

Exploring popular conceptions of just transitions via focus groups

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La Rochelle zero-carbon territory (LRTZC) is a project led by the agglomeration council that aims at making the territory carbon neutral by 2040. While territorial projects such as LRTZC gather a local elite around technical issues (Mazeaud, 2022), they promote behavioral changes which are disproportionately costly to those who live in precarious conditions, but do not question high carbon lifestyles. Their visions indeed rests upon developing low tech processes as well as supporting individual changes, without questioning the existing socio-economic institutions. The lack of involvement of the working classes in this project thus does not necessarily mean that they are disinterested in environmental issues, as has be shown otherwise (Comby & Malier, 2021 ; Malier, 2022). Research have also highlighted the existence of various conceptions of a just transitions (Didier, 2020 ; Cantillon & Hudon, 2023). Contrary to a vision focused on cutting down emissions of greenhouse gases, which reduces the scope of the debate, environmental justice is a political notion because it is dynamic, and its various avatars are considered a sign of its vitality (Laigle & Moreau, 2018).

Our hypothesis is that exploring the visions of just transitions of popular classes will help understanding their apparent indifference towards current environmental politics. But how can we explore visions of just transitions amongst populations considered as silent?

For this contribution, we intend to present how a methodology based on focus groups – or collective interviews - can help understanding conceptions of fairness in transition and their determinants from popular classes. The research project takes place over the period 2023-2024 in the La Rochelle territory, with the implication of two researchers in political science from the LIENSs laboratory and an intern.

Negotiating the constitution of the focus groups has been a crucial preliminary phase, as both a means of approaching new people with a research project, as well as a first step for analyzing conceptions of a just transition. The constitution of the groups has a major effect on the

subsequent discursive dynamics (Lefébure, 2011). Thus, we conducted a preliminary review of the literature which resulted in the elaboration of more specific hypotheses relative to a targeted population – in this instance, the young – and led us to various points of contact. The analysis of written and verbal preliminary exchanges with the individuals and groups targeted has proven useful to better understand the concerns of the individuals and groups approached, their commitment to social or environmental causes, and their first understanding of the just transition concept.

The focus group protocol was conceived, and adapted, based on the literature, the preliminary exchanges as well as the particulars of the group in question, in order to create an environment in which the groups would feel comfortable sharing and debating their conceptions of a just transition. The existing literature helped us identifying potential dividing lines between different visions of just transitions (La Gioia *et al.*, 2023; Deldrève *et al.*, 2019 ; Larrère et Larrère, 2016 etc.) which subsequently became the basis for the questions guiding the focus groups. The organization and facilitation of the collective interviews also took into account the specifics of the groups. As a final sequence, debriefings allowed the groups to reflect on the experience and offer suggestions for the conduct of subsequent focus groups.

The focus groups conducted so far, combined with the distribution of individual questionnaires, have highlighted areas of consensus and divergence both within each group and between the different focus groups. The process of a collective interview also proves fruitful to better understand the determinants of different conceptions, through the clarifications by individuals during the interview, as well as the social and economic data individually collected via the questionnaires. Our first results so far tend to confirm the vitality, and political character, of the notion of just transition.

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