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# MEL4JT – South Africa's emerging monitoring, evaluation and learning ecosystem around a socially just transition to a stabilising climate

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**Background:** The world is facing a polycrisis of climate and ecosystems breakdown, extreme inequality and social injustice. The South African government and social partners are focusing on the crisis through a national Just Transition Framework.

**Objectives:** This article explores emerging South African monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) systems to support a just transition. It documents initial experiences and learning, which can serve as orientation to other countries setting similar visions and MEL systems.

**Method:** The article describes and compares three of the main MEL systems for South Africa's Just Transition; those of the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and Environment (DFFE), the Presidential Climate Commission (PCC) and the Just Energy Transition Project Management Unit (JET PMU) in the Presidency.

**Results:** The DFFE system is comprehensive. The PCC has key systems at local and national levels, including the State of Climate Action Report, and reports on key problem areas, such as the initial site for decommissioning coal power plants, Komati. The JET PMU has a theory of change (TOC)-based MEL framework featuring quarterly reporting on indicators, plus reporting on core indicators by interventions, with evaluations about to start. These are examples of seeking to use M&E as a transformation catalyst.

**Conclusion:** The MEL systems are emergent, reflecting the challenges. Collectively, the evidence ecosystem features system-wide impact reporting, detailed quarterly reporting from the JET PMU against the TOC and the use of rapid evaluations. Results in the next few years will inform whether the ecosystem approach is yielding intended benefits in coherence, alignment and contributing to transformative change.

**Contribution:** Exploring how MEL of the just transition can be implemented and whether MEL itself can be a change instrument.

**Keywords:** monitoring; evaluation; learning; just transition; climate change.

## Introduction

Globally, countries are required to navigate transitions to a low-carbon, climate-resilient future. Most countries[1] have formally committed to reduce carbon emissions by nearly half by 2030 and to reach net-zero by 2050 to limit global warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels. Countries, including South Africa, have begun tracking and reporting progress on this. A few countries, such as South Africa, have managed to articulate what a more just, low-carbon, climate-resilient future should look like (Presidential Climate Commission [PCC] 2022)[2].

Noting the emissions-reduction targets that countries have committed to, it is essential that the process of emissions-reductions, particularly decarbonisation, occurs at a sustainable pace, through an inclusive process that centres households, communities and workers that are most

1.Of the 198 countries that are party to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, 195 adopted the Paris Agreement in November 2016.

2.Scotland's draft Energy Strategy and Just Transition Plan is another example.

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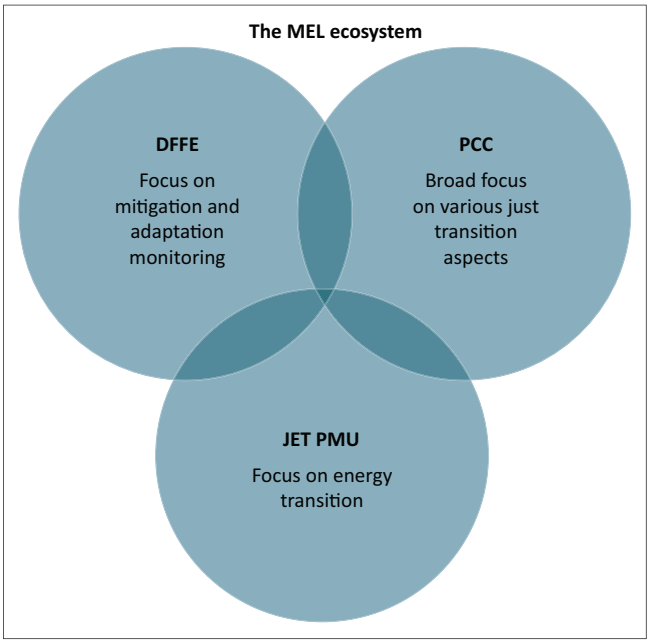
impacted by this transition. While a just transition encompasses broader aspects of a shift, such as social protection, training, skilling and reskilling and engaging sectors beyond energy, a just *energy* transition is more focused (but not exclusively) on the reduction of fossil fuels emissions and the implications thereof (PCC 2022).

South Africa's Just Transition Framework (PCC, 2022) was developed to build consensus on what a just transition is and on what principles it should be based. It states, among other goals, that a just transition aims to achieve a quality of life for all people in the context of decarbonisation. There is a particularly strong emphasis on justice, given the country's history of dispossession and exclusion, and persistent extreme inequality (Valodia 2023). South Africa is also among a relatively small set of countries that have secured substantial international investment into the energy aspect of its just transition – the Just Energy Transition Investment Plan (JET-IP), 2023–2027, with a Implementation Plan and an international partner group supporting the transition.

For South Africa in particular, a transition that is not just will exacerbate existing development issues, such as poverty, inequality and unemployment. Evidence is needed to understand progress against goals and commitments, which must be measured at a project and national level. A monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) system is not just required to track progress on the just transition but also wider developmental issues, impacts of change on specific groups of people, such as women and children, and to understand where course corrections are required (Singh et al. 2025). Chaplowe and Hejnowicz (2021) suggest that a truly effective MEL system can be transformative when it transcends accountability and tracking and drives continuous learning and course correction.

For more than a decade, South Africa has been developing an extensive climate change response planning and reporting system, led by the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and Environment (DFFE) (formerly the Department of Environmental Affairs). More recently, MEL systems were also launched for the broader just transition, led by the PCC, and the Implementation Plan, led by a Just Energy Transition Programme Management Unit (JET PMU) in the Presidency.[3] While these systems are distinct, with different custodians and conceptual approaches, their areas of focus intersect and overlap.

Since 2022, these key entities have liaised and collaborated to apply the 'complementary and bounded' principle for just transition MEL, which seeks to utilise existing MEL instruments and avoid duplication (PCC forthcoming). Together, they have also sought to build a MEL 'ecosystem' rather than a single hierarchical system – as depicted in Figure 1 – noting that information on additional aspects of the just transition is being collected by other departments and organisations. South Africa's journey is unique, and nascent. However, lessons from South Africa can serve as an early case study, as many other countries set similar visions and objectives in the coming years and undertake the generation of relevant evidence.




DFFE, Department of Forestry, Fisheries and Environment; PCC, Presidential Climate Commission; JET PMU, Just Energy Transition Project Management unit; MEL, monitoring, evaluation and learning.

**FIGURE 1:** A snapshot of the just transition monitoring, evaluation and learning ecosystem in South Africa.

This article aims to provide early insights for users of South Africa's MEL instruments and other countries on what has been learned from MEL of a just transition (DFFE, PCC and JET PMU). It briefly contextualises the three systems with an overview of the climate and just transition legislative and policy environment in South Africa. It describes the three respective MEL approaches and systems, including their underlying conceptual framework and practical implementation, and reports on the application of the ecosystem approach to date. It also considers the use of MEL systems in ensuring an effective and possibly a transformative just transition. The article ends with areas for further interrogation of this *potential* and how one might assess their *effectiveness* in doing so.

