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# **Just energy transitions as a path towards fair and place-based fossil fuel phase-outs?**

The case of the Just Energy Transition in South Africa

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## **Abstract:**

Given the need to mitigate adverse impacts of fossil fuel phase-outs, this thesis investigates whether just energy transitions lead to inclusive and place-based outcomes, focusing on the Just Energy Transition (JET) in South Africa. Using a political economy and procedural justice lens, and drawing on interviews with key stakeholders, the study explores the inclusivity of decision-making processes in the country's coal phase-out. The findings reveal that the JET process falls short of procedural justice goals, primarily due to unequal stakeholder influence, fragmented governance, and a lack of clarity regarding roles and objectives. The research concludes that although just energy transitions are essential, the planning of South Africa's JET faces significant challenges in achieving inclusivity and aligning diverse objectives and needs. These insights contribute to broader debates on fair, place-based approaches to sustainable coal transitions. The study recommends addressing structural and procedural deficiencies to prevent the reinforcement of existing inequalities.

**Keywords:** low-carbon transitions, just energy transitions, political economy, procedural justice, South Africa, stakeholder engagement

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## List of Abbreviations

COP	Conference of the Parties
JET	Just Energy Transition
JETP	Just Energy Transition Partnership
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
PCC	Presidential Climate Commission
RE	Renewable Energy
RQ	Research Question
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Background and Research Problem

Global energy targets, such as those set in the Paris Agreement and emphasised during successive Conference of the Parties (COP) meetings, underscore the urgent need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. These reductions are essential due to the escalating impacts of climate change on both planet and people. The energy sector, still heavily reliant on fossil fuels, remains a key contributor to emissions. COP26 in 2021 reinforced this urgency by highlighting the critical need to transition away from emission-intensive fossil fuels towards renewable energy sources (UNFCCC, 2021). Meeting these targets is crucial for limiting global warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels – a threshold beyond which climate-related risks are projected to increase significantly.

However, transitioning energy systems away from fossil fuels poses a complex challenge for many countries, especially in the Global South. These countries often face institutional, financial, and technical constraints that limit their ability to adapt (Fisher, 2015). Beyond the environmental imperative, energy transitions must also address deep-rooted economic dependencies and social vulnerabilities. For many developing nations, fossil fuel industries are not only economic engines but also major sources of employment and social stability. Consequently, while reducing emissions is crucial, energy transitions must also be socially just. Transitioning energy systems away from fossil fuels often risks further exacerbating already existing inequalities, disproportionately impacting communities relying on such industries. This is particularly true in countries like South Africa, where economies and livelihoods are deeply intertwined with coal-based industries (Burger, 2024; Tladi et al., 2024). To prevent the disproportionate burdening of already marginalised groups and countervail potentially adverse and uneven changes in fossil fuel phase-outs, transitions must be designed inclusively.

The concept of ‘just energy transitions’ has gained prominence in response to these concerns. It highlights the need for justice, inclusivity, and fairness in energy transitions towards renewable energies – often described with the notion of “leaving no-one behind” (Xaba, 2023). By involving governments, businesses, and civil society, just energy transitions adopt a collaborative approach to ensure equitable and inclusive shifts of energy systems (Nel et al., 2023; Topaloglou et al., 2024). Moreover, place-based approaches enhance the effectiveness of these transitions by tailoring solutions to specific contexts (Akrofi et al., 2024; Mirzania et al., 2023).



The Just Energy Transition (JET) in South Africa incorporates these aspects by aiming for a decarbonisation of the energy system in a socially just way. In this context, Just Energy Transition Partnerships (JETPs) as partnerships between industrialised and non-industrialised countries are a relatively new concept to address these issues (Fakir, 2023; Karg, 2024; Ordonez et al., 2024). JETPs add an international dimension to the concept of just energy transitions in the form of partnerships providing funding to diversify partner countries' economies away from fossil fuels (Banerjee, 2024). Despite their promise, JETPs and national JETs encounter however often challenges in aligning international ambitions, national priorities, and, most critically, local realities (Cashmore et al., 2014; Ha-Duong & Cassen, 2024; Singh, 2023). This misalignment of top-down processes emphasises the need to critically assess whether decision-making processes are inclusive and participatory and actually address local needs, ultimately leading to the question of how effective just energy transitions are. Despite growing attention to just energy transitions, there is limited research on how global and national priorities are reconciled with local needs in actual decision-making processes, particularly in developing countries.

## **1.2 Research Aim and RQs**

Against this backdrop, South Africa's JET offers an insightful case study. With its heavy dependence on coal and newly established JETP with international partners, the country finds itself at the intersection of global environmental imperatives and local socio-economic realities. Accordingly, this research aims to assess how effective the South African JET – and its international counterpart, the JETP – are in achieving equitable and sustainable transitions of energy systems based on fossil fuels towards renewable energies. For this study, effectiveness is defined through the lens of inclusivity and justice, focusing particularly on the alignment between international cooperation, national implementation strategies, and local priorities and needs. Central to this assessment is an understanding of stakeholder perceptions – how various actors view and experience participation in the JET process. Inclusive engagement and meaningful participation are often seen as a cornerstone of socially just transitions, as it enables diverse voices to influence the design and outcomes of energy policies.

Therefore, this research investigates the inclusivity and fairness of South Africa's JET and examines the procedural justice aspects of the transition process. In this context, it is central to analyse how different vulnerabilities and interests on the local level are considered in (inter)national decision-making processes and whether and how decisions are influenced and shaped by different interests.

The main research question guiding this study is: *How is the ongoing South African Just Energy Transition (JET) initiative facilitating an inclusive and place-based coal phase-out in the country?* Sub-questions to be investigated are:

- (1) How do key stakeholders perceive and experience the procedural justice of decision-making processes within the JET?
- (2) Based on political economy structures, what are procedural justice issues and gaps embedded in the JET?
- (3) How can stakeholder participation and inclusivity in the JET be enhanced, leading to more procedural justice?

### **1.3 Significance for and Contribution to Sustainability Science**

Sustainability science is concerned with how power dynamics are altered or reinforced in efforts to govern resources sustainably (Avelino et al., 2024; Cash et al., 2006). The research explores issues surrounding power dynamics and imbalances in influence related to social and ecological sustainability. While previous studies on just energy transitions have focused on the technical and economic aspects, more comprehensive research is needed that considers the social justice dimension, especially in different socio-economic and political contexts (Loorbach et al., 2017). Despite the growing number of JETs (and JETPs), there is limited empirical research on their effectiveness in promoting both sustainability and social justice. Understanding how both just energy transitions and their sometimes underlying partnerships function and their impacts is critical for designing better energy policies.

The study is significant for transition research regarding place-based approaches, which highlight context specificity. Sustainability science highlights the importance of context-specificity and place-based approaches for sustainable development and transitions (Horlings, 2018). Place-based transformations emphasise the need for holistic planning and interdisciplinary approaches in just transitions (Horlings, 2018), particularly in non-industrialised contexts. Different spatial, temporal, and cumulative impacts on countries, regions, and communities require just transitions specifically designed to and implemented in different contexts (Coenen et al., 2012).

Additionally, sustainability science emphasises the interlinkages between environmental, social, and economic development, promoting integrated approaches to address complex global challenges such as energy transitions (Kates et al., 2001). The research advances the discourse on just energy transitions and sustainable development, also regarding the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs),

in under-researched countries and regions. This research contributes to building knowledge around just (energy) transitions in non-industrialised contexts.

## **1.4 Structure of Thesis**

To answer the research questions, I first provide some background on the just energy transition in the South African energy context, followed by a theory chapter on the concept of the political economy and the just transition framework, with particular focus on the dimension of procedural justice. In the methodology chapter, I present the research design and the data selected for conducting the qualitative case study. The findings are presented, summarised, and analysed in section 5, where I also answer RQ1 and RQ2. In section 6 I discuss the findings in relation to previous studies, which answers RQ3 as well as the main RQ. Section 7 provides some concluding remarks.

## **2 Background**

Equitable and sustainable energy transitions have attracted increasing academic interest, particularly with the emergence of the concept of “just energy transitions”. The just design and implementation of energy transitions is considered as crucial for ensuring that communities dependent on fossil fuel industries are supported adequately in the systemic shift away from fossil fuels (Field, 2021; Tladi et al., 2024). In the case of South Africa, the JET was launched in 2021, with the JETP as an international partnership consisting of funding commitments of \$8,5 billion to support the country's JET.

The topic of just energy transitions has been studied from many different angles by different disciplines (see Boateng et al., 2023; Hägele et al., 2022; Tladi et al., 2024). As I will explore in more detail in the next section, existing studies point however to the need of further investigating the case of South Africa and the country's JET, particularly with focus on stakeholder engagement and the inclusivity of decision-making processes as well as the alignment of (inter)national objectives and local priorities and needs.

The following section will thus introduce the context and background needed for investigating the South African JET and be able to answer the main research question of how the ongoing South African JET is leading to an inclusive, equitable, and place-based energy transition in the country. In this context, I will focus in the following on the key themes of (1) the socio-economic implications from the local coal phase-out in South Africa, (2) the South African JET process aiming to counteract these potentially negative implications, and (3) the importance of stakeholder and community engagement for successful just and inclusive energy transitions.

