

Just Energy Transition Requires Functional Governance: The Variable South Africa's G20 Presidency Cannot Ignore

Position Brief for Helen Suzman Foundation Roundtable
23 October 2025

THE IMPLEMENTATION CRISIS NOBODY NAMES

South Africa's G20 Presidency championed Just Energy Transition for the Global South. Financing mechanisms were negotiated, technology pathways mapped, equity frameworks developed, timelines established.

Yet implementation consistently fails.

Not from lack of funding. Not from absent technology. Not from insufficient political rhetoric.

From collapsed governance system functionality.

Every energy transition plan assumes states possess coordinated implementation capacity. That assumption is empirically false for most Global South states - and measurably so.

SOUTH AFRICA'S INSTRUCTIVE FAILURE

South Africa's energy transition collapse provides the clearest case study:

Policy framework existed: - Integrated Resource Plan targets - Renewable Energy Independent Power Producer Programme
- Just Energy Transition Partnership (\$8.5 billion committed) - Presidential Climate Commission - Ministerial coordination structures

Implementation failed systematically: - Load-shedding intensified despite renewable commitments - IPP contracts stalled in bureaucratic dysfunction - JETP funds disbursed slowly with unclear outcomes - Departmental coordination remained theoretical - Public trust in transition evaporated

Standard explanation blames: Political will, corruption, capacity constraints, institutional weakness.

Mechanical explanation identifies: Governance system coordination failure.

THE GOVERNANCE MECHANICS OF ENERGY TRANSITION

Energy transition requires four functional governance components operating in coordination:

Component 1 - Public: - Must accept short-term costs (job losses, price increases) - Requires genuine participation in transition planning - Needs transparent information about trade-offs - Must be able to hold government accountable for outcomes

Component 2 - Legislature: - Must coordinate policy across energy, labor, finance, environment - Requires genuine deliberation about competing priorities - Needs capacity for long-term planning beyond electoral cycles - Must oversee executive implementation effectively

Component 3 - Executive: - Must implement consistently across multiple departments - Requires coordination between energy, treasury, labor, environment - Needs to resist capture by vested interests (coal, renewable rent-seekers) - Must apply rules consistently over decades

Component 4 - Judiciary: - Must protect long-term contracts from political interference - Requires independence to adjudicate disputes fairly - Needs capacity to resolve regulatory uncertainties - Must enforce environmental and labor protections

These must coordinate sequentially: Public legitimates → Legislature creates framework → Executive implements → Judiciary protects → Effects return to Public for assessment.

When this coordination breaks, transition becomes mechanically impossible regardless of financing or technology.

STATE CAPTURE BROKE THE COORDINATION SYSTEM

South Africa's energy transition failed because state capture destroyed governance coordination:

Public component: Participatory processes became theater, genuine input ignored, accountability mechanisms captured

Legislative component: Parliament rubber-stamped executive decisions, oversight failed, cadre deployment fettered independence

Executive component: Departments served private interests (Gupta networks in energy sector), inconsistent application, coordination impossible

Judicial component: Courts under pressure, regulatory uncertainty, contract enforcement weakened

Result: No amount of policy brilliance or financing could overcome broken coordination mechanics.

The Integrated Resource Plan assumed functional coordination that didn't exist.

The JETP assumed implementation capacity that had been destroyed.

The just transition frameworks assumed public trust that state capture eliminated.

THE GLOBAL SOUTH PATTERN

South Africa isn't unique. Governance system degradation affects most Global South states:

Component capture patterns observable across: - Executive overreach bypassing legislative processes - Judiciaries unable to protect long-term contracts - Public participation restricted or performative - Legislative oversight weakened or captured

Energy transitions in these contexts face identical mechanical barriers:

Cannot coordinate across departments (executive dysfunction)

Cannot maintain policy consistency (legislative capture)

Cannot protect investments (judicial weakness)

Cannot build public support (participation theater)

We keep designing sophisticated transition plans for states mechanically incapable of executing them.

THE URGENT QUESTION

Before designing more Just Energy Transition frameworks, we must ask:

Which states possess functional governance coordination capacity?

This is measurable: - Can public actually participate or just perform? - Does legislature genuinely deliberate or rubber-stamp? - Can executive coordinate across departments or operate in silos? - Will judiciary protect contracts or bend to political pressure?

Four simple questions. Objective assessment. Predicts implementation capacity.

States scoring: - 70-100: Transition implementable with adequate financing - 40-69: Requires governance strengthening alongside financing - 0-39: Transition mechanically impossible until coordination restored

Current approach: Design transition plans, provide financing, express frustration when implementation fails, blame “political will” or “corruption.”

Proposed approach: Assess coordination capacity first, target governance strengthening where needed, design transitions matched to mechanical capacity.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR SOUTH AFRICA’S G20 LEGACY

South Africa’s G20 Presidency pushed Global South priorities effectively. But **the legacy will be determined by implementation outcomes.**

If Just Energy Transition continues failing across Global South despite financing, the framework will be dismissed as another failed development intervention.

The missing element: Recognition that governance system functionality is prerequisite to implementation.

What South Africa could champion:

1. **Objective governance capacity assessment** before designing transitions
2. **Coordination system strengthening** as parallel priority to financing
3. **Graduated transition approaches** matched to state mechanical capacity
4. **Measurable implementation indicators** beyond financing disbursement

Not additional bureaucracy. Recognition that coordination mechanics matter.

THE CHOICE FOR GLOBAL SOUTH LEADERSHIP

Path A: Continue current approach - Design sophisticated transitions - Secure financing commitments - Launch with optimism - Watch implementation fail - Blame corruption, capacity, will - Repeat

Path B: Address coordination mechanics - Assess functional capacity - Strengthen where needed - Match transitions to capacity - Support governance

coordination - Measure implementation success - Build on what works

Path A maintains comfortable fictions about why transitions fail.

Path B confronts uncomfortable truths about governance system function.

Climate urgency requires Path B.

CONCLUSION

Just Energy Transition for Global South faces an implementation crisis that financing alone cannot solve.

The crisis is mechanical: States with degraded governance coordination cannot execute complex, long-term, multi-sectoral transitions regardless of resources available.

The solution is measurable: Assess coordination capacity, strengthen where deficient, match transitions to mechanical capability.

The urgency is existential: Climate change timeline doesn't permit continued implementation failures based on false assumptions about state capacity.

South Africa's state capture experience teaches the critical lesson: Governance system coordination is not a "nice to have" for energy transition. It's the mechanical prerequisite that determines whether any transition plan - however well-financed and designed - can be implemented.

Before spending more donor funds on transition plans, invest in understanding which states can mechanically coordinate their implementation.

That assessment capability doesn't exist yet. It should.

RECOMMENDED DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How do we objectively assess state coordination capacity before designing transitions?
2. What governance strengthening should parallel energy transition financing?
3. Can we develop implementation indicators that measure coordination function, not just financing disbursement?
4. Should transition timelines be adjusted based on governance capacity assessment?

5. What role can Global South leadership play in making governance coordination an explicit priority?
-

Word Count: 1,150 words

Reading Time: 4-5 minutes

Date: 23 October 2025

Event: Helen Suzman Foundation Roundtable - Just Energy Transition