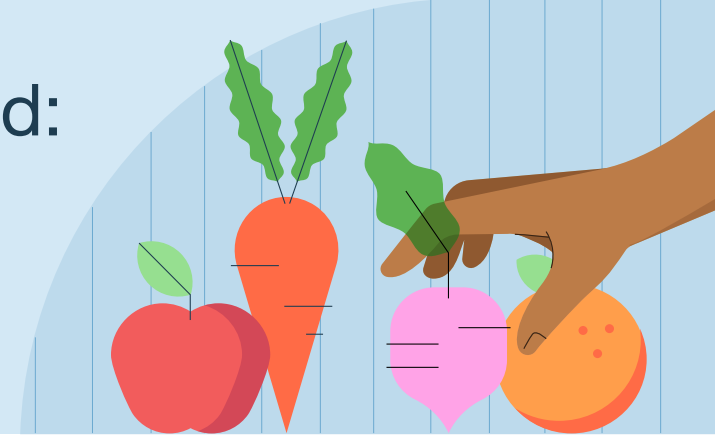
A Just Transition in Food: Impacts on Workers in the Food Supply Chain

Executive Summary



Our food system sustains our societies, economies, and communities—yet it currently drives nearly one-third of global greenhouse-gas emissions and has an outsized impact on nature and biodiversity. As climate impacts intensify, its future—and ours—depends on choices made today. Redesigning the food system to be fair, resilient, and climate-positive is no longer optional; it's essential for feeding a growing world and sustaining economies, people, and the planet.

A shift to healthier, more local and plant-based diets; smaller-scale animal agriculture; and restoration of natural habitats—as outlined in the Planetary Health Diet and within a broader move to agroecology—offers major benefits. Managed well, this transition can:

- **Improve economic resilience**
- **Build workforces and protect livelihoods**
- **Strengthen food security**
- **Improve public health**
- **Regenerate biodiversity and natural resources**

The private sector has a big role to play in a food transition. Its market share and reach mean actions create a ripple effect across supply chains, directly and indirectly impacting food availability, consumption, and millions of workers. With most large businesses already pursuing net-zero goals—and with regulations and consumer expectations tightening—there is an opportunity to shape the transition proactively and capture early-mover advantages.

Workers are the backbone of this $8 trillion food system—farming, producing, and packaging everything we consume. Their inclusion and agency will determine if transitioning to a new diet and reshaping the food system builds resilience or results in instability.

Laudes Foundation commissioned research to examine how the shifts in food consumption and production needed to cut greenhouse gas emissions affect the millions of workers who sustain the global food system. The research found that transitioning to a different diet will affect employment opportunities, locations, and job quality across the food system.

Today, most food workers face poor working conditions—and human rights abuses are well documented in the food system, ranging from forced and child labour to health and safety violations. The analysis suggests that adopting a Planetary Health Diet in the United Kingdom, United States, and European Union could create around 1–3 million jobs in fruit, vegetable, and alternative-protein production while displacing 1–2 million jobs in meat and dairy over the next 5–15 years. At the same time, a more sustainable food system can improve job quality by creating decent work with safer, more humane conditions, liveable incomes, and greater investment in the necessary skills to meet future food needs.

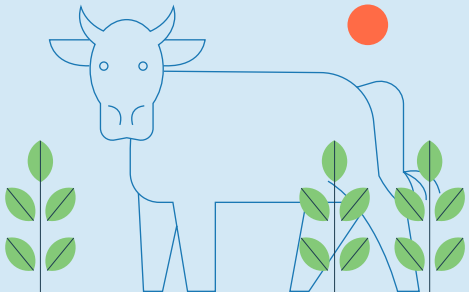
Transitions, opportunities, and impacts will vary by region, value chain, and community. The scale, timing, and location of job losses and gains will rarely align, and geographical barriers will be significant. A meat-processing worker in rural Germany, for example, will not easily transition to tomato production in Spain as diets decrease in meat proteins and increase in vegetables. Much work on the just transition overlooks these place-based and temporal realities. Addressing them will require regional responsive planning and investment—such as funding, reskilling, and labour protections—to ensure workforce adaptation and resilience.

