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POLICY DEBATES

Territorial governance of just transition? – A case study of Just Transition Fund (JTF) process in Finland

Mikko Weckroth[a], Michael Kull[a] and Hanna Lempinen[a]

ABSTRACT

This study examines Finland's planning of the EU's Just Transition Fund (JTF), focusing on phasing out energy peat and its socioeconomic impacts. Despite Finland's high governance capacity, significant challenges emerged in achieving distributive, procedural and recognitive justice. Through stakeholder interviews and policy analysis, the research highlights gaps in multilevel coordination, stakeholder inclusion and addressing socio-cultural dimensions of transition. The findings stress the need for synchronised policy timelines, clearer communication and place-sensitive approaches that recognise non-monetary place attachments. Recommendations include enhancing participatory governance and aligning national policies and funding with EU frameworks to ensure equitable and inclusive low-carbon transitions.

KEYWORDS

Cohesion policy; Finland; just transition; Just Transition Fund (JTF); spatial justice; territorial governance

JEL R5, R58

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1. INTRODUCTION

The European Union (EU) faces mounting challenges in achieving a just and inclusive transition toward sustainability. The low-carbon transition manifests unevenly across regions and socio-economic groups, raising concerns about justice and equity in policy design and implementation. In the context of the EU, the Just Transition Fund (JTF) – a key pillar of the Green Deal – serves as the key instrument aiming to ensure that 'no person or region is left behind' during the transition (European Commission, 2019). Hence, it is acting as a merger between the policy driven concept of territorial cohesion and academic configurations applying a spatial perspective to social justice (Demeterova et al., 2020; Weckroth & Moisio, 2020). However, translating abstract justice-related academic concepts – such as distributive, procedural and recognitive justice – into actionable policy initiatives and programmes involves navigating a complex science-policy interface where theoretical frameworks must contend with practical constraints, diverse regional realities and stakeholder interests (McCauley & Heffron, 2018).

This policy debate critically examines the planning process of the JTF in the context of Finland where the JTF is focusing on the phasing out of energy peat, a semi-fossil fuel historically significant for rural livelihoods, regional economies and national energy security. Finland, recognised for its high administrative capacity and citizen trust, is ranked highest in the European Quality of Government Index (EQI) as well as perceived happiness (Helliwell et al., 2023) and is widely regarded as a global exemplar of good governance. This context sets a rather high expectation for orchestrating the national low-carbon transition manner that is participatory, transparent and just. However, Finland's struggles with its JTF implementation (e.g., Lempinen & Vainio, 2023; Lonkila et al., 2024) reveal systemic gaps in striving towards just transitions, making it a crucial case for understanding how even the most high-functioning governance systems grapple with the demands of justice-centred policymaking.

This case study contextualises broader debates in regional studies concerning spatial justice, multilevel and territorial governance, and on large, cohesion policies. It situates the Finnish experience within discussions of the uneven geographies of decarbonisation (e.g., Beer et al., 2024; de Ruyter & Bentley, 2024), drawing on key

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concepts of territorial governance and place-based policy-making and places left behind (Luukkonen et al., 2021; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). Specifically, it examines how justice-related concerns – distributive, procedural and recognitive – (e.g., Cha et al., 2022; McCauley & Heffron, 2018) are addressed (or overlooked) in the Finnish JTF planning process.

This article aims to provide insights to both academics but most importantly to policymakers on supranational, national and regional scales. First, it highlights Finland's implementation of the JTF as a microcosm for wider EU challenges in operationalising justice-centred policy processes. Consequently, it provides actionable insights from territorial governance principles, such as ensuring stakeholder engagement across the whole policy cycle (including monitoring and implementation), balancing top-down steering with bottom-up strategic development and supporting regional working groups with clear mandates and resources. These findings offer transferable lessons, for example on how adaptive governance grounded in local knowledge can improve policy uptake, or how inclusive and transparent planning processes can mitigate perceptions of unfairness in transformative regional policies and funding.

2. JUSTICE, GOVERNANCE AND PLACES LEFT BEHIND IN LOW-CARBON TRANSITIONS IN EU

Originally, the JTF was introduced to the Commission in 2019 by President Ursula von der Leyen. The previous Juncker-Commission aimed to submit proposals for all cohesion funds earlier, targeting adoption by May 2018, with final agreements before the European Parliament elections in May 2019. Its establishment was aimed to guarantee support and justice for the 'industries and workers who will face the greatest challenges' because of decarbonisation policies and to make sure that 'no person and no region is left behind in the climate transition' (European Commission, 2019). In practice, European Union's JTF funds were intended to support the economic diversification and reconversion of the territories concerned through up- and reskilling of workers, investments in small- and medium-sized enterprises, the creation of new firms, research, innovation activities, and environmental, rehabilitation, clean energy and job-search assistance as well as the transformation of existing carbon-intensive installations.

As a policy mechanism, the JTF was designed to mitigate the negative socioeconomic consequences resulting from decarbonisation efforts whose pace and implications are bound to be geographically unevenly distributed (e.g., Beer et al., 2024 ; Golubchikov & O'Sullivan, 2020; Naumann & Rudolph, 2020, Norris et al., 2024). From a scholarly perspective, such policies sit (at times uncomfortably) at the junction of three overlapping academic debates: (1) interdisciplinary literature on just transitions (e.g., McCauley & Heffron, 2018; Williams & Doyon, 2019), (2) regional studies debates, particularly on recent observations in economic geography on 'places than don't matter' (Luukkonen et al., 2021; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018) and (3) those on multilevel and territorial governance and hierarchy, and the synchronisation need of different actors and (cohesion) policies (e.g., Bache, 1999; Davoudi et al., 2008; Kull, 2014; Moodie et al., 2021).

As its name implies, justice related considerations play a fundamental role in the design and implementation of JTF. While justice in transitions tends to be predominantly conceptualised in terms of (1) the distribution of benefit and harm (*distributive justice*), (2) the inclusion of those affected by policy planning (*procedural justice*) and (3) the recognition of both those suffering losses as well as the diversity of potential losses suffered (*recognitive justice*) (e.g., Cha et al., 2022; McCauley & Heffron, 2018; Williams & Doyon, 2019), contemporary debates revolving around the notion of justice in transition contexts paint a picture of justice as multidimensional and inherently contradictory, situated and perspectival (cf. e.g., Van Uffelen et al., 2024; Wood, 2023). This conceptual and practical complexity has been elaborated on by recent literature that sheds light on a wide range of experienced injustices from European low-carbon transition contexts (cf. e.g., Banerjee & Schuitema, 2022; LaBelle et al., 2023; Lempinen & Vainio, 2023; Lonkila et al., 2024; Schuster et al., 2023). Together, these observations highlight the need to both explicitly address what kind of 'justices' are being operationalised in different policy contexts – such as in the case of the JTF – and to remain sensitive to experiences and understandings of justice of the 'objects' of these transition policies.

