THE EAST AFRICAN TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION

Policy Recommendations on a Just Transition for the East African Community (EAC)

Contents

Executive Summary

The East African Community (EAC) stands at a critical juncture as the region navigates the intersecting challenges of climate change, economic transformation, demographic growth, and regional integration. The global shift toward low-carbon, climate-resilient development pathways presents both opportunities and risks for EAC Partner States. While green growth strategies can generate new jobs, enhance energy security, and foster sustainable industrialization, they also carry the potential to disrupt existing livelihoods, exacerbate inequalities, and marginalize vulnerable workers and communities if not carefully managed.

This policy document presents comprehensive, evidence-based recommendations to guide the EAC in embedding the principles of Just Transition into its regional development, trade, climate, and social policy frameworks. It argues that a Just Transition is not merely an environmental or economic agenda, but a social contract that ensures the benefits and burdens of climate action and economic restructuring are shared equitably across society. For the EAC, this means aligning climate ambition with regional integration goals, social protection systems, labour standards, skills development, and inclusive governance mechanisms.

The document proposes a regional Just Transition framework anchored in social dialogue, decent work, human rights, gender equality, youth inclusion, and the protection of vulnerable groups, including informal workers, smallholder farmers, and communities dependent on climate-sensitive sectors. It outlines institutional arrangements, financing strategies, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, and implementation pathways that can support Partner States in translating regional commitments into national and local action. By adopting these recommendations, the EAC can position itself as a continental leader in advancing a people-centered, inclusive, and sustainable transition toward a green and resilient economy.

1. Introduction and Context

1.1 Regional Overview

The East African Community (EAC) is one of Africa's most dynamic and strategically significant regional economic blocs, comprising Partner States with diverse economic structures, ecological zones, and development trajectories. The region spans coastal, highland, arid, and semi-arid ecosystems, and hosts a wide range of productive systems, from smallholder and commercial agriculture to extractive industries, manufacturing, services, and rapidly expanding urban economies. This diversity underpins the EAC's economic potential, but also creates differentiated vulnerabilities and uneven development outcomes across countries, sectors, and communities.

The economies of the EAC remain heavily dependent on climate-sensitive sectors such as agriculture, fisheries, tourism, forestry, and natural resource extraction, which together employ a significant proportion of the region's workforce, particularly in rural and informal settings. Smallholder farmers, pastoralists, artisanal fishers, and workers in nature-based tourism and extractive value chains are especially exposed to climate variability and environmental degradation. At the same time, the region is pursuing ambitious industrialization, infrastructure expansion, and urban development agendas aimed at enhancing regional connectivity, boosting intra-regional trade, and advancing structural transformation.

These parallel dynamics create both heightened vulnerability and significant opportunity in the context of global climate change and the international shift toward low-carbon and resource-efficient development pathways. On the one hand, climate-related risks, such as water stress, land degradation, biodiversity loss, and extreme weather events, threaten productivity, livelihoods, and public revenues. On the other hand, the growing demand for renewable energy, sustainable agricultural products, green construction, and climate-resilient infrastructure presents new avenues for investment, employment creation, and regional value chain development.

Climate impacts across the EAC, ranging from prolonged droughts and floods to rising temperatures, coastal erosion, and ecosystem degradation, are already affecting food security, public health, energy systems, and labour markets. These impacts often compound existing socio-economic challenges, including poverty, inequality, limited access to social protection, and high levels of informality. Disruptions to agricultural cycles, fisheries, and tourism flows can trigger income losses, internal and cross-border migration, and increased pressure on urban labour markets and public services.

At the same time, the global energy transition, evolving trade regimes, and the introduction of new environmental and sustainability standards are reshaping regional value chains, market access conditions, and investment flows. Export-oriented sectors face increasing requirements related to carbon footprints, due diligence, and environmental, social, and governance compliance, which can influence competitiveness and participation in international markets. These shifts are generating new demand for technical, digital, and green skills, while also exposing gaps in education, training systems, and enterprise support frameworks.

