Just food transitions: a plurality of framings and repertoires from below

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The Journal of Peasant Studies

ISSN: 0306-6150 (Print) 1743-9361 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/fjps20

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To cite this article: Lídia Cabral, Matías Volonterio, Iva Peša, Gearoid Millar & Melanie Levick-Parkin (11 May 2025): Just food transitions: a plurality of framings and repertoires from below, The Journal of Peasant Studies, DOI: 10.1080/03066150.2025.2488812

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2025.2488812

Published online: 11 May 2025.

THE JOURNAL OF PEASANT STUDIES
https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2025.2488812

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Just food transitions: a plurality of framings and repertoires from below

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we apply the concept of just transition to food systems, a domain central to environmental sustainability and social justice. We broaden and democratise the just transition debate by foregrounding a new set of voices and experiences from civil society organisations and networks in Brazil, Sierra Leone, the United Kingdom, and Zambia. We analyse the understandings of just food system transition as voiced in participatory exchanges between these organisations and their networks, highlighting the plurality of perspectives on just food system transitions. Certain viewpoints highlight the need for gradual changes, whereas others advocate for radical food system transformation.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 15 January 2024
Accepted 24 February 2025

KEYWORDS
Just transitions; food systems; civil society organisations; food justice; social movements; repertoires of action

1. Introduction

Unions in the 1980s embraced the idea of 'just transitions' to emphasise that industrial change should be achieved with respect for equity and justice. This concept has frequently been referenced in scholarship about energy systems and environmental policy amidst the current shift away from dependence on fossil fuels and toward a low carbon economy (Bell et al. 2023; Heffron 2021; Kortetmäki and Huttunen 2023; McCauley and Heffron 2018; Newell and Mulvaney 2013; Wang and Lo 2021). McCauley and Heffron (2018, 2) define just transition as 'a fair and equitable process of moving towards a post-carbon society'. In this paper, we apply the notion of just transition to food systems, a domain that is at the core of environmental sustainability and social justice agendas (Ericksen 2008; IPES-Food 2015). The paper thereby contributes to the emerging field of just food system transition studies (Kaljonen, Kortetmäki, and Tribaldos 2023; Tribaldos and Kortetmäki 2022), but, informed by social movement theory, diversifies and democratises this field by introducing novel perspectives from marginalised food system actors.

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The centrality of food to just transitions cannot be overstated. Current food systems have a huge environmental impact. They drive deforestation and estimations show that they contribute approximately one third of greenhouse gas emissions (Crippa et al. 2021; Mammadova, Behagel, and Masiero 2020). Climate change-related land degradation negatively impacts food security and agricultural livelihoods, triggering conflict and migration (Olsson et al. 2019). FAO et al. (2022) calculated that, in 2021, between 702 and 828 million people were affected by hunger globally and 3.1 billion people could not afford healthy diets, as an already bleak situation was made worse by the Covid-19 pandemic. Food systems are also ridden with inequities and power differentials, from farm to fork (Leach et al. 2020; Patel 2013). This spurs us to ask who defines the direction of change when it comes to prefiguring just food system transitions? Whose opinions matter?

In their analysis of the political economy of just energy transitions, Newell and Mulvaney (2013) argue that power struggles determine who defines what is just and for whom. Those with more power, therefore, dominate the discussion. In this paper, we explore how just transitions in food systems are envisioned by those at the margins. Our motivation is to open up and democratise the debate about just transitions by bringing to the fore a new set of voices and experiences. For this we draw on insights from local food system actors in Brazil, Sierra Leone, the United Kingdom (UK), and Zambia. These insights were generated in workshops facilitated by four local civil society organisations (CSOs) as part of an action-research project carried out in 2021–2022. This project hoped to create a space for international dialogue, exchange, and learning between CSOs working within local food systems. We aimed to document the experiences of food system actors (however that is defined in each context) who have yet to be given the attention they deserve in debates about just transitions. Instead of focusing on in-depth analyses of individual country contexts, the project sought both to examine the diversity of experiences across, and to bridge between, the four contexts.

Our analysis in this paper foregrounds participants' own conceptions of just food system transition processes. It is guided by two questions: (1) how do CSOs and people in their networks in distinct settings understand just transitions in relation to agrifood systems? (2) What strategies do they use to drive just transitions in their spaces of intervention? We purposively avoided defining 'just transition' in advance, and instead asked participants in the study to come up with their own understandings of 'justice' and 'transition'. This approach opened the door for more plurality in how a 'just transition' or 'just food systems' are defined. This paper analyses and explains such plurality.

The project was rooted in Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology, with an emphasis on using participatory principles that were suitable to the local contexts. As is the norm in PAR, the research team did not dictate the specific methods that CSO partners should use to facilitate the discussions with their networks. At the beginning of the project, the research team and CSO partners discussed a range of potential methods for the workshops, including storytelling, drawing, photography, and the collection of artifacts representative of food systems and just transitions. Each CSO partner chose the method(s) they felt comfortable with according to their experience, resources, networks, and context. In Brazil and the UK, participants used video, photography, and drawings to share experiences of the food system and their visions of just transitions. In Sierra Leone and Zambia, the interaction with participants was carried out through community

meetings and focus groups discussions. While not procedurally identical, they are comparatively legitimate methods within those contexts, as is suitable for PAR methodology.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. Section 2 combines concepts from just transitions, food justice, and social movements literature to form our main framework for analysing perspectives regarding just food system transition from below. Specifically, we combine a multidimensional perspective on justice with understandings of transition which vary from incremental to radical. Section 3 describes the research design and context. Section 4 presents our findings regarding how participants framed just food system transition and what strategies they envisioned as driving such transition. Our analysis highlights a plurality of perspectives shaped by context and participants' circumstances. Section 5 discusses commonalities and differences in just transition framings across the four contexts, while Section 6 relates these back to perspectives on justice and the spectrum of incremental-to-radical transitions. This grounded approach reveals that, while some perspectives emphasise incremental changes, others call for more radical food system transformation. In section 7, we conclude by highlighting the implications of our findings for the just transition debate.