As the root causes of geography of discontent (i.e., spatial expressions of injustice and lack of political agency; Luukkonen et al., 2021) lies at the structural change in regional economies and employment, which is furthermore intensified by *greening* the economy, there exists an urgent need to address spatial and territorial dimensions of justice in regional policies (de Ruyter & Bentley, 2024; Demeterova et al., 2020; Gürtler, 2023: Herberg et al., 2023). Recent debates in regional studies and economic geography have explored the link between the geography of EU discontent – implicitly tied to perceptions of injustice – and the regional development trap (Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2024). Empirical studies have observed that living in regions subject to such territorial traps, characterised by stagnation in economic growth, employment and productivity, is strongly associated with support for anti-system parties at the ballot box (Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2024) as well as negative climate change attitudes (Weckroth & Ala-Mantila, 2022). However, some authors have also critiqued this predominant focus on macroeconomic variables as an instrumental link between economic decline and the sense of 'being left behind' and instead emphasised the importance of subjective, socio-cultural and cognitive dimensions of marginalisation and spatially selective decay of political efficacy (Luukkonen et al., 2021).

This setting defines Finland – and the focus on peat within the JTF instrument – as an intriguing case within

the European Union to examine how (and how well) a justice-centred policy formulation process and governance system can recognise the multidimensional nature of experiences of justice, especially their cognitive and sociocultural foundations. Recent contributions underscore that even carefully designed place-based strategies may struggle to reconcile macroeconomic 'levelling up' with local perceptions of fairness if they neglect the lived experiences, affective attachments and discursive framings through which communities interpret change and development (Bailey et al., 2023; Beer et al., 2024).

Indeed, if such strategies are not explicitly linked to the sociopsychological dimensions of left-behindness, perceived agency and recognitive justice, the process of regional transformation may inadvertently deepen cognitive discontent at both individual and community levels, even as aggregate indicators of growth would improve. This tension highlights the importance of scrutinising the balance between 'people-centred' and 'place-centred' (see e.g., Howcroft & Rees, 2023; Middlemiss et al., 2024) approaches, and interrogating whether institutional arrangements are sufficiently attuned to nuanced locally embedded understandings (Adamson et al., 2023) of what constitutes a desirable local development.

3. THE CASE OF FINLAND – GOVERNANCE OF PEAT AND JUSTICE

As a result of processes investigated in more detail in the sections below, Finland's policies under the Just Transition Fund were decided to focus exclusively on phasing out CO^2 emission intensive energy peat. Internationally, Finland has been among the few countries that have relied on peat – a semi-fossil fuel extracted from drained peatlands – as an energy source. Despite its relatively minor share in the contemporary national energy mix, the combustion of peat has continued to account for around 10% of national annual greenhouse gas emissions (Soimakallio et al., 2020). When Finland's decision to gradually transition away from energy peat use in 2019, employment generated by peat had already been steadily declining: the estimated 10,000 person years of employment in 2010 had declined to around 1200 direct and an additional 1300 indirect jobs (Soimakallio et al., 2020). JTF was intended to serve as the tool to alleviate the impacts of the disappearance of these jobs, to create alternative education and employment prospects for those at risk of employment because of the peat phase-out and to support the 'greening' and diversification of economies of the peat-extracting regions.

However, framing the peat transition solely in terms of socioeconomic indicators and monetary losses paints a rather simplified picture of what is at stake at livelihood transitions (e.g., Lempinen, 2023). After its state-led establishment in the 1970s, the Finnish peat industry has played a role slowing down rural depopulation and decline, and the work that it has generated has become a source of identity and self-understanding for individuals and communities involved in its everyday practices (Lempinen, 2025, forthcoming; Ruuskanen, 2010). Decades of interactions with the industry and peat as a resource have contributed to the formation of multigenerational resource communities for whom the deep sociocultural ties with the livelihood often have symbolic meaning that policies focusing on monetary losses struggle to account for (cf. e.g., Banerjee & Schuitema, 2022; Della Bosca & Gillespie, 2018; Lempinen, 2023).

From a governance perspective this analysis approaches the Finnish JTF policy making processes as territorial governance (TG) 'in the making'. TG highlights patterns of cooperation and collaboration between governmental and non-governmental actors (Davoudi et al., 2008), promoting a bottom-up approach as opposed to top-down, one-size-fits-all solutions. Hence, TG scholars emphasise the integration of local knowledge and experience (e.g., Van Well & Schmitt, 2015), the interdependence of different actors from various governance levels, and the importance of different territorial aggregations in policy and planning processes (Moodie et al., 2021). TG focuses on territorial distinctions between countries or sub-national levels and considers temporal variations and changes, especially in different stages of policymaking. TG is deemed essential for successfully implementing major policies like the EU Territorial Agenda 2030 (Böhme et al., 2015; Cotella, 2019) and the European Cohesion Policy (European Commission, 2007).

Through applying territorial governance in the context of Finnish JTF implementation we want to identify patterns of multi-level coordination and balancing top-down directives with bottom-up processes, and the horizontal integration of policy sectors and characteristics of policy making also relevant from a procedural as well as recognitive justice perspective. Delving into stakeholder engagement, and adaptability to changing contexts, and considering place-based specificity, shall help us to detect how distinctive needs of individuals and groups are recognised but also whether they are appropriately addressed. In the context of these country specific conditions and existing just transition literature, this analysis approaches the JTF process in Finland from the premise that many of the challenges in justice-centred policy planning processes be tackled when following the key principles in territorial governance; mobilising stakeholder participation; acknowledging place-based/territorial specificities, cross-sectoral and hierarchical policy coordination; building adaptive capacity to changing contexts.

4. DATA AND METHODS

This article employs a qualitative case study approach to examine how the EU Just Transition Fund (JTF) has been interpreted and operationalised in Finland, with attention to national coordination and regional implementation. Case studies are seen as particularly suited for investigating complex, multilevel governance processes in depth and in context (cf. Flyvbjerg, 2006; Yin, 2018). This approach enabled us to trace how coordination, interpretation and contestation unfolded during the JTF

planning process, and how justice-related concerns were negotiated across institutional levels (cf. Lempinen & Vainio, 2023; Tosun et al., 2024). Our data consist of official policy and planning documents, and semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders involved in the JTF design and delivery as the primary data source.