Within this context, the EAC's regional integration agenda including the Common Market, Customs Union, and emerging initiatives on industrialization, infrastructure, and digital

transformation provides an important platform for coordinating responses to climate and development challenges. A regionally anchored approach to Just Transition can help ensure that economic transformation is inclusive, that labour mobility and skills development are supported across borders, and that the benefits of green growth are more evenly distributed among Partner States and social groups. By situating climate action within the broader objectives of social cohesion and regional solidarity, the EAC can strengthen its resilience to external shocks while advancing a shared vision of sustainable and people-centered development.

1.2 The Imperative for a Just Transition

A Just Transition framework seeks to ensure that the shift toward environmentally sustainable and climate-resilient economies does not deepen existing social, economic, and territorial inequalities. In the EAC context, where development pathways are shaped by structural transformation, rapid population growth, and high levels of informal employment, the transition to low-carbon and resource-efficient models of growth must be carefully managed to avoid the marginalization of workers, communities, and small enterprises that are least able to absorb economic shocks.

At its core, a Just Transition is grounded in the principles of fairness, inclusivity and protection. Fairness requires that the costs and benefits of climate action and economic restructuring are equitably distributed across society, including between urban and rural areas, formal and informal workers, and current and future generations. Inclusivity emphasizes the meaningful involvement of social partners, governments, employers, trade unions and affected communities in shaping transition pathways, policy priorities, and investment decisions. Protection refers to the establishment of robust social protection systems, labour standards, and rights-based safeguards that prevent the erosion of livelihoods and working conditions during periods of structural change.

For the EAC, the imperative for a Just Transition is closely linked to the Community's broader objectives of regional economic integration, social development, and political cooperation. As Partner States pursue industrialization, infrastructure expansion, and energy transitions, regional coordination becomes essential to ensure that national policies are mutually reinforcing rather than competitive. A shared Just Transition approach can help align climate strategies with the goals of the Common Market, support labour mobility through the harmonization of skills and certification systems, and promote the development of regional value chains in green and sustainable sectors.

The regional dimension is particularly important in addressing cross-border economic and environmental externalities. Climate impacts, resource degradation, and labour market shifts often transcend national boundaries, affecting shared ecosystems, transport corridors, and migratory labour flows. Without a coordinated framework, Partner States risk adopting fragmented and inconsistent policy responses that create uneven standards, regulatory gaps, and opportunities for social and environmental dumping. Such dynamics can undermine hard-won labour and environmental protections, weaken collective bargaining power, and generate tensions among states competing for investment and market access.

A regional Just Transition policy can provide coherence by establishing common principles, minimum standards, and procedural guidelines that guide national implementation while

respecting domestic policy space. It can promote peer learning and policy convergence by facilitating the exchange of best practices, data, and technical expertise across Partner States. Moreover, it can strengthen the collective voice of the EAC in global climate, trade, and development negotiations by articulating a unified regional position that emphasizes the centrality of decent work, social dialogue, and inclusive growth in the global green transition.

From a development perspective, embedding Just Transition principles into regional planning can help ensure that investments in renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, green manufacturing, and climate-resilient infrastructure translate into long-term employment creation, enterprise development, and poverty reduction.

The ideological and normative foundation for this approach is strongly aligned with the vision and mandate of the International Labour Organization (ILO), which frames a Just Transition as an essential pathway to achieving environmentally sustainable economies and societies for all, grounded in the principles of decent work, social justice, and social dialogue. The ILO's Guidelines for a Just Transition towards Environmentally Sustainable Economies and Societies for All emphasize that environmental sustainability and economic competitiveness must be pursued in tandem with the protection of workers' rights, the promotion of quality employment, and the strengthening of social protection systems.

These Guidelines articulate a policy coherence approach that integrates macroeconomic, industrial, labour market, and environmental policies, recognizing that fragmented or siloed interventions risk undermining both social outcomes and environmental objectives. Central to the ILO's ideology is the concept of tripartism, which positions governments, employers, and workers' organizations as equal partners in shaping and governing the transition process. This model underscores the importance of institutionalized social dialogue as a mechanism for building trust, managing distributional impacts, and ensuring that transition pathways are socially legitimate and politically sustainable.