## **2.1 Socio-Economic Challenges of South Africa's Coal Phase-Out**

The global shift toward low-carbon energy systems, driven by international climate agreements such as the Paris Agreement and COP commitments, is leading to national-level fossil fuel phase-outs (Cole et al., 2023; Ordonez et al., 2024; von Lüpke, 2023). While these transitions are environmentally necessary, they often carry severe socio-economic consequences for regions heavily dependent on fossil fuel industries (Akrofi et al., 2024; Bridge et al., 2013). In South Africa, where coal dominates the energy mix, the planned phase-out is expected to generate significant challenges (Cole et al., 2023; de Jong, 2021; Hägele et al., 2022; Houston & Ruppel, 2022; Mirzania et al., 2023; Nel et al., 2023; Ordonez et al., 2024; Simpson et al., 2023; Tladi et al., 2024; Xaba, 2023). These include the loss of livelihoods and employment, reduced well-being, compromised energy security, decreased community engagement and development, weakened educational opportunities, and risks of institutional failure, corruption, and governance deficits (Cole et al., 2023; de Jong, 2021; Hägele et al., 2022; Ignatov, 2023; Mirzania et al., 2023; Nel et al., 2023; Tladi et al., 2024; von Lüpke et al., 2023).

To mitigate these adverse effects, comprehensive and inclusive political interventions are needed. These consist of social protection programs, re-skilling and education initiatives, investments in alternative economic activities, and strengthened governance and institutional frameworks (Cole et al., 2023; Ignatov, 2023; von Lüpke et al., 2023). Political strategies must be responsive to local needs while remaining aligned with broader national and international climate goals, ensuring that affected communities are not left behind during the transition. However, designing and implementing such interventions is complicated by the nature of multi-level governance and the diversity of actors involved. Stakeholders – including government bodies, energy companies, NGOs, and local communities – often have competing interests and priorities regarding how the energy transition should be structured (Cock, 2019; ICLEI Africa, 2024; Tarekegne et al., 2022; von Lüpke, 2023). These misalignments can undermine policy coherence and delay or distort the intended outcomes of the transition, thereby exacerbating existing inequalities and inefficiencies.

Therefore, a deeper understanding of the various actors' interests, their influence within the transition process, and the dynamics shaping decision-making is essential. Only through such analysis can appropriate and context-sensitive policy interventions be developed to counteract the adverse socio-economic impacts of the coal phase-out. Addressing these questions is the focus of this research's first research question (RQ1), which aims to explore the key stakeholders' perceptions of the decision-making processes within the South African JET.

## **2.2 Aligning Climate Commitments with Local Realities: South Africa's Just Energy**

### **Transition Pathways**

As discussed in the previous section, the coal phase-out in South Africa is likely to result in substantial socio-economic disruption, particularly for coal-dependent communities. Addressing these challenges requires not only targeted policy interventions but also robust governance mechanisms capable of managing the complex interplay of international climate commitments and national-local socio-economic realities (Cole et al., 2023). Strong political will and coordinated leadership across all levels of government – national, provincial, and local – are essential (Nel et al., 2023). National governments may drive and coordinate policy implementation, but it is at the local level that the human consequences of the transition are most acutely felt (Cock, 2021). In the sense of equity, justice, and inclusivity, particularly already marginalised and vulnerable population groups, communities, and those unable to transition need however to be supported through empowerment and just engagement across all planning and implementation (Fakir, 2023; Nel et al., 2023; Simpson et al., 2023) to ensure that nobody is left behind. In this context, Simpson et al. (2023) argue for the key challenge of just energy transitions lying in balancing top-down (international) climate goals with bottom-up national and local concerns.

This is also the case in the context of South Africa and its JET, since avoiding further exacerbating already existing societal inequalities because of decisions taken on higher levels and impacting the local level is of utmost importance (de Jong, 2021). Closely linked to the country's JET, the Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP) serves as a transnational policy process designed to facilitate financial investments from industrialised countries into South Africa, aiming to support a fair and inclusive transition away from coal (Simpson et al., 2023). While the partnership seeks to integrate a just, equitable, and sustainable energy transition at multiple levels – international, national, and local – with investments focusing on decarbonising the energy system and mitigating socio-economic consequences of the coal phase-out (Houston & Ruppel, 2022; Kruckenberg, 2015), JETPs often encounters tensions due to differing priorities between donor and recipient countries. Additionally to the above mentioned potential disconnect between national and local levels, concerns persist thereby regarding the fairness of these international processes.

Therefore, RQ2 seeks to explore which core issues key stakeholders identify in terms of fairness and inclusivity in the decision-making processes, offering insight into the procedural justice dimension of South Africa's energy transition.

## **2.3 Importance of Place-Based Approaches and Local Governance**

In response to the potential adverse implications for affected communities, community engagement is highlighted as a major aspect for ensuring just energy transition processes (Topaloglou et al., 2024; Xaba, 2023). Particularly coal-dependent and therefore among the most affected community members have to be acknowledged in a people-centred approach as key stakeholders in energy transition processes (Cock, 2021; Tarekegne et al., 2022; Xaba, 2023) and different perspectives, needs, and interests need to be aligned for decision-making and consensus-building (ICLEI Africa, 2024; Simpson et al., 2023; Taliep, 2022; Tyler & Mgoduso, 2022). Moreover, public participation and robust stakeholder engagement resonates with the important notion of inclusive and just energy transitions of leaving no-one behind (ICLEI Africa, 2024; Xaba, 2023).

Although it cannot uncritically be assumed that civil society participation is inherently benevolent, scholars argue that the engagement of various stakeholders generally increases support and legitimacy, raises awareness – also among decision-makers – and acceptance, and thereby leads to more effective policy-making (de Jong, 2021; ICLEI Africa, 2024; Simpson et al., 2023; Topaloglou et al., 2024). Ultimately, stakeholder engagement consists of accessing, reflecting, and meaningfully incorporating diverse stakeholders' perspectives and needs, leading to inclusivity, legitimacy, social dialogue, and energy justice (de Jong, 2021; Taliep, 2022; Topaloglou et al., 2024; Tyler & Mgoduso, 2022).

Moreover, decentralised local governance is essential for mediating between top-down and bottom-up interventions for just energy transitions (Cole et al., 2023; Swarnakar & Singh, 2022; Topaloglou et al., 2024) and grassroots actors can play a crucial role for local and regional change (Grimley et al., 2024). In this context, it is important to design just energy transitions as place-based approaches with ensured inclusiveness in decision-making and coordination across different actors and levels (Hägele et al., 2022; Mirzania et al., 2023) as well as to empower affected citizens through engagement in just transitions (Nel et al., 2023). Justice for local stakeholders is of utmost importance when planning and implementing transitions (Swarnakar & Singh, 2022; Tladi et al., 2024) and can be best achieved through inclusive and participatory processes taking place-based and context-specific dynamics into account. In this context, Swarnakar & Singh (2022) highlight the key role of local governance in just energy transitions in countervailing limited stakeholder engagement and cooperation through bottom-up mechanisms.

Civil society engagement and stakeholder participation are therefore seen as important aspects for achieving truly just energy transitions, which need to be informed by local contexts and needs and

driven by the respective countries and communities themselves in order to gain broad political support (Tyler & Mgoduso, 2022; von Lüpke et al., 2023). RQ3 aims therefore to investigate how stakeholder engagement and procedural justice can be enhanced in the case of the South African JET.

## **2.4 Summary and Research Gaps**

In conclusion, previous research has demonstrated that coal phase-outs have multiple adverse implications, many of which will particularly affect civil society and already marginalised groups, also in the case of South Africa. Given the importance of inclusivity and justice in stakeholder engagement, it is therefore essential for the success of the country's JET that planning and implementation processes ensure fairness and place-specificity to counteract these effects of fossil fuel phase-outs.

Nonetheless, in the face of just energy transition processes globally often being criticized for inadequately involving and engaging civil society and a wide range of stakeholders in its decision-making processes, the question remains how fair and inclusive the South African JET processes are. Already existing research pays however inadequate attention to stakeholder engagement in the country's JET and its crucial importance for addressing exclusivity and misalignment of objectives and needs for achieving a truly just energy transition in South Africa. Therefore, in my study, I will address this knowledge gap by investigating the main research question: how is the ongoing South African JET facilitating an inclusive and place-based coal phase-out in the country?

## **3 Theories**

To answer the question of how fair and inclusive the JET is, it is important to look not just at the initiative in isolation, but at the broader structures it is situated in, since transitions are naturally shaped and influenced by the underlying system. In this section, I will therefore explain the broader concept of the political economy with its inherent influence imbalances and power dynamics and the just transition framework with focusing on the dimension of procedural justice. Lastly, I present how these two theoretical concepts are conceptualized in the research context of the thesis.

### **3.1 Political Economy**

The study is placed within the political economy structures of fossil fuel phase-outs with its numerous stakeholders and inherent power dynamics, acknowledging that politics and economy are

intertwined and inseparable from each other (Ravenhill, 2020). Transitions to low-carbon energy systems are not merely technical shifts but deeply political and economic processes that reshape power dynamics at global, national, and local levels (Healy & Barry, 2017; McCauley & Heffron, 2018). Since injustices are often deeply rooted in social-economic and political structures, Wang & Lo (2022) argue for the importance of understanding just transitions through a political economy perspective, which is sensitive to local contexts. Moreover, the political economy influences to which degree change is politicized, the power relations between key stakeholder groups, and ultimately the ability and means to govern (Stark et al., 2023).

The interdisciplinary field of political economy also guides the research's understanding of influence and power in the context of fossil fuel phase-outs, such as in the case of the just energy transition in South Africa. Power structures and its underlying imbalances and asymmetries of influence as a fundamental but often overlooked aspect of politics and international cooperation (Healy & Barry, 2017; Pearse, 2021; Wang & Lo, 2021; Williams & Doyon, 2019) influence the who, how, and why of energy transitions, that means who participates in decision-making, whose perspectives are included, and whose interests shape transition processes (Barnett & Duvall, 2004; Boateng et al., 2023; Menashy, 2019; Nightingale & Ahlborg, 2018). Therefore, power dynamics, being deeply embedded in governance (Barnett & Duvall, 2004), have the potential to either accelerate or hinder energy transitions, influenced by the different kinds of agency (Bookbinder, 2024; Pearse, 2021). It is therefore important to contextualise influence within the wider political context of interactions and between political, economic, and societal actors and their respective objectives (Bookbinder, 2024; Ohlendorf et al., 2022; Pearse, 2021).