2. Connecting just transitions with food justice thinking and practice

2.1. Just transitions

'Just transition' has become a popular slogan in scholarly and policy debates concerning the environment, climate change, and pathways towards a low carbon economy. The concept draws attention to issues of equity and justice in the transition away from fossil fuels. Its origins have been traced back to the 1980s, when American trade unions demanded attention to the negative impact of new air and water pollution regulations on employment in affected economic sectors (Newell and Mulvaney 2013). Since then, the intensification of climate change effects and the uneven distribution of its impacts worldwide have reinforced the need for urgent just transitions. But lack of clarity regarding what this means practically has led to conceptual developments that take the concept well beyond its environmental justice roots. To this end, for example, McCauley and Heffron (2018) propose an integrative analytical framework that highlights three dimensions of justice in just transitions: distributional, procedural, and restorative. Distributional justice is concerned with how social groups are differently affected by climate change or by the transition to a low carbon economy because of their location, capabilities, and/or vulnerabilities. Procedural justice relates to fairness in policy and decision-making processes related to transition. Restorative justice is concerned with repairing harm done to people and the environment.

Building on this, and further work by Williams and Doyon (2019) and Fraser (2007), Wang and Lo (2021) draw attention to power and add a fourth dimension of recognition-based justice, which calls for inclusion of the perspectives of those who are affected by injustices. Nonetheless, they warn that 'the concept of just transition could be co-opted by powerful actors to prioritize certain strategies, social groups, and industries', and argue that 'the extent to which just transitions can achieve a radical transformation in power relations is unclear' (2021, 8). Power differentials, therefore, not only create injustices but also shape transitions designed to overcome them. In this respect, our

paper aims to open-up and democratise the just transition debate by foregrounding voices of actors usually excluded from policy debates.

Our focus is on CSOs operating in and around food systems, a domain where calls for (food) justice date back to the period of environmental campaigning that triggered the idea of a just transition. There are a number of concepts that are helpful for framing just food system transitions. We introduce them below and connect them with social movement perspectives.

2.2. Food justice, alternative food networks, and food sovereignty

Food justice is a normative concept that relates to fairness in food relations and transactions. It has been defined as 'ensuring that the benefits and risks of where, what, and how food is grown and produced, transported and distributed, and accessed and eaten are shared fairly' (Gottlieb and Joshi 2010, 6). It originated in the 1960s, in connection to social movements for environmental, labour, and racial justice in the US (Holt-Giménez and Shattuck 2011). More recently, movements for food justice have been referred to as alternative food networks (AFN) to convey their provision of potential alternatives to conventional agro-industrial food systems. Research on AFNs highlights the collective endeavour by networks of actors joined in the struggle for justice (Levkoe and Wakefield 2014), often with an emphasis on shared management of resources (Zhang and Barr 2019). AFNs specifically emphasise the local scale, the need to shorten food chains, and the virtue of proximity between food producers and consumers (Goodman and DuPuis 2011; Watts, Ilbery, and Maye 2005).

However, differently from other localised food movements (such as slow food or foods with geographical indication), AFNs are also presented as being about bringing into closer contact social actors (such as small-scale farmers or poor consumers) that are diversely disadvantaged by food systems that are governed by regimes of power dominated by a few large agrifood corporations and retailers (McMichael 2013; Patel 2013). AFNs often blend environmental sustainability goals (such as growing food with minimal environmental impact, valuing seasonality, and reducing food miles and waste) with a quest for social justice (land and resource access, fair and inclusive markets, affordability of healthy food). Examples of AFNs include community allotments/gardens, Community Supported Agriculture[1], farmers' markets, and social supermarkets.

While AFNs are often associated with experiences located in the Global North, food justice movements also find expression in the Global South, where the term 'food sovereignty' is more commonly used (Holt-Giménez 2011) and has been dubbed food justice's 'radical sister from the global South' (Cadieux and Slocum 2015, 2). Whyte (2018) links food injustices and lack of sovereignty to the legacies of colonialism. Food injustices take place when two or more groups interrelate through their food systems at the local and/or global level in a way which enables one group to impose their practices, knowledge, and ways of organising on another. For Whyte, settler colonialism represents a typical situation of this kind of interaction. A coherent political response to this way of

[1]Community supported agriculture typically refers to a kind of partnership between farmers and consumers in which the responsibilities, risks, and rewards of farming are shared.

understanding injustice is the recognition of the food sovereignty of dominated groups, insofar as this would guarantee the continuation of their lifestyles and cultures.

2.3. Agroecology

Agroecology is another relevant concept for conceptualising just food system transitions. Although it initially focused on the interactions between biological components of agroecosystems and how human activities impact them (Tischler 1965), with time agroecology broadened its scope to consider how the entire food system impacts ecology and social justice. Gliessman (2016, 197) defines it as 'a way of redesigning food systems, from the farm to the table, with a goal of achieving ecological, economic, and social sustainability'. Social movements embraced this expanded perspective on agroecology as expressed at the 2015 International Forum for Agroecology: 'we gather here … to enrich Agroecology through dialogue between diverse food producing peoples, as well as with consumers, urban communities, women, youth, and others' (*La Vía Campesina* 2015).

Agroecology is today considered to be a science, a practice, and a movement (Wezel et al. 2009). As a movement, agroecology is centrally concerned with distributional and restorative justice, focusing on empowering marginalised food system actors, from farm to fork. It is also concerned with procedural and recognitional justice as it calls for inclusive policy processes that empower producers and communities. It encourages horizontal knowledge systems that recognise and value people's knowledge and experience. As expressed by FAO (2018, 2), '[a]groecological innovations are based on the co-creation of knowledge, combining science with the traditional, practical and local knowledge of producers. By enhancing their autonomy and adaptive capacity, agroecology empowers producers and communities as key agents of change'.

