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**2026-03-07**
Routledge
http://hdl.handle.net/10138/629328
Osso, B N 2026, 'Towards ‘Just Access’ : A Critical Framework for Analyzing Migrant Labor Governance in the Green Transition', Environmental Politics. https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2026.2640724

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environmental politics

Environmental Politics

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

ISSN: 0964-4016 (Print) 1743-8934 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/fenp20

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**To cite this article:** Berfin Nur Osso (05 Mar 2026): Towards 'just access': a critical framework for analyzing migrant labor governance in the green transition, Environmental Politics, DOI: 10.1080/09644016.2026.2640724

**To link to this article:** https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2026.2640724

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Published online: 05 Mar 2026.

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ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS
https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2026.2640724

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# Towards 'just access': a critical framework for analyzing migrant labor governance in the green transition

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**ABSTRACT**

The pursuit of an ambitious green transition in the European Union (EU) risks overlooking the essential needs and contributions of migrant workers. This article proposes the 'just access' framework for a systematic, critical assessment of how the transition's justice is delimited by migration and labor governance, manifested as physical, legal, and social bordering. The framework does this by operationalizing Nancy Fraser's three-dimensional account of justice – redistribution, recognition, representation – within a three-level model of migrant 'access' (state territory, rights, society). Ultimately, this layered analysis reveals that achieving an equitable and sustainable transition rests upon a structural shift, moving beyond treating migrant workers as passive objects to recognizing them as active subjects with effective justice claims. The framework provides scholars and decision-makers with conceptual tools to identify and challenge systemic inequalities concerning non-citizen workers, thereby advancing discussions on just transitions. The article concludes by demonstrating the framework's application in the EU context.

**ARTICLE HISTORY** Received 12 October 2025; Accepted 1 March 2026

**KEYWORDS** Just transition; migration governance; bordering; European Union; migrant labor; climate justice

## 1. Introduction

In December 2019, the European Commission announced the European Green Deal (EGD) to reinforce its commitment to the Paris Agreement, the first legally binding global treaty on climate change, which the European Union (EU) ratified in 2016 (Commission 2019, p. 22). The EGD's primary objective is to enable a fair transformation of the EU economy and society towards 'climate neutrality,' reaching zero greenhouse emissions by 2050 while reducing systemic social inequalities (Commission 2019, pp. 2–4).

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Increasing labor demand at all skill levels in the green economy and a lack of necessary training programs may delay the urgent reduction of global emissions (Hooper and Huang 2024, p. 1, Acosta *et al.* 2025, pp. 32–33). While acknowledging the long-term necessity of recruiting from third countries and recognizing foreign qualifications for green sectors, official reports by EU institutions and international organizations primarily focus on labor needs rather than the needs of migrant workers (Asikainen *et al.* 2021, Hooper and Huang 2024, Huckstep and Dempster 2024). This narrow framing, however, fails to address social justice dimensions integral to the green transition. Crucially, achieving carbon neutrality justly necessitates addressing the instrumental categorization of migrant workers as labor utilities, rather than key contributors to its realization, and the systemic inequalities they face across all stages of their journeys. Against this background, this article answers the following important questions: How do green transition goals intersect with existing legal and policy frameworks governing migration and labor in shaping the access of migrant workers to state territory, rights, and the host society? What are the key (political, legal, social) barriers to achieving equitable distributional, recognition, and representational outcomes for migrant workers in green economy sectors? By addressing these questions, the article offers a novel lens for studying the intersection of justice, labor, and migration in sustainability transitions, complementing existing debates that have largely overlooked migrant perspectives.

