



# Interrogating Just Urban Transitions: Governance and precarity in Southern African cities

**Abstract Deadline: 17 April 2026**

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In this special issue, we are interested in using empirical cases to hone our understanding of ‘the Just Urban Transition’. The term ‘just transition’ was coined in the 1970s by unions advocating for those working within fossil fuel industries who would be affected by a shift to renewable energy (McCauley & Heffron 2018). This narrow focus has been a strength and a limitation of the scholarship, policy and activism that has followed.

Our Special Issue responds to calls by activists and scholars who advocate for a more expansive analytical lens. A focus on Just Urban Transitions moves beyond energy and labour, to include the full range of resources, services, and opportunities needed to thrive in urban areas (Maboye et al 2025). As Hughes and Hoffman (2020, 8) argue, this requires us to pay greater attention to impacts to the “political, institutional, social, and economic forces... that shape and reshape urban trajectories”.

The concept of ‘Just Urban Transitions’ has the potential to link climate-based anxieties, harms, and crises into broader discussions of (in)justice at an urban scale. In doing so, it highlights the “complex trade-offs” that urban planners (amongst others) are forced to navigate (van Aswegen and Matamanda 2025:vii). Our special issue explores this conceptual intervention by asking what forms of precarity and what constellations of governance ‘Just Urban Transitions’ bring into focus, which existing discussions on urban social justice do not. What are the ways in which governance practices, including decision-making by state and non-state actors, draws on both political and technical perspectives across multiple levels and actors, and how might these mitigate or exacerbate urban precarity.

We centre cities, particularly those across Southern Africa, as complex, dynamic spaces where governance is enacted through state and non-state actors, and where climate-induced crises of energy, water, employment and housing are entangled with legacies of colonial dispossession and contemporary forms of precarity.



This special issue invites contributions that investigate how just urban transitions are co-produced, governed, contested, and lived across diverse urban geographies. We invite topics that range from access to basic services within informal settlements to the licensing of Independent Power Providers by municipal officials. We welcome papers that explore how the climate crisis and diverse responses and innovations by communities, governments, and other actors are reshaping access to basic services in contexts of urban precarity. We are particularly interested in research that examines these dynamics, considering how emerging practices, infrastructures, and governance arrangements influence equity and inclusion in cities.

Please submit your abstract through this [form](#) by 17 April 2026

**We will be submitting this special issue proposal for consideration by the Journal of Southern African Studies.**

## Core Questions

- What does the concept of a 'Just Urban Transition' add to our existing understanding of urban social justice?
- How are existing forms of precarity (and entrenched privilege) shaped by the politics of climate crisis and transition?
- What constellations of governance mediate and manage access to resources, services, and opportunities in urban areas? How are these shaped by the politics of climate crisis and transition?
- How do strategies and small-scale innovations engage (or evade) state-led policies linked to the Just Urban Transition?
- What does a just urban transition mean in cities where infrastructure for basic services is already unevenly accessed or functionally limited? How can we conceptually and theoretically expand notions of sustainability, justice and precarity?

This special issue contributes to the growing interdisciplinary literature on urban political ecology, infrastructure studies, and just transitions by foregrounding informal settlements as not only sites of vulnerability but also sites of innovation and contestation. It challenges dominant transition narratives that assume universal pathways and instead asks how governance arrangements must be rethought to support locally grounded, socially inclusive, and politically reflexive transitions.

It will draw on multiple perspectives, including research from residents in informal settlements to explore grounded approaches to a just transition, as well as the view of government officials and how policy frames and conceptualises the design and management of a just transition.

## Background to special issue organisers

This is an open call for papers. The Editorial Team is supported by the Governing the Just Urban Transitions (GoJUT) project, funded by the South African National Research Foundation (NRF). The GoJUT project is led by Prof. Fiona Anciano (University of the Western Cape), and includes the following team members: Christina Culwick Fatti (University of the Western Cape), SJ Cooper-Knock (University of Sheffield), Samkelisiwe Khanyile (Gauteng City-Region Observatory), Charlotte Lemanski (University of Cambridge), Mamokete Modiba (Gauteng City-Region Observatory), Margot Rubin (Cardiff University), Motshwaedi Sepeng (University of the Western Cape), Kurisani Mdhuli (University of the Western Cape), Boitumelo Papane (University of the Western Cape), Asemahle Mahlunwana (University of the Western Cape), Rogini Naidoo (University of the Western Cape).