Therefore, both the political economy and inherent influences in processes and politics surrounding socio-technical energy transitions, such as the coal phase-out in South Africa, need to be taken into account (Healy & Barry, 2017). In order to apply the lens of political economy in the research context, key dimensions were identified from the reviewed literature (see Boateng et al., 2023; Newell, 2019; Newell & Mulvaney, 2013; Pearse, 2021; Ravenhill, 2020; Wang & Lo, 2022). These include: (a) actors and their interests; (b) system structures, including institutions and governance as well as economic structures; and (c) power dynamics.

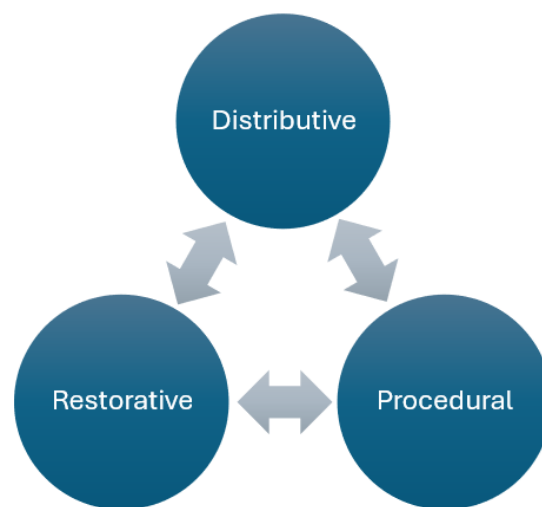
### **3.2 Just Transition Framework and Procedural Justice**

A just transition naturally avoids reproducing environmental and socio-economic inequalities and injustices while addressing global threats like climate change (Boateng et al., 2023; Wang & Lo, 2021). Therefore, it can be defined as “a fair and equitable process of moving towards a post-carbon



society” (McCauley & Heffron, 2018), taking place across multiple scales and ensuring fair and equitable transitions for all individuals and communities (Hägele et al., 2022).

The Just Transition Framework is the central theoretical approach used in this study to assess the justice dimensions of the South African JET. Rooted in climate, energy, and environmental justice (McCauley & Heffron, 2018; Stark et al., 2023; Wang & Lo, 2021), the Just Transition Framework is defined and operationalized by the South African Presidential Climate Commission (PCC) (de Jong, 2021) in order to bring coordination and coherence to the just transition planning by integrating policy measures, planning elements, at-risk groups, principles, and vision (PCC, 2022) (see Figure 1). It provides a structured way to analyse how transition processes impact different actors and whether they are implemented fairly and inclusively (see Akrofi et al., 2024; Carley et al., 2018; de Jong, 2021; Hägele et al., 2022; Steadman et al., 2024). The concept of the just transition understood as an integrated framework for justice (Wang & Lo, 2021) differentiates between the three dimensions of distributive, procedural, and restorative justice (Hägele et al., 2022; McCauley & Heffron, 2018; PCC, 2022).



**Figure 1.** The PCC’s Just Transition Framework with its three dimensions of distributive, restorative, and procedural justice. (own visualization)

Given the research aiming to investigate the inclusivity and fairness of decision-making processes within the South African JET, the primary focus of the study is on procedural justice as one of the three pillars of the PCC's Just Transition Framework. The dimension of procedural justice is the core of *how* decisions are made, highlighting the importance of ensuring fair and inclusive decision-making processes and determining whether governance structures enable meaningful participation and equitable decision-making (McCauley & Heffron, 2018; Newell & Mulvaney, 2013). It can

therefore be defined as the “perceived fairness of the procedures used to design a just transition and all the steps taken to implement such plans” (Banerjee & Schuitema, 2022).

In order to apply the lens of procedural justice as an analytical tool, key aspects of procedural justice were reviewed in existing literature. Williams & Doyon (2019) provide a helpful list of key questions for the different justice dimensions, from which – together with reviewed literature and the PCC's Just Transition Framework – the following central aspects of procedural justice were identified and derived: (a) meaningful participation and justice framing (Hägele et al., 2022; PCC, 2022; Stark et al., 2023; Williams & Doyon, 2019); (b) recognition and mitigation of power imbalances (Boateng et al., 2023; Healy & Barry, 2017; Menashy, 2019; Wang & Lo, 2021); (c) effective institutional coordination and participatory governance (Healy & Barry, 2017; McCauley & Heffron, 2018; Newell & Mulvaney, 2013; PCC, 2022; Stark et al., 2023); and (d) capacity-building and equitable access to participation (Newell & Mulvaney, 2013; PCC, 2022; Wang & Lo, 2021). Table 1 gives a more detailed explanation of the definitions and application of these aspects in the research context.

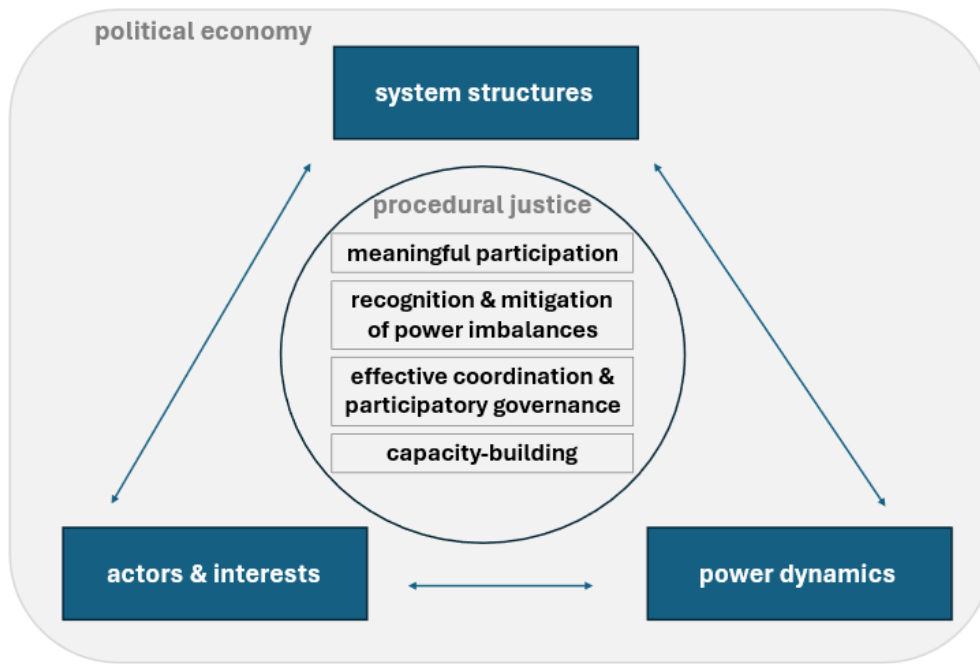
**Table 1.** The four central aspects of procedural justice identified for the analysis of the South African JET. (own visualization)

Dimension of Procedural Justice	Definition/Application to Case	Adapted from
<b>Meaningful participation and justice framing</b>	Providing stakeholders with real opportunities to influence decisions, so that their perspectives shape how justice is defined and concerns are taken into account.	Williams & Doyon 2019; Hägele et al. 2022; Stark et al. 2023; PCC 2022
<b>Recognition and mitigation of power imbalances</b>	Acknowledging unequal power among stakeholders, competing interests are mediated, and underrepresented actors empowered.	Boateng et al. 2023; Menashy 2019; Wang & Lo 2021; Healy & Barry 2017
<b>Effective institutional coordination and participatory governance</b>	Ensuring institutions work together efficiently and interdisciplinary and that governance structures allow for inclusive public input and consultations.	McCauley & Heffron 2018; Healy & Barry 2017; Newell & Mulvaney 2013; Stark et al. 2023; PCC 2022
<b>Capacity-building and equitable access to participation</b>	Supporting stakeholders with education, communication, and skills development to ensure that participation is not limited by technical, financial, etc. barriers.	PCC 2022; Wang & Lo 2021; Newell & Mulvaney 2013

### 3.3 Conceptualizing South Africa’s Just Energy Transition

This study integrates two interrelated theoretical approaches to provide a comprehensive analysis of the South African JET (see Figure 2). The following theories are integrated:

1. Political Economy as the broader framework situating the JET within global and national structures.
2. Procedural Justice (as one key dimension of the Just Transition Framework) as the core analytical tool for evaluating the justice dimensions of the JET.



**Figure 2.** The two interrelated concepts of political economy and procedural justice, and their different dimensions/aspects. (own visualization)

By combining these perspectives, this study examines both the structural constraints and (procedural) justice implications of the South African JET. The political economy perspective highlights how actors and interests, governance structures, and power relations shape transition processes, with dynamics underlying governance, decision-making, and justice. Situated in these broader structures and dimensions of the political economy, procedural justice assesses whether processes meet justice criteria, with a particular focus on aspects such as inclusivity, fairness, and participation. In this context, the dimension of procedural justice plays a central role in the process-dimension of political economy – additionally to agency and structure (see Pearse, 2021).

As suggested by scholars with regard to the need of justice in energy transitions (see Boateng et al., 2023; Healy & Barry, 2017; Newell & Mulvaney, 2013; Stark et al., 2023; Williams & Doyon, 2019), this integrated approach allows for a critical analysis of the South African JET, evaluating both political and economic (governance) structures and justice impacts. It also provides insights into the broader challenges of balancing international cooperation with local priorities in energy transitions, emphasising the need for fair, participatory, and context-sensitive approaches to just transitions.