Agroecology also engages with practical aspects of transitions. For example, Gliessman (2014) proposes five steps for an agroecological transition that comprise incremental adjustments (e.g. increasing the efficiency of external input use) as well as systemic changes (e.g. re-establishing direct connections between those who grow and consume food). On this basis, the United Nations Committee on World Food Security established 13 operational principles to achieve resource-use efficiency, system resilience, and social equity to guide multiple transition pathways towards more sustainable and equitable food systems (Wezel et al. 2020).

Food movements and repertoires of action

CSOs, social movements, and informal networks of action are often the drivers behind AFNs and advocacy for food sovereignty and agroecological transitions. They support and connect marginalised actors across the food system, and encourage change (Levkoe 2006; Rosset and Martínez-Torres 2012). However, the forms of social mobilisation and the nature of claims made are known to vary according to the type of social actor driving change and the context in which they operate. Holt-Giménez and Shattuck (2011, 115), for example, distinguish between progressive and radical food movements. Progressive movements push for practical alternatives to industrialised food systems (e.g. organic farming and farmers markets) that sit 'largely within the economic and political frameworks of existing capitalist food systems'. By contrast, radical movements call

for a redistribution of resources and power, and systemic reforms to property regimes, framed in a strong anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist discourse (Holt-Giménez and Shattuck 2011; Holt-Giménez and Altieri 2013).

Repertoires of action – i.e. forms of intervention that are used by social movements to make claims and drive change (Tilly 2004) – also vary according to the nature of the movement. Radical movements may adopt more contentious forms of intervention, such as rioting (Hossain and Scott-Villiers 2017), squatting (Goulart 2011), and land occupation (Wolford 2006). Progressive food movements use less contentious action repertoires, such as petitions, marches, and collectivisation of resources (as in community gardens and kitchens) that lead to incremental change (Goodman and DuPuis 2011).

While these various distinctions and categories are conceptually useful, it is unclear to what extent they reflect what happens on the ground and in different contexts. The remainder of this article explores local understandings of what just food transitions might mean from the perspectives of diverse CSOs and the lived experiences of those in their networks (farmers, consumers, citizens, activists). Our findings illustrate the diversity of concerns and worldviews that are, importantly, shaped by the contexts in which they are articulated.

3. Research design, context, and methods

The project adopted a Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology, whereby knowledge is co-constructed with research participants who, importantly, drive the knowledge production process (Brydon-Miller, Kral, and Ortiz Aragón 2020; Enria 2016). We departed from the observation that the just transitions debate lacks a firm grounding in people's lived experiences across a diversity of contexts. We therefore partnered with CSOs working to improve the ways in which diverse marginalised groups interact with food systems. The role of these organisations in the project was to facilitate reflections on existing food systems and just food system transitions together with those marginalised groups (Millar et al. 2024).

To explore what just food system transition meant across diverse socioeconomic settings, we chose to focus on different locations and to work with different CSO types. The settings included urban and rural locations in four countries: Brazil, Sierra Leone, the UK, and Zambia. We invited the CSOs based on our knowledge about their work and previous experience of interacting with them. Our selection purposely brought together organisations working in rural and urban areas, with diverse food system foci (including environmental sustainability, smallholder market access, agroecology, and ethical consumption), and with different approaches to grassroots mobilisation. The CSOs included: AS-PTA Family Farming and Agroecology, a not-for-profit association established in 1983 and working to promote family farming and sustainable rural development in Brazil; Brighton Food Factory (BFF), a not-for-profit social enterprise that operated from 2019 to 2022 and aimed to address food inequality in the city of Brighton & Hove, UK; Green Earth Sierra Leone (GrESiL), a non-governmental organisation (NGO) working to promote sustainable environmental management through advocacy, awareness raising, capacity and resilience building; the Zambia Land Alliance (ZLA), a network of NGOs established in 1997 to create a platform for collective action to promote equitable access and secured ownership of land by the rural poor.

Within AS-PTA, we interacted specifically with its urban agriculture team, whose work focuses on promoting agroecological transitions and short food chains connecting marginalised food producers and consumers in the city of Rio de Janeiro. To put the organisation into context, AS-PTA's 40-year long trajectory of advocating for agroecology has been a reaction and countermovement to Brazil's agricultural industrialisation, a process that started with the country's Green Revolution in the 1970s (Cabral, Pandey, and Xu 2021). While the country has seen the establishment of a lucrative and powerful industrial, export-oriented agrifood sector (Contini 2014), inequalities and poverty characterise many segments of the food system. Land-based inequalities and violence remain features of the most industrialised agricultural territories, particularly in the centre of the country, which was the birthplace of the Green Revolution (Sauer and Cabral 2022). And while commodity exports feed highly concentrated agricultural wealth, food insecurity and hunger continue to affect large segments of the population and have risen in recent years because of the economic crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic (Rede PENSSAN 2022). Food system inequalities occur also in urban spaces. In the state of Rio de Janeiro, where our research was focused, about 23.6 percent of the population faced severe or moderate levels of food insecurity in 2022 (Rede PENSSAN 2022). Much of Rio de Janeiro's food insecure population live in *favelas*.[2] These are neighbourhoods marked by high population density, poor infrastructure, the absence of public services, and thriving drug-related violence. *Favelas* are also food deserts lacking sources of healthy and affordable food and adequate spaces where people can grow their own produce. AS-PTA's urban agriculture work is part of wider efforts to strengthen food security, food sovereignty, and agroecology by connecting the urban poor with food production initiatives within the city (May et al. 2022).

In the much smaller and relatively less deprived urban context of Brighton & Hove, UK, BFF's work also focused on strengthening local food chains and promoting food justice for the urban poor. This social enterprise was first conceived as a warehouse where locally sourced food could be stored, processed into meals, and then sold at low cost to people on low incomes. Food would come from local farms and include leftover crops from farmers' fields collected by gleaning initiatives. The Covid-19 pandemic hit as BFF was starting its operation, leading to the abandonment of the original food processing plan and a focus on emergency food distribution. At the time, multiple so-called 'affordable food projects' were being established across the city to ensure access to food in poor neighbourhoods at a time of growing food insecurity (Sustain 2020). Affordable food projects were supported by local grants and food surplus donations (from supermarkets, local independent shops, gleaning networks, and others) and were comprised of social supermarkets, community pantries, and vegetable box schemes, all of which offered alternatives to conventional food banks (Taylor 2021). Instead of distributing prepacked food parcelsy and selecting beneficiaries through a referral process, as done by food banks, these projects charged modest membership fees to community members in deprived neighbourhoods for access to food at subsidised prices, thereby putting the emphasis on choice and dignity in food access (Ranta et al. 2024). BFF's role was to purchase food from local farmers and sell it to affordable food projects.