4.1. Document analysis

Document analysis focused on key EU and national policy texts that framed the Finnish JTF. Specifically, this included Regulation (EU) 2021/1056 establishing the Just Transition Fund in the EU, the Finnish JTF Operational Programme, national strategy papers on the peat phaseout, and regional Just Transition Plans for all six eligible regions. The documents were purposively selected for their central role in defining objectives, implementation rules and governance structures. Analysis combined deductive coding – using distributive, procedural and recognitive justice dimensions as categories – and inductive attention to how different justice concepts were translated and negotiated across scales.

4.2. Interview data

Nine semi-structured interviews were conducted with parties directly involved in JTF design and implementation: two officials from DG REGIO, one representative from the Finnish Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment (TEM) and six regional representatives from authorities responsible for preparing the regional plans; the Finnish regional councils. Respondents were identified through purposive sampling to cover both EU and national levels as well as regions eligible for funding. Interviews explored understandings of justice, experiences of multilevel coordination, and views on the overall JTF process. Thematic coding combined deductive categories from the analytical framework with inductive coding to capture emergent insights. The interviews in the Finnish context (TEM and regional councils) were conducted in Finnish and translated by the authors. More detailed descriptions on the methodical choices and analytical strategy are described in Appendix 1 in the online supplemental data.

5. RESULTS

5.1. The territorial governance of JTF in the making

The Commission began informal negotiations on the Cohesion Policy funds for 2021–2027 with the Parliament and Council. The amount of JTF funding to be allocated for Finland between 2021 and 2027 was set to around EUR 645 million. Overall, support from this one single fund was to account for almost half (47.4%) of the EU's regional and structural funding policy for the current period. The JTF entered the agenda during this process, 'complicating matters due to its timing' and the distinct purpose of supporting regions most affected by the green transition (GT) (DG Regio interviewee). Identifying these regions, based on non-binding Commission proposals (European Semester country reports of 2020), added complexity to the negotiations.

In Finland, the JTF planning process differed from previous periods. Unlike the 2014–2021 period, which had one programme for Mainland Finland and one for the Åland islands (plus the small- and medium-sized enterprise (SME) initiative), the JTF plans were developed at the NUTS (nomenclature of territorial units for statistics) 3 level, involving regions from the start with technical assistance from the Commission. Table 1 highlights key dates for the Finnish JTF programme development.

The focus on peat in Finland was suggested by the Commission due to the Finnish Government's commitment to reduce energy peat use and achieve climate neutrality by 2035. During the European semester process, the Commission reviewed Finland's national energy and climate plan, finding no JTF-related commitments other than a 50% reduction in peat for energy. The managing authority TEM was asked if Finland had other commitments besides peat. An interviewee explains 'apparently there was nothing and the decision was with Finland to take this path', and that compared to other member states, 'not a lot of extra commitments was needed' (Interviewee – DG Regio).

However, an interviewee from TEM pointed out two problems in relation to this choice. On the one hand, peat use is a controversial and heated topic in Finnish politics and hence 'this will become difficult'. The second concern was that of regional targeting and the allocation of JTF funds. In the end, JTF covers a vast majority of Finnish regions (see Figure 1) and in many regions eligible for JTF funding, peat use is a marginal industry in terms of employment and land area. The geographical scope of the JTF was justified by the assumption that the impacts of the peat-phase out could potentially extend far beyond the immediately affected regions (TEM, 2022). The implications of this decision were twofold. First, a significant share of funding that was intended to support those most affected by the peat transition was channelled to regions as a form or regional development funding. Second, this meant that regions now had access to large amounts of funding whose conditions did not necessary meet their development needs. One TEM interviewee foresaw this might turn into 'a real catastrophe and we saw that the regions couldn't probably use the money'.

5.2. Governance relations I: national and EU level … or waiting for clear instructions

The national level started the preparations for the JTF programme development with excitement but criticised a lack of clear instructions throughout the development of JTF plans. This also had repercussions at the regional level, since 'we did not progress because they at the national level were so unsure what they can tell us' (Interviewee from regional council). For an interviewee from TEM, the hardest part was that different DGs had diverse positions and messages, 'one says it like this the other DG differently … a very heavy process'. DG Regio was seen as 'weak', whilst DG Climate's comments were 'difficult' and

Table 1. Timeline of the Finnish JTF programme development.

When	What	Comments
Autumn 2020	First information about JTF opportunities to regional actors and formation of the Regional Coordination Group	Just transition money focused on regions phasing out peat BUT no direct links to peat
December 2020	Positive signs on draft regional plan	
Until February / March 2021	Expectation: Rough guidelines to be defined	Delayed
April 2021	Expectation: Plan submission to the Council of State	Delayed
Summer 2021	Expectation: Feedback from COM and Finland will be first or second country to submit JTFs to COM	Delayed
Autumn 2021	Expectation: regions can open call for applications	Delayed and new expectation that programmes to be ready in spring 2022
Spring 2022	Feedback from COM	All regional programmes to state strict links to peat + measures to be linked to peat (cf. above)
Summer 2022	Feedback round	All regional programmes to state how green transition is tackled + environmental and energy impacts
October 2022	Draft revisions and cutting down too long text.	Fear of possibly loosing important issues 'in transition'
22 October 2022	National JTF programme + all 14 regional programmes approved by the Finnish government and sent to COM for approval	Signal from COM => to be approved rather quickly to allow implementation to start early 2023/spring
December 2022	All territorial just transition plans were adopted except for Bulgaria	Finland was among the leading countries in the process, at the end 24th out of 27.
April 23	First project adopted in the EU	First region to receive support is in Estonia
June 23	Project implementation can start in Finland	Original plan was May – technical problems with decision-making system

Note: COM = commission.

one was unsure 'how seriously one should take action regarding these'.

Among the strategies was also the collaboration with other EU member states (MSs) to exchange experience, e.g., how 'they were pushed to certain themes'. According to a DG Regio interviewee, there was no dramatic change of focus in the case of Finland and the JTF programmes' focus on peat was clear for Finland from the very start. Small changes regarding certain investments were proposed but there was no major change of focus. One DG Regio interviewee stressed that Finland was one of the MSs without territorial tensions and going from seven to 14 regions was seen as a rather easy step. However, another interviewee pointed at disagreements among the regions.

An interviewee from DG Regio perceived the relations with the national ministry as unproblematic and rather good. They explained they 'didn't have any problems with the ministerial people, our cooperation went well and the interaction between us and the ministry was good in my opinion'. Whilst, according to the interviewee, TEM had to put rather strict limits for the regions and there were some difficulties on how Finland would see the programme, when an agreement was found, there was a 'joint understanding what we want to achieve. Ministry and Commission worked together for the same goal. There were no differences of opinions'. An interviewee from the Commission questioned, whether the Commission deciding to create a new financing instrument for every new challenge and crisis is a very sustainable way for the future in the era of polycrisis.

