

Accelerating a Just Transition in Washington State: Climate Justice Strategies from the Frontlines

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Climate impacts hit us wherever we live, work, and play in Washington state. From our cities, towns, and neighborhoods to our forests, farmlands, and waterways, every community is at risk. Climate pollution threatens our health and the health of future generations—but the impacts are not distributed evenly. Who is at risk is a factor of both 1) who is most exposed, and 2) who has the ability to respond; communities of color, Indigenous peoples, and communities with lower wealth and incomes tend to face the greatest climate risks—we're on the frontlines of the environmental threats and have greater existing social, economic, and health issues we're facing. Addressing climate change requires confronting this reality while creating a wholesale transition of our energy, transportation, land use systems, and beyond.



Figure 1: Risk Framework from our Unfair Share Report, illustrating that who is impacted is both a factor of who is exposed and who is most vulnerable.

COVID-19 PANDEMIC THROUGH THE LENS OF CLIMATE INJUSTICE

The measure of health impacts and available remedies during the COVID-19 pandemic follow a similar pattern to climate and environmental injustices. How you're impacted is a factor of both 1) if you're exposed, whether to the virus or the economic fallout, and 2) pre-existing vulnerabilities like healthcare access, existing health conditions, race and language discrimination, and lack of employment or savings. These vulnerabilities disproportionately impact Indigenous communities and people of color and are the result of historic and persistent institutional racism and systemic inequity.

These systems are not sustainable nor just. Whether it's COVID-19 and our response that proves to be the tipping point, compounding climate disasters, an economic crisis, or some combination of events, business as usual cannot last. Together we have an opportunity to decide whether we proceed through this crisis by disaster, or by design. This transition is inevitable, we must make sure it is just.

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WASHINGTON'S OPPORTUNITY TO LEAD

Washington state has long been an incubator for forward-looking climate solutions. We see it as an important proving ground for climate justice. Climate change is a global phenomenon that does not recognize political boundaries, both in effect and in cause, but it hits close to home and is linked to the most pressing problems in our communities, such as health, the cost of living, and jobs. Understanding the scale and nature of our state's responsibility to reduce emissions includes recognizing that thresholds exist which we cannot accept transgressing and a budget that we must meet. It is integral to climate justice that the budget not only account for our current greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, but also our historic contributions and the impacts of co-pollutants. We must differentiate not only between energy sectors, but between different communities and their role and ability to transition.

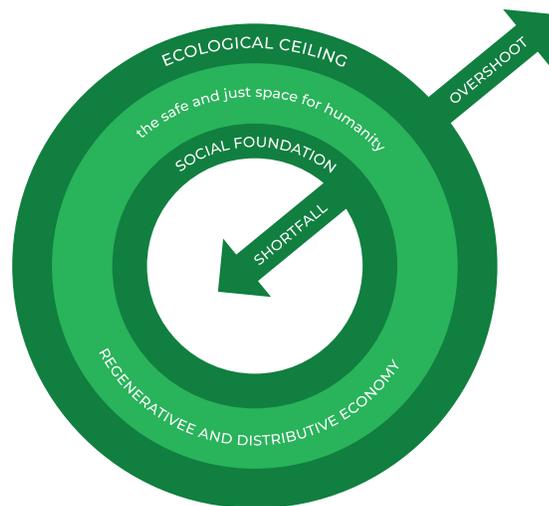


Figure 2: Kate Raworth's doughnut diagram showing sweet spot between failing to provide social foundation and exceeding ecological limits.

VISION FOR CLIMATE ACTION FROM THE FRONTLINES

The scale of the challenge is massive, yet in it we see—and choose to focus on—the opportunity. An equity-focused approach to solving the climate crisis can dismantle institutionalized systems of oppression and replace them with regenerative models that serve everyone. This report is intended to guide Front and Centered, our member organizations, and our allies as we consider where to focus our work.

Front and Centered's Principles of Climate Justice

- ✓ Racial and economic analysis should drive decisions.
- ✓ Follow the leadership, knowledge and expertise of communities disproportionately impacted.
- ✓ Use targeted strategies to create net environmental and economic outcomes for communities of color and Indigenous people.
- ✓ Advance Just Transition toward regenerative economies.

OUR APPROACH

Front and Centered's approach to policy begins with discussions with people most impacted by the issues through grassroots organizations rooted in communities of color doing direct listening and organizing. It builds from the Front and Centered Principles for Climate Justice established originally in fall of 2014. These principles define the coalition's collective approach to equity and guide our practice. We focus on policy that improves the well-being of everyone by identifying and targeting support to the communities facing the greatest risk. Policy that ensures those most responsible for pollution, are most accountable for the transition. We see a strive for action on all fronts on the solutions we really need. We are not content with what is politically feasible today if it is not effective and just.