For the EAC, referencing and operationalizing the ILO's Just Transition Guidelines provides an internationally recognized normative framework that can strengthen the credibility and coherence of regional policies. It offers a common language and sets of principles that can guide Partner States in aligning national climate strategies, employment policies, and social protection reforms with regional integration objectives. By embedding these guidelines into the EAC's regional architecture, the Community can reinforce its commitment to a rights-based, people-centered development model that situates workers and communities at the heart of the green transition, while enhancing the region's standing and influence in global labour, climate, and development policy forums. By linking climate ambition with social justice and economic integration, the EAC can position itself not only as a participant in the global transition, but as a leader in advancing a people-centered model of sustainable development that reflects the realities and aspirations of its diverse societies

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2. Conceptual Framework for Just Transition in the EAC

2.1 Defining Just Transition

In the EAC context, a Just Transition refers to a managed and inclusive process of economic and social transformation toward low-carbon, climate-resilient, and resource-efficient development pathways that ensures the protection of workers' rights, the creation of decent and quality employment, and the safeguarding of vulnerable populations and ecosystems.

This definition emphasizes four interlinked pillars: environmental sustainability, economic diversification, social inclusion, and democratic governance. It recognizes that climate action and development strategies must be mutually reinforcing rather than competing priorities.

2.2 Normative Foundations

The conceptual foundation of a Just Transition in the EAC is grounded in a broad body of international labour standards, human rights instruments, and regional development commitments that collectively establish a rights-based and people-centered approach to economic and environmental governance. These norms provide both legal and ethical guidance for policy design, implementation, and accountability.

At the international level, core labour standards related to freedom of association, the right to collective bargaining, the elimination of discrimination in employment, and the prohibition of forced and child labour form the backbone of a Just Transition framework. These standards are complemented by principles related to occupational safety and health, access to social security, and the promotion of full, productive, and freely chosen employment. Human rights frameworks further reinforce the obligations of states to protect the rights to health, education, an adequate standard of living, and participation in public affairs, all of which are directly affected by climate change and economic restructuring.

The ILO's Guidelines for a Just Transition towards Environmentally Sustainable Economies and Societies for All provide a comprehensive normative and policy reference point for the EAC. The Guidelines emphasize the importance of policy coherence across macroeconomic, industrial, labour market, social protection, and environmental domains, and highlight tripartism and social dialogue as central governance mechanisms for managing the distributional impacts of transition. By drawing on this framework, the EAC can anchor its regional policies in internationally recognized principles that enhance legitimacy, predictability, and alignment with global labour and development standards.

At the regional level, the EAC Treaty and associated protocols articulate commitments to people-centered development, gender equality, the promotion of employment, and the improvement of working and living conditions. These commitments provide a legal and institutional basis for mainstreaming Just Transition principles into regional strategies on climate change, energy, industrialization, trade, social development, and infrastructure. They also underscore the responsibility of regional institutions to facilitate coordination, harmonization, and mutual support among Partner States in pursuing inclusive and sustainable development pathways.

2.3 Regional Specificities

The socio-economic structure of the EAC presents distinctive characteristics that require a context-specific and differentiated approach to Just Transition. High levels of informal employment, a rapidly growing and youthful population, and a strong reliance on smallholder agriculture and natural resource-based livelihoods shape both the risks and opportunities associated with economic and environmental transformation.

Informal workers, who constitute the majority of the regional labour force, often operate outside regulatory and social protection frameworks, making them particularly vulnerable to climate shocks, market volatility, and policy-induced structural change. A regional Just Transition strategy must therefore extend beyond formal employment relationships to address the needs of own-account workers, casual labourers, and micro-entrepreneurs, including through the expansion of social protection coverage, access to finance, and the formalization of enterprises where appropriate.