## Climate resilience and a just transition: South Africa's legal and policy context[4]

The South African Constitution includes the right to a healthy environment for current and future generations (South African Government 1996). Successive national policies articulate the goal of transitioning to a low-carbon economy while balancing socio-economic needs. The National Climate Change Response Policy (white paper) (Department of Environmental Affairs, 2011) outlined a

3.There are other stakeholders in the just transition space. An important government body was the Department of Mineral and Petroleum Resources, which at the time of writing is handing over its previous energy role to the Department of Electricity and Energy. They are developing their indicators and their M&E system, and collaboration is underway with them, but at the stage of writing the article, this was incipient. There are also other stakeholders, including regulators, and think tanks.

4.For a more detailed review of South Africa's climate change legal and policy framework see https://cer.org.za/virtual-library or https://www.nbi.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/DEA-NBI-Infographics-2-20171102-WEB.pdf.

vision for a climate-resilient, low-carbon economy, focusing on adaptation and mitigation. This policy laid the foundation for the adaptation and mitigation policy instruments (discussed later). The National Development Plan of 2012 also placed considerable emphasis on climate issues (National Planning Commission 2012).

Figure 2 illustrates the steps that South Africa has taken – both legislative and applied – to respond to climate change and articulate its commitment to a just transition in South Africa. Strong commitment through legislation, programmes and implementation is important to define the scope, aim and objectives of a MEL system and can allow for an additional assessment of accountability.

## Understanding how monitoring, evaluation and learning can contribute to systems change

A Just Transition requires *systemic change*, that is, fundamental shifts in system structures and functions (Transformational Change Learning Partnership [TCLP] 2021). Transformational Change Learning Partnership (2021) defines transformative change as a fundamental change in systems relevant to climate action that has large-scale positive impacts, accelerating progress towards climate-neutral, inclusive, resilient and sustainable development pathways. This definition is supported by five key dimensions: relevance, systemic change, speed, scale and adaptive sustainability. This poses a challenge to the monitoring and evaluation profession, both because

| Climate | | Just transition |
|---|---|---|
| | 1992 | The just transition imperative emerges in environmental justice discussions during the earthlife Africa conference. |
| South Africa shows unequivocal commitment to the environment in the drafting of its Constitution. | 1996 | |
| South Africa ratifies the UNFCCC | 1997 | |
| South Africa ratifies the Kyoto Protocol. | 2002 | |
| **COP15:** South Africa pledges 34% under BAU emissions by 2020 and 42% by 2025 under the copenhagen accord | 2009 | Congress of South African trade unions (COSATU) highlights the importance of the just transition. |
| The **National climate change response white paper** (NCCRP) is published, which outlines South Africa's long-term climate strategy, including provisions for carbon pricing | 2011 | The NCCRP refers to just transition, focusing on green jobs and skills. |
| | 2013 | South Africa adapts a **National development plan** (NDP) with a focus on environmental sustainability and charting an equitable transition to a low-carbon economy. |
| South Africa ratifies the Paris agreement and submits its first intended **Nationally determined contribution** (NDC), which specified peak emissions between 2020 and 2025. | 2016 | South Africa is the first (and anly) country to explicitly note the just transition imperative in its first NDC. |
| South Africa's **Climate Change bill** (CCB), which outlines the State's emission targets and adaptation plans, is published for public comment. | 2018 | Presidential Jobs summit establishes the presidential climate change coordinating commission to oversee and coordinate the just transition for South Africa. |
| South Africa submits its long-term low-GHG emission development strategy (LT-LEDS) to the UNFCCC, and adopts the **integrated resource plan,** which outlines the expansion of electricity supply. The DFFE also passes the **National climate change adaptation strategy** (NCCAS). | 2019 | |
| President cyril ramaphosa constitutes the **Presidential climate commission** (PCC), which would independently advise on the country's climate change response and pathways to a low-carbon, climate-resilient economy, and society. | 2020 | The PCC comprises commissioners from all major social partners to forge consensus and partnership on the just transition, including with government ministers. |
| South Africa updates its **NDC** to target a range of 398–510 MICO2e by 2025 and 350–420 MICO2e by 2030. | 2021 | South Africa is the first country to agree to a US$8.5 billion **Just energy transition partnership** (JETP) with the EU, UK and USA. |
| South Africa commits to **net-zero carbon emissions** by 2050 in its long-Term strategy, also reflected in the just transition framework. | 2022 | The PCC sets out a unifying objective for a just transition in the country's first national **just transition framework**. Just transition is also introduced in the CCB. In November, the Presidential climate finance task team (PCFTT) releases its **Just energy transition investment Plan** (JET IP). |
| South Africa's national assembly approves the CCB, which awaits further approval from the national council of provinces and the president. | 2023 | South Africa tables a detailed **just energy transition implementation plan,** including with a specific focus on skills development and economic diversification for the coal-dominated Mpumalanga province. |

*Source*: PCC, 2024, *The state of climate action in South Africa*, Presidential Climate Commission, viewed 13 January 2026, from https://pccommissionflo.imgix.net/uploads/images/24_REP_State-of-Climate-Action-in-South-Africa_v4.pdf

UNFCC, United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change; BAU, business as usual; GHG, greenhouse gas.

**FIGURE 2:** South Africa's climate and just transition legislative framework and climate action.

conventional forms of monitoring and evaluation have been too linear and have not dealt well with complex systems, and in some cases, monitoring and evaluation is merely supporting *incremental* improvement of development efforts while leaving unaddressed the underlying power dynamics and paradigms that are exacerbating the socio-economic and environmental challenges. Attention has turned to MEL from systemic change (TCLP 2021) and how MEL itself should be approached so that it drives this type of change (Goldman et al. 2026).

Given that they are explicitly in service of the South African Just Transition, it is particularly important to consider whether the three MEL systems presented in this article are positioned to contribute to transformative change. Goldman et al. (2026, forthcoming) argue that efforts to drive systemic change must focus on implicit power dynamics and their underlying mental models, values and beliefs – and not just on explicit features of policies, practices and resource flows – as shown in Figure 3. Using this framework, the article notes in what way each of the three MEL systems can plausibly address these deeper levels.

## The theoretical framework for monitoring, evaluation and learning systems

As described above, South Africa has three national entities with established systems for just transition-related MEL: the DFFE, the PCC and the JET PMU in the Presidency. The underlying approaches and emphases differ, but there are clear overlaps. The following paragraphs briefly depict their conceptual approaches to MEL.