## **4 Methodology**

### **4.1 Social Constructivist Onto-Epistemology**

This thesis adopts a social constructivist onto-epistemological perspective, holding that reality is socially constructed through individuals' subjective interpretations of experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Consequently, the research relies on participants' perspectives, using methods such as interviews and personal narratives.

In line with the social constructivist approach, I focus on stakeholder perceptions, justice dimensions, and engagement as socially constructed and context-dependent concepts. Furthermore, multiple realities exist within the research context, as policymakers, private sector actors, local communities, and international donors may perceive and experience justice, influence, and engagement differently. This also shaped the choice of interview questions, which focus on the interviewees' own perceptions and thoughts on the JET's decision-making processes, as well as the analysis and interpretation of diverse experiences expressed in the interviews as subjective meanings, often shaped through social interaction (Amineh & Asl, 2015; Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

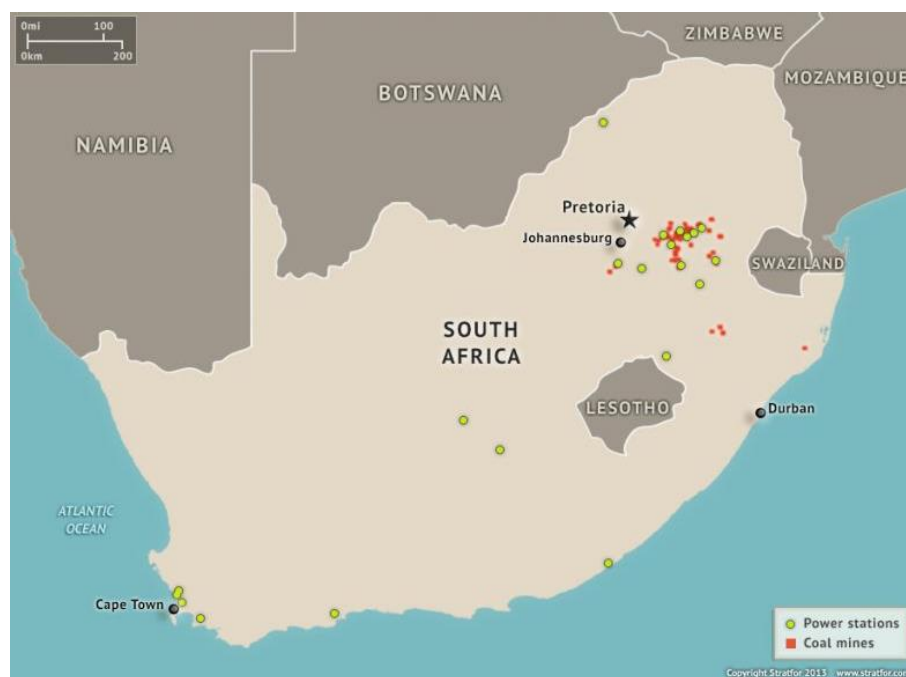
### **4.2 Case Study Design: Case of South African JET**

As a research strategy, I use a single-case study of the South African Just Energy Transition (JET) for an in-depth analysis and detailed understanding of the case within its real-world context – in the case of the research, South Africa (Bryman, 2012; Creswell & Poth, 2025; Yin, 2018). Although the transition process – including the partnership dimension under the JETP – represents a less concrete case for case studies (Yin, 2018), a case study design in the context of the South African JET allows for analysis at more than one level: international, national, local as well as political, economic, and social.

The case of South Africa's JET is important since South Africa is the most important coal producer in Africa, producing almost 5,5 billion tonnes in 2022 and exporting a high share – around one third of its production – globally (IEA, 2023). With coal representing 85% of its electricity production, the country's energy sector is highly dependent on coal (de Jong, 2021; IEA, 2023; Ratshomo & Nembahe, 2022). However, with the coal industry's importance come also considerable impacts on both environment and human health (IEA, 2023; Ratshomo & Nembahe, 2022). Additionally, soaring inequalities and unemployment rates as high as 32% (as of 2024; Statistics South Africa, 2025) persist in the country. Given these contextual circumstances and the significance of coal in South Africa's political economy, the South African JET and the linked JETP, launched in 2021 as the first one of its

kind, provide a relevant example for assessing the alignment of (inter)national objectives and local priorities, justice concerns, stakeholder participation, and power dynamics.

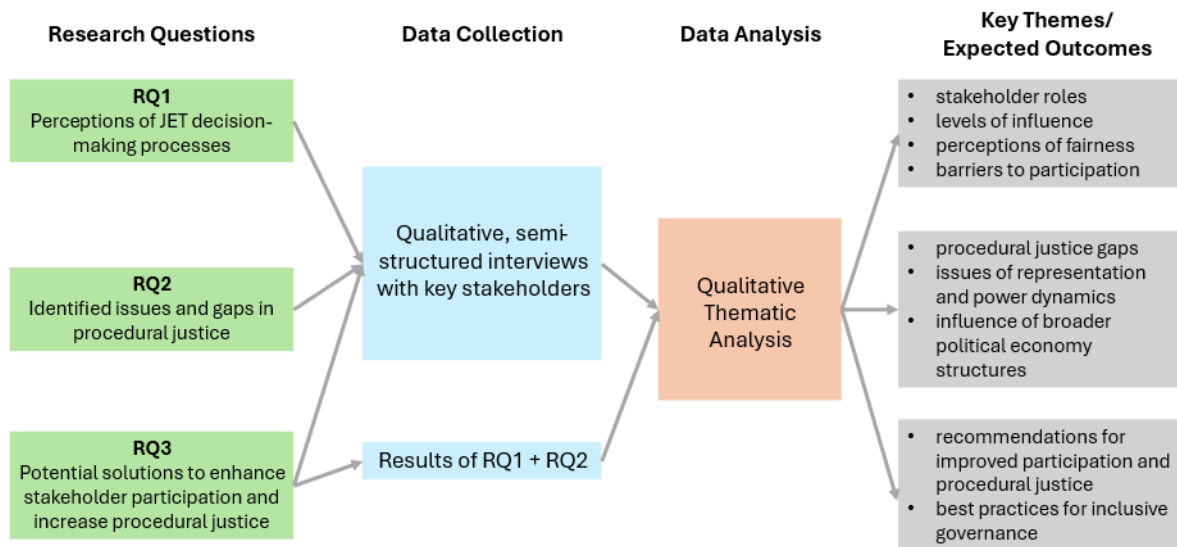
In the face of this context and the above mentioned adverse impacts from the coal phase-out, the JET aims to reduce South Africa's dependency on coal and shift towards a low-carbon energy system in a socially just and inclusive manner (PCC, 2025). However, recent shut-downs of power plants, such as the infamous case of the Komati Power Plant in the Mpumalanga province, show that processes are not yet just and inclusive. The unjust and exclusive design of the energy transition risks exacerbating existing inequalities, which are also clearly visible in the geographical distribution of coalfields and power plants (see Figure 3) (Ratshomo & Nembahe, 2022).



**Figure 3.** Map of South Africa displaying the location of coal mines and power plants in the country. (Stratfor, 2013)

#### 4.3 Data Collection: Semi-Structured Interviews

The collected data, consisting mainly of semi-structured interviews, allow for an up-close and in-depth understanding and analysis of the case by providing information on stakeholder engagement in the JET, experiences and perceptions of the processes and potential misalignment between interests, and eventual effects from imbalances in influence and interests. Figure 4 shows the logical connection between the RQs and the data collected and analysed.



**Figure 4.** Visualization of the research design, including the logical connection between the RQs, the data collected and analysed, and the key themes and expected outcomes used for deductive coding. (own visualization)

Interviews are a key source of evidence for explaining events and participants' insights (Yin, 2018), which I found to be suitable for my research with its social constructivist onto-epistemology. In-depth interviews allow individuals to explain how they understand and perceive events and processes within the South African JET (Knott et al., 2022; Yin, 2018). This gives insights in the perceptions on justice, stakeholder engagement, and influence dynamics (Yin, 2018).

As my aim was to understand how different actors experience the decision-making processes within the JET, with a particular focus on justice and underlying dynamics, I conducted 12 semi-structured interviews with participants from different stakeholder groups (see Table 2). The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were recorded and transcribed for further analysis. To get a varied interdisciplinary understanding and different perspectives, I included the following groups: (1) government and political actors given their involvement in decision-making and JET planning processes, (2) energy companies for their specific focus on the energy sector, (3) researchers and consultants for a scientific perspective on the topic, and (4) NGOs and community groups representing the local perspective.

I employed purposive sampling to identify relevant JET actors for informed perspectives on its decision-making processes and stakeholder involvement (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Silverman, 2017). Participants were selected based on their professional roles, institutional affiliations, or direct engagement with the JET, ensuring alignment with the research objectives. Following this, I used snowball sampling to expand the participant pool by asking early interviewees to suggest additional relevant interviewees. The combination of purposive and snowball sampling supported the research

aim of capturing diverse but interconnected perspectives on the fairness and inclusivity of South Africa's JET. For the semi-structured interviews, I developed an interview guide (see Appendix) with a list of topics and questions to be covered with each interviewee. This allowed for flexibility by adjusting the questions to the respective background and relation to JET of each participant, since not all key stakeholders are expected to provide the same information.