5.3. Governance relations II: national and regional level … or handbrake turns on the way

Among the first messages regions received from TEM (Table 1) were that the JTF was going to enable a just transition focused on regions phasing out peat but that no direct links to peat would need to be established. However, after feedback on the first regional draft plans, all regional programmes had to state and establish explicit links to and develop measures linked to peat. In summer 2022, it was established that all regional programmes would be required to state how the green transition will be tackled and what identifies the plans' environmental and energy impacts. In October 2022, rather close to the deadline, the authors of the plans in regional councils were asked to edit texts that were too long to make them fit a specific maximum of text length. Interviewees feared losing important issues.

The bottom line and conclusion drawn by one regional council interviewee was that the 'interaction worked quite

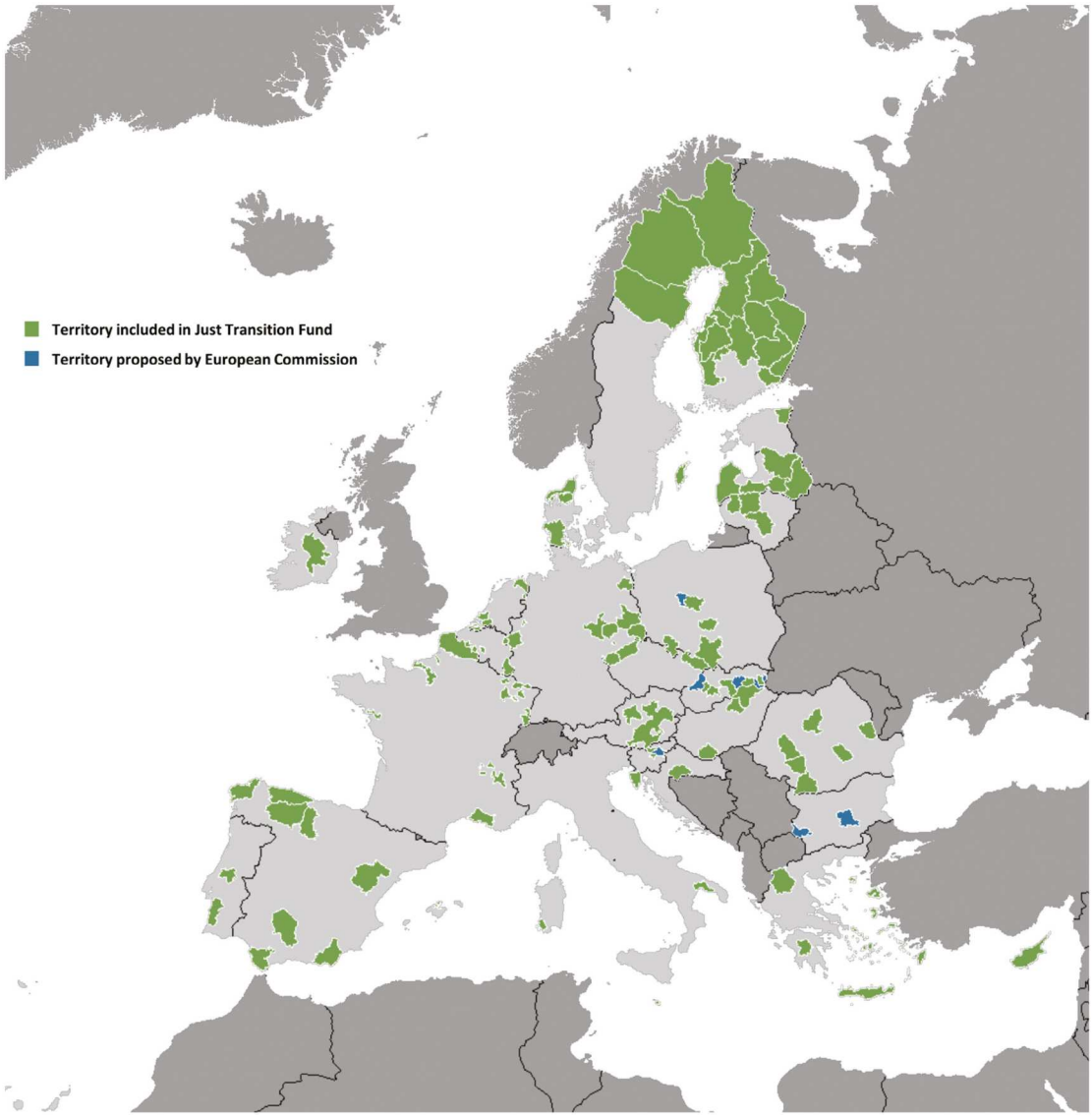

Figure 1. Territories eligible for the Just Transition Fund 2021–2027.

well but the guidelines changed fairly often'. Other interviewees were more critical, stating that the JTF exercise was very particular, 'a category of its own. Changes, also sudden ones, took place several times'. An interviewee from TEM concluded that the JTF was a new instrument that 'brought us a considerable amount of extra work and some administrative confusion'. For one interviewee in one regional council, the JTF programme development was no less than ' … a traumatic experience'.

5.4. Governance relations III: regions-EU level … national gatekeeping in the making?

Direct contacts with the Commission were new for many regions, as previous interactions were managed by the Managing Authority (TEM). While this approach gave regions more control and power, it also contributed to perceptions of difficulty among some interviewees. Overall, regional interviewees were satisfied with direct access to national desks at the Commission, which provided valuable information and assistance. However, the EU's limited resources were a challenge, as one person was responsible for two countries and 14 Finnish regions, in addition to coordination within the Commission and across DGs. A DG Regio interviewee explained that 'the JTF was managed in the Commission as a desk only by me. I was supposed to be in contact with the financing authority and Finnish regions and in parallel the Estonian case'. Despite the restricted resources, the interviewee considered the connections and rather frequent contacts with regions very useful. A long collaborative history since 2007 also contributed to smooth collaboration. 'I know them quite well, the regional development directors from several regional councils. Met them personally several times, and also other stakeholders, who were present in these meetings. I know many of them personally quite well'. These personal relations provided opportunities to say directly what issues were important. 'I said to them what I thought, quite directly and let them know even if there were disputes within the Commission', the interviewee explains.

Regional representatives felt that stricter programme development requirements sometimes originated from

the Commission because of TEM. Some interviewees noted that the Commission allowed more flexibility in support activities, with a broader range of indicators and eligible funding measures. In contrast, TEM preferred simplicity, leading to fewer priorities and support measures. An interviewee from the Commission stressed that both organisations had 'quite a shared view of what needs to be achieved and both the ambition and objective to get the programmes adopted in time'. The Finnish administrative tradition is, he stressed, to make rather simple programmes, which are easy to manage and based on considerations of smooth implementation.

