

# Just Transition and Place-Based Policy in Coal-Dependent Areas

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## **Abstract**

Recently, the interrelated concepts of the place-based approach, spatial justice, and just transition appear not only in scientific dialogue but also in developing policies that seek to address spatial inequalities. This article attempts to discuss the European, national, and local just transition policies and to assess the extent to which these policies are in line with the place-based model, as reflected in the Barca report (2009). The study reference area at the regional level is Western Macedonia, for which the transition towards an alternative, sustainable, and just path stands a very challenging policy exercise. The empirical section involved questionnaires with local specialists and professionals who hold profound knowledge and experience of the area. The results of the analysis revealed that just transition policies designed only at a European level demonstrate a high-level degree of relationship with the place-based model. The exact opposite seems to prevail at the level of national and regional policies.

**Keywords:** place-based policy, spatial justice, just transition

## **1. Introduction**

Incorporating the place-based approach into development strategy is not a new idea. Firstly, it appeared in the US and the UK in the 1950s and 1960s, as early attempts to link central policymaking to local specificities (Taylor, *et al.* 2017). However, the debate on this issue revived after the well-known Barca report in 2009, prepared at the request of the then EU Commissioner for Regional Policy, Danuta Hubner. The crucial issue raised by this view is that a development policy that aspires to tackle spatial injustice should embed strategies that

will take into consideration the uniqueness of a place and not merely economic transfers from the central state to the periphery.

The notion of 'place' in the place-based approach is detected, defined, and interpreted through a relational perspective. Seen in this respect, 'place' is not encapsulated, but porous as part of broader relationships, which could be horizontal, vertical, or transversal, reflecting a multilevel governance model (Madanipour *et al.* 2017). In this discussion, the concept of 'spatial justice' connects social justice with the spatial dimension, through a holistic approach for the interpretation of space (Soja, 2010).

The literature's debate on correlations between place and justice seems to echo to some extent in the EU policies. In this economy, under the European Green Deal, which aims to achieve climate neutrality by 2050, the EU has set up a Just Transition Mechanism, aiming at a smooth transition of areas with a solid carbon footprint, fairly, making sure no one is left behind.

The article attempts to record the policies of just transition at European, National, and Regional / Local level and additionally, to assess the degree of relevance of these policies to the basic assumptions of the place-based model, as reflected in the Barca report (2009). The analysis at the regional level focuses on the Western Macedonia region in Greece, signifying a lignite-dependent economy from the early 1950s. The empirical section involved questionnaires with local specialists and professionals who hold profound knowledge and experience of the area. Aiming to examine the articulation between just transition policies and place-based approach, methods of tracing techniques have been utilized (Blatter and Blume, 2008) with the use of fieldwork interviews, text analysis, and participative observations (Yazan, 2015). The empirical work included a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods to investigate the area under consideration.

The chapter that follows provides a brief overview of the literature. In the third section, the just transition policies at the European, national, and local level, are recorded and discussed, while the fourth chapter attempts to assess the compliance of these policies with the place-based model. The last section provides the main conclusions.

## **2. Just Transition Through the Lens of Place-Based Approach and Spatial Justice**

The concept of 'just transition' first appeared in North America in the 1990s, referring to support programs for workers who lost their jobs due to environmental protection policies (Smith, 2017). In 2015, the General Assembly of the United Nations, adopted the Resolution entitled "Transforming the world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development" (UN, 2015). In this document, more than 190 countries pledged to meet 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) by 2030 (Table 1), targeting to ensure sustainable global social and economic development, and to strengthen universal peace.

Table 1. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals

1. No poverty	2. Zero hunger	3. Good health and well-being	4. Quality education	5. Gender equality	6. Clean water and sanitation
7. Affordable and clean energy	8. Decent work and economic growth	9. Industry, innovation, and infrastructure	10. Reduce inequalities	11. Sustainable cities and communities	12. Responsible consumption and production
13. Climate action	14. Life below water	15. Life on land	16. Peace, justice and strong	17. Partnerships for goals	

In recent years, criticism of the dominant development model based on the neoclassical paradigm has emerged. This paradigm has coexisted with certain negative externalities over the decades, such as environmental pollution or increasing inequalities in the distribution of income or discrimination in equal gender opportunities or unjust access in the digitalization era, etc. which are precisely part of the problems that the SDGs aim to tackle (Maria *et al*, 2020).