Realising a sustainable, resilient and equitable future food system depends on joint action: businesses, governments, workers and communities must form partnerships that turn necessary change into shared prosperity. Managed collaboratively and with foresight, this transition can become a model for how climate action achieves environmental gains while creating economic and social opportunities for people and the global food economy.

Laudes Foundation offers this analysis as a starting point and an open invitation: to co-design place-based, worker-centred, climate-positive industry solutions that turn insight into shared action.

Recommendations

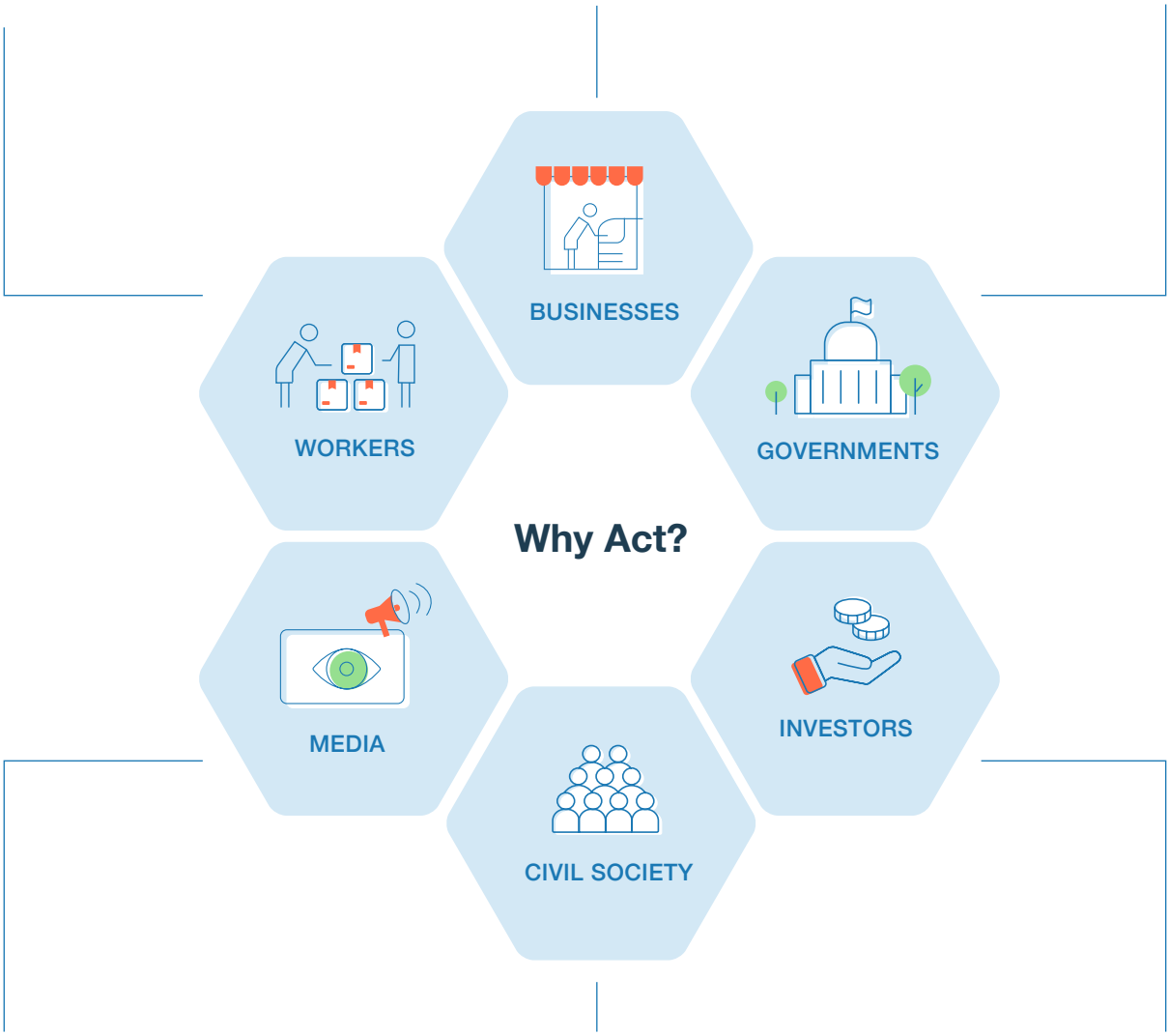
Achieving a just transition requires all actors to play their parts—aligning policies, investments, and practices to build economies that protect livelihoods while achieving climate change goals.



