



Economic Commission for Europe**Committee on Sustainable Energy****Group of Experts on Coal Mine Methane****Seventeenth session**

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Item 7 of the provisional agenda

Transition of the coal mining sector**Cultural issues: managing the social aspects of the transition of industries along the coal value chain and coal-dependent regions****Noted by the Secretariat****I. Background**

1. The commitment to keep global warming to well below two degrees Celsius compared to pre-industrial levels requires decarbonization in all economic sectors and reduction of emissions of all potent greenhouse gases. In practice, this means modernization of the energy sector with a focus on gradual phasing down coal and finding innovative solutions for its replacement in industries that rely on it and therefore constitute its “ecosystem”, such as e.g., steel or cement. It also implies a rapid mastering of growing atmospheric concentrations of methane and the role increasing concentrations of methane plays in climate change.
2. The more profound a given country’s transition towards low-carbon energy and green economy, the more competitive its national economy will become. However, any proposed changes must be economically feasible, as well as socially acceptable for the country in question, its affected regions and, in particular, for the local community, which is the most affected by these changes.
3. While it can be expected that decarbonization efforts will create new opportunities and employment in all economic sectors, it will surely have also certain disruptive effects on high-carbon dependent regions and energy-intensive industries. As can be observed in most coal producing countries, fears of job losses, disruptive structural and cultural changes, economic decline, and negative implications for elections, influence the social debate more strongly than the benefits of the low-carbon transition. What can change this balance and boost efforts for greening the economies is the implementation of a “just transition”.

II. Just transition

4. A “just transition” is an integrated approach to sustainable development, which brings together social progress, environmental protection and economic success into a framework of democratic governance. Effective “just transition” strategies require local, bottom-up



participation of all affected stakeholders and commitment by governments to guarantee their buy-in and provide planning security. Adapting to a decarbonizing world is a deep structural shift not just for the involved industries and installations, but also for their workers as well as dependent communities and regions.

II. Cultural aspect

5. Proposed changes should focus not only on the broadly understood economic needs of people but must also take into consideration other substantial needs related to their sense of identity, belonging to a given community, and adherence to a given culture and heritage.

6. From the historical perspective, for centuries coal mining has been, in most countries, much more than an occupation. It was a craft that for generations had been proudly passed from father to son, but most of all, it has been a way of life characterized by a certain well-developed and widely known ethos.

7. For centuries coal mining was a “subculture” with its own traditions, legends, heroes, saints, holidays, music, fashion, language, cuisine, etc. It was a social glue that kept people of given regions together.

8. In certain cases, up until the 20th Century coal mining and the sense of belonging to a region based on that activity defined people’s identities more than their national affiliation. In regions that for centuries has been at the crossroads of different cultures and countries, many people identified more with a local mining community, than with any particular nation state, regardless of the fact under which jurisdiction they were living at a given moment of history.

9. Coal mining is a true culture in its own right and as such should be protected as are protected certain languages, minorities, or tribes, which constitute a testimony of human history and are a living prove of cultural diversity. The fact that the “world” which gave rise to that culture is coming to an end, does not mean that the culture itself is not worth preserving. To the contrary, letting it vanish would be a sad repetition of the history, in which blinded by the power of innovation and, most of all, greed, people let countless precious cultures vanish with all their rich heritage that is now generally unknown and forgotten.

10. Nevertheless, it is not only the culture itself that needs to be protected, but the people who constitute it and who carry it on. The challenge is to offer them a different life which would, on the one hand, give them pride and a sense of material security, and on the other hand, an opportunity to remain themselves and carry on with the practice of their cultural traditions.

III. Proposed approach

A. The current state of affairs

11. Nowadays, just transition has become a very popular subject that is being promoted through hundreds of projects and publications and by countless organizations and activists.

12. Most of those initiatives have one thing in common: they offer a ready solution. They claim to know what needs to be done to go through the transition process successfully. The decision makers, scientists, and academicians are convinced that they know best what the affected people need, and that they are capable of showing the latter how to get that and deal with the changes.

B. A bottom-up approach

13. The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) Group of Experts on Coal Mine Methane¹ supports a different approach. While it is necessary to approach affected communities with an offer or indication of what and how they could change to fit better to the new economic and environmental circumstances, those proposals should not offer any preconceived solutions. They should rather inform affected individuals and communities about the challenges that they face and the changes that are happening around them, and guide them and facilitate, but not lead, a thought process that allows them to identify themselves their objectives and the means of achieving them.

14. “Just transition” is a truly complex, complicated and long-term journey, which must allow people to make their choices, own the process, and take responsibility for the outcomes. It is a task of teaching people how to fish, rather than of serving them fish on a golden platter.

15. If the efforts are to render good, resilient, green and sustainable results, those results need to be accepted and appreciated by the communities. If the communities are to survive and thrive, they need to learn how to take care of themselves. They need to learn and discover how to be proactive and innovative.

16. If the transition process is designed and implemented properly, the communities will learn how to employ the skills and knowledge that its members already possess or can easily acquire to offer to the world services or products of value in delivery of which they could have a comparative advantage.

17. Those who facilitate that process, in turn, have to learn how to actively listen to what the concerned communities have to say, rather than telling them, what is good for them.

C. A need for a holistic approach

18. A strategy encompassing all aspects of transition, i.e., social, economic, and environmental, and aimed at long-term development of a given region is necessary to avoid civil unrest throughout the process and ensure sustainability of the results.

19. Without an all-encompassing approach, projects targeting either only one aspect of a transition process, or a specific infrastructure or entity will be developed in silos and will not add up to a strategy allowing for a structural change of the economic profile of the region in question.

20. A good strategy should lead to development of a robust business model for efficient transition of a given coal mining region. It should include proposals for a new identity for the region that is aligned with the needs and aspiration of its population, as well as for its new economic profile. The latter should correspond to local capabilities, resource base, and needs, and take into account such matters as the existing and the desired educational and professional training directions, regional transportation patterns, infrastructure, as well as the applicable regulatory and legal frameworks.

D. A call for partnership

21. The Group of Experts on Coal Mine Methane encourages ECE member States interested in adopting the proposed approach to engage with the ECE secretariat to explore opportunities for cooperation in developing and implementing projects in the field of just transition. The Group also calls on any potential donors willing to finance implementation of any such projects to identify themselves and present the conditions under which they would be ready to provide the necessary resources.

¹ The Committee on Sustainable at its thirtieth session (22-24 September 2021) approved the change of name of the Group of Experts on Coal Mine Methane to Group of Experts on Coal Mine Methane and Just Transition. The name change is now subject to approval by the ECE Executive Committee in early 2022.