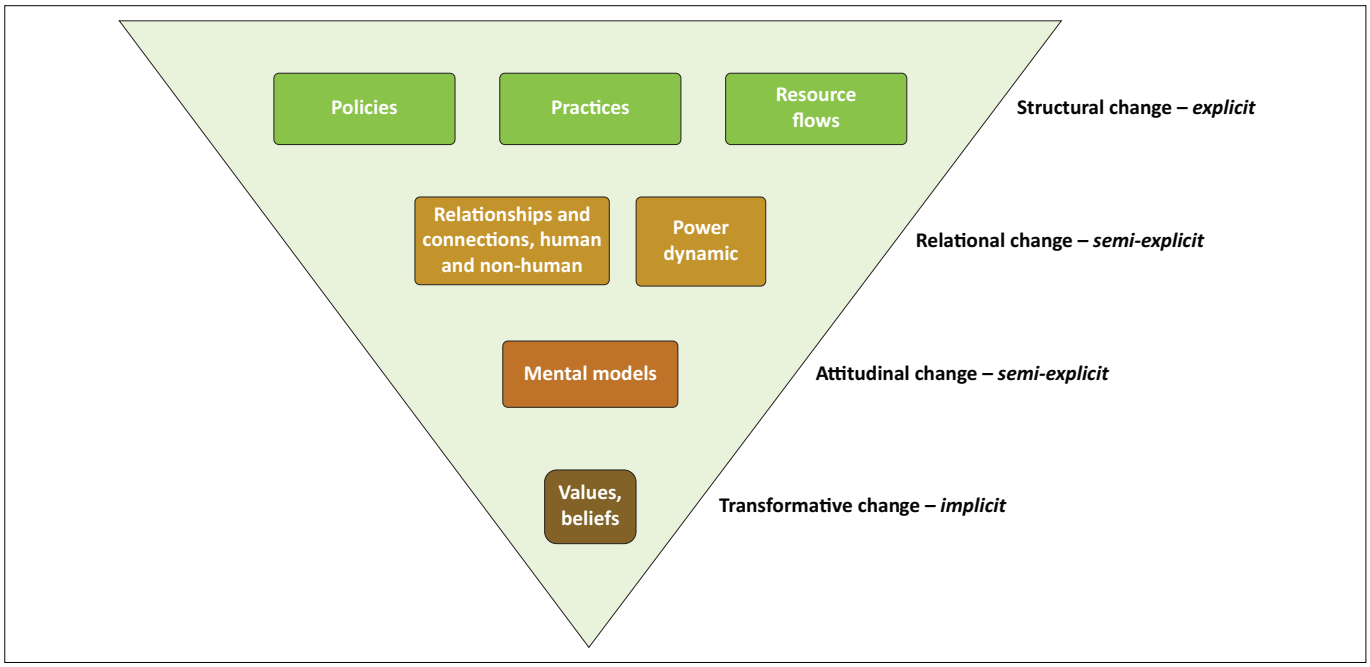
### The national climate change monitoring and evaluation system

As mandated by the Climate Change Response Policy (2011), the DFFE developed a framework for a National Climate Change Response Monitoring and Evaluation System (SACCMES) (Department of Environmental Affairs 2015, 2016). This framework conceptualises monitoring, reporting and verification as separate from evaluation and recognises that evaluation is needed to support the analysis of the impact of mitigation and adaptation. South Africa, therefore, explicitly endorses the need for monitoring, reporting, verification *and evaluation*, unlike some other countries. Furthermore, the SACCMES is conceived of as a distributed set of distinct information systems, capable of exchanging data and processes within an ecosystem of participant and contributing systems. These information systems could be in provinces or other national departments or provided by third parties – locally or internationally.

Building on this initial work, DFFE is the custodian of what is now called the South African National Climate Change Information System (NCCIS). This is described in a later section.

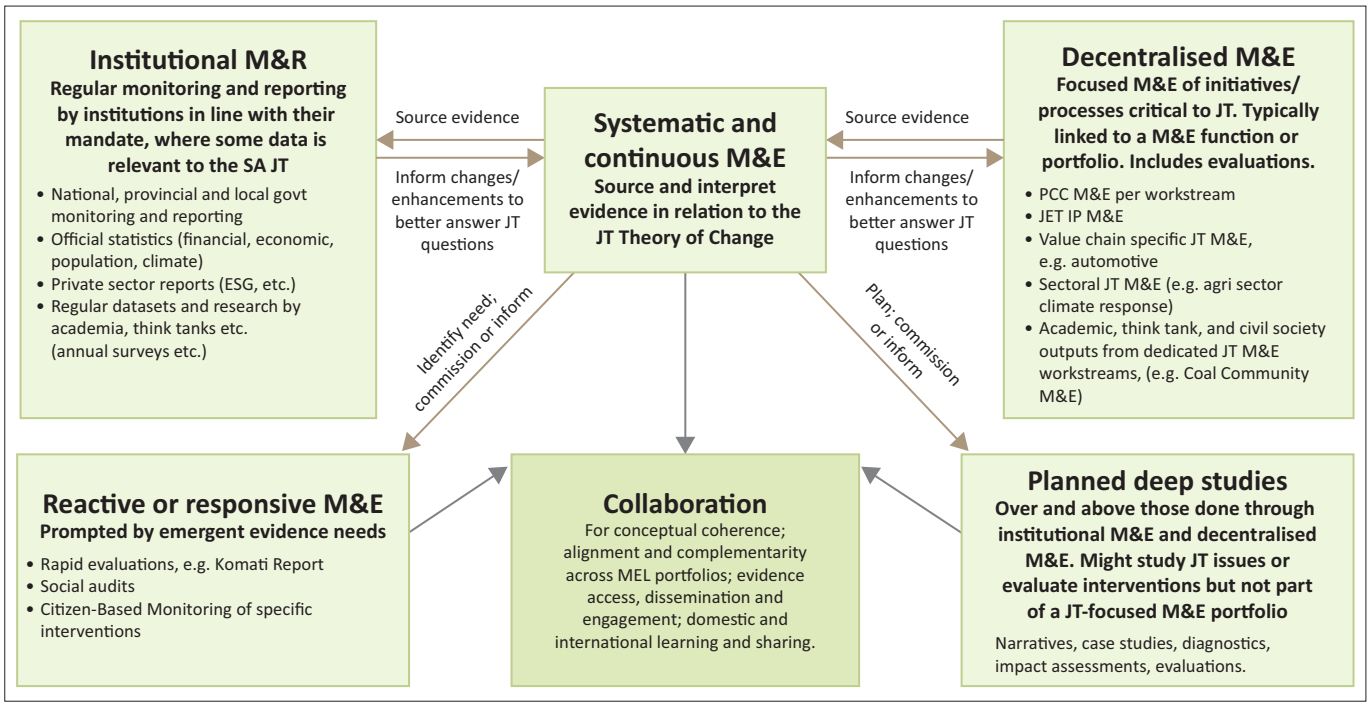
### The conceptual approach underlying the Presidential Climate Commission's Just Transition

The M&E unit at the PCC aims to guide the tracking efforts of the PCC in line with the mandate set out in key legislation, particularly the *Climate Change Act (2024)* and the objectives laid out by the President when forming the PCC. This includes tracking just transition actions and related mitigation, adaptation, employment and economic




*Source*: Adapted from Goldman et al. 2026; Kania, J., Kramer, M., Senge, P., 2018, *The water of systems change*, FSG, viewed 13 January 2026, from https://www.fsg.org/resource/water_of_systems_change/

**FIGURE 3:** Conditions of system change.




*Source*: Adapted from the Just Transition MEL framework (PCC, forthcoming)

M&E, monitoring and evaluation; PCC, Presidential Climate Commission; JET, Just Energy Transition; MEL, monitoring, evaluation and learning; ; M&R, monitoring and reporting; JT, Just Transition.