The multidisciplinary literature on 'just transitions' has evolved from a normative ideal to a critical field of inquiry. Scholars have increasingly examined the complex legal (Johansson 2023, Schwöbel-Patel forthcoming), social, cultural, political, economic, and environmental dimensions of just transitions (Williams and Doyon 2019, Wang and Lo 2021), as well as their spatial and temporal aspects (Heffron and McCauley 2018, Stevis and Felli 2020). In the EU, some have questioned the EGD's promises from various perspectives, including social policy (Petmesidou and Guillén 2022), democracy (Buzogány *et al.* 2025), and Nancy Fraser's lens of justice (Buzogány and Scherhaufer 2025). A growing body of work has critically assessed how the green transition can (un)intentionally exacerbate existing inequalities by, for instance, problematizing simplified and instrumental definitions of 'marginalized communities' within just transition frameworks (Bueno Patin and Stapper 2025) or examining the effects of green energy or mining projects on the rights of Indigenous Peoples in the Arctic (Cambou and Buhmann 2025). While a substantial body of literature now offers analytical frameworks for studying just transitions, defining and approaching justice through various lenses (Williams and Doyon 2019, Wang and Lo 2021, p. 5), the intersection of just transitions and migration governance remains largely overlooked.

The literature on the migration–climate nexus has focused mainly on displacement (Doorey *et al.* 2022). By contrast, there is burgeoning empirical attention to the position of workers in sectors facing disruption, focusing on the precarity of workers in fossil fuel industries (Kalt 2021) and the role of trade unions in negotiating a fair transition (Stevis and Felli 2015, Snell 2020). Moreover, a growing scholarship has examined the critical position of migrant workers in the Nordics (Wikström and Sténs 2019, Olofsson 2025). Nevertheless, questions concerning the access of migrants seeking green jobs (such as forestry, mining, sustainable energy) to admission, rights protections, and durable integration have received insufficient scrutiny. This analytical gap, intensified by the rising negative climate surrounding migrants in the post-2015 EU context (Osso 2025a), underscores the necessity of a critical framework on the green transition's justice 'from and with a perspective of migration' (Osso 2023, p. 274). As injustices towards migrant workers are part of the wider economy and society, the framework's findings concerning the green economy offer new analytical insights applicable to justice issues facing those in other industries, as well.

In this article, I introduce the framework of 'just access' to critically assess the green transition's justice for migrant laborers, incorporating Nancy Fraser (2005, 2007, 2008, 2009) three-dimensional account of 'justice' – redistribution (fair shares), recognition (fair respect), and representation (fair voice) – into a three-level model of migrant 'access' (state territory, rights, and society) (Osso 2025a, 2025b). Here, 'migrant workers' capture foreign-born non-citizens working in a country other than their own – including refugees, asylum seekers, temporary and seasonal labor migrants, and, where relevant, mobile EU citizens – differentiated when needed from a legal perspective.[1] Importantly, migrant workers are not a fixed, homogeneous group: their access to territory, employment opportunities, rights, integration, and social belonging, as well as their concomitant experiences of precarity, are situational and shaped by intersecting hierarchies of nationality, race, gender, ethnicity, class, skill level, and legal status (Tapia and Alberti 2019). As Charles *et al.* (2024, p. 529) argue, without attention to these intersecting inequalities, climate transitions can reduce emissions while reproducing structurally racist and gendered employment regimes. Recognizing these differentiated positions is essential when applying the 'just access' framework to different contexts.

The multi-level 'just access' framework – informed by migration law, critical border studies, and social justice theory – offers a practical tool to systematically analyze how migration, bordering, and labor market regimes create systemic power imbalances and perpetuate injustices through physical, legal, and social borders, thus hindering a just green transition for migrant workers. Firstly, the framework operationalizes Fraser's abstract dimensions of justice in the context of migration, treating 'migrant workers'

as an analytical category to expose how different migrant groups experience distinct forms of injustices within these regimes. Then, it helps identify specific barriers to justice for migrant workers, pinpointing *where* injustices occur – whether it is at the border (access to territory), in legal status (access to rights), or in terms of societal integration (access to society)—*why* they occur, and *how* they are maintained. Finally, the framework helps diagnose *which migrant groups* are subalternized or excluded from the green transition's benefits due to socio-economic *im/mobilization*, cultural-geographical *in/visibilization*, and political *silencing* (see Spivak 1988, 2006).[2] Thus, it demonstrates that the possibility of a just green transition is intrinsically linked to addressing social inequalities for migrant workers, specifically by analyzing how denying safe and legal pathways to work in host countries, a comprehensive spectrum of human rights, and meaningful social participation undermines this goal. In analyzing the latter, the framework provides the necessary tools to investigate how specific legal and policy mechanisms concerning the green transition and migration can lead to a tokenistic 'voice' that merely lets subaltern migrants speak (de Kock 1992, p. 46). As Liisa Malkki (1996, p. 393) claims, the real issue of voice is precisely 'the ability to establish a narrative authority over one's own circumstances and future, and, also, the ability to claim an audience.' Thus, the framework provides insights into how these mechanisms may fail to confer the necessary authority for migrant claims to be effectively recognized and acted upon (Fraser 2009, p. 75).