**Table 2.** Key stakeholders who participated in the semi-structured interviews. (own visualization)

No.	Date	Location	Stakeholder Group	Interviewee Position
#1	Feb 13	Johannesburg	energy company/RE	RE developer, grid connection manager
#2	Feb 17	Johannesburg	government	project finance manager
#3	Feb 25	Johannesburg	NGO	advice office
#4	Feb 25	Johannesburg	energy company/Eskom	(former) corporate strategist, energy consultant
#5	Mar 10	online	energy company/Eskom	corporate specialist JET
#6	Mar 4	Cape Town	research institute	senior specialist
#7	Mar 6	online	government	programme manager
#8	Mar 6	Cape Town	energy company/RE	RE developer
#9	Mar 13	online	NGO	coal campaigner
#10	Mar 13	online	energy company/Eskom	senior consultant
#11	Mar 14	Cape Town	policy group/consultant	director
#12	Apr 4	online	government	M&E specialist

#### 4.4 Data Analysis: Qualitative Thematic Analysis

I analysed the interview data using a thematic approach, which is well-suited to a case study design. This approach is useful for identifying and interpreting themes by exploring complex and interrelated issues such as stakeholder engagement, justice aspects, and underlying dynamics of South Africa's JET (Creswell & Poth, 2025). Thematic analysis enables a structured yet flexible interpretation of the empirical material, allowing for the systematic identification, organisation, and interpretation of key themes that emerge across interviews (Knott et al., 2022). The analysis was carried out using NVivo software, which facilitates the coding of transcripts and the detection of recurring patterns in participant responses. A hybrid approach of deductive and inductive coding was applied. Initially,

deductive coding guided the development of a codebook based on the study's theoretical frameworks, drawing on concepts from political economy and procedural justice (Bryman, 2012; Knott et al., 2022). This phase helped anchor the analysis in the study's main research objectives, particularly in relation to stakeholder dynamics, power relations, and governance mechanisms within the JET (see Key Themes/Expected Outcomes in Figure 4). As coding progressed, inductive coding was incorporated to capture themes and insights that were not fully anticipated by the initial framework. This ensured the codebook evolved throughout the analysis process, accommodating context-specific themes emerging from the data (see Appendix). The integration of inductive insights ensured the analysis remained grounded in participants' lived experiences, rather than being overly constrained by pre-existing assumptions.

After coding the data, I employed pattern matching to compare themes with theoretical frameworks. This involved systematically linking interviewee responses to aspects of procedural justice – such as participation, power asymmetries, coordination, and stakeholder capacities – and examining how these were shaped by political economy structures. Theory guided the analysis and enabled analytic generalization, using this specific case to draw broader conclusions about procedural justice and power relations in energy transitions (Yin, 2018).

#### **4.5 Ethical Considerations and Positionality**

Finally, fieldwork methods such as interviews require reflections on ethics, positionality, and potential bias. While ethical principles revolve around harm to participants, lack of informed consent, invasion of privacy, and deception (Bryman, 2012), it is important to follow ethical guidelines, such as obtaining consent and confidentiality, particularly in the case of research in different cultures and about vulnerable groups (Silverman, 2017). I asked each interviewee for informed consent and provided information on how their data would be used, stored, and processed. To protect the privacy of participants, I refrained from using real names or referring to identifiable characteristics. This anonymisation helped ensure that interviewees' identities and views remained confidential. Since my research studies sensitive issues, I decided to not directly interview community members, but to situate my research on a “higher” – meaning not local – level and incorporate the different views of stakeholders involved in policy, advocacy, or institutional decision-making related to JET processes. These decisions have important implications for the findings, as I will discuss in more detail in VI.3.

Moreover, I reflected on my role as a researcher and potential assumptions in knowledge production due to my positionality. My identity as a young, female, white researcher from Europe shapes the kind of knowledge and perceptions I bring to the field (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Knott et al., 2022)



as well as how I am seen. The question of objectivity and subjectivity plays an important role in assessing the quality of social research (Fahy & Rau, 2013; Funder, 2005). Therefore, I continuously reflected on potential bias, presuppositions or power relations that risk to negatively affect my research.

## **5 Results**

This chapter presents my findings from the qualitative interviews with key stakeholders involved in South Africa's JET, aiming to answer RQ1 and RQ2. Using the lens of political economy and procedural justice, I explore how interviewees perceive the JET's decision-making processes and their inclusivity and fairness. The results are structured along the three dimensions of political economy – system structures, actors and interests, and power dynamics –, each linked to subsequent core issues to achieving procedural justice identified through stakeholder responses: fragmented and complex governance, confusion and lack of clarity, and perceived unequal influence.

### **5.1 System Structures: Fragmented and Complex Governance**

The JET operates across multiple levels – local, provincial, national, and international – and involves diverse actors with varying mandates and differing agendas: *“there are many irons in the fire and different agendas in this just energy transition”* (#4). As a consequence, interviewees described the governance landscape as fragmented and complex, with often redundant processes and misaligned priorities (#11; #6). Yet interdependencies between multiple sectors, institutions, and levels of governance make comprehensive change difficult.

#### ***Political Economy Dimension: System Structures***

The multi-level system structures in the context of the South African JET, encompassing both federalism and international cooperation, pose great challenges to governance and comprehensive change in the country's energy system. Inconsistencies and disconnects in implementation arise due to a lack of coordination and clarity between the levels. While national authorities are tasked with coordinating policies and activities under the energy transition while adhering to global climate commitments, municipalities are expected to implement local-level development and participation processes (#7). Yet many local governments remain under-resourced and lack the capacity to carry out these responsibilities effectively. For instance, while there are already existing public participation processes in municipalities, these processes are described as symbolic or insufficiently linked to national strategies (#11).

Moreover, the South African JET is not only shaped by domestic policies but also by international partnerships and financial flows – such as under the JETP. Tensions between international commitments and local priorities further complicate governance, as highlighted by some interviewees who criticized international partner countries for attaching policy conditionalities to loans (#12; #11; #9; #8), which they argue reflect “*hidden agendas*” (#4) and “*neo-colonial [dynamics] within the guise of climate change*” (#3). While international partners provide essential funding and climate finance, their role in shaping South African national policies raises therefore concerns over independence and alignment with community needs. However, other stakeholders argue that South Africa maintains considerable leverage due to its strong domestic capital market, which accounts for a significant portion of its climate finance – around 80%, respectively (#2). The extent and nature of international influence remains therefore contested.

### ***Procedural Justice Constraints: Ineffective Coordination and Misalignment***

The fragmented governance system results in limited local ownership and persistent misalignment between policy goals and community needs: “*I mean there's a disconnect at the local level, but also there's not adequate information at the local level because people do not have any idea of what's happening around them. (...) because currently there's a transition, but we need to be very frank. It's not just.*” (#9). Communities feel disconnected from high-level agreements and perceive that they are being left behind, also due to the lack of real and tangible impacts on the ground. Consultative processes are seen as slow, bureaucratic, and disconnected from actual service delivery or economic opportunities. Miscommunication and parallel dialogues – between the government and donors, or between municipalities and communities – further diminish trust (#6).

The contestation around the JETP is coupled with South Africa's already precarious situation of things being dictated from the Global North while facing the global climate crisis. The different understandings between the Global North and South result in tensions: “*I think just understanding our (historical) context, obviously there's a lot of mistrust with developed nations.*” (#2). Given the public scepticism because international donors do often not act according to their own accountability mechanisms (#9) and lacking transparency in international negotiations, interviewees highlighted the need for more transparent, participatory, and locally grounded decision-making to align global ambitions with domestic priorities: “*So I think really the engagement part is very important to make people aware that this is happening on an international scale, (...) and then the local impact of that international impact, but then more focus on the opportunity and the just aspect of that, I think we'll make people more proactive.*” (#7).

## ***Suggestions and Implications***

Addressing the disconnect between (inter)national objectives and local priorities, caused by a fragmented governance system, requires better alignment of interests and consideration of the South African context. Interviewees often named co-creation as an essential strategy for inclusivity, since it involves both co-defining the existing problems through involving lived experiences on the ground and co-implementing of solutions for these identified problems (#2). With regard to the country's context of high prevalence of energy insecurity and insufficient grid capacity, co-creation is highlighted as an essential bottom-up process when negotiating international agreements around the necessary coal phase-out to avoid misalignment of projects and interests. Moreover, it is important to map what already exists within communities: *“Inclusive for me, it means that everyone has been given the information and everyone has inputs and everyone is involved in the creation of the solutions. Inclusivity goes slightly further than just information sharing and people giving comments on it. It goes to the solution side as well. And the communities must be involved in solution making so that they are leaders in the shape of their transition.”* (#10)

Additionally to co-creation in order to bridge the disconnect between the different system levels, capacity-building enables bottom-up approaches and collaboration across all levels (#5). Involving communities addresses feelings of the transition being detached and abstract from lived realities in communities. Given the often mentioned problem of having everybody represented but not capacitated to actually express their needs (#3), it is of utmost importance for enhanced stakeholder engagement to *“evolve the capabilities for people to articulate their needs appropriately”* (#6). Education on the stakeholders' benefits of the JET across the different levels creates in this context awareness and empowerment for more proactive people through knowledge, information sharing, and outreach, and ultimately a fundamental shift at a cultural level: *“It feels detached. I think there's a lot of times, you know, in academia, right? Even in politics, people seem to think that politicians are the only people involved in politics. When that's not the case. And even with science, science is not just for the scientists, right? Because the subjects are not scientists at all. And a lot of times people don't understand why you're doing something that it's difficult for them to support it. And I think again, this just goes back to education and awareness.”* (#1)

In conclusion, the South African JET is hindered by fragmented governance, misaligned priorities, and limited local inclusion, highlighting the need for co-creation, capacity-building, and better alignment between international ambitions and community needs.