[2]Favelas are shanty towns that emerged out of informal settlements throughout the XX century, particularly during its second half.

Although its main concern during the pandemic was food access and affordability, BFF's vision was to contribute to building a fairer local food economy, whereby healthy, seasonal, and sustainably produced local food could be available for all. At the time of our interaction with BFF, the peak of the Covid-19 crisis was over and the organisation was in the midst of redefining its business model within the city's food network.

In Sierra Leone, our partner was based in Makeni, a city in the northern Bombali District. GrESiL aims to promote more sustainable environmental management among small-scale farmers, supporting them to develop skills and conditions so they can generate income from what they produce. This CSO is working in a context of extreme poverty and food insecurity. Sierra Leone has 'struggled chronically' across all four of the food security dimensions identified by the World Food Summit in 1996: access, stability, availability, and utilisation (Volz, Canagarajah, and Mehta 2020, 1). The country suffers from one of the highest child mortality rates in the world, along with one of the highest malnutrition rates. 'More than one-third of children are chronically malnourished', while in 2010 '22% were underweight, and 44% were stunted' (Chauhan, Chauhan, and Chaurasia 2023, 119). As the majority of the country's six million population are subsistence farmers, the seasonal nature of food production generates additional pressures on food availability and security at different times of the year, with 'the months leading up to the harvest … often characterized by depletion of food stocks' and increasing food precarity (Bonuedi, Kornher, and Gerber 2022, 473). In addition to the cycles of food precarity related to the seasonality of the West African monsoon climate, however, recent studies have raised serious concerns about the broader impacts of climate change on food production in the country (Wadsworth, Jalloh, and Lebbie 2019), with many studies focusing on the lack of awareness and preparation among rural farmers for the eventual negative impacts on food production (see Jalloh et al. 2023; Sesay, Sesay, and Kallon 2022). This is the problem GrESiL seeks to address among its network of subsistence farmers, who it works to educate regarding the risks posed by, and farming methods to adapt to or mitigate, the risks from climate change.

In Zambia, our partner was a CSO advocating at the national level for fair land policies that consider the needs of socio-economically marginalised agricultural producers. Established in anticipation of the 1998 land reforms which promoted land privatisation while making customary landholding more precarious, ZLA promotes secure access, ownership, and control over land as a means towards sustainable development (Chitonge and Mfune 2015; Hansungule, Palmer, and Feeney 1998). This is a crucial endeavour because Zambia's agricultural system is designed to supply urban consumers with cheap food and favours centralised marketing boards and large-scale farms utilising hybrid seeds and artificial fertiliser (Bowman 2011). Environmental sustainability, through using local seeds and adopting agroecological methods, also features strongly in ZLA's strategies (Adams 2003). ZLA aims to safeguard women's land rights, for example in cases of land grabbing by multinational corporations and by insisting on women's continued access to land after a divorce or the death of their spouse. ZLA also strives to make farmers more resilient to environmental shocks and market fluctuations by promoting disease and drought resilient strands of maize, as well as sorghum and millet, rather than propagating hybrid maize seeds that are reliant on expensive inputs, such as fertilisers and pesticides.

Each of these four partners convened three workshops with invited and voluntary participants from their distinct local networks to discuss what just transitions in food systems

mean and what a 'just food' system might look like. The workshops focused on the following three questions: (1) How do local food system actors describe their current and their ideal 'just food' systems?; (2) What steps must be taken to achieve a 'just transition' to such ideal food systems?; and (3) What resources, supports or capacities do food system actors require to achieve a 'just transition'? While we encouraged the CSOs to use creative methods, including drawing, photography, and storytelling, to capture participants' reflections, as is appropriate in PAR, the final decisions regarding specific methodologies were left to the CSOs themselves. The scope and nature of their networks and decisions regarding engagement techniques determined the number and profile of the workshop participants.

In Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, AS-PTA chose to facilitate workshops with members from their urban agriculture network, including community activists, small food growers, participants in local agroecological farms, and professionals linked to local authorities. The selection focused on peripheral neighbourhoods where AS-PTA had ongoing community development projects focused on urban agriculture and access to healthy food. Each workshop started with stories of marginalised city neighbourhoods and accounts of lived experiences of food injustices. Approximately 30 people participated in these workshops and discussions were supported by storytelling and sharing of visual material, including photographs, drawings, and videos.

In Brighton & Hove, UK, BFF chose to facilitate workshops with staff members and people in the local food networks, including local activists and volunteers connected with affordable food projects in the city. The workshops provided an opportunity for bonding and creating spaces of dialogue and reflection at a time when social distance imposed by the pandemic restricted social interaction. About 20 people participated in the three workshops. To prompt the conversations, participants shared photographs that reflected their individual experiences of food system challenges, which they had been asked to assemble ahead of the workshops.

In Sierra Leone, GrESiL chose to conduct workshops with smallholder farmers from Kambia District, in Northwest Province, where farmers mainly produce for household consumption. Workshops in this case consisted of community meetings in locations close to where farmers live and work. Approximately 60 people participated in these meetings. They followed an assembly-style format, where CSO facilitators guided the dialogue by posing questions and highlighting common problems and concerns. Participants then shared their views on potential solutions in response to these prompts. This dynamic allowed for wide participation and discussion of current and future ideas regarding just food systems.