Bring vital frontline knowledge and negotiate agreements and just transition plans that improve worker rights and are rooted in reality

Ensure the resilience of business operations and supply chains—and of the workers and planet that sustain them—through fair, accountable transitions

Build resilient, competitive food systems and workforces ready to thrive in a net-zero future



Inform the public and support inclusive, fact-based reporting on the realities of food value chains and the risks and opportunities within them

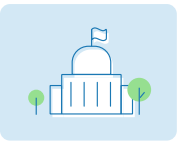
Advocate for transition plans that centre justice and inclusion, surface challenges, amplify underrepresented voices, and facilitate pathways and solutions in solidarity with worker groups

Manage long-term social and climate risks, safeguard portfolio value, and meet growing regulator and stakeholder demands

Below are illustrative practices that each stakeholder can adopt to facilitate a just transition.

BUSINESSES

- Break down silos to align climate, social, and business strategies and invest in **transition planning and preparedness**, such as worker training, reskilling, and shared investment in the future of work.
- Strengthen **supply chain due diligence, transparency, and accountability** to enable shared responsibility and action.
- Strengthen worker inclusion and agency and increase **access to unionisation and collective bargaining.**
- Improve and uphold **labour protections across the supply chain** through concrete actions such as prohibiting recruitment fees, providing fair pay and benefits, adopting climate adaptation and mitigation initiatives, and supporting industry-led grievance mechanisms.

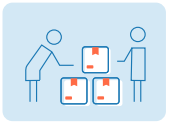


GOVERNMENTS

- Promote **fairer food systems through market levers and ownership reform**—for example, through supporting alternative ownership models, public procurement, and use of antitrust laws.
- Harmonise and adapt **climate and labour policies** at regional, national, and supra-national levels.
- Plan for and invest in a **transition that includes and delivers value for workers**, e.g., through strengthened social policies, community-based reskilling, and expanded social protection programmes.

INVESTORS

- Leverage **influence**—by offering favourable funding terms or via shareholder resolutions—to promote transition pathways that include worker perspectives.
- Engage with governments to promote **fair food systems through market levers.**
- Encourage and require **corporate disclosures and action on labour, climate, and just transition** to increase accountability and enhance investor transparency.

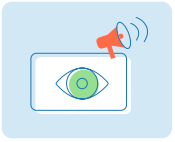


WORKERS AND WORKER ORGANISATIONS

- Participate in **local and national climate and labour policymaking** to amplify perspectives of affected groups, e.g., farmers, workers, and migrant workers.
- Build **worker capacity and literacy on climate and labour rights** to ensure that workers are aware of, and able to exercise, their rights.
- Promote a just transition through **bargaining and global advocacy.**

CIVIL SOCIETY

- Provide **pathways and blueprints** for a just transition in the food industry through collaborative and pre-competitive work, and drive innovations in the sector that spotlight the frontrunners and lift the laggards.
- Promote **structural reform** (e.g., legal aid, safe reporting tools) and **build inclusion and agency of workers and communities** to lift up underrepresented voices and ensure that they are not left behind in transition planning and implementation.
- Drive **business accountability and transition planning** and raise sector-wide standards.



MEDIA

- Support **inclusive, fact-based reporting and showcase positive examples** to shape the just transition narrative, such as new developments, policy measures, and examples of effective implementation.
- **Amplify workers' voices** in just transition narratives.
- Track progress, **sustain public pressure, and investigate labour rights abuses** across food supply chains.