## **5.2 Actors and Interests: Confusion and Lack of Clarity**

Another recurring theme across interviews was the confusion surrounding the JET's actual goals. While the formal objective is the managed coal phase-out and transformation of the energy system, the motives and activities often remain vague or overly technocratic, especially in public discourse. This ambiguity is exacerbated by the politicization of energy debates: *"Obviously there's a lot of politics at play, right?"* (#1).

### ***Political Economy Dimension: Actors and Interests***

Stakeholders expressed frustration that different actors – ministries, donors, companies – push competing agendas, each with their own definitions of what a "just" transition should look like (#11). In addition to confusion around goals and objectives, roles and responsibilities remain unclear. While it was stated that *"the just energy transition should be a responsibility, not a burden"* (#1), there is generally a huge uncertainty on the different roles and responsibilities of authorities in the process. Although mandates exist through legislation, stakeholders reported a lack of alignment, coordination, and consensus across departments and between levels of government (#10; #7). Due to the current planning and design of the JET as a top-down process, it seems to be difficult for stakeholders to know where exactly the priorities of the JET lie and what actually falls under the just transition.

### ***Procedural Justice Constraints: Uninformed Decision-Making and Exclusiveness***

The political governance and role of the state in South Africa pose great challenges to justice in decision-making processes. Stakeholders emphasised that procedural justice requires aligning the JET's objectives with the needs of South Africans – especially those facing poverty, unemployment, or lack of access to basic services. Yet energy policy is often perceived as abstract, elite-driven, and disconnected from these realities. Climate change, biodiversity, and energy decarbonisation might be necessary objectives to achieve globally, but for many South Africans, immediate survival and everyday life is of higher importance and priority: *"And even when you start talking about wildlife and biodiversity and all these other kinds of things, if I'm worried about how much a loaf of bread [costs], biodiversity is not high on my importance. And that's not to say that a person who is worried about the cost of bread doesn't care about biodiversity or doesn't have the capacity to understand, but it's just you always have to eat first. And then you can think."* (#1)

The ambiguity of roles contributes to confusion over who is accountable for what, and leads to fragmented implementation, as already discussed under V.1. For example, interviewees described a

disconnect between presidential-level negotiations (e.g., for JETP funding) and community-level realities. High-level deals are rarely communicated to the public, and local officials often lack the information or capacity to engage communities in meaningful ways: *“I think the biggest threat here talking to people, it's about transparency, you know? Do you give them enough information so that they can take their informed decision?”* (#9).

The lack of clarity in the JET's purpose and structure has led to growing disillusionment among communities and civil society, since communities are unsure what the JET entails, how it affects them, or what benefits they can expect: *“There's been huge concern on how the communities are involved, you know, engaged and due to this whole process of so many players and so many engagements, the communities are getting really confused. They're getting uncertain and then obviously they're getting aggressive because there's so many moving parts.”* (#7). Engagement often feels superficial and *“exclusive”* (#1), aimed at *“ticking those boxes to sort of satisfy the [international] commitments”* (#7) rather than driving real change. Even where consultations do occur, people frequently feel unprepared or unqualified to participate. They may lack the technical knowledge, access to information, or even the confidence to speak in decision-making forums: *“People always have a voice. It's just that people don't necessarily feel empowered to speak in certain rooms.”* (#2). This perceived disempowerment represents a clear gap in procedural justice, reinforcing social and procedural exclusion.

### ***Suggestions and Implications***

Lastly, to address the issue of confusion and lack of clarity around both objectives and roles within the JET, some interviewees highlight the need to change the narratives around the transition, mainly through improving transparency and accountability of processes. Stakeholders stressed that the transition and change must be systemic and *“transformational (...), not incremental”* (#12), since coal mine closures affect entire communities and supply chains – not just workers at the coal plants. Although there is willingness and intention to be procedurally just (#4), this is very complicated to achieve without increasing transparency and accountability as two crucial factors. Transparency is a key requirement for informed decision-making and making processes more constructive by reducing mis- and distrust. Thereby, engagement feels more meaningful than just *“ticking the box”*. Moreover, accountability is another essential requirement closely linked to transparency and responsibility, such as, for instance, Eskom in the process of repurposing power plants and being responsible for transitioning whole communities.

In the context of both transparency and accountability, communication and access to information plays a significant role to involve people in the processes surrounding the transition. Since average people do not seem to know what their role and requirements in the JET are, interviewees suggest focusing less on technical aspects of the transition and educate stakeholders instead through comprehensive and ongoing information sharing (#10). Moreover, adequate and accessible language is considered as enabling people to engage more and be more proactive (#11).

Overall, the JET is shaped by a complex system of actors, leading to unclear roles, competing agendas, and limited accountability, and resulting in widespread confusion, exclusion, and a growing disconnect between high-level negotiations and the lived realities of affected communities.

### **5.3 Power Dynamics: Perceived Unequal Influence**

Interviewees recognize that influence within the JET process is largely defined by formal mandates and institutional authority: *“so there’s obviously a lot of posturing and a lot of political playing and a lot of personal mandates, unfortunately.”* (#7). Eskom – the state-owned energy company – and the national government were most frequently identified as key actors driving the transition due to their central role in decommissioning coal plants, managing energy supply, and directing national climate strategies: *“I think the government has a huge role because the previous energy assets, 90% if not 95/98% belong to them”* (#1). Interviewees consider Eskom having the main responsibility to deal with the consequences of mining in coal-dependent communities (#5; #6), for example by starting community engagement processes. However, Eskom’s *“intention to extend the life of these [coal] plants for as long as possible”* (#1) illustrates their opposing perspective to the transition.

Related to these responsibilities, interviewees across the different stakeholder groups have certain expectations to both Eskom and the national government, such as leading and directing the transition in a clear and concise role (#1). Local communities and civil society, by contrast, are often excluded from formal decision-making processes or involved only after major decisions have been made. Some interviewees emphasised that community engagement is a legal right, not a favour by the state or energy companies (#3). Yet, community consultations often occur after stating facts, which violates the communities’ rights of engagement. Additionally, even within communities, influence is often highly unequal and politicized: *“we traditionally would stay away from community meetings because previously they have caused instability because then people come there with different agendas (...), the meeting ends up being hijacked and not being effective.”* (#10).

### ***Political Economy Dimension: Power Dynamics***

Underlying these disparities in influence are deep-rooted systemic issues and power dynamics shaped by South Africa's apartheid history, structural inequalities, and governance challenges. Bottlenecks are caused because governments on all political levels are under-resourced and -capacitated, which is especially visible in the massive issues around basic service delivery in the country: *"South Africa has a problem of service delivery and infrastructure already, so the communities are seeing government as a government who doesn't always deliver what they promise because some of them are still lacking basic services (...) it's frustration, particularly in civil society."* (#10). Corruption – highly prevalent at both governmental and community levels – was consistently mentioned across all stakeholder groups as a major obstacle to equitable participation and influence of stakeholders: *"a big problem in South Africa obviously is corruption, so making sure that the money actually goes, where it should be going and that the communities actually benefit, that not just 10% goes there and I mean there's corruption within the communities as well"* (#7). Often, political gatekeeping and corruption in procurement processes limit effective resource allocation (#6; #8).

Systemic inequalities and limited access to decision-making platforms due to a lack of resources or technical complexity of energy transition policies constrain local communities' and small businesses' participation and ability to meaningfully engage (#8). Further complicating these matters are power dynamics and relations, as for example visible in Eskom's dual role as both a policy implementer and coal industry actor raising concerns about conflicts of interest. Interviewees expressed scepticism about the company's ability to prioritize a fair transition while still benefiting from the existing coal infrastructure: *"(...) [the biggest influence on the JET processes,] at this stage Eskom, which is quite worrying because (...) they played too many roles and I think it's sometimes there's conflict of interest because they sort of in charge of the power stations that's closing."* (#7).

### ***Procedural Justice Constraints: Exclusiveness and Lack of Fairness***

The differing influences and interests in processes and power dynamics have tangible consequences. Due to the imbalanced influence of the national government and Eskom, real consultations with local communities are often bypassed (#3), undermining the legitimacy and inclusivity of these processes. Communities often lack awareness of or access to information about the JET, making it difficult for them to understand or support the process: *"They don't know what they don't know."* (#7). Many stakeholders described the transition as feeling externally imposed, abstract, and disconnected from everyday struggles related to poverty, employment, and basic services (#11; #9): *"So it becomes very*

*difficult where you're working with very marginalised mining affected communities and the question of climate change is so abstract, people are struggling now, like right now, they need to put food on the table now.” (#3).*

### ***Suggestions and Implications***

Addressing the identified issue of unequal influence, one of the main needs suggested is the shifting of influence in decision-making through a fundamental change of power structures and dynamics towards the local (and provincial) level and bottom-up processes: *“It requires an actual culture shift in South Africa and a power shift. That's the hardest thing, a power shift in the most unequal country in the world. (...) and the heart of that is actually the procedural justice and the power, the shifting of power.”* (#11). Shifting from a large-scale system of centralized energy generation towards a more distributed, decentralized, and flexible energy system offers in this context a huge potential to distribute influence and address issues around power imbalances: *“so part of the work that's gonna be needed going forward is trying to look at more social ownership of energy supply, for example, in rural areas.”* (#12).

Particularly when aiming to fit specific contexts, such as communities in the highly coal-dependent province of Mpumalanga, governance on the provincial and municipal level needs to be strengthened to deal with specific socio-economic impacts and represent those affected most by the transition accordingly. In this context, representative voices and intermediary organisations, such as the PCC, are essential (#6). Engagement on the local level is moreover important for increasing awareness of people on local impacts by (inter)national decisions: *“I mean, it's a partnership. It's not a dictatorship”* (#7). Focusing more on the opportunities and justice aspects for people in local communities leads them to being more proactive in developing own solutions instead of waiting for them: *“The government, the South Africans, Africans love to have everybody involved and everybody must have a say and everybody must talk and everybody must contribute how they will develop”* (#4).