**FIGURE 4:** Presidential Climate Commission's understanding of the just transition monitoring, evaluation and learning ecosystem.

diversification, as well as policies and linkages to broader sustainable development efforts. The PCC's M&E unit is intended to complement, rather than duplicate, existing tracking efforts in South Africa.

Figure 4 shows the PCC's concept of a M&E ecosystem for the just transition.

The system in its entirety is underpinned by a theory of change (TOC). The TOC provides a set of assumptions, expected outcomes from a just transition and conditions that are required to achieve these outcomes. The underlying assumption is that human-induced climate change and extractive industries are mutually reinforcing of poverty and inequality, which, in South Africa, occur along a fault line of race and gender.

The expected *impact* is a just transition to a low-carbon, climate-resilient green economy by mid-century. To achieve this will require improved institutional and governance systems in the country *(outcome 1);* decarbonisation that occurs at a pace and scale that does not compromise socio-economic development *(outcome 2);* and putting procedural, distributive and restorative justice at the centre of decision-making *(outcome 3).* These outcomes must be achieved in tandem rather than as parallel and are achieved by deliberate core work (e.g. implementation of the JET Investment Plan); related areas of work (e.g. building climate resilience in agriculture); and areas of work that influence the just transition, even if not explicitly connected to it (e.g. various public sector reforms).[5] The intention is to keep updating these elements as conditions change and strategies evolve, while keeping the outcomes and impacts constant.

## The conceptual approach adopted by the Just Energy Transition Project Management Unit in the presidency

The JET PMU's approach to MEL is based on an overall TOC, which embeds decarbonisation and elements of jobs, livelihoods and skills support for a just energy transition. Procedural justice is specifically included. Based on the collaboration with the PCC, it has also adopted the approach in Figure 4.

In its approach to MEL, the JET PMU seeks to apply the following principles:

- Complement and build on existing or related tracking efforts in government.
- Be transparent by, for instance, making the register of interventions and quarterly reporting public (Presidency 2023).
- Be based on a TOC of how the just energy transition should be delivered.
- Be developed in collaboration with key stakeholders, so that it is widely owned and the higher levels of the framework are shared across the state.
- Be learning-focused; for example, quarterly reporting can identify areas where intervention is needed, whether by the JET PMU or other agencies.[6]
- As per the South African National Evaluation System, evaluations are seen as applicable throughout the policy cycle, including diagnostic, design, implementation, impact and economic evaluations (DPME 2011).

5.See narrative in the JTF MEL framework (PCC forthcoming) for more detail on the contextual factors, enabling conditions, outputs, and milestones.

6.In addition, an annual learning event is planned.

The evaluation work is conceived as taking two forms: rapid problem-solving evaluations (see DPME 2020) and major evaluations undertaken to assess progress in implementing the overall or portfolio-level theories of change. It is designed to be system-focused rather than on specific programmes. The use of system-focused evaluation has been advocated as critical in achieving the type of systemic changes needed to address a just transition (Cabaj 2019).

## Emerging monitoring, evaluation and learning systems and their evolution

As the previous sections have explained, the DFFE, PCC and JET PMU each have a distinct MEL system, which corresponds to their conceptual approach and mandate – serving different audiences to meet different information needs. Table 1 presents a summary of the three MEL systems, which are then elaborated upon in brief.

The DFFE system is the oldest, most established and most multifaceted. The routine evidence generation, collation, analysis and reporting or communication mechanisms listed in the table have gone through several iterations, although the introduction of the *Climate Change Act (Act 22 of 2024)* has implications for new mechanisms and processes. By contrast, the PCC and JET-IP PMU's systems are in their infancy, with key MEL processes and products being piloted or in early stages of implementation.

### Key Department of Forestry, Fisheries and Environment policy instruments for climate change monitoring, evaluation and learning

With the 2011 National Climate Change Response Policy as a foundation, South Africa has developed mitigation and adaptation policy instruments.

In terms of *mitigation*, the development of greenhouse gas inventories and the analysis of mitigation potential and

**TABLE 1:** Summary of the three monitoring, evaluation and learning systems in South Africa linked to the just transition.

| Characteristic | DFFE (NCCIS) | PCC | JET |
|---|---|---|---|
| Purpose | To account for and provide insight into the country's progress in responding to climate change and achieving national and international goals, commitments and targets, in relation to both mitigation and adaptation. | To guide implementation of the PCC's Just Transition Framework by providing theory and principles to be considered by stakeholders when monitoring and evaluating just transition projects, and guiding revisions to implementation. Covers both mitigation and adaptation and additional sustainable development outcomes. | To facilitate tracking of the JET and learning for continuous improvement for both domestic and international stakeholders. Covers mitigation only. |
| Role in planning for the JT | The *Climate Change Act* defines institutional arrangements and coordination mechanisms for NCCIS and for plans to be developed at subnational levels. | Ongoing review of just transition targets in the Medium-Term Development Plan, Strategic Plans and Annual Performance Plans of government departments. | JET Implementation Plan includes portfolios planned to use a TOC and indicators. Reviewed Medium-Term Development Plan and Annual Performance Plans to assess coverage of JET issues and indicators. |
| TOC | Implicit not explicit. | Implicit in the outcomes and assumptions. | Overall and portfolio. |
| Research | Has a unit dedicated to research on mitigation, including a dedicated modelling tool. Research is also used to inform policy and decision-making. | Much of the work at the PCC is research aimed at assessing pathways for mitigation, adaptation and economic diversification. | Specific pieces of diagnostic work undertaken (e.g. modelling to inform the Investment Plan). |
| Monitoring | Focus on the drivers of climate change, national objectives, targets and strategies in respect of climate change mitigation and adaptation. It covers:<br>• National greenhouse gas emissions trajectory (against the NDC).<br>• Sectoral contributions to a lower-carbon economy (sectoral emission targets).<br>• Progress in the implementation of sectoral emission targets, carbon budgets and climate actions.<br>• Provincial and local government contributions to a lower-carbon economy.<br>• Individual mitigation projects and programmes (response measures) – their cost, outcome and impact on jobs, climate change and other sustainable development. | The MEL framework speaks to a MEL system that includes, but is not limited to, tracking indicators across the three outcomes in the TOC.<br>The State of Climate Action Report does outcome and impact monitoring.<br>The PCC also partners with others to conduct and/or disseminate monitoring outputs (e.g. for a survey monitors of perceptions of climate change and a just transition). | Indicators for short- and medium-term outcomes and impacts.<br>Milestones indicate direction rather than hard targets.<br>Short- and medium-term objectives tracked quarterly.<br>Core impact indicators are tracked every 6 months. |
| Evaluation | The framework affirms the value of evaluations and assigns responsibility for national climate change-related evaluations to the Presidency. While climate change is a theme in many national evaluations, it has not been linked officially to the NCCIS to date.<br>Various outputs have an evaluative element (e.g. including ex-post assessment reports). | Conducts evaluations, stakeholder engagements (including community meetings) and interviews to evaluate progress on specific just transition projects or in specific communities.<br>Also undertakes periodic assessments and reactive studies that have an evaluative element (e.g. assessments of the readiness of municipalities to deal with climate-related disasters and the decommissioning process at the Komati Power Station). | Rapid and major evaluations are planned, with the former focused on problem-solving, and the latter on TOC and system level. |
| Learning | Learning is a continuous process within NCCIS.<br>Participates in PCC M&E Working Group.<br>Working groups with provinces and municipalities. | The PCC holds quarterly working group meetings to track progress on projects where findings and recommendations are presented for comment, modification and adoption.<br>In addition, the PCC is working to develop a community of practice on M&E for a just transition. | Participates in PCC M&E Working Group.<br>Quarterly report identifies areas where interventions are needed.<br>Initial learning event is planned for 2025. |