In Zambia, ZLA organised the workshops with approximately 40 women farmers from Chongwe, a peri-urban area just outside of the capital city, Lusaka. While these women farmers showed willingness to participate in commercial agriculture, insecure land tenure, access to seeds, issues of transport, and access to markets impeded upscaling (Spichinger and Kabala 2014). On the other hand, shocks caused by climate change and Covid-19 painfully laid bare the vulnerability of these producers. During the focus group discussions, participants were encouraged to use objects that they associated with their food practices. Participants brought with them seeds, produce, and tools. CSO facilitators used these objects to encourage them to share concerns with the existing food system, and from there they moved onto a discussion about envisioning just alternatives.

The project followed standard ethical principles when undertaking research with human participants, including informed consent, data protection, and anonymity. The ethics protocols for working with CSOs and for CSOs to engage with workshop participants[3] were approved by the Committee for Research Ethics & Governance in Arts, Social Sciences, & Business at the University of Aberdeen, where the project was hosted.

The research was influenced by the project's funding structure mechanism and the Covid-19 pandemic. The limitations related to both are discussed at length in another paper (Millar et al. 2024). These relate, first, to the structures of contemporary neoliberal academia, which challenge the implementation of participatory methodologies and, second, to the need for some of the workshops to be conducted online due to government regulations on social distancing and travel restrictions.

Despite these constraints, and while not claiming to be representative, these four organisations captured a diversity of views about food systems, which is novel in a field dominated by studies of and insights from particular cases. They also highlighted striking parallels and distinctions between experiences of food system injustices. In the following section, we draw from the workshop discussions, as recorded and transcribed by our partners, to describe the diversity of framings and strategies for just food system transitions that were expressed across these contexts. We then proceed by highlighting commonalities and differences.

4. Findings: just food transition framings and strategies

Our findings are organised into responses to two questions. The first question relates to participants' framings of just food transitions, while the second question relates to strategies used to drive just transitions. We deal with these in turn, using vignette style descriptions of each case. While we recognise the limited generalisability of these vignettes, they highlight the specific contexts and findings in each case, thus allowing the later comparison of themes in section 5.

4.1. How do people involved in food networks and civil society organisations understand just food system transitions?

In Rio de Janeiro (Brazil), workshop discussions centred on agroecology, reflecting the focus of AS-PTA's work. Participants described agroecology as a set of practices for sustainable food growing and as a movement for justice. Participants talked about the power held by large supermarkets as a form of injustice and how this can be addressed by shortening food chains and establishing more direct connections between food producers and consumers, as illustrated by farmers' markets and home delivered vegetable boxes in peripheral areas of the city. Participants regarded these experiences positively because they secure a market for small producers, who struggle to compete with large retailers, while providing access to healthy fresh food to consumers on a limited budget. Participants also valued home and community gardens, as these complemented short food chains by guaranteeing access to diversified food that is adequate for people's needs, defined in terms of biophysical as well as cultural dimensions.

[3]Ethical protocol approval numbers were EC/GM/070521 and EC/GM/090721, respectively.

Participants in Rio considered food to be more than a source of nourishment or income. They talked about food as a means to good health, strengthening social support networks, expressing cultural and political identity, and preserving ecosystems. An example was provided of how, during the Covid-19 pandemic, community gardens were safe havens for women who had lost income-earning opportunities and were subject to domestic violence. They also became spaces for educating young people about agroecological practices and the process of transitioning to more sustainable food growing practices. In another example, short food chains were seen as ways of building social relations of trust, and enabling reciprocity and non-monetary transactions, such as exchanging knowledge about food.

By contrast, discussions facilitated by Brighton Food Factory (UK) centred on participants' individual experiences of the food system as consumers and citizens linked to the voluntary food sector in the city. Similarly to Brazilian participants, they discussed just transition as a movement away from the current food system where large corporations (notably supermarkets) disproportionately concentrate wealth, hold the power to set prices and standards, and, thereby, shape food production and consumption behaviour. However, from their consumer viewpoint, they also talked about distorted perceptions about food, such as notions of year-round availability of food and a lack of knowledge about seasonality, that generate negative environmental impacts. Furthermore, they addressed the excessive packaging and transportation of food over long distances, as a lot of fruit and vegetables are imported into the UK market. Participants emphasised localism and sustainability as interconnected features that should guide a just food system transition toward more seasonal consumption of locally grown foods. Local food relations were talked about as establishing bonds between consumers and producers, reducing the environmental footprint of food transactions, and enhancing all stakeholders' participation in shaping food systems.

In Kambia (Sierra Leone), research participants were largely local subsistence farmers. The main issue they raised was the lack of government support. They expressed a sense of government abandonment of the farming sector and being left on their own to access basic inputs for production and transport. They also highlighted difficulties in market participation and linked this to poor transport and market infrastructures and the existence of powerful brokers who control market access. The priority for these farmers is to produce enough food for consumption and then to sell the surplus. Their focus on production and yields may require them to use inputs that are not ecologically sound (such as pesticides). Farmers described how they faced significant challenges to incorporate sustainable farming techniques due to resource constraints and the low productivity of the land they farmed. In their view, then, a just food system transition would require extensive government support, so they could incorporate more sustainable farming methods, while receiving fair payment for their produce. It would also require creating market infrastructures for more direct transactions, that would allow them to capture a greater proportion of the market value of their produce. Fairer market arrangements are therefore important for building a better food system.

Gender inequality among farmers was another central issue that came up in the workshops in Kambia. For customary reasons, women cannot own land in the north of Sierra Leone. This diminishes their autonomy and impacts their access to the benefits of production. Women farmers are also subjected to exhausting patterns of work involving

harvesting, processing, and transporting the food, which they must accommodate with their care responsibilities. According to their views, a just food system transition must comprise a more equitable gender division of labour.

In Chongwe (Zambia), workshops were conducted largely with women farmers, but gender did not come forward as a factor inhibiting a just transition. Participants understood just food system transitions as encompassing different economic and socio-political dimensions. They pointed out that an important dimension would be to reduce the power of corporations as suppliers of hybrid seeds and inputs that damage the environment (e.g. chemical fertilisers and pesticides). As in Kambia, they also envisioned a fairer participation of small-scale farmers in markets, where their products would be fairly priced. But they emphasised that improving farmers' position in the food-chain required more cooperation among them and greater voice and representation in decision-making. To achieve this, they suggested that NGOs and the government needed to facilitate the development of collective action networks.

