Just Coal Transition Taxonomy (2024), provides the purest example of depoliticization achieved via the technologization of discourse. This taxonomy is structured explicitly around technocratic criteria:

"The structure of the taxonomy is based on the three pillars of the World Bank's 3x3 "Coal Regions in Transition" Framework matrix: (1) governance arrangements, (2) people and communities, and (3) repurposing land and assets." (World Bank, 2025)

Ironically, while presenting a technical framework, the World Bank itself internally acknowledges the political contradiction of JT in its publications:

"This is an essentially political task that cannot be delegated to technocratic agencies." (World Bank, 2025)

This process is the culmination of the JT illusion, demonstrating how complex historical, social, and structural problems (social practice) are converted into manageable technical frameworks, metrics, and standards for investment (discursive practice). The taxonomy provides the formal and measurable language required to channel sustainable finance. By converting social injustice into a quantifiable financial risk (mitigating legal and reputational risks), the World Bank effectively sidesteps the necessity for restorative or redistributive justice rooted in historical responsibility. The inherent contradiction—

acknowledging that JT is essentially political yet continuing to produce technocratic instruments (taxonomies, risk analysis)—proves that the global system prefers managing the risk of injustice over addressing the root causes of injustice (Bouzarovski, 2022). The illusion of a technical solution effectively substitutes difficult political negotiation over power and redistribution.

3.5 Contestation of tripartite ILO discourse: The marginalized voice

In stark contrast to the managerial approaches of the UNFCCC, G20, and World Bank, the ILO steadfastly maintains the concept's original focus. The Resolution from the 111th International Labour Conference (ILC) in 2023 reasserts JT as a framework centered on robust social dialogue. The quote from the 2015 ILO Guidelines emphasizes the central role of tripartite social dialogue:

"Governments and social partners should: (a) actively promote and engage in social dialogue, at all stages from policy design to implementation and evaluation and at all levels from national to enterprise level... to forge consensus on pathways towards environmental sustainability with decent work." (ILO, 2015)

The ILO discourse employs strong modality, using rights-based language and emphasizing implementation obligations through national frameworks and agreements. However, within the practical social dimension of global governance, the ILO's normative discourse risks becoming marginalized within the macro-economic dialogue dominated by the G20 and the World Bank. When JT is primarily reframed as a matter of investment opportunity yielding long-term growth (G20) or taxonomic risk (World Bank), the fundamental requirements for tripartite social dialogue and comprehensive social protection (ILO) are relegated to secondary, often non-binding considerations (da Silva Hyldmo et al., 2024; Leal Filho & Pons-Giralt, 2024; Stark et al., 2023). This functional imbalance is a critical indicator of the asymmetry in definitional power. The following table summarizes the strategic differences observed in the utilization of the JT discourse across the key institutions.

Table 2. Strategic differences in JT discourse usage across institutions

Institution	Primary discursive focus (CDA text)	Dominant rhetorical mechanism	Implication for power asymmetry
UNFCCC/COP28	"orderly, equitable, and just transition"	Softening modality (prioritizing 'orderly'); intertextuality (equity vs. CBDR)	Ensures transition aligns with market interests, limiting specific global north funding obligations and reducing demands for urgent transformation.
G20 (2022/2023)	"long-term growth, sustainable and inclusive"	Normalization (jt as market opportunity); lexicalization (growth-centric)	Legitimizes green capitalism; depoliticizes the structural costs of jt as growth-generating investment, eliminating redistributive conflict.

World bank (2024)	"taxonomy," "governance," "financial risk"	Technologization of discourse (3x3 framework); formalization	Transforms political issues into technical/managerial problems; reinforces the illusion of non- structural solutions and manages risk, not the roots of injustice.
ILO (2023)	"social dialogue," "decent work," "social protection"	Affirmation of origin (rights-based language)	Maintains focus on the labor dimension, but risks marginalization from the dominant macro- economic and financial discourse.

This comparison underscores the fundamental shift in conceptual substance and discursive practice that defines the JT illusion. The power asymmetry illustrated in this table shows the success of hegemonic actors in shifting JT from a challenging framework (ILO) to a co-opted framework. Within the Faircloughian framework, this shift reflects the dominance of power behind discourse (the structural power of global financial institutions) over the power in discourse (the normative authority of the ILO). The dominant actors, through the discursive practices of technologization (World Bank) and normalization (G20), successfully defined the criteria for successful JT in language that is financially measurable and easily absorbed by market logic (Galanis et al., 2025).

The most critical implication of these findings is the depoliticization of JT. While the ILO advocates for JT to be based on tripartite negotiation—an inherently political and conflictual process—institutions like the World Bank and G20 respond by reducing this conflict to a technical problem: a risk to be managed or a project to be measured through taxonomies. Academic critique of sustainable development governance confirms that this practice functions as an epistemic infrastructure that shifts attention away from the structural causes of injustice toward managerial performance, thereby maintaining the existing global power hierarchy, particularly the asymmetry between the Global North and Global South (Arora-Jonsson, 2023). Consequently, the contestation over JT discourse is not merely a definitional disagreement, but a struggle over who possesses the authority to define what constitutes a 'just' global transition.