One important aspect related to misperceptions of funding eligibility. Peat entrepreneurs and workers, industry interest groups and even some political actors and government authorities assumed that the JTF could be utilised directly to compensate for the loss of machinery or equipment and give them access to direct support. For an interviewee from the Commission, there were communication problems, while the JTF regulation was, according to him, clear on what could be funded.[1] As he explained,

> there is quite a detailed list in the JTF regulation. I'm afraid that there were misunderstandings and misconceptions on what can be supported and who will receive the money. The very few, if any, of the potential beneficiaries, peat farmers or peat entrepreneurs, if they have read the regular basis, what is available, what can be done. Perhaps this has been a communication issue, leading to misunderstandings.

The implications of this misunderstanding were, however, profound, as political promises had already been made to peat entrepreneurs about allocating 70 million euros as compensation to peat entrepreneurs voluntarily giving up peat extraction[2] based on the assumption that JTF funds could be utilised for these compensations As this turned out to not be the case and no political consensus about an alternative funding source for the compensations was achieved, no compensations were paid out in the form they had been publicly announced.

5.5. Governance relations IV: mobilising stakeholder participation

JTF adheres to the Partnership Principle.[3] Each territorial JTF plan includes a governance chapter detailing the involvement of diverse groups, which was also reviewed by the Commission. The Commission emphasised the importance of involving young people, supported by a toolkit on youth participation. In a similar vein, commission interviewees highlighted the need for diverse stakeholders, including youth, to be engaged from the start and to participate in coordination meetings. They stressed the necessity of involving those affected by the transition in programming exercises.

Some member states, including Estonia, were referred to as good practice examples for involvement in JTF planning, 'involving people from that region, including young people' (DG Region interviewee). There were, however, differences across the member states. In some countries, the involvement of diverse types of actors was 'more superficial'. A DG Regio interviewee also stated that the Commission always hears excuses, some authorities saying that because of the timing it was not possible to do a wide range of public participation. Nonetheless, there was 'huge pressure' to adopt the territorial JTF plans rather quickly before the end of 2022, while the JTF regulation was only adopted in June 2021 by the EP and the Council. This also meant there were no expectations that member states could in reality dedicate two or three years to public participation processes.

Looking at stakeholder participation in Finland, several institutionalised stakeholders were part of regional working groups. Public hearings were organised by the regional authorities, too. However, an interviewee (DG Regio) pointed out that youth organisations were underrepresented in the monitoring committees. Similar under- and misrepresentation applied to peat workers and entrepreneurs who consistently voiced their disappointment in the planning process (cf. Lempinen & Vainio, 2023). As the partnership principle is not only important in plan development but also later in policy implementation and evaluation and in the work of the monitoring committees, the Commissions expected authorities to involve the youth, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), trade unions and other key actors in the whole programme cycle.

5.6. Governance relations V: intra-regional relations – sharing the cake and useful forms of collaboration

In interregional relations, the coordination and knowledge exchange for programme development was positively received. The JTF coordination group, regarded as a crucial governance instrument for inter-regional cooperation, was initiated by Finnish regions to coordinate goals and strategies. Initially it was focused on northern and eastern Finland, other regions joined during the programme development phase.

However, discussions arose regarding fund distribution within Finland, particularly between the northern and eastern regions and those in the south and west. The northern and eastern regions argued they should receive funds to support rural vitality and employment, considering their sparse population and distance challenges. Meanwhile, southern and western regions claimed entitlement to more funds due to a higher number of enterprises and a larger labour force. The final decision was taken at national level and was described as 'rather difficult' (anonymous interviewee). A DG-REGIO interviewee stressed that he was 'quite happy that the Commission doesn't have to burn its fingers in those decisions'.

Overall, the interview data reveals a complex and, at times, fragmented process of multilevel coordination, governance relations and stakeholder engagement in Finland's JTF process. Interviews with regional and national policymakers, as well as EU representatives, highlighted recurring challenges, including inconsistent guidance, unclear responsibilities and limited stakeholder representation. While regional councils played a proactive role in adapting

to evolving requirements, shifting directives from national and EU authorities created uncertainty, strained collaboration, and, in some cases, feed the perceptions of procedural injustice at regional level. These dynamics not only complicated the programme's design but also diluted its capacity to recognise and address the principles of distributive, procedural and recognitive justice effectively. These expressions underscore the demand for clear communication channels, consistent governance frameworks and enhanced mechanisms for local-level engagement – findings that inform the policy recommendations in the following chapter.

6. WIDER REGIONAL POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The key findings of this analysis in relation to their policy implications can be summarised into three themes: (1) failure to address those who are most affected and to balance between interregional and socio-spatial justice, (2) shortcomings in terms of being able to recognise, address and balance between different dimensions of justice and (3) the need for being mindful of an inclusive (territorial) governance framework. Based on these key findings, we formulate corresponding policy implications relevant for future EU and national-level policymaking.

6.1. Leaving no place and/or people behind? The question of 'the most affected' and balance between place and people distributions

The question of the relationship between structure and agency is central to science-policy interface at the regional scale and has recently emerged in local climate change governance (Haupt et al., 2024). As noted at the beginning, the JTF aims to secure that 'no person *and* no region is left behind in the climate transition' (European Commission, 2019). Based on our analysis, it is fair to say that the Finnish JTF performed much better on leaving no place (region) behind than it did regarding affected individuals or socioeconomic groups. After a long and complex process, the Finnish JTF ended up covering almost all regions in Finland which created interregional tensions. In addition, JTF funded projects do not need to be explicitly linked to peat to diversify regional economies in accordance with broader green transition and Smart Specialisation Strategies. In this sense, the JTF in Finland has been targeted to those 'who' suffer from the transition but only on a macro-economic regional level and also beyond regions directly affected by the phase-out of energy peat.

Albeit being by default *the* spatial scale for regional scientists and the like, in justice considerations it is worth mentioning that a region – when based on formal spatial division – is not an entity that has sentiments of justness or injustice. What is striking is that while existing scholarship has highlighted the injustices experienced by those involved in the peat industry (Lempinen & Vainio, 2023; Lonkila et al., 2024), in this study we did not find a single party in the JTF process, who had entirely or even largely positive experiences of the process – not even the representatives of regional councils, who, de facto, benefit from the funds. Instead, those involved in the planning of Finland's JTF had both foreseen many of the injustices that would later arise during its implementation and also experienced the process itself as unreasonable or unfair. In fact, one regional-level interviewee even described the whole process as 'traumatic'. This highlights that, in the Finnish case, injustice has not only been experienced by the subjects of the policies (most explicitly the peat workers) but also those who were involved in policy-planning.