DFFE, Department of Forestry, fisheries and Environment; NCCIS, National Climate Change Information System; PCC, Presidential Climate Commission; JET, just energy transition; TOC, theory of change; MEL, monitoring, evaluation and learning; NDC, nationally determined contribution; M&E, monitoring and evaluation.

carbon budgets have enabled emissions tracking in the country. Key policy instruments such as sectoral emission targets guide sector-specific decarbonisation efforts, assigning emission reduction targets to sectors and requiring the development of policies and measures to meet the targets. Carbon budgets cap emissions for companies over defined periods, ensuring alignment with national reduction trajectories. These interventions promote accountability in decarbonising high-emitting industries. In 2021, Cabinet approved South Africa's updated 2030 climate change mitigation target range of 398–510 MtCO2e for 2025 and 350–420 MtCO2e for 2030 contained in its Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) submitted to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (DFFE 2021a).

In terms of *adaptation*, the National Climate Change Adaptation Strategy (NCCAS) (DFFE 2019) provides a 10-year roadmap for climate resilience, aligning with sectoral and provincial plans. It ensures coordinated adaptation efforts across government levels, integrating climate risks into development planning.

In 2024, the *Climate Change Act* was promulgated (commenced in early 2025) (Government Gazette 2024), which provides an integrated response to climate change through adaptation and mitigation policies and programmes, such as those mentioned above. The Act requires provincial and municipal governments to establish Climate Change Needs and Response Assessments to serve as blueprints for climate action. In terms of mitigation, the Act establishes a national emissions trajectory, setting binding greenhouse gas reduction targets in line with international commitments. It also formalises the PCC to oversee the just transition process for the country.

In addition to the above-mentioned adaptation and mitigation policy instruments, South Africa prioritises employment tracking, particularly job creation.

## National Climate Change Information System

As mentioned earlier, DFFE is the custodian of the NCCIS, which integrates both mitigation and adaptation data. The NCCIS is a web-based platform[7] for the tracking, analysis and enhancement of South Africa's progress in its transition to a low-carbon economy and climate-resilient society, as enshrined in the National Climate Change Response Policy (Departmental of Environmental Affairs, 2011). The NCCIS comprises building blocks that collate data from a range of sources and integrate a wide variety of tools which are either hot-linked or soft-linked into a modular system. This helps to avoid duplication of effort and ensure a common frame of reference. The NCCIS monitors key elements as listed in Table 1.

In developing the next NDC in 2025, the DFFE approach is to change mindsets – in other words, the approach is guided by the shared aspirational vision of achieving a 'Good Life' for all South Africans by 2050, rather than the need to reduce emissions. With a wide vision of how the economy needs to transform to achieve this just, net-zero society, development pathways are being defined for a variety of sectors (e.g. food systems, human settlements, mobility and nutrition). These will then inform objectives and associated indicators. For example, for poor South Africans in the lowest income quintile, more than two-thirds spend over 20% of their monthly household income per capita on public transport (StatsSA 2013). A proposed goal is to improve mobility to reduce commuting times to 15 min. The emissions of this can then be modelled. In this way, NDC development is taking on broader aspects of development and the need for a social, economic and ecological transition.

The process of defining the net-zero vision and the development pathways is inclusive, with participants from a range of stakeholder groups. It seeks to build relationships and address power differentials. It includes civil society representatives, government and non-governmental organisations, business representatives and leading academics.

## The Presidential Climate Commission's monitoring, evaluation and learning system

The PCC, established in 2020, advises South Africa, particularly the government, on the most appropriate climate response and facilitates a just transition to a low-carbon economy. Its three core functions include: providing evidence for decision-making, fostering inclusive policy development and advising on implementation (finance, technology, capacity).

The PCC undertook research and wide-scale engagement and consensus-building with multiple stakeholders to produce the JTF, published in 2022 (PCC 2022). The JTF sets out a vision for the just transition, principles to guide the transition and policies and governance arrangements to give effect to the transition. The JTF contextualised the just transition and the need for it, noting the impacts that climate change will have on the whole country and on specific sectors and communities. It attempts to provide an all-encompassing definition of a just transition that is applicable to the country nationally and locally. Importantly, it shows strong commitment to the principles of procedural, restorative and distributive justice (see Box 1). It is a strong articulation of *values* that should underpin system(s) in South Africa. The JTF also positions the just transition as an opportunity to reimagine the economy and society and to address South Africa's socio-economic and governance challenges for improved well-being for all.

The PCC's MEL system includes two main activities: broad research projects (e.g. a survey of perceptions of climate change) that include indicators to monitor just transition projects and smaller evaluations that aim to generate learning and enable course correction. The M&E unit commonly produces the following three types of outputs:

7.Visit https://nccis.environment.gov.za/home.