The demographic profile of the EAC, characterized by a large and growing youth population, creates both a development dividend and a policy challenge. Harnessing this potential requires substantial investment in education, technical and vocational training, and lifelong learning systems that equip young people with the skills demanded by emerging green and digital sectors. At the same time, the transition must create sufficient and accessible employment opportunities to absorb new labour market entrants and prevent the entrenchment of unemployment and underemployment.

Smallholder agriculture and rural livelihoods remain central to food security, export earnings, and social stability across the region. Climate-resilient agricultural practices, sustainable land and water management, and the development of agro-processing and rural value chains are therefore critical components of a Just Transition in the EAC. These measures can enhance productivity and incomes while reducing environmental pressures and building resilience at the community level.

Gender inequalities further shape access to resources, skills, and decision-making power within the region. Women are overrepresented in unpaid care work and low-income, informal, and climate-exposed sectors. A regionally coordinated Just Transition approach must incorporate gender-responsive budgeting, targeted support for women-led enterprises, and the promotion of women's leadership in policy and institutional processes to ensure that the transition contributes to greater equity rather than reinforcing existing disparities.

3. Socio-Economic and Environmental Challenges

3.1 Employment and Labour Market Dynamics

The majority of the EAC's workforce is employed in informal and vulnerable forms of work, characterized by low productivity, limited social protection, and exposure to environmental and occupational risks. Climate change exacerbates these vulnerabilities by increasing the frequency of climate-related shocks that disrupt livelihoods and local economies.

The transition toward greener production systems and energy sources will alter labour demand across sectors. While new opportunities are expected in renewable energy, sustainable

agriculture, waste management, and green manufacturing, there is also a risk of job displacement in carbon-intensive and resource-extractive industries. Without proactive planning, these shifts could intensify unemployment and social unrest in affected regions.

3.2 Gender and Youth Dimensions

Women and youth are disproportionately represented in informal employment and low-wage sectors, and they often face barriers to accessing skills training, finance, and decision-making spaces. Climate impacts, such as water scarcity and food insecurity, also place additional care and labour burdens on women.

A Just Transition strategy must therefore be explicitly gender-responsive and youth-centered, ensuring that policies promote equal opportunities, address structural inequalities, and recognize the unpaid and care economy as a critical component of sustainable development.

3.3 Environmental Degradation and Resource Governance

Unsustainable land use, deforestation, and pollution pose significant threats to ecosystems and community livelihoods across the EAC. Weak regulatory enforcement and limited institutional capacity hinder effective resource governance. Integrating environmental protection with social and economic objectives is essential to building resilience and long-term prosperity.

4. Institutional and Policy Landscape

4.1 Regional Architecture

The EAC operates through a multi-layered institutional structure, including the Summit of Heads of State, the Council of Ministers, the East African Legislative Assembly, and the Secretariat. Sectoral councils and specialized institutions address areas such as energy, environment, labour, and social development.

This architecture provides a platform for mainstreaming Just Transition principles across regional policies, but coordination challenges and limited resources often constrain implementation. Strengthening inter-sectoral collabouration and clarifying institutional mandates are key to advancing a coherent regional approach.

4.2 National Policy Frameworks

Partner States have developed national climate strategies, development plans, and labour policies that touch on elements of Just Transition, such as green growth, social protection, and skills development. However, these initiatives vary widely in scope, ambition, and institutional capacity. A regional framework can help harmonize standards, promote best practices, and support capacity building at the national level.

4.3 Role of Social Partners

Trade unions, employers' organizations, civil society, and community groups play a critical role in representing the interests of workers and affected populations. Their meaningful participation in policy design and implementation is essential to ensuring legitimacy, accountability, and effectiveness.

5. Policy Recommendations

5.1 Establishing a Regional Just Transition Framework

The EAC should adopt a formal Regional Just Transition Framework that articulates shared principles, objectives, and implementation guidelines. This framework should be integrated into existing regional development strategies and climate policies, ensuring coherence across sectors and institutions.

The framework should define minimum labour and social protection standards applicable to green economy investments and projects supported at the regional level. It should also provide guidance on stakeholder engagement, impact assessments, and grievance redress mechanisms.