Since then, just transition has become an integral part of many global commitments adopted by countries. To this end, the Paris Agreement acknowledges "the imperatives of a just transition of the workforce and the creation of decent work and quality jobs under nationally defined development priorities" and highlights the importance of workers in responding to climate change" (Paris Agreement, 2015). According to the International Labor Organization, a fair transition for all to an environmentally sustainable economy must inter alia contribute to decent work for all, social inclusion, and the eradication of poverty (ILO, 2015). In the context of the EU just transition strategy, social dialogue and consultation between governments, businesses, trade unions, and civil society are of utmost importance for a transition towards a sustainable zero-emission and 'leave no one behind' economy (COM 21, 2020).

The goal of a just transition has intertwined in this discussion with the pressures of climate change and the goal for a green zero-emission economy based on the specific characteristics and resources of each region (ESPON, 2013). This approach calls attention to the need to seek place-based development policies that challenge the "one size fits all" logic. According to the well-known Barca Report, the place-based policy is a long-term strategy that aims to make full use of the potential of a place, reduce inequalities and social exclusion and provide integrated services and goods to citizens through multilevel governance. This model relies on local knowledge which is verifiable and subject to continuous scrutiny through consultation, supplemented by institutional changes. At the same time, linkages among places are taken into account (Barca Report, 2009).

On the opposite of the place-based model lies the spatially blind or otherwise spatially neutral development strategy. From this perspective, the emphasis on addressing inequalities should focus rather on the 'space of flows' (Castells, 2007) between places and the interconnections among them than on the 'space of places'. Furthermore, horizontal interventions that will be applied equally to all regions will be more effective as they will reach a critical size and will not slow down the economic development of dynamic areas (World Bank, 2008, OECD,

2009, Gorzelak, 2011). In fact, global importance issues such as climate change, it has been argued that local solutions are not sufficient to address such an enormous problem (Rees, 2015, 2017).

A noteworthy debate has developed around the above two development paradigms, which on the one hand, further deepens the discussion and on, the other hand, bridges to some extent the gap between the two approaches. Ball et al (2011), consider that policymaking and strategy should be planned at the supranational/ national level horizontally. However, the implementation of policies should take into account local specificities. They even admit that even full implementation of a place-based perspective will have winners and losers in terms of development due to the aggregation dynamics caused by economies of scale and imperfect labor mobility.

On the other hand, even "spatially blind" policies in practice are not ultimately "blind" as they are usually implemented, in large concentrations favoring the center over the periphery (Rodriguez Pose, 2011). Eventually, the so-called 'spatial-territorial capital ' of every distinct place could provide a bridge between competition and solidarity, efficiency and equity, redistributive logic (needs, results), and development policy (inclusive development) (Sarmiento-Mirwaldt 2015, Barca et al, 2012).

In the growing literature that theorizes justice in space, it is interesting to contemplate whether the concepts of just transition and place-based approach are related to the conceptualization of spatial justice. According to Madanipour *et al.* (2017), the adaptation to global environmental requirements due to climate change should pursue place-based logics, which in turn, should involve spatial justice and territorial cohesion policies. In this sense, territorial justice cannot be explored separately from environmental justice.

Spatial justice reflects the fair distribution of social resources and opportunities in space (Morange and Quentin, 2018; Madanipour et al. 2017). In this sense, spatial justice indicates the spatial dimension of social justice (Soja, 2010). Citing Soja, (2010), territorial justice may concern redistribution processes and patterns that produce a fair or unfair outcome in space. Within this outline of spatial justice, the place becomes the context that could link the concepts of equality, democracy, decentralization, and sustainable development (Madanipour *et al.* 2017).