A STRATEGY FRAMEWORK FOR JUST TRANSITION

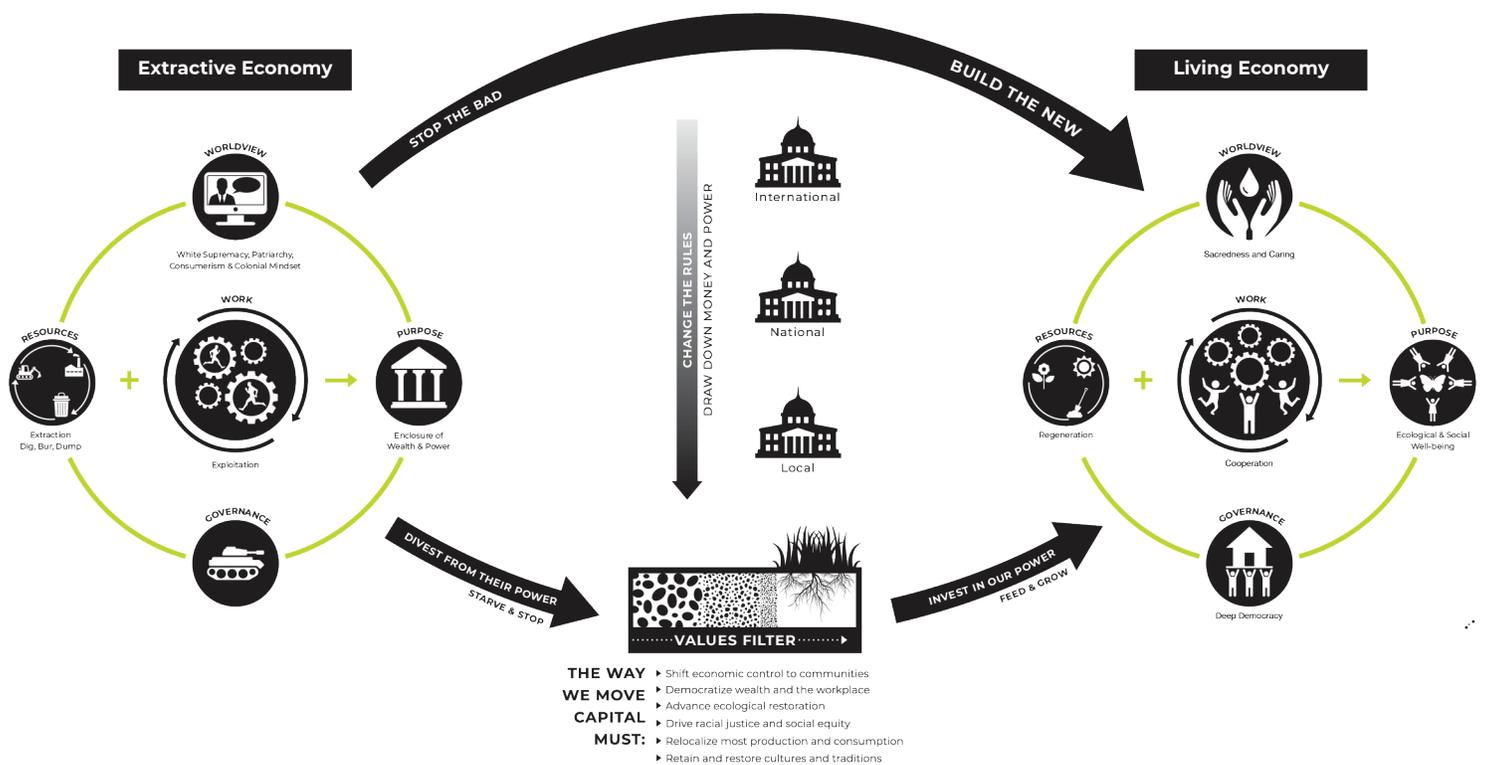


Figure 3: Movement Generation's Just Transition Framework illustrating what Just Transition looks like.