**BOX 1:** How justice is interpreted in the Just Transition Framework.

| |
|---|
| Procedural justice refers to following due process in the application or implementation of a just transition, particularly related to meaningful engagement with vulnerable and impacted communities. |
| Restorative justice speaks to rectifying or ameliorating the situations of harmed or disenfranchised communities. It aims to ensure that there is redress for past, current and future injustices that emanate from a just transition and related processes, noting South Africa's high levels of poverty, unemployment and inequality. |
| Distributive justice aims to ensure that all risks and opportunities resulting from a just transition will be fairly distributed, with particular cognisance of gender, race and class inequalities. It is essential that affected communities and workers do not carry the full burden of a transition and that the costs are borne mostly by those who are historically responsible for the problem. |

*Source*: PCC, 2022, *A framework for a just transition in South Africa*, Presidential Climate Commission, viewed 13 January 2026, from https://pccommissionflo.imgix.net/uploads/images/22_PAPER_Framework-for-a-Just-Transition_revised_242.pdf

**BOX 2:** Komati evaluation report.

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|---|
| Eskom's Komati Power Station (KPS), in Mpumalanga, South Africa, reached the end of its economic life, and it was decommissioned over a period between 2018 and 2022. The World Bank agreed to fund decommissioning, repowering and repurposing activities in and around the KPS. In 2023, the PCC was requested by the President to conduct an evaluation of the decommissioning process to evaluate the extent to which the process and early outcomes at Komati met the principles of procedural, distributive and restorative justice as prescribed by the country's JTF. In November 2023, the PCC published its findings of the 6-month evaluation in a report entitled 'Early Lessons and Recommendations from Komati's Decommissioning and Repurposing Project' (PCC 2023). |
| The report detailed findings and recommendations, including that an intergovernmental, multi-stakeholder approach is necessary for successful transitional projects. Following the adoption of the report, the PCC initiated a work programme to accelerate progress at Komati, which included the convening of monthly coordination meetings chaired by the PCC with participation from key stakeholders. To further accelerate progress, the PCC created seven workstreams, including one on M&E. The M&E workstream has been monitoring progress and findings from the various workstreams against the recommendations in the original report to support learning and course correction where necessary. |

*Source*: PCC, Presidential Climate Commission; JT, Just Transition; M&C, monitoring & evaluation

- *Apex reports* are the results of in-depth research, typically based on extensive evidence and stakeholder engagement. They draw robust conclusions and make recommendations that are underpinned by research. Apex reports are approved by all Commissioners at Commission meetings and are issued as formal recommendations based on consensus.
- *Technical reports* (also reports of rapid assessments) contain preliminary research or quick analyses, findings and recommendations. They are circulated to stimulate timely discussion and critical feedback and to influence ongoing debate on emerging issues. Working papers are typically written by external consultants, at the request of the PCC, as input to thematic work areas. These do not require full Commission approval and can be released by the working group on a no-objection basis.
- *Issue briefs* are short and aimed at informing policymakers, drawing out the implications of existing evidence. They are issued in a timely manner, responsive to current contexts. Issue briefs do not require full Commission approval and can be released from working groups on a no-objection basis.

One of the PCC's key Apex reports is a biannual State of Climate Action Report (PCC 2024), which reports on outcome and impact monitoring. In this report, progress was assessed against several priority indicators of change: mitigation, adaptation, finance and the just transition, reviewing available data up until the end of 2023. The climate policy environment was also examined. Experts were interviewed to gather primary data and ground findings, and preliminary findings of a nationally representative survey of perceptions, attitudes and support for climate action and the just transition were presented. The report was peer reviewed by 40 experts from a range of stakeholder groups, and follow-up interviews on the draft report were conducted with experts in various fields.

This and other Apex reports feed into smaller or more local evaluations that aim to further unpack the findings of the assessments, including rapid evaluation exercises. Box 2 provides an example of an evaluation of progress at Komati, the first coal-fired power plant to be decommissioned. Other mechanisms for data to feed into the MEL system include community engagements, learning networks or communities of practice, storytelling (from interviews with community members) and meetings with stakeholder groups (i.e. labour, business).

Linked to the State of Climate Action report, the PCC has contracted a professional to visit communities that are impacted by mining or climate change or that will be affected by the just transition. Community members are being interviewed to record their views on the conditions under which they live related to the climate theme. Initial drafts of stories show that larger assessments miss the nuanced impacts of climate change, mining or a just transition that the communities experience and with which they need assistance.

As these examples demonstrate, core to the PCC's MEL work is to compare the vision of the JTF, with what is happening in practice. With the three forms of justice as core values of the envisioned future, studies such as the Komati report ask to what extent they are finding expression in practice. Identifying where practices and resource flows are not aligned to this vision prompts reflection on contradictions at the deeper levels of power dynamics, relationships, mental models and values and beliefs. Similarly, the State of Climate Action report highlighted contradictory policies which reflect contesting power dynamics and values.

Another important contribution of the PCC's MEL portfolio to systems change is its *ways of working* – in particular the following three:

- The PCC generates and showcases multiple forms of evidence that reinforce key perspectives. This includes *both* rigorous statistical evidence such as climate change trends and the nationally representative survey of South Africans' perspectives *as well as* case studies and locally focused portraits which are less abstract and more vivid and relatable ('putting a human face to the just transition').
- Prolific public communication, visibility and media engagement, to promote awareness and understanding of the evidence, are part of the PCC's strategy, supported by its MEL function; and
- As shown in Figure 5, the PCC, as convenor of social partners nationally and locally, facilitates diverse stakeholders' joint,

productive engagement with evidence. Using the strategies above, the PCC brings diverse stakeholders to the point of recognising that the current system is not taking the country in the direction of the shared vision. Consensus on the desired future (the JTF and the justices) and acceptance of evidence that progress is unsatisfactory can then prompt productive deliberation on what to do about it.