These failures not only represent insufficient policy targeting but may have indirect negative consequences to the legitimacy of regional policies and especially those which have connotations to the concept of justice and fairness, such as the JTF. At large, EU Structural Funds and the Cohesion Policy have been chronically suffering from lower recognition, acceptance and legitimacy among populations in rural and peripheral regions (Scipioni & Tintori, 2021; Tosun et al., 2024). Hence, as policy implication this analysis stresses the importance of perceived – that is procedural and recognitive – justice as a fundamental component going beyond mere mechanical allocation of economic resources between formal regions. Thereby, the Finnish process has most likely decreased the perceptions of justice and legitimacy of the JTF among other cohesion policy measures. Hence, this case is a good example that place vs. people distributions may conflict with one another (e.g., Storper, 2011) and feed expressions of injustice towards policies and funding instruments which are paradoxically presented under the justice label.

6.2. Securing procedural and recognitive justice in policy process

In terms of justice considerations, the Finnish JTF planning process demonstrated efforts towards different dimensions of justice and their coordination but also faced challenges in terms of consistence, communication and equitable outcomes across the whole process. In terms of distributive justice, key shortcomings from our analysis also include funding directions and miscommunication. Communication about what could be funded by the JTF was unclear (people or places), leading to misunderstandings, particularly among potential beneficiaries – above all the nation's peat entrepreneurs. Delays in planning and approval processes caused uncertainty and hindered progress. Different Commission DGs provided conflicting messages, complicating the planning process. The focus on peat, driven by political decisions, caused regional concerns about the effective use of JTF funds. Disagreements among regions on fund allocation, especially between northern and eastern versus southern and western regions, highlighted regional disparities and tensions on distribute justice.

Regarding procedural justice, in Finnish JTF planning there was an intent to involve diverse stakeholders, but actual execution may have fallen short in ensuring

balanced representation across sectors and a lack of involving the peat industry, especially the small-scale enterprises operating in the field. Misunderstandings about funding eligibility and communication issues between the Commission and beneficiaries constituted further challenges. As previous literature (e.g., Norris et al., 2024) notes, the role of agency, beyond mere acceptability, is pivotal in the just transition process. Empowering communities and workers to actively participate in decision-making processes enhances the legitimacy and effectiveness of policies. Community involvement is a fundamental step to ensure that 'those most affected' by the transition have a voice in shaping policies impacting their lives, thereby fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility of the transition.

Ensuring recognitive spatial justice in Finnish JTF planning could have started by recognising the evident non-monetary place attachments: peat industry practitioners, their family members and communities have profound ties with the livelihoods, its practices and its environments which have failed to be recognised in just transition policy formulation (see Lempinen, 2023; Lempinen & Vainio, 2023; for similar failures in Ireland, see Banerjee & Schuitema, 2022). Previous accounts of peat workers' transition experiences have demonstrated that instead of a simple source of employment and income, Finnish peat workers perceive their livelihood as a 'lifestyle' and a 'family member' and report deep non-monetary place attachments to their communities and rural Finland (Lempinen & Vainio, 2023). This would have called for more 'place sensitive policies', recognising local values. Further, jobs in carbon-intensive industries are often deeply rooted in local culture and identity (see e.g., Della Bosca & Gillespie, 2018). As such, they cannot be simply addressed technically and be replaced by so-called 'green jobs' (Abram et al., 2022, p. 1033; Lempinen & Vainio, 2023).

Recognitive justice involves acknowledging and respecting the identities and experiences of affected individuals and communities, and it should be integrated with distributive and procedural justice. As noted by Weller et al. (2024) although difficult to measure, addressing emotional well-being is crucial for the acceptability and success of transition policies. This calls for place-sensitive policies that recognise the deep cultural and emotional attachments communities have to their livelihoods, especially in carbon-intensive industries like peat in Finland. Rather than treating jobs simply as sources of income, just transition frameworks must acknowledge them as lifestyles and integral parts of local identity. Failing to recognise these attachments risks alienating communities and undermining the fairness of the transition process, as justice extends beyond employment into cultural and emotional domains (Abram et al., 2022; Lempinen & Vainio, 2023).

Overall, recognitive spatial justice requires locally formulated definitions for concepts of subjective wellbeing, development and desirable futures instead of relying only on objective economic measures. This approach ensures a holistic and respectful handling of transitions by incorporating local identities and cultural attachments into policy, rather than focusing solely on macro-economic development and measures. Hence, as a once concrete policy implication, JTF could be integrated or at least aligned to the most grounded form of local led development supported by the EU – the LEADER groups – which is considered more localised than regional actors. This would ensure that policies are not only fair in terms of interregional resource distribution but also in acknowledging and valuing the affected communities' identities and contributions.

6.3. Manifestations and implications of territorial governance principles in justice-centred policies

Utilising a (territorial) governance framework can help to structure the 'lessons learned' in Finnish JTF planning and programme development. Table 2 represents the key lessons learned in the Finnish JTF in relation to relevant TG principles and consequently to policy implications for any justice-centred policymaking.

The focus on the phasing-out of energy peat, driven by political commitments, also created inter-regional tensions and concerns about the effective use of funds. The diverse needs and contexts of different regions and people were not sufficiently considered concerning the ongoing transition to phasing out peat. Youth organisations and other stakeholders were underrepresented in the monitoring committees, suggesting that the involvement of diverse groups was not as robust as intended. Further, the guidelines for the JTF plans changed frequently, leading to frustration among regional actors about losing important issues. This inconsistency highlights a failure to provide stable and predictable guidance.

Stakeholder mobilisation and integration should adhere to the partnership principle throughout the entire policy cycle. Although institutionalised forms for knowledge and information exchange among stakeholders existed, they were less developed than in other cohesion or rural development policies. Both regional interviewees and DG Regio noted this. Youth involvement in programme implementation and evaluation, such as in monitoring committees and steering groups, would have needed improvement. While TG researchers suggest that territorial policies should ideally adapt based on new information and learning, we found that in JTF programming, adaptation occurred at the regional level due to new information or requests from higher policy levels, rather than from local knowledge and the needs of those most affected by the transition, such as peat entrepreneurs.

From a governance perspective, our analysis reveals noteworthy lessons regarding the consideration of place-based and territorial specificities. We found modest top-down steering regarding programme focus on peat and the programme development process as such. This is because the regional level had to adapt regional strategies considering new demands 'from the above'. To cover for the potential omissions that result from these interactions

Table 2. Key lessons learned in the Finnish JTF in relation to relevant TG principles.