Given that the concept of sustainability entails the conceptualization of social justice among generations (Brutland, 1987), then one could argue that social and spatial justice go hand in hand with environmental justice. From this perspective, it becomes particularly challenging to explore the intergenerational and intragenerational aspects of environmental justice and its correlations with spatial and social justice (Topaloglou, et al. 2019). For example, the high incomes of an economy based on high carbon reserves, undermine the prospect of future generations, exacerbating regional disparities at the same time. On the other hand, the forceful transition to a zero-carbon economy undermines the income of the current generation by alleviating interregional inequalities (Topaloglou, 2019).

### **3. Just Transition Policies**

#### *3.1 The European Context*

Taking the baton from the emblematic Paris Agreement in 2015, the EU proposed within the new Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027 to spend 25% of its budget to serve climate targets. In fact, in the context of the European Green Deal in December 2019, it set ambitious targets to cut greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55% by 2030 and to achieve climate neutrality by 2050 (COM 640, 2019). This strategic political decision brings about radical socio-economic transformations in their productive model in areas based on fossil fuels.

In the light of the above, the Commission adopted on 14 January 2020 a proposal for a Regulation to establish the Just Transition Fund (JTF) with a budget of € 7.5 billion, aimed at supporting EU regions most affected by the transition to a low carbon economy, so that this transition will be fair and inclusive (COM 22, 2020). At the same time, the Commission presented a new Investment Plan for a Sustainable Europe (Sustainable Europe Investment Plan), standing as the investment pillar of the European Green Deal (COM 21, 2020). It is also worth noting the Commission's initiative in December 2017 to establish a Coal Regions in Transition Platform to provide technical support, systematic information, and networking of 41 EU-28 lignite regions so that they can turn their economies towards a green development paradigm and smooth transition.

On 28 May 2020, the Commission, aiming to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, published an amended proposal increasing the previously JTF budget from € 7.5 billion to € 40 billion (COM 460, 2020). The European Council in July 2020, however, after marathon negotiations, reduced the available budget to € 17.5 billion (EUCO 10/20, 2020). Contrary to that, the European Parliament during its plenary session on 17 September recommended an increase to over € 25 billion (REGI, 2020). Funding will be available in all Member States, focusing on areas facing the most urgent transition challenges. The new-established Just Transition Fund, as the main component of the Just Transition Mechanism, will be part of cohesion policy Funds, as well as national co-financing, which is complemented by resources (loans or guarantees) of the InvestEU private investment plans and public sector loans with the support of the European Investment Bank (EIB).

An obligatory condition for the utilization of the above mentioned Just Transition Mechanism resources is the preparation of Territorial Just Transition Plans at each NUTS 3 region that is drastically affected by the transition towards a zero-carbon footprint model. These Plans aim to provide real support to employees, businesses, and local/regional authorities on the one hand and pave the way to attract investments that facilitate a smooth transition on the other. Besides, Territorial Plans must be aligned and in compliance with the National Energy and Climate Plans (NECPs) to ensure compatibility with national and local strategies.

#### *3.2 The National Context*

In September 2019, the Prime Minister of Greece announced from the UN podium the

complete independence from lignite by 2028. With this decision, Greece becomes one of the EU forerunners who have already decided their complete independence from lignite. At the same time, Greece becomes the first lignite-producing country in the EU to set a phase-out of lignite date before 2030 (Green Tank, 2020). In November 2019, the revised National Energy and Climate Plan (NECP) approved, which presented a roadmap with even more ambitious goals and milestones by 2030 compared to the previous plan. The new NECP includes the government's commitment to phase-out lignite and coal, with increasingly forward-bearing time schedules.

In the same vein, the revised business plan of PPC in December 2019, envisages the priorities of the Green Deal in energy and includes the retirement of all existing lignite plants (power 3.4 GW) by 2023. These fast-moving developments have raised reasonable concerns to local communities about the economic and social consequences of phasing out of lignite by characterizing these developments as violent and unjust. To alleviate these concerns, an inter-ministerial committee was set up in December 2019 at the national level led by the Minister of Environment, which aims to draft a National Plan for a Just Development Transition (SDAM) in the post-lignite era. In May 2020, a Technical Committee was appointed to support SDAM in development planning and to evaluate investment proposals submitted by private companies. At the same time, in June 2020, the elaboration of the overall Just Development Transition Plan (Master Plan, 2020) was launched, which was put up to consultation in September 2020.