Participants in Chongwe acknowledged that sustainable agriculture was an important aspiration of a just food system transition. However, they recognised that they were far from achieving it. They pointed out that a just transition would need to incorporate sustainable inputs such as local seeds, organic fertilisers, and a better integration between agricultural production and animal husbandry. Participants also talked about indigenous knowledge and culture and how these are insufficiently recognised. They argued that government and corporations have not only overlooked but also eroded indigenous knowledge and culture, and that a just transition would require a change of attitudes in this regard.

4.2. What strategies do they envision to drive just transitions in their spaces of intervention?

In Rio de Janeiro, participants highlighted a variety of actions to build just food systems. These included solidarity initiatives led by social movements and citizen-led groups that emerged in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and in response to the government's lack of response to rising food insecurity among poor communities in peripheral neighbourhoods. Participants regarded these solidarity initiatives as forms of collective mobilisation and resistance that constituted food system alternatives, centred on agroecological principles and relations of affection.

Another form of action highlighted in Rio was the reclaiming of spaces and territorial identities rooted in experiences of disadvantage and oppression. The experience of *quilombo Dona Bilina*[4] was presented as an example where agroecology helped to critically revisit colonial histories of oppression and establish a sense of identity and pride in being part of a historically subjugated territory. Attempts to recover forgotten crops, farming practices, and food recipes for medicinal or gastronomic purposes associated with people's heritage were regarded as efforts to develop a territorialised food identity for the *quilombo*. These dynamics echo the communal conception of just food system transition within the agroecological community in Rio.

[4]Quilombo is the designation given to settlements of black people of African heritage in Brazil. These territories were originally established by free or escaped slaves during the slavery regime that was abolished in Brazil in 1888.

Rio participants also shared experiences of reclaiming urban spaces for food production as part of their strategies. A resident of the Complexo do Alemão *favela* described how she grew vegetables and herbs in abandoned corners of her neighbourhood. Other participants described an agroecology farmers' market in Campo Grande neighbourhood, where smallholders sell their products. This takes place in the grounds of a derelict manor house that is property of the local government and was occupied to create a space for the community. The occupation of this space was talked about as symbolic of social movement action for territorial justice.

Finally, the Rio workshops illustrated the ways in which communities collectively construct new meanings of food and justice. They combined an informal '*roda de conversa*' (conversation circle) set up with the sharing of photographs, verbal testimonies, singing, and poetry reading. They also used drawings to synthesise ideas discussed in an accessible and captivating manner. These methods enabled inclusive interactions that resulted in shared and collective expressions of just food transitions.

By contrast, workshop participants in Brighton & Hove highlighted individual attitudes towards food (e.g. buying locally and seasonally) and, specifically, ethical consumption as crucial steps towards a more just food system. They noted how one's ability to make informed ethical decisions is contingent on transparency and accountability from big corporate actors. Strengthening people's knowledge about food (where it comes from, the conditions under which it is produced, when it is available, food preservation methods to avoid waste, etc.) was also highlighted as crucial to making more informed decisions. Discussions highlighted the importance of promoting collective spaces for sharing knowledge and developing social relationships around food (e.g. community gardens, kitchens, and shops) as part of creating broader consciousness about food and enabling active and conscious, but still individual, consumer attitudes.

In Kambia, strategies highlighted by farmers comprised collective action to strengthen their capacity and voice, coupled with alliances with actors such as NGOs and government departments, that can offer key resources. Participants emphasised that systems do not work in their favour, and that working cooperatively could help them better access markets and resources, such as loans, inputs, and land. Participants also recognised the importance of incorporating more sustainable farming practices, which would entail using agroecological techniques like mixed cropping and sustainable inputs such as locally made manure using animal waste and compost. However, they perceived support from NGOs and government as crucial to enable the incorporation of such practices. These were not changes they could make on their own.

Finally, in Chongwe, participants discussed similar ideas around farmers' collective action and building alliances with strategic actors. They stressed that having stronger farmer networks could amplify their voices and improve their negotiating power in an unequal market, and they saw alliances with NGOs and government institutions as strategically necessary to influence decision-making at the national level. The advocacy role of our partner CSO was seen as crucial. They use the privileged position that first-hand contact with farmers provides to lobby national decisionmakers. This has two goals: to push forward policies that consider the interests of local farmers, and to restrain the development of industrial agriculture and the influence of large corporations. Participants considered different forms of participation and concluded that just food system

transitions required not only representation but an active engagement by farmers in decision-making concerning food systems.

5. Contrasting just food transition framings and strategies

Although each case provides unique context-specific reflections about local food systems, commonalities and differences between participants' understandings of just food system transitions are worth highlighting.

Participants across all four contexts, for example, shared the view that farming needs to incorporate sustainable practices to build just food systems. This evidences a common interest in sustainability. Reducing the length of food supply chains and promoting proximity between producers and consumers is seen as complementary because it reduces the environmental footprint of the food chain as well as the overall costs. However, despite a shared concern for sustainability, there were differences in where the emphasis was placed. Brighton participants emphasised concerns for healthy and ethical consumption, Rio participants perceived sustainability as a political agenda centred on agroecology for social justice, while in Chongwe and Kambia sustainability was framed as a route towards improved livelihoods and economic autonomy.

Participants also weighted the responsibilities of producers and consumers in driving change differently. In Chongwe and Kambia, the emphasis was placed on farmers as the main drivers of change through transforming and improving their farming practices. But in both there was also a recognition of a role for NGOs and government to support farmers by improving their capacity and access to resources and infrastructures. By contrast, participants in Brighton emphasised the role of consumers in making responsible decisions to drive positive change. For them this also meant that the food market should be structured in a way that allows ethical decisions, through improved transparency among retailers and greater awareness among consumers. Rio participants did not make a clear-cut distinction between producers and consumers, as these categories are seen as superimposed by a market-centric logic. Instead, they emphasised solidarity networks where people disadvantaged by the system (from farm to fork) come together to push for change.