ACCELERATING A JUST TRANSITION

We seek to transition away from an extraction-based economy to one centered on ecological restoration, community resilience, and social equity, fueled by regenerative resources and cooperative work, governed by deep democracy, and a culture of caring and sacredness. This Just Transition will require interventions in four key areas, that while not historically the focus of climate work, are necessary conditions for achieving climate goals:

1 Center Those Disproportionately Impacted in Governance

Those closest to an issue are best able to identify effective and equitable solutions. Core to Front and Centered's vision is democratic, localized, participatory system of resource management and self-governance that protects and upholds the rights of our most vulnerable communities. Overcoming the patterns of discriminatory biases in the policy and governance processes, systemic disregard for community knowledge, exclusion of community participation, and lack of diversity within decision-making and environmental organizations are core steps on the path to achieving equitable governance. In order to truly center social equity, we must:

- Create practices and structures that enable equitable governance
- Enhance Grassroots Participatory Democracy

"Recognition of the knowledge, innovations and practices, institutions and values of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities and their inclusion and participation in environmental governance often enhances their quality of life, as well as nature conservation, restoration and sustainable use."

~ **United Nations, 2019**

2 Restore Community Connections to Place

At the heart of a Just Transition are place-based communities that can practice self-determination, care for their social and economic well-being, and honor ecological stewardship and sustainability. A place-based approach focuses policy, programmatic interventions, and innovations in specific geographic areas that are suffering from environmental and social injustices. When we prevent extraction and emissions from the communities most impacted, pollution will have no place to hide. Place-based strategies include increased green space, strengthened food systems, public transportation, sustainable land-use planning, and affordable housing all together. In doing so, place-based approaches can reduce greenhouse gases and improve health and economic outcomes for low-income communities and communities of color. Through this work, communities can reclaim culturally-rooted traditions of land stewardship and interpersonal connection that have been decimated by colonization and systemic oppression. Overarching policy approaches that are important in Front and Centered's vision of place-based strategies are:

- Local accessibility for all through integrated housing and transportation
- Clean-up and prevention of pollution
- Green infrastructure, open space, and supporting healthy ecologies
- Regenerative agriculture

3 Create Livelihoods within a Healthy Environment

A regenerative economy is one that is structured to prioritize sustainable living and work within ecological limits, eradicate inequality, ensure all basic needs are met, and foster individual and community well-being and health. We envision a Washington where all people's fundamental needs are met, including having free time for important things like family and participation in community life. Where all work is dignified, rewarded, where all workers have a voice at work, and where everyone can afford to live a good life; and where the air, water, and land is clean and healthy. This is a fundamental reorientation away from an economy and livelihoods rooted in growth, commodification, extraction of labor and resources, and exclusion based on race and gender.

"A Just Transition must advance ecological resilience, reduce resource consumption, restore biodiversity and traditional ways of life, and undermine extractive economies, including capitalism, that erode the ecological basis of our collective well-being...This also means producing to live well without living better at the expense of others."

~ Climate Justice Alliance

- Meet universal, fundamental needs, build a social foundation
- Create economic models that support livelihoods within ecological limits
- Equitably distribute of wealth and work

4 Transition to Renewable Resources and Energy

Ensuring a transition to renewable, equitable energy generation and use can and must be a tool to achieve environmental and climate justice and can be a cornerstone to powering the new regenerative economy we envision. We have identified various policy approaches to achieve this goal, including 'stopping the bad' strategies through the slowing of energy emissions and energy demand to 'building the new' approaches that deploying renewables and electrifying end uses in ways that advance equity. The approaches are often overlapping and are interwoven together. By developing policies that expand access and increase affordability for low-income residents, safeguarding against negative impacts in low-income communities, and strengthening democratic and participatory practices, many of the policy approaches can directly improve the health and economic opportunities of low-income communities, while creating universal benefits for all Washingtonians and the climate. The policy approaches include:

- Limit pollution
- Improve energy efficiency and conservation
- Increase renewable energy production
- Electrify energy uses

While climate action conversations traditionally focus on energy, due to the outsized role the burning of carbon-based fuels plays in the greenhouse effect, such a narrow focus can create additional extraction pressures, such as increased mining for raw materials needed to produce solar panels and wind turbines. While we include energy in this report as fundamental to the climate crisis, we recognize the need to address the broader set of very important resource questions going forward.

Looking Ahead

Washington state is at a pivotal moment. While we are winning small battles to shift our economy off extractive resources, we are losing communities to displacement, life expectancy to air pollution, and our future to climate change. The solutions that will allow us to break from business as usual are those that prioritize equity. There is no climate path forward that does not address the need to shift systems of governance, place, economy, and energy toward justice. We must temper the urge to put all our resources toward short term wins based on what is politically possible right now to illuminate the full potential of where we can go if we pull together for a truly Just Transition to a regenerative economy.