In the following section, I ground the analytical agenda in the EU's ongoing transformation into a carbon-neutral economy and society, addressing its current discourse and the position of migrant workers in it. Then, I introduce the concepts key to the 'just access' framework, drawing on Fraser's understanding of social justice and migrant 'access.' The fourth section presents the 'just access' framework, which utilizes spatial and temporal lenses to examine the production and manifestation of injustices concerning migrant workers (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, Delaney 2015). The penultimate section returns to the EU context to demonstrate how the framework can be used for critically assessing the green transition's justice for migrant laborers. While the current analysis focuses on the EU, the concluding section suggests that the findings necessitate future research toward contextual, national-level studies to investigate the varied justice implications for migrant workers, given substantial intra-EU differences.

## 2. The limits of justness in Europe's green transition

Originating with 1970s trade union responses to decarbonization, the term 'just transition' has broadened to blend labor rights with climate concerns in sustainability transitions, a definition widely adopted by labor unions,

international organizations, and EU institutions (Stevis and Felli 2015, ILO 2018, Snell 2020, Wang and Lo 2021). The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) defines just transition as '[a] set of principles, processes and practices that aim to ensure that no people, workers, places, sectors, countries or regions are left behind in the transition from a high-carbon to a low-carbon economy' (IPCC 2023, 1805). The International Labor Organization (ILO) acknowledges a 'just transition to environmentally sustainable economies and societies' as a key component of sustainable development (ILO 2018, pp. 1–2). The two main elements of just transition, according to the ILO, 'should be decent work for all in an inclusive society with the eradication of poverty [and] with meaningful social dialogue at all levels to make sure that burden sharing is just and nobody is left behind' (ILO 2018, p. 2).

Resonating with the IPCC, the EGD aspires to a just transformation towards climate neutrality by 2050 while reducing systemic societal inequalities. This bold promise has already raised debates on whether a just green transition is possible for diverse regions, individuals, and communities (Buzogány *et al.* 2025, Gray and McArdle 2025), including workers with migrant and refugee backgrounds (Akgüç and Arabadjieva 2024). A qualitative assessment of 25 EU legal and policy documents, governing certain aspects of the green transition or migration, revealed that migrant perspectives are significantly marginalized.[3] Crucially, despite highlighting the need to 'pay attention to the regions, industries and workers who will face the greatest challenges' (Commission 2019, p. 2), the EGD largely fails to provide a specific, dedicated framework for migrant workers, their unique needs and perspectives. The discourse primarily focuses on citizens, highlighting them as 'a driving force of the transition' (Commission 2019, p. 22).

Even when migrant workers are mentioned in official documents concerning just transition, skills attraction, legal (labor) migration, and migrant integration, they are often framed based on their economic value. Whereas the EGD largely overlooks these workers, documents such as the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR), the New Pact on Migration and Asylum (NPMA), and the 'Union of Skills' Communication speak of migrants mainly in terms of a rising demand for labor, for instance, within the EU's green and digital transformations (Commission 2017, 2020, 2025). In particular, the EPSR Action Plan was adopted in 2021 to facilitate a socially just transition in situations such as climate change, paying particular attention to 'underrepresented groups' like individuals with a migrant background (Commission 2021). The Plan states that 'Europe's ageing and shrinking population' and subsequent skill shortages require attracting a diverse workforce from outside the EU and skills recognition to ensure that 'the EU legal migration framework *benefits* European societies and economies' (Commission 2021, pp. 16–18, emphasis added). Similar to the EPSR, the

NPMA, a key policy tool aimed at standardizing asylum and migration frameworks throughout the EU, underscores that '[l]egal migration can bring *benefit* to our society and the economy' (Commission 2020, p. 22, emphasis added). The Pact suggests that 'attracting skills' is significant for the EU to meet 'labour and skills shortages' and compete in 'the global race for talent' while countering its 'ageing and shrinking population' (Commission 2020, pp. 24–25). It further highlights 'the potential of migrant workers to contribute to the green and digital transitions by providing the European labour market with *the skills it needs*' (Commission 2020, p. 25, emphasis added).