In short, the JET process is marked by deep power imbalances, where national actors like Eskom and the government dominate decision-making while marginalised communities remain largely excluded, reinforcing systemic inequalities and limiting procedural justice.

### **5.4 Summary**

Across all three themes, interviewees expressed concerns that the JET processes – while ambitious and necessary – are currently falling short of its procedural justice goals, particularly with regard to inclusive participation, addressing power dynamics, effective coordination, and adequate capacities.



Fragmented governance, a lack of clarity on roles and objectives, and power imbalances due to the different dimensions of the political economy, such as system structures, actors and interests, and power dynamics, have led to exclusive practices and limited public participation. Without addressing these structural and procedural shortcomings, the risk is that South Africa's energy transition may reproduce existing inequalities rather than resolve them. Therefore, interviewees suggested redistributing power in decision-making processes, capacity-building at all levels, and improving transparency and accountability.

## 6 Discussion

In the following discussion, I will summarize the key findings, with particular focus on reflecting on the theoretical concepts of political economy and procedural justice used to investigate the case of the South African JET. Adding to the results and by linking back to already existing research and literature, I will furthermore discuss what is ultimately needed to achieve inclusive, equitable, and place-based fossil fuel phase-outs, further adding to answering RQ3.

### 6.1 Summary and Reflection on Key Findings

This analysis aimed to understand how stakeholders perceive and experience South Africa's Just Energy Transition (JET) decision-making processes, particularly inclusivity and fairness (RQ1), and investigate procedural justice issues and gaps in the JET (RQ2). The political economy of just energy transitions proved valuable for understanding decision-making within system structures, actors and interests, and power dynamics. The findings indicate ongoing procedural injustices in South Africa's JET processes. Previous research criticised JET planning for limited transparency, tokenistic engagement, and alignment with donor country interests (Kruckenberg, 2015; Larioniva & Doronin, 2023; McNamara, 2024; Steadman et al., 2024; von Lüpke et al., 2023). This study's findings reinforce these concerns. Stakeholders confirm that procedural justice and inclusivity are limited due to political economy structures and subsequent issues and challenges.

Firstly, challenges in the **system structure** – namely, South Africa's multi-level governance system – create coordination gaps across levels. This results in fragmented and complex governance, ineffective coordination, and limited participatory decision-making and transparency, especially in adapting JET goals to local contexts. A suggested strategy is to strengthen capacity at the local level and ensure information is communicated in clear, accessible language to enable communities to engage constructively in transition planning. This supports the findings of Healy & Barry (2017) and

McCauley & Heffron (2018), who argue that low-carbon transitions are not just technical but deeply political and economic processes requiring coordination across governance levels. Governance fragmentation in South Africa, as confirmed here, exacerbates the disconnect between high-level policy and local realities – a gap previous scholars (see Akrofi et al., 2024; Fakir, 2023; Ignatov, 2023; McNamara, 2024; Murcott, 2022; von Luepke, 2023) have also stressed needs bridging through more synchronised and aligned multi-level governance and targeted local engagement.

Secondly, ambiguity around objectives and roles due to competing **interests of actors** like ministries, donors, Eskom, and civil society causes confusion and weak accountability. Stakeholders describe JET goals as technocratic, vague, and detached, and unclear about what constitutes a “just” transition and who is responsible. This lack of role clarity and insufficient capacity – particularly among local actors – hinders participation. Interviewees stress the importance of access to information and communication for community participation. However, technical language and centralised decision-making alienate those most affected, especially in coal-dependent areas. As literature emphasises (Evans & Phelan, 2016; Newell & Mulvaney, 2013; Topaloglou et al., 2024; Wang & Lo, 2021), transitions require broad and genuine participation reflecting diverse perspectives. The findings here strongly support this – without inclusiveness, the legitimacy of JET processes is compromised.

Lastly, **power dynamics** in JET governance constrain fairness and inclusivity. Eskom and the national government hold disproportionate influence in defining transition pathways, while civil society and local communities are often marginalised. This centralisation fosters disillusionment and reinforces procedural injustice. Communities feel excluded and powerless to shape outcomes directly affecting them – often describing the transition as top-down, externally imposed, and disconnected from their lived realities. Nevertheless, research agrees that national governments play a key role in enabling and steering low-carbon energy transitions (Healy & Barry, 2017; Newell & Mulvaney, 2013), but inclusive stakeholder engagement is essential as coal phase-outs affect multiple actors (Böhling, 2011; Hägele et al., 2022; Pearse, 2021; Stark et al., 2023). Corruption undermines equitable participation and trust. In line with previous scholars (Barnett & Duvall, 2004; Boateng et al., 2023; Menashy, 2019; Nightingale & Ahlborg, 2018; Wang & Lo, 2021; Williams & Doyon, 2019), this study underscores the importance of power as a foundational – but frequently under-addressed – dimension of procedural justice. Without efforts to shift decision-making influence, JETs risk perpetuating rather than alleviating social inequities.

In conclusion, the political economy dimensions explored – system structures, actors and interests, and power dynamics – are interlinked and collectively shape procedural justice outcomes. This research illustrates that governance across multiple levels complicates coordination, weakens

accountability, and ultimately leads to misalignment of national strategies with local needs. These findings support Newell & Mulvaney (2013) and Stark et al. (2023), who argue that power asymmetries must be explicitly addressed when designing just energy transitions. As emphasised throughout the interviews, without enhanced transparency, accountability, and inclusion, South Africa's JET risks remaining a technocratic exercise detached from the very communities it is meant to serve.

## 6.2 Towards Inclusive, Equitable, and Place-Based Just Energy Transitions

Ultimately, the question of how to achieve just, inclusive, and place-based fossil fuel phase-outs in the sense of procedural justice still remains. In the face of the complexity of such transitions, policymakers need to be aware of the barriers to a just and inclusive coal phase-out – like those identified for South Africa – and take these into account for planning and implementing truly just energy transitions. Building on the challenges identified in RQ1 and RQ2 – namely, procedural injustices rooted in system structures, unclear mandates, and power imbalances – this section addresses RQ3 by discussing solution strategies proposed by stakeholders. These strategies aim to foster procedural justice by enhancing stakeholder engagement through three interconnected aspects: localization/context-specificity, equitability, and inclusivity (see Table 3).

**Table 3.** Overview of the core issues identified in the interviews with their respective political economy dimensions and procedural justice aspects, as well as potential solution approaches. (own visualization)

Core Issue	Political Economy Dimension	Procedural Justice Aspects	Solution
Fragmented & Complex Governance	System Structures	Effective institutional coordination and participatory governance	<b>Place-based</b> (better alignment of objectives and needs)
Confusion & Lack of Clarity	Actors & Interests	Capacity-building and equitable access to participation	<b>Equitable &amp; Just</b> (capacity-building, increase transparency and accountability)
Unequal Influence	Power Dynamics	Recognition and mitigation of power imbalances	<b>Inclusive</b> (redistribute power)

The first core issue of fragmented and complex governance illustrates the need for better alignment of objectives with local realities and needs, as well as capacity-building at all levels. The lack of meaningful involvement of local actors in decision-making processes undermines procedural justice, leading to misalignment and weakening local democratic processes. With regard to **localization/context-specificity** and **place-based approaches**, the findings of this research have important implications for local governance and democratic practice in South Africa, since change often happens at the local level. Interviewed stakeholders pointed to a “trilemma” faced by South

Africa, underlining the importance of context-specific transition approaches: replacing coal capacity while ensuring energy affordability and environmental sustainability. As Topaloglou et al. (2024) argue, trust in public institutions and multi-level governance is eroded and democratic legitimacy put at risk when communities are excluded from key decisions affecting their livelihoods and futures. As the results show, local governments are frequently sidelined, despite their potential for decentralising energy systems. This aligns with previous literature (see Hermanus et al., 2022; McNamara, 2024; von Lüpke et al., 2023) pointing to local governments' limited capacities and tensions arising from consultative processes being perceived as time-consuming compared to the urgent pace of climate action required. Swarnakar & Singh (2022) argue that influence and power are therefore moving back to higher (political) levels.

The second key problem is confusion and lack of clarity on the JET's objectives and roles. This calls for improved transparency and accountability of processes, as well as inclusivity to enable adequate capacities for all stakeholder to participate and make informed decisions. As previous research suggests (see Akrofi et al., 2024; Cock, 2019; Cole et al., 2023; Tladi et al., 2024; Topaloglou et al., 2024; Xaba, 2023), without procedural justice – ensuring accessible and inclusive decision-making processes – the transition risks reinforcing existing inequalities, leading to the second key factor of **equitability and justice**. In the sense of these two aspects, scholars highlight that adverse impacts of energy transitions need to be mitigated by including and considering those communities that are most affected by the transition, since their livelihoods depend on fossil fuel industries (see Boateng et al., 2023; Carley et al., 2018; de Jong, 2021; Newell & Mulvaney, 2013). This also applies to the studied case of South Africa, where the coal phase-out is affecting marginalised communities and exacerbating inequalities, as those most affected are often excluded from decision-making processes. Interviewees frequently emphasised the need for capacity-building through education and accessible communication strategies, especially for marginalised groups. This aligns with previous research emphasising the need for adequate representation and access to participation for all stakeholders in decision-making processes, as well as social dialogue in governance processes (Akrofi et al., 2024; de Jong, 2021; ICLEI Africa, 2024; Topaloglou et al., 2024). The lack of such support undermines both informed participation and trust in the JET process. In this context, Topaloglou et al. (2024) mention that accountability is increased through transparency – ultimately fostering equity – and involving stakeholders at all stages in identifying, understanding, and responding to issues and concerns (see also de Jong, 2021; Hermanus et al., 2022).