The lack of physical and social infrastructures to support just transitions was commonly described. But this point brought out differences in perspective on the government's role in just transitions. While Rio participants emphasised the strength of grassroots solidarity networks, Chongwe participants stressed the need for external support to facilitate cooperation and collective action among farmers. Both Chongwe and Kambia participants believed that governments needed to step in to create favourable conditions for just food system transitions. By contrast, Rio participants preferred to eschew any relation with governments, favouring instead self-managed initiatives based on mutual aid and solidarities to construct the food systems that they desire. This position could be explained, in part, by the fact that these workshops took place during the government of President Jair Bolsonaro (2019–2022), which implemented repressive policies against social movements. Brighton participants had a middle of the road position. While they criticised the UK government as responsible for unsustainable and unjust food systems, they nonetheless considered public interventions necessary to strengthen local food supply infrastructures.

Finally, while participation in markets was a common concern, different dimensions were accentuated in each context. For Brighton participants, consumer access to locally produced food is constrained by high prices and insufficient marketing infrastructures for local producers. In Chongwe and Kambia, the main preoccupation related to improving farmers' access to and participation in the market under fair conditions. To achieve this, they highlighted the development of their productive capacities and pointed out that the way the market is structured must be transformed so that it reverses the situation of exclusion and disadvantage that small farmers suffer in their countries. This has to be realised from above, through state intervention. Participants in Rio presented a strikingly distinct position. They focused instead on a bottom-up approach to transformation, in which relations of proximity, such as those that occur in food fairs and community gardens in peripheral neighbourhoods, such as *favelas*, play a crucial role in building a just food system.

6. Repertoires of action for just food transitions

We now relate our case study findings to the conceptual foundations outlined in section 2. Our analytical framework combines a multidimensional perspective on justice (McCauley and Heffron 2018) and a perspective on social mobilisation that encompasses approaches sitting on an incremental change-to-radical transformation spectrum (Holt-Giménez and Shattuck 2011; Tilly 2004). The repertoires of action practiced or envisaged by research participants reflect an emphasis on different dimensions of justice, as synthesised in Figure 1. The figure also indicates how we interpret the various actions to be positioned on the spectrum. The position of the actions along this spectrum should be read as indicative since we did not discuss with participants what they considered as incremental change or radical transformation in their specific settings. The figure was compiled based on our interpretation of the data and our earlier provided definitions of incremental change and radical transformation (cf. section 2). It aims to provide a basis

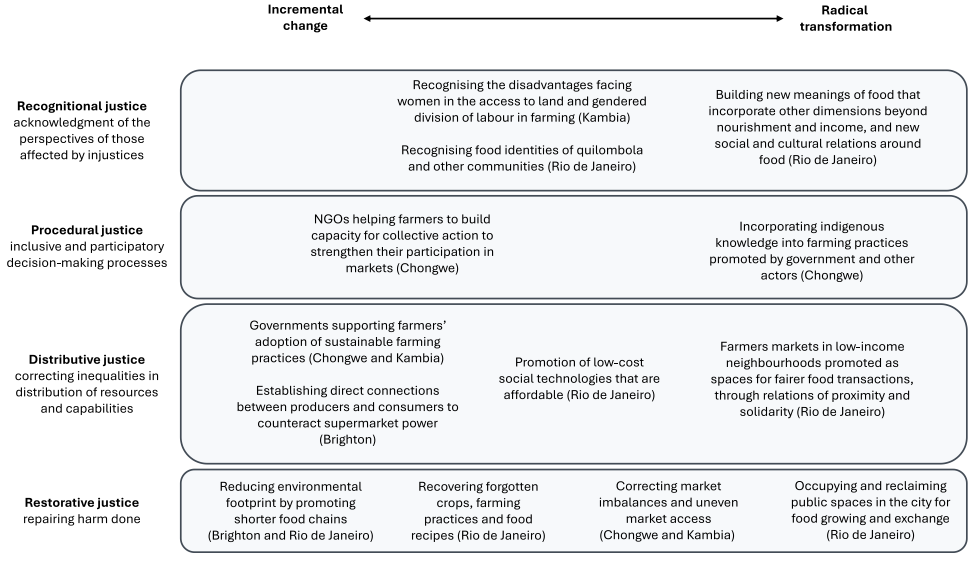

Figure 1. Repertoires of just food transitions: from incremental change to radical transformation.

for comparison between types of interventions rather than an absolute classification of those interventions.

Recognitional justice entails acknowledging the perspectives of those who are affected by injustices. Calls for recognition of women farmers in Kambia and *quilombo* food identities in Rio de Janeiro are illustrative examples of what we interpret to be incremental changes in recognitional justice. More radical transformation on this justice dimension requires turning recognition into action that effectively restructures the exclusionary systems to be fully inclusive of usually marginalised voices, without having to adapt their viewpoints to hegemonic discourses. An example of this is the attempt to establish new collective meanings of food that incorporate cultural, racial, and affective dimensions, as voiced by participants in Rio de Janeiro.

The procedural dimension of justice clearly appeared in Chongwe farmers' demands to participate in decision-making. This vision of participation in the institutional democratic channels to drive change in line with their goals is the central element of procedural justice. We interpret this as incremental change because the existing structures of governance would not be challenged by such an approach, but simply made more inclusive of farmers' voices. Calls for the incorporation of indigenous knowledge into the farming practices promoted by government and NGOs in Chongwe are an illustration of a more radical vision of transformation.