4. Conclusions

The JT illusion operates through three primary discursive strategies of hegemony. The first strategy is the softening of radical commitment: In the climate political arena (UNFCCC), the strategic lexical insertion of terms such as "orderly" into the demands for a just and equitable transition rhetorically locks the transition into a framework prioritizing market stability. This indicates that the power behind the discourse successfully prioritizes the financial interests of the Global North over the requisite need for genuine, rapid, and redistributive transformation. The second strategy is the Normalization of Market Solutions: This is evident as the G20 successfully normalized JT as an integral element of the long-term growth and green economy narrative. Through growth-centric lexicalization, conflictual structural justice issues are transformed into matters of investment that yield profit, effectively depoliticizing the issue of cost distribution. The final strategy is Technocratic Depoliticization: This is observed as the World Bank refined depoliticization through the technologization of discourse, converting justice demands into manageable technical frameworks and taxonomies. This strategy bypasses the inherently political nature of JT, offering the illusion of a technical solution that manages the risk of injustice (just transition risk) without addressing the underlying structural roots of inequality.

The documented shift in discursive authority—from the tripartite dimension (ILO) to the financial-technocratic dimension (World Bank, G20)—serves as clear evidence of the failure of participatory discursive practices to maintain JT's original transformative character. In confronting the pervasive JT illusion, policymakers, particularly those in the Global South, must adopt assertive measures: Repoliticize the JT Discourse: Policymakers must reject the narrow managerial-technocratic narrative and explicitly re-link JT to urgent demands for inter-state justice (CBDR-RC). JT must be articulated as a framework necessitating large-scale public finance transfers and technological support provided without market-dictated conditionalities. Link JT to historical redistribution: Any discussion concerning JT must include demands for accountability regarding historical emissions and the determination of binding funding obligations from the Global North, moving beyond a sole focus on retraining workers in developing nations. Strengthen alternative discursive practices: Substantive steps must be taken to integrate and reinforce the tripartite social dialogue platforms advocated by the ILO into macro-economic decision-making processes (such as the G20 and major climate finance forums) to actively challenge the dominance of financial discourse.

The primary contribution of this research is the provision of a rigorous analytical framework designed to penetrate the often-universal and misleading rhetoric of global policy. Failure to critically dissect the JT illusion will permit existing power structures to consolidate injustice further under the legitimizing guise of sustainable development. Future research should continue and expand upon this critical analysis, with the hope that subsequent research can strengthen and expand the findings of this study and also allow for a comparison of research results. Based on the series of research processes that have been conducted, future research can delve deeper into several important aspects, particularly across three key dimensions; 1) Comparative CDA of marginal actors: Subsequent researchers should conduct comparative CDA focusing on JT discourses generated by grassroots and resistance actors in the Global South (e.g., coal sector trade unions, farmers affected by bioenergy transitions, or indigenous communities) to expose opportunities for structural prefiguration and offer challenges to hegemonic narratives from below. CDA theories developed by scholars such as Norman Fairclough or Teun A. van Dijk would be applicable here; 2) Non-market financial studies: Future studies should delve deeper into how just transition finance can be articulated outside the World Bank's framework of taxonomies and risk assessment, specifically investigating public and inter-state mechanisms for redistribution; 3) Visual and non-linguistic analysis: The scope of CDA should be expanded to include multimodal analysis, examining how visual representations (such as photographs and infographics) in World Bank and G20 documents contribute to the depoliticization of JT and project the technocratic illusion.

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Author Contribution

I.Z.N. is entirely responsible for the conceptualization of the title, the design of the methodological framework (Fairclough CDA), the collection and analysis of the secondary data corpus (2018–2025), and the interpretation of findings used to formulate the central argument concerning the just transition illusion. This contribution is substantial to the overall research work.

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This research constitutes a qualitative study based on the analysis of public documents and secondary data sourced from multilateral and public institutions. Consequently, the research did not involve interaction with human subjects (e.g., interviews, surveys) or animal subjects. Therefore, an Informed Consent statement is not available to this study.

Data Availability Statement

The secondary data utilized in this research, consisting of official declarations and policy documents from the G20, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the International Labour Organization (ILO), and the World Bank, are freely and publicly accessible via the official digital repositories of the respective institutions cited within the Methods section.

Conflicts of Interest

The secondary data used in this study, in the form of official declarations and policy documents from the G20, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the International Labor Organization (ILO), and the World Bank, are freely available and accessible to the public through the official websites or digital repositories of the relevant institutions mentioned in the Methods section.

Declaration of Generative AI Use

This research employed AI technology only as minor assistance, specifically utilizing Grammarly AI for grammar review during article preparation. Connected Paper and Publish or Perish were used to locate relevant data sources. Additionally, Turnitin was used as a tool to assess the textual similarity level of this article against other sources to ensure the prevention of plagiarism.

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