It is also worth noting the establishment of the National Just Transition Fund in April 2019, by channeling 6% of CO<sub>2</sub> allowances auctioning revenues through the Green Fund. The establishment of this Fund was the result of a long-standing public debate that began in 2015 with the active involvement and efforts of local and regional authorities and environmental NGOs (Green Tank, 2020). To date, two calls for proposals have been launched for the submission of Energy and Climate Action Plans and the promotion of the circular economy.

### *3.3 The Regional Context*

The challenge of the post-lignite transition has long preoccupied the local community due to the one-dimensional economic model and environmental concerns. However, it has been at the center of study and policymaking interest since 2015. It is worth noting that in 2015 a series of remarkable studies were come to the fore, aiming to assess the effects of a transition towards an alternative production model (ANKO, 2015; TCG-Western Macedonia, 2018; WWF 2015). In 2017, the five Greek energy municipalities, under the coordination of the Municipality of Kozani, prepared a joint letter to the European Commission requesting the establishment of a European Fund for Just Transition. The letter was also co-signed by representatives of the Greek trade union sector (General Confederation of Greek Workers and General Confederation of Workers in PPC) as well as other Mayors from the EU. The result of this effort was the creation of the Pan-European Forum of Just Transition Mayors which led to a Cooperation Pact among 54 mayors from 12 lignite regions of 10 countries (Green Tank, 2020).

In December 2017, several experts and elected representatives from Western Macedonia took part in the inaugural meeting of the Coal Regions in Transition Platform in Strasburg. Very soon, Western Macedonia was chosen as one of three pilots in a total of 41 EU lignite regions. In January 2018, the Regional Governor of Western Macedonia established an 8-member working group to prepare the transition to a regime of low lignite dependence. With an amended decision of the new Regional Governor in 2020, the new working group became 34 members with the core intent to provide technical support to the Region.

The systematic presence of Western Macedonia in the workshops of the Coal Regions in Transition Platform led to the decision of technical support by the European Commission under the Structural Reform Support Service (Structural Reform Support Service - SRSS). In this context, the World Bank has drawn up a roadmap for the transition to the post-lignite era on the axes of governance first, workers and local communities second, land use and investment third, and finally, monitoring and consultation.

The Government Committee, in parallel with the Master Plan, drawn up a Special Transitional Just Transition Program for the period 2021-2023, financed by the NSRF 2014-2020, the Green Fund, and the Recovery Fund. The Master Plan includes a special incentive package aiming to attract labor-intensive and value-added investments. Besides, worth mentioning is the decision to apply a just transition clause in all the development initiatives of the state, such as those related to energy saving, electromobility, renewable energy sources, etc. Inter alia, the Master Plan attempts to articulate a vision towards a just transition, to propose a series of emblematic investments, to map out the available sources of funding, and to formulate some initial scenarios for land use location and reskilling of human resources.

#### **4. Assessment of Policies Based on Justice and Place-Based Perspective**

The assessment of just transition policies is theoretically founded on the well-known definition of the place-based approach, given by Barca, according to which: *"A place-based policy is a long-term strategy aimed at tackling persistent underutilization of potential and reducing persistent social exclusion in specific places through external interventions and multilevel governance. It promotes the supply of integrated goods and services tailored to contexts, and it triggers institutional changes. In a place-based policy, public interventions rely on local knowledge and are verifiable and submitted to scrutiny, while linkages among places are taken into account"* (Barca Report, 2009).

The field research involved twenty (20) questionnaires and interviews with experts and academics with in-depth knowledge of the region on the one hand, and the relevant debate in Western Macedonia on the other. The just transition policies listed in Chapter 3 were classified at European, National, and Regional / Local level and then correlated and evaluated against each place-based assumption. What follows is the analysis of the empirical findings.