In this way, migrant workers are viewed as shortcuts to fill labor gaps in the green economy; 'skilled' migrants are often considered as economic utilities, while those with irregular status, low-skilled, and middle-skilled are mainly ignored. This instrumentalist framing treats them as passive objects of governance rather than active participants, creating a conceptual 'gap' between the rhetoric of the EGD and relevant frameworks, and their practical implementation. Migrants are present when it comes to utilizing their workforce in the green transition but are unequivocally absent, invisible, and silenced as rights-bearing subjects, whose lack of durable integration and participation in decision-making processes continues to plead an explanation. Importantly, as Petmesidou and Guillén (2022, p. 323) note, a significant protection gap exists in the EPSR 'regarding the groups furthest from the labour market, including . . . migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers ,' thereby casting a shadow over the aspirations for a just green transition. This is despite a key claim in the NPMA that 'migrants fully benefit from the European Pillar of Social Rights,' hence from a socially just transition to a net-zero economy (Commission 2020, p. 27).

The EU case exemplifies the analytical gap concerning the just transition and migrant labor nexus. This article argues that from a justice perspective, the green transition necessitates critical inquiry in connection with migration governance, given its significant role in shaping the experiences of migrants working in green economies. The article responds to this necessity of a systematic examination of injustices concerning migrants – both those searching for jobs or those already in the labor market – by considering the challenges to their entry, residence, rights, and integration.

## 3. Justice, labor, and access in the green transition: a multidimensional approach

### *3.1. Justice for all but migrant workers?*

Justice concerns for migrant workers in the green transition are far-reaching, encompassing their journeys from home countries to full

integration into host societies, not merely their role in the green labor market. Some of these workers are likely from countries severely affected by climate change, making justice concerns even more crucial. Otherwise, highly skilled or educated workers may leave their home countries to work in the green economy due to poor employment prospects or labor conditions at home. Regardless of motivation and skill level, all migrants seeking green jobs in another country are compelled to navigate diverse physical, legal, and social borders produced by immigration and bordering regimes.

To critically analyze the green transition's justice for migrant workers at different stages of their journeys, the 'just access' framework incorporates the core analytical components of a just green transition from the perspective of migrants, which informs the systematic critique of existing injustices (Wang and Lo 2021, p. 5). The framework employs Fraser's three-dimensional conceptualization of social justice, understood beyond mere economic redistribution, which is then systematically operationalized within a three-level model of migrant access to examine how bordering delimits justice across three sites (state territory, protection, and society) (Osso 2025b). Using the lens of subalternity (Spivak 1988, 2006), the framework finally unpacks *which* migrant workers are excluded from the green transition's benefits and opportunities despite the undue burdens they shoulder. This helps foreground the experiences and voices of marginalized groups who are often rendered invisible and silenced within dominant legal and policy narratives.

Fraser (2005, 2009) conceptualizes social justice as economic redistribution (opportunities and benefits), cultural recognition (identity and difference), and political representation (voice and participation). Overcoming injustices necessitates addressing all three dimensions to dismantle institutionalized obstacles that hinder individuals from participating as equals in social life or 'parity of participation' (Fraser 2005, p. 73; 2009, p. 16). For migrants working in green economies, *redistribution* (fair shares) involves analyzing the mechanisms governing the equitable allocation of resources, opportunities, benefits, and burdens of the transition, focusing on elements such as access to fair wages, job security, and working conditions within the green economy (Fraser 2009). *Recognition* (fair respect) constitutes the analytical dimension concerned with challenging cultural domination that positions migrant laborers, especially refugees and precarious workers, as 'outsiders' within host societies, leading to the misrecognition of their agency, diverse skills, identities, and contributions (Fraser 2009). Finally, *representation* (fair voice) concerns migrant workers' capacity to participate as peers in advocacy and public deliberations, focusing on the structural mechanisms that determine whether their perspectives are effectively heard and included in decisions concerning the green transition (Fraser 2009).