Lastly, the third core issue is unequal influence due to power imbalances, highlighting the need for fair and inclusive decision-making processes. As the findings show, power asymmetries concentrate

decision-making in national or donor-driven institutions, marginalising civil society and local actors, despite their central role in implementation. This shows **inclusivity** as a major aspect of procedural justice. Power imbalances in decision-making processes need to be addressed. Existing power asymmetries must be challenged and local stakeholders must be empowered in the sense of local and bottom-up participatory governance – as also highlighted by multiple scholars (see Boateng et al., 2023; Cock, 2019, 2021; Healy & Barry, 2017; ICLEI Africa, 2024; Stark et al., 2023; Topaloglou et al., 2024). ICLEI Africa (2024) and Topaloglou et al. (2024) argue that informed decision-making for all stakeholders is of utmost importance, calling for accessibility of processes and opportunities for participation of all actors. This aligns well with the results from interviews, in which stakeholders highlighted the exclusiveness of often abstract and detached decision-making processes within the JET. Participation of stakeholders is determined by their capacities, interests, priorities, and knowledge (ICLEI Africa, 2024), so inclusivity is also closely linked to equitability and localization.

Conversely, scholars have observed that strengthening local governance structures and ensuring active, empowered community participation can contribute to more democratic, transparent, and accountable decision-making processes (see Cole et al., 2023; Hermanus et al., 2022; Topaloglou et al., 2024). This is especially critical in the JET context, where decisions must reflect local needs and knowledge. Therefore, the study underscores the need to reframe stakeholder participation not just as a technical necessity but as a democratic imperative in the sense of (decentralised) community engagement – as Swarnakar & Singh (2022) and Taliep (2022) highlight, one that reinforces the role of local voices in shaping the energy transition from the ground up.

These aspects make it obvious that the different dimensions of justice, namely procedural, distributive, and restorative, are closely linked and intertwined. Even though the study focused on procedural justice and the inclusivity and fairness of JET decision-making processes as this dimension determines whether governance structures enable meaningful participation and equitable decision-making (Newell & Mulvaney, 2013), shortcomings in this dimension have immense implications for distributive and restorative justice. Procedural injustices undermine distributive and restorative justice, as decisions fail to reflect the priorities of those most affected, leading to inequitable and unjust transitions. Thus, achieving distributive and restorative justice is contingent on procedural justice – by ensuring that those most impacted by transitions are consulted and empowered to shape outcomes.

### **6.3 Limitations**

A major limitation of the research was also presented as one of the key findings – namely, the confusion between the different concepts of JET and JETP and the processes and policies associated with them. Although I began the research (and fieldwork) with a main focus on the JETP and initially aimed to specifically investigate how the international partnership component shapes (mis)alignments between objectives on the (inter)national level and local needs, this became difficult in practice. Once in the field and after engaging with various stakeholders it became obvious that these different processes are deeply intertwined and often not clearly distinguished from one other. Consequently, this limited the clarity and precision of the research focus, as it complicated attempts to isolate the influence of international cooperation mechanisms from broader, ongoing domestic transition efforts under the JET. This lack of differentiation made it challenging to attribute specific outcomes or procedural justice issues to one aspect or the other, ultimately requiring a broader analytical lens and reducing the specificity of conclusions regarding the role of international partnerships.

With regard to the interviews conducted with stakeholders involved in the JET in South Africa, another major limitation emerges given the missing perspective of international partner countries and community members. Although these were aimed to be covered by speaking to actors working for companies and institutions working with international partners as well as insights from NGOs and community-based groups, it would have been very valuable to also directly gain insights and perspectives from these stakeholder groups. This lacking perspective is particularly concerning in the context of recommendations for place-based and local governance as well as focusing on the local level of affected communities. However, this was not feasible due to practical challenges, such as the limited scope of the research, time constraints while conducting fieldwork, and valid ethical considerations. Nevertheless, the chosen methodological approach of including the perspectives of a broader range of stakeholders ultimately allowed me to get more detailed insights into the multi-level and scalar system, which enabled me to get to the findings presented before and proved thereby to also be a strength.

## **7 Conclusion**

The coal phase-out of South Africa will be essential for meeting international and national climate objectives and addressing the climate crisis. However, low-carbon transitions risk to overlook the socio-economic impacts of energy transitions, demanding for socially just and equitable fossil fuel

phase-outs. Through the lens of political economy and procedural justice, this thesis aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the perceptions and experiences of key stakeholders involved in South Africa's Just Energy Transition (JET), particularly regarding decision-making processes and their inclusivity and fairness – thereby indicating the effectiveness of the country's just coal phase-out. The findings show that JET processes – although necessary for countervailing adverse impacts from the coal phase-out – are falling short of their procedural justice goals – namely, meaningful engagement and participation, inclusivity and equitable access to participation, participatory governance, and mitigating power imbalances. Although there is generally a good intention, achieving procedural justice is challenged by political economy structures. Core issues such as fragmented and complex governance, general confusion and lack of clarity, and unequal influence pose crucial challenges to procedural justice. The thesis suggests that the implementation of the current coal phase-out is complicated by the country's political economy structures, which ultimately rather hinder than facilitate an inclusive and equitable energy transition in South Africa (main RQ).

These findings yield significant insights for both South Africa's JET and just energy transitions more broadly. Challenges are not unique to South Africa, but reflect systemic issues in global energy transitions. Given the complexity of energy transitions, it is crucial to address these issues through equitable governance models that strengthen capacities, clarify roles, and redistribute decision-making power. Fossil fuel phase-outs can lead to loss of livelihoods, well-being, and employment opportunities, often making distributive injustices more visible than procedural or restorative injustices. The research shows however that procedural justice is equally important, particularly in defining what is “just” (for who? by whom?). Globally, the notion of just (energy) transitions is highly contested due to different narratives. Nevertheless, a key issue remains the (often adverse) transformation of places because decisions are made elsewhere, linked to objectives and priorities misalignment at different governance levels.

Overall, the findings align with previous research on the just energy transition in South Africa. However, the study adds more depth to the exploration of stakeholder engagement in the JET by specifically focusing on procedural justice and how stakeholders perceive decision-making. While previous academic research focuses mainly on industrialised countries and the implementation of just energy transitions in these contexts, research on such transitions in non-industrialised and developing contexts, such as South Africa, is currently largely missing (Jenkins et al., 2021; Tladi et al., 2024). Instead, research focuses on (economic) development or energy access and security. Moreover, reflecting on the applied theoretical concepts of political economy and procedural justice, these two theories and their underlying dimensions and aspects represent useful frameworks to

analyse just energy transitions, particularly when focusing on shortcomings of decision-making processes and their causes.

While the study shows how power dynamics and imbalances affect inclusivity and fairness in energy transitions, other dimensions of justice, such as distributive or restorative, proved also to be relevant in the research context. Given the limited scope of this study, there is therefore need for further exploration of these justice dimensions in the planning and implementation of just energy transitions. Moreover, the inclusion of perspectives missing in the study, such as international partners or community members, would be highly recommended for future research. A more specific focus on the community level would also align well with a lens of local democracy and governance, closely connected to questions of energy democracy and community engagement.

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## 9 Appendix

### *Interview Guide*

- # Question
- Opinion on JET as such**
- 01 Do you think the JET adequately addresses South Africa's energy transitions needs?
- 02 To what extent do you think the JET represents a just energy transition?
- Experiences and Perceptions of Stakeholder Engagement in JET**
- 03 What has been your experience with stakeholder engagement in the JET? How would you describe your (organization's) role in the JET process?
- 04 To what extent have local communities, civil society, and labor unions been included in the JET discussions?
- 05 Do you think the JETP reflects the priorities and concerns of local communities? Why or why not?
- 06 What challenges have you observed regarding participation and engagement in JETP-related processes?
- Decision-Making Processes of JET (Including Influence, Procedural Justice, and Power/Political Economy Structures)**
- 07 Do you believe different stakeholders (government, private sector, civil society, local communities, international donors) have equal influence in the JET? Why (not)?
- 08 Who do you think holds the most influence over decision-making within the JETP? Why?
- 09 How do you view the role of international cooperation in the JETP? Is it beneficial, problematic, or both?
- 10 How transparent do you think the decision-making process has been in the JETP?
- 11 How do you perceive the balance of power between (inter)national government actors and local governance structures? Are there specific power imbalances in how decisions are made? If so, how do they manifest?
- 12 To what extent do economic and political interests (e.g., foreign investment, private sector influence) shape JETP priorities?
- 13 Do you think procedural justice is being upheld in the JETP? Why (not)?
- Potential Solutions to Problems/Challenges**
- 14 What do you think could improve stakeholder engagement in the JETP?
- 15 What changes in governance or decision-making processes could improve the JETP's alignment with local priorities and enhance meaningful community participation?

**Interview Codebook (Excerpt)**

Themes	Sub-Themes	Codes
Perceptions of the	General Perceptions of the	JETP Awareness & Un
		Perceived Fairness of
	Stakeholder Roles & Respo	Stakeholder Role Clar
Power Asymmetrie	Decision-Making Power &	Influence of Internati
		Corporate & Private S
	Governance & Institutional	Government Decision
Procedural Justice	Participation & Inclusion	Opportunities for Eng
		Barriers to Participati
	Transparency & Accountal	Transparency of Deci
		Accountability Mecha
Distributional Just	Unequal Distribution of Be	Disparities in Funding
	Just Transition Support Me	Worker Transition Po
	Improving Governance & D	Strengthening Local C