##### *4.1 Test Place-Based Assumption #1*

This section examines the hypothesis that a place-based policy is a long-term strategy aimed

at tackling persistent underutilization of potential and reducing incessant social exclusion in specific places through external interventions (Barca, 2009).

The following table presents the findings that emerged from the processing of the questionnaires. In all questions, the scale from 1 to 5, was used, with 1 indicating NO, 2 Probably NO, 3 Maybe, 4 Probably YES and 5 Definitely YES.

Table 2. Place-Based Assessment #1

	Long Term Strategy	Reduce inefficiency	Reduce Economic Inequalities	Reduce Social Exclusion
<b>The European Context</b>				
European Green Deal	4,6	3,8	3,5	2,7
Just Transition Mechanism	3,7	3,2	2,8	2,8
Coal Regions in Transition Platform	3,1	3,5	2,8	2,8
<b>The National Context</b>				
National Energy and Climate Plan	3,5	2,8	2,3	1,9
National Just Transition Fund	3,2	3,9	3,4	2,8
National Plan for Just Development Transition	3,2	3,0	2,4	1,7
<b>The Regional/Local Context</b>				
European Forum of Just Transition Mayors	3,0	3,0	3,0	3,4
World Bank Roadmap	3,4	3,5	3,2	3,1
Master Plan in relation to Western Macedonia	3,1	3,2	2,5	2,1

Starting with the just transition policies at the European level, it becomes apparent that the European Green Deal represents a long-term policy, with a positive contribution to the efficiency and economic equity, with a small impact, however, on the decrease of social exclusion. The Just Transition Mechanism also reflects an EU long-term strategy. However, it is interesting to note that the expectations of this initiative in terms of effectiveness, equality, and social inclusion are not quite visible. The initiative of Coal Regions in Transition Platform seems to be able to open up prospects. However, its contribution to efficiency, the reduction of inequalities and social exclusion is not clear-cut.

Moving to the lower spatial scale, paradoxically, the National Energy and Climate Plan is not perceived as a long-term strategy, even though it sets goals and milestones that reach 2030 and 2050. This finding could indicate a confidence deficit in the reliable implementation and volatility of this strategy. This hypothesis underpinned by the fact that this Plan does not generate any expectation in contributing either to increase efficiency in administration or to decrease economic inequalities and especially, to tackling social exclusion. A similar picture highlights the policy regarding the National Just Transition Fund. The only difference is that this initiative is supposed to be more effective in practice. The fact that the long-term character of this initiative is not visible, could be attributed to the fact that this Fund was established very recently, after several setbacks that lasted for years (Green Tank, 2020). However, a finding of particular interest is that of the National Just Transition Plan (Master Plan), which is under consultation. This kind of outcome make it clear that in terms of a



place-based point of view, the proposed plan is not seen either as a long-term strategy with the prospect of a just transition or as a plan that will bring in substantial results. Moreover, its contribution to reducing economic inequalities and reducing social exclusion is not expected to be positive. This finding is of utmost importance if one considers that the great challenge of the transition to the post-lignite era is to deal with the severe economic and social consequences.

At the Regional / Local level, the European Forum of Just Transition Mayors, as expected, is not perceived as a long-term strategy, capable of enhancing efficiency and reduce inequalities and social exclusion. On the contrary, the Roadmap drawn up by the World Bank seems to raise positive expectations in all the questions addressed. Given that the roadmap prepared by the World Bank with the advent of the Master Plan has been set aside and marginalized to some extent, this finding is interesting, in terms of its compliance with the place-based approach. In an attempt to evaluate the proposed Master Plan at the level that concerns only Western Macedonia, the results reflect low relevance to the place-based approach. In other words, according to the prevailing perceptions, social exclusion is expected to worsen, economic inequalities to increase, and the effectiveness of the designed policies is expected to below.