Territorial governance dimension	Characteristics	Lessons learned and manifestation in Finnish JTF	Implications for Justice Debates
Coordinating actors and institutions	Involve sub-national authorities and other public and private actors. Policymaking agency devolved to the lowest level. Vertically embedded in multilevel governance structures.	EU-national-regional coordination: (perceived) changes of direction and focus EU-level coordination across DGs: (perceived) lack of coordination. National-regional coordination: changing perspectives. Regional: intra-regional & regional WGs, intra-regional coordination less developed than in other policies.	Ensures procedural justice by including multiple governance levels. In the JTF case, varying coordination challenges can impact equitable participation and distribution of resources.
Integrating policy sectors	Synergies between public, private, and civil society actors created horizontally. New networked structures enable territorial cohesion.	Programme planning and development: rather symbolic focus on peat sector. Programme implementation: funding eligibility possibly open to various sectors.	Enhances distributive justice by potentially widening the scope of beneficiaries across different sectors. Symbolic focus may undermine effective resource distribution.
Mobilising stakeholder engagement	Relevant and interested actors may participate in shaping policymaking processes. Local/regional autonomy in public administration improved.	Must follow the partnership principle through entire policy cycle. Regional level: various institutionalised forms for knowledge and information exchange. Less developed and used as in other regional/rural development policies. Youth involvement to be improved for programme implementation and evaluation (e.g., monitoring committees and steering groups)	Promotes procedural justice by ensuring diverse stakeholder participation. Various gaps in Finnish JTF, e.g., youth involvement and regional engagement need improvement for inclusive decision-making.
Adaptive to changing contexts	Changes in a territorial context are reviewed by relevant actors together. Territorial policies are adapted considering new information and learning.	Adaption at regional level to new information/requests from higher levels of policy making rather than adaption of territorial policy due to local knowledge.	Supports procedural and recognitive justice by adapting policies to new information. Limited local knowledge integration may hinder equitable and context-sensitive outcomes.
Place-based/territorial specificities	Bottom-up processes are driven by local knowledge creation. Motivation to find solutions to territorial challenges through focused visions and strategies.	Modest top-down steering regarding programme focus on peat: suggested by EU COM based on Finnish Government programme's commitment to reduce use of energy peat and managing authority agreeing. Identification of eligible regions not decided by the COM. Modest top-down steering in programme development: regional level had to adapt regional strategies in light of new demands.	Enhances recognitive justice by valuing local knowledge and bottom-up processes. Top-down steering can limit the effectiveness of truly localised, just solutions.

of different policy levels in the process, national funds should be made available to complement EU funding to avoid externalising the responsibility of delivering just outcomes solely to the EU. This aligns with the EU´s complementary principle of structural funds, ensuring that national governments also contribute to addressing the socio-economic impacts of transitions. Securing national funding enhances the scope and effectiveness of transition policies, ensuring that the support provided is adequate and tailored to local contexts. This dual approach, with clear coordination between national and EU funds, could strengthen the legitimacy and acceptance of policies among affected populations, avoiding administrative confusion and ensuring cohesive policy implementation.

Finally, there is also a need to synchronise the time frames of the transition process, and the funding allocated to alleviate their impacts. In the Finnish context, the government decision to phase out energy peat was announced in 2019, while the first JTF funds for the 2021–2027 period only became available by application in 2023. Combined with the faster-than-anticipated decline in energy peat demand. the delayed availability further exacerbated the challenges experienced by peat industry workers and added yet another layer of confusion and insecurity to their precarious situation.

In operational terms, the Finnish JTF experience points to several actionable insights grounded in territorial governance principles. First, stakeholder engagement should extend across the entire policy cycle, not only to the planning stage. In the Finnish case, this would have meant ensuring that underrepresented groups such as peat entrepreneurs, small-scale operators and youth organisations were also given formal roles in monitoring and implementation committees, rather than being marginally involved or absent altogether. Second, adaptive governance mechanisms that combine bottom-up local knowledge with top-down adjustments could improve both uptake and effectiveness.

For example, structured territorial reviews could have helped integrate context-specific needs from peat-dependent communities into programme design, rather than primarily adapting to evolving EU/national guidelines. Third, top-down steering from the EU and at the national level should be balanced with genuine regional capacity to shape programmes in response to their own challenges. In Finland, this could have allowed regions where peat plays only a marginal role to focus more on locally relevant transition issues, while still aligning with national and EU climate goals. Finally, regional working groups with diverse stakeholders – including those that emerged informally during the Finnish JTF process – can foster ownership and continuity, provided they have clear mandates, adequate resources and mechanisms that ensure participation is genuinely influential rather than merely symbolic.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The Finnish experience with the Just Transition Fund (JTF) underscores the complexity of balancing between place-based and people-centred distributive justice (Storper, 2011) in place-sensitive sustainability transitions (e.g., Beer et al., 2024, Norris et al., 2024). While Finland successfully ensured broad regional coverage for JTF funding, this broad allocation led to tensions among regions and blurred the focus on those groups most affected in the transition, such as peat workers and entrepreneurs. As such, this study highlights that inter-regional distributive justice is insufficient to address the cognitive and emotional dimensions of perceived injustices among local communities and stakeholders (e.g., Lempinen, 2025; Lempinen & Vainio, 2023, forthcoming). Moving forward, if future justice-centred policies in the EU and beyond want to tackle the geographies of discontent and left-behindness, they must adopt more conceptually nuanced approaches that integrate the socio-psychological and cognitive dimensions (Luukkonen et al., 2021) of (in)justice evaluations. These approaches should also enhance the agency of affected groups, ensuring they can actively participate in shaping the decisions that impact their livelihoods and wellbeing (Jones, 2019; Haupt et al., 2024).

From a procedural justice perspective, inconsistent guidance and shifting directives from the national and EU levels disrupted the planning process, creating frustration and uncertainty among regional actors. While the JTF process nominally promotes stakeholder participation through the Partnership Principle, the Finnish implementation revealed significant gaps, particularly in including marginalised groups like peat entrepreneurs and youth organisations. Addressing these shortcomings requires a stronger commitment to transparent and inclusive governance frameworks that ensure diverse voices are represented throughout the policy cycle from planning to implementation. Improved communication and capacity-building initiatives are necessary to align expectations and enhance local-level engagement in regions and communities undergoing socio-economic transformation (Garvey et al., 2022).

The findings of this analysis also reveal that recognitive justice remained underemphasised in the Finnish JTF process. The socio-cultural significance and non-monetary place attachment of peat as a livelihood was overlooked, with policy discussions primarily framed in macroeconomic terms. This highlights the need for place-sensitive policies that acknowledge non-monetary attachments and integrate local definitions of wellbeing and identity into just transition frameworks (Banerjee & Schuitema, 2022; Della Bosca & Gillespie, 2018). Hence, aligning the JTF with grassroots initiatives, such as LEADER programmes, could enhance the localisation of justice-focused policies and better address the socio-cultural dimensions of transition (Weller et al., 2024).