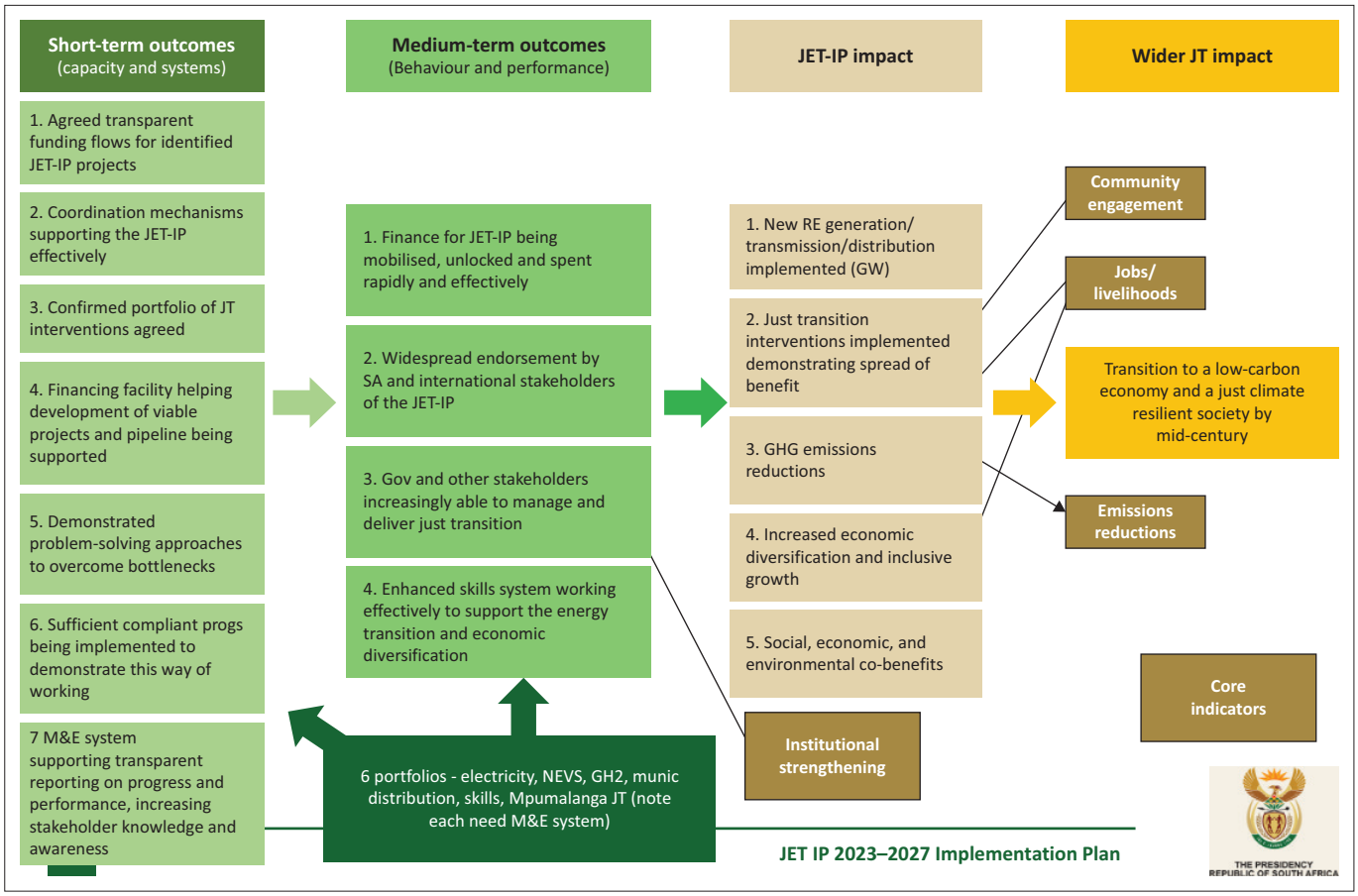
The expected outcome of this work is to improve policy development and decision-making for the just transition by allowing the country to understand which policies are working, which are not and why and to produce recommendations for course corrections where needed.

## Just Energy Transition Project Management Unit

In the Glasgow Conference of the Parties (COP) in 2021, development partners announced an $8.5 billion commitment to a South African Just Energy Transition Programme. An Investment Plan (Presidency 2022) was launched at COP 2022, and a JET Implementation Plan (Presidency 2023) was launched in November 2023. The JET focuses on mitigation, particularly on renewable energy generation, transmission, distribution and storage; green hydrogen (GH2); and new electric vehicles, both private and public. There are support portfolios: on skills to support these sectors; a focused portfolio on Mpumalanga province, the province most affected; and on supporting municipalities to handle electricity distribution. An MEL plan is included in the JET Implementation Plan.

The JET PMU system is based on theories of change established at an overall PMU and portfolio level. These were used to achieve some consistency in the portfolio plans that were prepared. The overall PMU TOC is based on outputs, short- and medium-term outcomes, JET PMU impacts and wider impacts (Presidency 2023) (see Figure 5).

The core TOC is around coordination systems established for multi-stakeholder partnerships for each portfolio, building a pipeline of programmes and projects, matching funding to these and problem-solving. This leads to finance for the JET Implementation Plan being mobilised, deployed and spent rapidly and effectively; partnerships across national and international stakeholders; and government and non-government stakeholders increasingly able to manage and deliver Just Transition interventions in an integrated manner. An enhanced skills system is needed to ensure that skills are available to support the transition. The anticipated impacts are renewable energy dominating the energy mix, with significant cuts in greenhouse gas emissions. The economy will need to take up opportunities for a just transition and wider economic diversification, with the benefits spreading widely, particularly




*Source*: Based on Presidency, 2023, *Just energy transition implementation plan*, JET PMU, Presidency, viewed 13 January 2026, from https://justenergytransition.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/JET-Implementation-Plan-2023-2027-1.pdf

JET-IP, Just Energy Transition Implementation Plan; NEVS, New electric vehicles; RE, Renewable Energy; GHG, greenhouse gas; GH2, green hydrogen; M&E, monitoring and evaluation.

**FIGURE 5:** The Just Energy Transition Implementation Plan theory of change (simplified).

in communities most impacted. There are also co-benefits for healthy communities and ecosystems that will be realised from the transition away from coal, including freeing of water resources (for domestic use, agriculture and industry), reduction in air pollution, improvements in road condition and regeneration of mining-affected land.

The TOC led to the development of indicators for each of these output, outcome and impact elements. Rather than setting hard targets, a system of using milestones as signals has been used to permit tracking progress against the direction of travel, rather than hard targets which imply succeed or fail, as suggested by the Climate Investment Fund (CIF 2020). The short- and medium-term outcomes initially had milestones set for 2024, and the 2025–2027 milestones are being finalised.

Quarterly reporting against the short- and medium-term objectives started in the quarter ended September 2024.[8] Impacts will be reported annually. As there is a long lead time in getting some of the impact data (e.g. some DFFE data has a 2-year delay, for instance, the national Greenhouse Gas Emissions inventory is subject to a rigorous quality assurance process before being released), the PMU has developed a system of getting interventions to report against five core indicators: four impact indicators (jobs, livelihoods, emissions, community involvement) as well as institutional strengthening, a leading indicator for the required changes to happen. While the definition of jobs and emissions is relatively straightforward, that for livelihoods, community involvement and institutional strengthening is not, and rubrics have been developed to facilitate consistency in reporting on this. An example community involvement rubric is shown in Table 2. The example illustrates how, by defining different levels of engagement, MEL can contribute to transformation in promoting particular types of behaviour, in this case by valuing procedural justice and making transparent the level of community involvement.

The TOC incorporates key aspects of system change. There are attempts at outcome level to track policies and/or practices (e.g. rollout of electric vehicle charging stations) and resource flows (e.g. funding of JET interventions). The impacts sought and tracked also seek to address issues of relationships and power dynamics, with benefits widespread rather than concentrated as South Africa's unequal economic system works currently. As such, economic power is challenged through indicators of the spread of livelihood benefits across households in Mpumalanga province and a core indicator addressing livelihoods. This seeks to change mindsets and value systems to consider wider aspects of well-being than simply incomes or jobs.

As shown in Table 2, the M&E system also seeks to encourage strengthened community ownership of development interventions, tracking the strength of community power and ownership. In doing so, it also seeks to influence power dynamics and mindsets. In addition, the evaluation system is conceptualised as focusing on systems, not just projects and programmes, thus taking a systems view on how change is occurring. This can be transformational in itself.

8.Visit: https://justenergytransition.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Just-Energy-Transition-Qaurterly-Progress-Report-31-December-2024.pdf

## The emerging ecosystem

This article does not seek to ascertain if currently the explored MEL systems are achieving their transformative ambitions. However, there are key learning outcomes and analytical questions that emerge from this study that are important to highlight.