#### 4.2 Test Place-Based Assumption #2

The hypothesis examined in this section is that the place-based model is relied among others, on multilevel governance and the transfer of responsibilities to the lower levels of government. At the same time, linkages among places are taken into account" (Barca, 2009).

Table 3. Place-Based Assessment #2

	Place-based decision-making model	Multilevel Governance	Transfer of responsibilities in lower levels	Vertical & Horizontal Linkages
<b>The European Context</b>				
European Green Deal	3,1	3,5	3,0	3,3
Just Transition Mechanism	3,3	3,4	3,2	3,4
Coal Regions in Transition Platform	3,1	3,1	3,4	3,2
<b>The National Context</b>				
National Energy and Climate Plan	1,6	2,0	1,9	2,0
National Just Transition Fund	2,0	2,1	2,0	2,2
National Plan for Just Development Transition	2,1	2,1	1,8	2,3
<b>The Regional/Local Context</b>				
European Forum of Just Transition Mayors	3,1	3,3	3,3	3,4
World Bank Roadmap	3,5	3,5	3,6	3,6
Master Plan in relation to Western Macedonia	2,1	1,8	2,1	2,1

Examining the theoretical aspects of the 2nd research hypothesis at the level of European

policies, it is clear that the Green Deal raises positive expectations for applying place-based decision-making and multilevel governance models. The Green Deal also includes decentralization as well as vertical and horizontal interconnections among different poles of power. In correspondence with the Green Deal are the results presented in the two other European policies under scrutiny. These findings suggest that the three European just transition policies constitute a cohesive policy mixture, which is highly relevant to the place-based approach in terms of decision-making, the model of governance, level of decentralization, and interconnections among the poles of power.

In contrast to the European spatial scale, policies of just transition at the national level are perceived differently. The National Energy and Climate Plan is seen as a top-down plan rather than a strategy that activates place-based decision-making logic. Also, this plan seems to reflect a centralized and a vertical setting in power relations, which favors core-periphery modes of interactions. Similar findings concern the National Just Transition Fund and the National Master Plan, reflecting a centralized governance model in Greece, in which the critical decisions and crucial administration structures are taken and established respectively, at the center.

In the Regional / Local context, the empirical evidence suggests a variation in of perceptions is detected regarding the examined policies. In particular, the European Forum of Just Transition Mayors, apart from its expected positive contribution as a network of pressure among different poles of power, does not seem able to exhibit place-based practices and multilevel governance in decision-making models. Likewise, the Master Plan concerning Western Macedonia is not expected to employ multilevel governance models, place-based decision-making, and further decentralization of responsibilities and resources, respectively. Instead, the Roadmap elaborated by the World Bank is perceived as a policy that integrates all the place-based approach aspects. This finding is worth studying further to identify the individual aspects of the place-based logic provided by this policy text.

#### *4.3 Test Place-Based Assumption #3*

This section focuses on testing the hypothesis that the place-based model is associated with institutional changes that lead to integrated goods and services. Besides, public interventions rely on local knowledge and are verifiable and submitted to scrutiny, while linkages among institutions and geography are considered (Barca Report, 2009).

Table 4. Place-Based Assessment #3

	Supply integrated goods	Supply integrated services	Outcomes tailored to local context	Interaction between institutions & geography
<b>The European Context</b>				
European Green Deal	3,8	3,6	3,6	3,6
Just Transition Mechanism	3,2	3,3	3,5	3,5
Coal Regions in Transition Platform	2,9	2,9	3,5	3,0
<b>The National Context</b>				
National Energy and Climate Plan	2,3	2,1	2,1	1,8
National Just Transition Fund	2,2	2,2	2,4	2,4
National Plan for Just Development Transition	2,4	2,1	3,0	2,8
<b>The Regional/Local Context</b>				
European Forum of Just Transition Mayors	2,6	3,0	2,7	2,6
World Bank Roadmap	2,9	3,2	3,3	3,3
Master Plan in relation to Western Macedonia	2,2	2,4	2,5	2,5

In an attempt to assess the 3<sup>rd</sup> research hypothesis, high level of compliance with the place-based approach is found in all European just transition policies. Seen in this respect, it is expected that these policies, accompanied inter alia by institutional changes, will favor the provision of integrated goods (e.i. energy) as well as integrated services (e.i. technical support). Interestingly, the results of specific European policies are perceived as well adapted to the local context, incorporating local knowledge. The consultation also seems to be the focal point in this scenery, paving the way for interaction between institutions (e.i. Commission, European Parliament, Governments, trade unions, environmental organizations) and geography (e.i. degree of lignite dependence, particularly socio-economic characteristics).