Finally, governance challenges in the Finnish JTF process reflect broader issues in multi-level coordination and policy implementation in the EU. The lack of stable and predictable guidance from the EU and at national levels hindered the timely and effective mobilisation of resources

at regional level. Synchronising the timelines of policy planning and implementation is critical, as demonstrated by Finland's delay in utilising JTF funds despite early commitments to phase out peat (Soimakallio et al., 2020). To strengthen the legitimacy of future justice-centred policies, national governments must complement and temporally synchronise EU funding with additional resources.

While this analysis provides valuable insights of the JTF process in Finland, it is limited by its focus on a single country and sector, which constrains broader generalisations. Future research should build on comparative studies on just transitions, like Sandmann et al. (2024), to examine how different governance arrangements and justice narratives shape outcomes across contexts. Moreover, there is an explicit and growing need to identify examples of successful practices and frameworks that enable effective policy transfer of just transition principles between different regional settings and governance structures. It would be especially valuable to undertake mixed-method, transdisciplinary analyses or research initiatives that can empirically distinguish and verify the effects of regional funding instruments (e.g., the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and JTF) not only on regional economic trajectories but also on perceived wellbeing, institutional trust or satisfaction with governance.

While this analysis has provided rather critical insights into the Finnish JTF planning process, it is essential to acknowledge that structural funds remain an effective instrument for driving cohesion policy across the EU and can make a substantial difference to local socioeconomic realities. The core problem in the Finnish case lies not with the concept of the JTF itself but in how plans were developed. Justice, the founding principle of the fund, was often overshadowed by a tendency to treat it as a conceptually glorified version of established regional development instruments such as the ERDF, without fully embracing its unique role in promoting fairness for communities being – or feeling – left behind (Luukkonen et al., 2021).

Recent scholarship underscores that even well-intentioned place-based strategies risk deepening discontent if they fail to engage with local identities, sociopsychological attachments and recognitive justice (Bailey et al., 2023; Beer et al., 2024; Rainnie & Snell, 2024). In parallel, we see great potential in the recent framing of 'people-centred and place-based' approaches (Howcroft & Rees, 2023; Middlemiss et al., 2024), which aligns closely with Deep Place thinking (Adamson et al., 2023) as well as key principles of Territorial Governance (Moodie et al., 2021). While the binary between people and places remains a perennial tension in regional studies and development practice, this analysis on the JTF in a Finnish context illustrates what happens when macro-level strategies for regions neglect the lived experiences and perspectives of people themselves.

Looking ahead, this analysis underlines the importance of strengthening the science–policy interface for just transition policies. While our focus here has been on the processes of policy formulation, the societal effects of such policies – whether in terms of perceived fairness, trust in institutions or socioeconomic outcomes – are only fully felt, experienced and verifiable during and after implementation. This calls for more systematic integration of policy evaluation into the life cycle of transition instruments such as the JTF. As demonstrated by Ferrara et al. (2022), regional policy impacts can be assessed through composite well-being measures that integrate subjective and objective indicators, enabling a more nuanced understanding of how funding interventions affect people beyond gross domestic product (GDP) growth. Applying similar approaches to just transition policies would allow policymakers to track changes in subjective wellbeing, attitudes and perceptions of justice alongside economic metrics. Large-scale survey infrastructures such as the European Social Survey and Eurobarometer, when linked to NUTS-level geographies, would provide an excellent basis for this work, and should be further developed to meet the specific evidence needs of regional policy evaluation.

In the Finnish context, such an approach could build on a pilot[4] initiative using the biannual 'Terve Suomi' survey by the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (THL) to track subjective wellbeing (SWB) among the rural population during the common agricultural policy (CAP) programming period. This project links wellbeing indicators with detailed rural–urban classifications to monitor progress towards specific CAP sub-objectives. It demonstrates the potential of high-quality, location-specific datasets to inform rural policy evaluation, while also underscoring the need to develop data infrastructures so that such resources are systematically collected, acknowledged and utilised in policy programme design and monitoring.

As a final remark, we live in an era when core normative concepts in social sciences (e.g., democracy, wellbeing freedom) risk being hollowed out through overuse and strategic ambiguity – a phenomenon some have described as the banality of normative discourse under post-truth conditions (McIntyre, 2018; Swyngedouw, 2010). Given that justice – and its spatial applications – occupy such a central place in the literature of human geography and regional studies (e.g., Soja, 2010), when these terms are adopted explicitly in policy frameworks, they must be handled with particular care and scrutiny. Hence, for all future justice-centred policies, it is crucial that the principle of justice truly remains at the forefront, guiding both design and implementation of 'just' policies, to avoid diluting the concept´s transformative and progressive potential.

AI DISCLOSURE

This manuscript was finalised with the assistance of ChatGPT, version 4 (OpenAI). The tool was used solely

to improve the structure, clarity and writing style of the text. No new content, data or references were generated. The authors have carefully reviewed, edited and verified all content and accept full responsibility for the final version of the manuscript.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

As interviewees were advised that their responses would only be accessible to members of the research team there is no publicly available data to report.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ETHICS STATEMENT

During the interviews all participants were informed that their participation in the study was purely voluntary and conferment that they gave oral consent to the use of anonymised interview data to be used in international peer-reviewed academic article.

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NOTES

1. Funding priorities have a regulatory base and all the actions that can be supported by JTF are laid down in the JTF regulation. This provides the framework of what and which sectors can be supported.
2. https://valtioneuvosto.fi/-/10616/hallitus-paatti-vaalikauden-lopun-linjauksista-ja-vuosien-2022-2025-julkisen-talouden-suunnitelmasta?languageId=en_US.
3. On the application of the principles of partnership and multi-level governance in Cohesion Policy programming 2021–2027, see European Union (2021).
4. This pilot applies subjective wellbeing indicators from THL's 'Terve Suomi' survey (2022, 2024, 2026, 2028 waves) to evaluate the Finnish CAP 2023–2027 plan's Specific Objective 8, sub-goal 3: 'improving the average perceived quality of life' in core rural areas, peri-urban rural areas and sparsely populated rural areas. The indicator set comprises the MHI-5 mental health index, a perceived loneliness measure, and an indicator of perceived financial scarcity. Responses are linked to the Finnish Environmental Institute's (SYKE's) urban–rural classification and to ELY-centre (Centre for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment) areas enabling spatially detailed monitoring. Data are processed within THL, with Natural Resources Institute Finland (LUKE), compiling and publishing regional indices via its Agrikaattori portal as part of its performance agreement with the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry of Finland, which oversees CAP policy design and implementation in Finland. Although limited to a single sub-goal, the pilot project represents, in a national context, a significant step in integrating high-quality SWB data into policy impact assessment and exemplifies effective collaboration between ministries and sectoral research institutes in Finland (Kull et al., 2023).

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