### A differentiated ecosystem, with permeable boundaries

Table 1 summarised the different MEL systems and how they overlap or differ. An important point of departure is that the end goal is not a single hierarchical MEL system. This would not optimally serve the different entities' mandates and the different evidence needs and audiences that they seek to serve. Rather, stakeholders recognise that there is already an evidence ecosystem for the Just Transition; the PCC, the DFFE and the JET-IP PMU are critical nodes, with the Department of Electricity and Energy being another important stakeholder which is just starting to develop its M&E system. A key difference is that both the DFFE and the PCC focus on both mitigation and adaptation, while the JET PMU is focused on mitigation.

Collaboration between these entities is intended to ensure that their work is aligned and complementary. Collectively, they are in a position to influence many other just transition evidence producers and users to do the same.

The entities also have different strengths and resources. As a government department, the DFFE has a comprehensive legal mandate pertaining to climate change (both for domestic and international functions), and over decades has built up an extensive system for evidence gathering, consolidation and reporting. The PCC and JET-IP PMU have only a few individuals tasked with MEL. They are also subject to fewer administrative requirements and can more easily set and adapt their work agenda and activities. All three however are vulnerable as they are dependent on external financing to finance the M&E for JT work, which is a significant vulnerability.

### Linkage to stakeholders

All three have strong links to policymakers in the public sector: DFFE with its Minister, PCC with participation of ministers as Commissioners and the PMU through its home in the Presidency, an interdepartmental high-level steering committee and an inter-ministerial committee – a route into government. Both the JET PMU and especially the PCC have significant links to civil society. The JET-IP PMU works closely with international funders (development finance institutions, multilateral and bilateral development organisations) and to a lesser extent with private investors and thereby is able to influence their approach to MEL of the JET work that they fund in South Africa. Overall, private sector engagement is more limited, with some involvement in donor working groups, for example, on electric vehicles.

**TABLE 2:** Community involvement core indicator, Just Energy Transition Project Management Unit.

| Level | Definition |
|---|---|
| L1: Lack of community engagement | The intervention has not engaged community representatives or workers' groups to date. There is no representation in decision-making structures or influence on intervention design and implementation. Public information on the intervention is lacking. |
| L2: Limited community engagement | There has been limited engagement of community representatives and/or workers' groups at this time. If there is a community representative on an intervention decision-making structure, it is mostly consultative with participation inconsistent or only occurring after the intervention was designed. Basic intervention information is available online and/or was publicly disseminated once. |
| L3: Community engagement in the intervention | There has been participation of community representatives and/or workers' groups with influence on the intervention from the design stage onwards. There is representation on an intervention decision-making structure, but it does not reflect a wide range of stakeholders or significantly influence the intervention. Some intervention information is publicly available online and/or was disseminated, but transparency is limited. |
| L4: Substantive and meaningful community engagement | There has been meaningful participation of community representatives and/or workers' groups from the design stage onwards. There is active community representation and participation on an intervention decision-making structure. There are intervention communications and progress updates available online and/or publicly disseminated in other languages, including those spoken by the local community. |
| L5: Community owned and run intervention | Community representatives and/or workers' groups, including disadvantaged households, have owned and managed the intervention from design through implementation. There is active participatory decision-making throughout the intervention life cycle and community ownership of the results. The intervention makes available updated information online and/or publicly disseminates it locally in different languages for transparency. |

*Source*: Based on Presidency, 2023, *Just energy transition implementation plan*, JET PMU, Presidency, viewed 13 January 2026, from https://justenergytransition.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/JET-Implementation-Plan-2023-2027-1.pdf

### Emergent collaboration

The three entities, recognising that South Africa's Just Transition will be best served by collaboration and coordination among them, have met in joint working group sessions since 2023. Through these sessions and building relationships between the MEL units, the three entities have benefited from each other's variable levels of resourcing and institutional positioning. They have also built a stronger MEL ecosystem by including each other in initiatives that they are part of. For instance:

- The PCC involved the DFFE and the JET-IP PMU in international work on just transition tracking, led by the World Resources Institute (WRI) and Initiative for Climate Action Transparency (ICAT). There is direct collaboration between the PCC and the DFFE on work that feeds into the DFFE system (i.e. national reports or studies that provide diagnoses and information). The PCC and the JET-IP PMU have also collaborated on ways to integrate just transition outcomes into the work of government and on these indicators.
- The JET-IP PMU has leveraged its strong relationship with the South African Monitoring and Evaluation Association (SAMEA) to foster engagement by M&E practitioners with the JTF and associated MEL framework. This has boosted awareness, interest and skill development for Just Transition MEL among M&E practitioners, who make up the MEL 'supply side' in government, research and academia, consultants and, to a lesser extent, the private sector.

However, there is still room for the three entities to deepen their knowledge and understanding of each other's work. In late 2025, collaboration has extended to DEE, notably in developing impact indicators for the wider JT.

### Common lessons and challenges

In comparing approaches and practices, it is apparent that the entities are encountering some similar issues.

- The challenge of agreeing on milestones for the transition, with multiple state and non-state actors with differing priorities and visions for the pace and radicalness of the transition.
- Acknowledging the complexity of the transition but having a minimum viable approach which stakeholders can buy into.
- The challenge of handling more technical indicators around decarbonisation versus softer, more intangible objectives around social justice.
- The need for systems approaches and to build MEL capacity to address this.
- The need for more strategic MEL to oversee the transition, but combining this with locally based initiatives, planning and MEL, which are going to be essential for an effective just transition.

In some instances, complementarity among the MEL systems helps to address these issues. For instance, the evidence that they collectively generate can answer a broader range of both strategic and locally based just transition questions and allow for better triangulation. Similarly, the capacity to apply systems approaches in MEL will be applied and developed in different ways through the evaluations to be commissioned by the JET PMU and the context-specific, localised studies conducted by the PCC.

## Conclusion

Collectively, these MEL systems reflect an emergent approach to addressing the complex challenges of South Africa's just transition. By collaborating and aligning where appropriate, without seeking formal integration, the three MEL systems are able to leverage their different strengths. Collectively, they contribute to an MEL ecosystem with comprehensive climate reporting frameworks, stakeholder-driven policy development and innovative evaluation techniques, with systematic use of rapid evaluations to enhance responsiveness to emerging challenges and encourage continuous improvement in project outcomes.

The next few years will give insight into whether this evidence ecosystem approach, in which collaboration among MEL portfolios is largely voluntary, will be successful in strengthening conceptual coherence, alignment and complementarity.

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### CRediT authorship contribution

Cara H. Hartley: Conceptualisation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. Ian Goldman: Conceptualisation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. Samuel Mabena: Writing – original draft. Yuri Ramkissoon: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. Jongikhaya Witi: Writing – original draft. Christel Jacob: Writing – review & editing. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

### Ethical considerations

The article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

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### Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, Cara H. Hartley, upon reasonable request.

### Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. They do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency or the publisher. The authors are responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

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