5.2 Strengthening Social Dialogue and Governance

Institutionalized social dialogue mechanisms should be established at the regional level, bringing together governments, employers and trade unions to deliberate on transition pathways, policy reforms, and investment priorities. These platforms can facilitate consensus-building, conflict resolution, and the co-creation of solutions.

The EAC Secretariat should designate a focal unit for Just Transition to coordinate activities, monitor progress, and liaise with Partner States and development partners. This unit should be adequately resourced and empowered to convene inter-sectoral working groups.

5.3 Promoting Decent Work in the Green Economy

Regional policies should prioritize the creation of quality jobs in emerging green sectors, with a focus on fair wages, safe working conditions, and respect for labour rights. This includes the development of regional guidelines for occupational safety and health in renewable energy, waste management, and sustainable agriculture.

The EAC should support the harmonization of skills standards and certification systems to facilitate labour mobility and the recognition of green skills across Partner States. Partnerships with training institutions and the private sector can help align curricula with labour market needs.

5.4 Integrating Social Protection and Resilience

A regional approach to social protection can enhance the capacity of Partner States to respond to climate-induced shocks and economic transitions. The EAC should promote the development of interoperable social protection systems, including unemployment benefits, health coverage, and income support for displaced workers and vulnerable households.

Innovative financing mechanisms, such as regional solidarity funds or climate insurance schemes, can provide additional resources to support affected communities and small enterprises.

5.5 Gender-Responsive and Youth-Inclusive Policies

All Just Transition initiatives should be subject to gender and youth impact assessments to ensure that policies address differential impacts and promote inclusive outcomes. The EAC should establish regional targets for women's and youth participation in green jobs, leadership positions, and decision-making bodies.

Dedicated funding windows and mentorship programs can support women- and youth-led enterprises in the green economy, fostering innovation and entrepreneurship.

5.6 Financing the Transition

Mobilizing adequate and predictable financing is critical to the success of a Just Transition. The EAC should develop a regional financing strategy that leverages public resources, private investment, and international climate finance.

This strategy should prioritize transparency, accountability, and alignment with social and environmental safeguards. The EAC can also explore blended finance models and regional investment platforms to de-risk green projects and attract private capital.

5.7 Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning

A robust monitoring and evaluation framework should be established to track progress toward Just Transition objectives. This framework should include indicators on employment, social protection coverage, gender and youth inclusion, environmental outcomes, and stakeholder participation.

Regular regional reviews and peer learning forums can facilitate the exchange of experiences, identify challenges, and inform policy adjustments.

6. Implementation Pathways

6.1 Phased Approach

Implementation should follow a phased approach, beginning with pilot initiatives in selected sectors or regions to test and refine policy instruments. Lessons learned can then inform scaling up across the Community.

6.2 Capacity Building

Targeted capacity-building programs are needed to strengthen the ability of regional and national institutions to design, implement, and monitor Just Transition policies. This includes training for policymakers, social partners, and local authorities on climate governance, labour standards, and inclusive planning.

6.3 Partnerships and International Cooperation

The EAC should deepen partnerships with development partners, regional organizations, and international institutions to access technical assistance, financing, and knowledge resources. Aligning regional priorities with global initiatives can enhance visibility and leverage support.

7. Risks and Mitigation Strategies

Potential risks include limited political commitment, insufficient financing, weak institutional coordination, and stakeholder resistance. Mitigation strategies should focus on high-level advocacy, transparent communication, and the demonstration of tangible benefits for communities and enterprises.

8. Conclusion

A Just Transition offers the East African Community a strategic pathway to align climate action with social justice, economic integration, and sustainable development. By adopting a comprehensive regional framework grounded in participation, equity, and resilience, the EAC can ensure that the transformation toward a green economy strengthens rather than undermines social cohesion and regional solidarity.

The recommendations outlined in this document provide a foundation for collective action, enabling Partner States, social partners, and development actors to work together in shaping a future that is environmentally sustainable, economically dynamic, and socially inclusive. The success of this endeavor will depend on sustained political will, adequate resources, and the active engagement of the people whose lives and livelihoods are most directly affected by the transition.