The distributional dimension of justice emphasises the unequal distribution of capabilities, wellbeing, and risks, and this has to be addressed by considering who is responsible for injustices while recognising who the affected groups are (McCauley and Heffron 2018). In Chongwe and Kambia, farmers demand support for access to resources to increase their capabilities to engage with sustainable practices, as well as their capacities for collective organising. In Brighton & Hove, closer connections between producers and consumers, for example through farmers' markets, are regarded as ways of counteracting supermarket power. In Rio de Janeiro, the promotion of low-cost social technologies is a means towards improving distributional justice by improving people's capabilities. All these are examples of measures that would improve people's circumstances in the food system without necessarily altering the underlying system at the root of injustices. We therefore position them towards the incremental end of the spectrum. The construction of spaces of solidarity for food provision in Rio de Janeiro represents a more radical form of distributional justice because they challenge capitalist market relations and attempt to build new meanings of food and new socio-cultural relations around food.

Restorative justice focuses on repairing harms done rather than punishing offenders (McCauley and Heffron 2018). This approach is reflected in calls for action to correct market imbalances by participants across the four locations. This may be achieved through alternative food networks, as highlighted in Rio de Janeiro and Brighton, or by improving the position of small farmers as producers, as suggested in Chongwe and Kambia. In all these cases the goal is to repair harms done against producers or consumers. In the cases of Brighton & Hove and Rio de Janeiro, calls for restorative actions also transcend human relations, to consider the environment. Shorter food chains were justified on the basis that they reduce the environmental impact of food transactions, for example. All these appear to be examples of efforts to drive incremental change, because they focus on restoring one aspect of injustice (e.g. unfair access to markets, or unhealthy and unaffordable food for consumers) without challenging existing food

system structures. More radical restorative justice efforts appear to be, again, exemplified by practices in Rio de Janeiro, such as the reclaiming of public spaces for food growing and exchange, sometimes using direct action such as occupation of empty land and unused public buildings. These not only address immediate food insecurity but also seek to repair deeply rooted territorial injustices.

As these examples show, participants in each of the four communities are articulating demands for different forms of justice, but the analytical framework we propose helps to identify the commonalities and distinctions underpinning their perspectives. While a multidimensional understanding of justice points to different layers of food injustices, social movement theory helps in interpreting how far propositions go in terms of transforming existing food systems. The perspectives voiced by workshop participants are shaped by the context in which they are articulated and, specifically, the nature of the CSO convening the discussions. It is not surprising that what seem to be more radical perspectives on just transition emerged predominantly in Rio de Janeiro, reflecting the views of a social movement whose work is about envisioning alternatives to a dominant corporate-controlled food system. In the two African contexts, smallholder farmers are calling for justice through support for market access without radically questioning existing structures of power that govern those markets, reflecting a context where CSOs often play the role of intermediaries between farmers and these structures. In Brighton & Hove, though critical of the power of supermarkets, workshop participants emphasise their individual responsibility in pressing for fairer and more sustainable food systems, falling short of a more radical vision for the food system but, again, reflecting the more individualised cultural norms of the context.

7. Conclusion

In this paper we applied the concept of just transition to food systems, a domain at the core of environmental sustainability and social justice agendas. Our aim was to open up the just transitions debate by foregrounding a new set of voices. We drew on the insights generated by CSOs located in Brazil, Sierra Leone, the UK, and Zambia and analysed how, through a series of participatory exchanges, these organisations and the members of their networks systematised their understandings of just food system transitions and their role in transition processes. Our analysis highlighted a plurality of perspectives, with some emphasising the need for incremental changes while others called for radical food system transformation. All, however, were shaped by the contexts in which they were articulated, and this is a key finding, as it points to the inherent contextuality of justice and just food system transitions.

Rio de Janeiro participants voiced the most radical perspectives regarding just food system transitions, which comprised new meanings of food and social relations around food, with a strong emphasis on collective identity expressing a radical interpretation of recognitional justice. In Brighton & Hove, by contrast, participants' views of just food system transitions centred on individual choice and the ethics of consumption, reflecting incremental views on distributional and restorative justice. The two African contexts, Chongwe and Kambia, produced quite similar understandings of just food transitions, centred on farmers' needs and constraints and with expectations that governments and NGOs help to address them. These also reflected incremental

conceptions of distributional and restorative justice, though coming from different viewpoints. But there were also examples of more radical formulations, as when Chongwe participants suggested the inclusion of indigenous knowledge and culture in farming practices promoted by government and other actors, a radical take on procedural justice.

These understandings of just food system transitions are not meant to be representative of the contexts where they were articulated, and certainly not of contexts wider still. While certainly shaped by those contexts, these understandings primarily reflect the visions of selected groups of research participants that were in our partners' networks. These insights have, nonetheless, helped us identify quite varied and contrasting perspectives on just food system transitions in different locations (urban and rural, in the Global North and the Global South) which, while also allowing us to note some common themes, nonetheless serve to highlight the substantial context specificity of conceptions of justice and just food system transitions.

Further, while a multidimensional understanding of justice allowed us to unveil various layers of food injustices, social movement theory enabled us to see how far the proposed corrective measures might go in transforming established systems of power. This adds a new perspective to just food transition theorisation (e.g. Kaljonen, Kortetmäki, and Tribaldos 2023; Tribaldos and Kortetmäki 2022) that highlights people's agency in defining the direction of just transitions as well as the intensity of those transitions (from incremental to transformational). These views are shaped by peoples' circumstances, including their positions of (in)dependence in food systems, which is shaped, again, by context. As this paper illustrated, however, CSOs are in a key position to ensure that the voices of marginalised food system actors are heard and incorporated into debates and deliberations on just transitions nationally, as well as globally, while recognising that the true bearers of change are local actors through their everyday practices. While unable to ensure full control of the research process, the PAR approach utilised for this project further enhances both the role of CSOs and the voice and influence of often marginalised local food system actors.

Acknowledgements

The authors are indebted to our project partners at AS-PTA (Brazil), Brighton Food Factory (UK), Green Earth Sierra Leone, and Zambia Land Alliance without whose support the project would not have materialised. Our heartfelt thanks to all participants who took part in workshops facilitated by our partners for their invaluable insights. We finally thank the three anonymous reviewers for their stimulating and constructive feedback, which has significantly enhanced the quality and clarity of this paper.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

The research was funded by the British Academy under [grant number VSFoFJT\100015].

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