In sharp contrast to perceptions on European strategies, policies at the national level seem to deviate once again from place-based logic. The National Energy and Climate Plan, as well as the National Just Transition Fund, are not perceived as strategies addressing institutional change capable of providing integrated goods and services. Moreover, they do not seem to integrate local knowledge, nor generate outcomes adapted to the local context. It is worth noting that similar findings are recorded in how the National Plan for Just Development Transition is perceived. Put differently, the prevailing view seems to be that the Master Plan does not take into consideration local peculiarities as much as it should, nor does it incorporate the local knowledge background into the proposed blueprint. Additionally, the ongoing consultation is not perceived as a process where public interventions initiated by institutions at different levels, interact adequately with the geographical peculiarities of the place under consideration.

Moving towards the Regional/Local level, a greater relevance of the World Bank Roadmap to the place-based approach is detected, compared with the Mayors' Forum and the Master Plan concerning Western Macedonia. To be more precise, evidence suggests that the World Bank's outcome initiates interactions between institutions and local characteristics and organizes

quite efficient consultation processes, incorporating local knowledge. The interesting point in this assessment is that even though the Master Plan reflects the official government's post-lignite strategy by incorporating all other relevant initiatives, is not perceived as a strategy close to the place-based approach. This evidence makes sense since it reveals the prevailing perceptions of experts and academics with a profound knowledge of the area.

## **5. Conclusions**

In the preceding analysis, a critical review of the literature on the place-based approach, spatial justice, and just transition has attempted. At a macroscopic level, these three conceptual frameworks seem to be quite distinct from each other. We may safely argue, however, for a strong interrelationship among these perspectives, since they penetrate and interconnect the concepts of 'place' of 'justice' and 'transition'. The deepening of the debate on this triptych is challenging since it could open new perspectives for linking the literature on development policies and regional disparities with the literature on climate change and the green economy having spatial justice as a common denominator.

Based on mapping and analysis of the just transition policies, and commencing from the Paris Agreement in 2015, the concept of justice concerning space and the environment, seems to pervade all the emblematic EU development and environmental initiatives. From this strategic point of view, the European Green Deal, the Just Transition Mechanism, and the Coal Regions in Transition Platform put in a high priority the goal 'no one be left behind'. This requires policies that ensure a smooth and just transition towards a zero-carbon economy by considering the local socio-economic specificities. Seen in this perspective, one could identify an interesting and creative interaction between the place-based model and the just transition policymaking at the European level.

Based on insights gained from the empirical research, what attempted was to assess the extent to which policies pursued at the European, national, and regional level, are relevant to the main assumptions of the place-based paradigm. The empirical results referring to the just transition policies at a European level revealed a high degree of relevance in almost all the hypotheses of the place-based model. This evidence indicates that despite the decline in confidence in the idea of European integration in recent years, the EU continues to create positive expectations of territorial justice, taking into account local specificities.

Moving at the national and regional level, the empirical evidence offers straightforward answers to the question of the relevance of just transition policies with a place-based approach. It is worth noting that through the eyes of experts, neither the National Plan for Energy and Climate nor the National Plan for Just Development Transition seems to incorporate adequately the local framework in the policymaking. This means that neither a place-based model of decision-making nor indications of multi-level governance are visible. Besides, an uncontroversial intention to transfer responsibilities to the lower level or to activate vertical and horizontal interfaces between the poles of power is not detected. What is being identified is rather a top-down vertical model of governance that fails to effectively

reduce the social exclusion phenomena that are expected to be caused by a violent transition.

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