### 3.2. A three-level model on the borders of 'access'

This section turns to the three-level model of migrant access (Osso 2025a, 2025b), a spatio-temporal lens through which to analyze how selective inclusion to state territory, rights, and host society – through physical, legal, and social bordering – influences the green transition's justice (redistribution, recognition, representation) for migrant workers.

Global phenomena such as international migration, climate change, and the green transition challenge the inherent limits of national labor markets and the traditional account of a public as a national citizenry within a fixed territorial boundary, thereby contesting the assumption of justice within the Westphalian framework (Fraser 2007, p. 16; Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, pp. 101–102). In this article, I maintain the Westphalian structure, given that (labor) migration governance remains largely a national matter, to understand how borders shape the justice claims of migrants in the green economy. Despite coming from outside Westphalian borders, migrants have valid claims to justice because they are significantly affected by legal and policy frameworks governing their access to the green labor market, rights, and integration into host countries (Fraser 2009, pp. 93–95).

Moving beyond the traditional understanding of borders as static, physical, visible, and territory-limiting entities, I use the term 'bordering,' a continuous, socio-legal process of making state borders (Osso 2023) and labor markets (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, p. 101). Bordering practices sustain inequalities within green economies, managing entry (admission), rights protections, and integration into labor markets and societies through social attitudes and discourses, as well as regulatory tools like restrictive immigration policies (Osso 2025b), precarious work permits, and institutional barriers that split labor markets into 'non-competing' divisions based on nationality, occupation, geography, industry, and other parameters (Castles 1995). These tools govern labor migration by arbitrarily formalizing a complex hierarchy of legal statuses and existing invisible social divisions that trap migrant workers behind impermeable borders (Mezzadra and Neilson 2011, p. 192; 2013) while allowing capital to exploit them by leveraging permeable borders and withholding the green transition's benefits (Spivak 2006, p. 483; Wagner 2018, p. 97). These mechanisms of 'differential inclusion' (Mezzadra and Neilson 2011, 2013) disproportionately affect non-citizens beyond mere access to territory and protections, determining who is legally and socially recognized as a worker, who is relegated to informal or exploitative labor conditions, and who can fully (culturally and socio-economically) integrate into society.

Drawing attention to how bordering practices shape justice also helps unpack migrant workers' justice claims and understand their implications in a post-Westphalian context (Fraser 2005, p. 84; Mezzadra and Neilson 2011,

p. 184). While it is crucial to outline the multiple scales and dimensions of justice struggles beyond territorial borders, the 'emphasis on borders and boundaries is meant to shed light on the turbulent processes of *production* of these scales, challenging the very idea of their stability' (Mezzadra and Neilson 2011, p. 184, original emphasis). Below, I detail how the three-level bordering mechanism constrains migrant access to state territory, rights, and society – the levels where their justice struggles for admission, rights, and integration are manifested.

#### 3.2.1. Entry: access to state territory

Migrants' access to state territory and its labor market is regulated primarily at the national level by a complex set of rules governing migration and labor markets. Within the Westphalian framework, states assume migration management as a sovereign right to regulate the entry, stay, and participation of non-citizens in their economy and society, provided, as some argue, they adhere to international legal and human rights obligations (Shachar 2020).

The mode of entry into the host state's territory – legal, documented *versus* illegal, irregular, undocumented – significantly shapes the rights non-citizens are entitled to in that state. Physical entry is managed at official crossing points in land borders, international airports, and seaports through legal mechanisms, such as visas, residence permits, or asylum applications from third-country nationals. As contemporary examples from the EU and the United States illustrate, however, physical entry alone is no longer sufficient for 'irregular' entrants at border and transit zones – legal admission is often required for official entry into state territory (Commission 2020, p. 4; Shachar 2020, p. 24).

In sum, the rules of admission govern how third-country nationals can access the host state's territory and job market, thus significantly shaping their opportunities and rights. The legal framing of migrants before or at the point of entry fundamentally determines the extent of rights they have access to, as well as their socio-economic integration and treatment as foreign laborers.

#### 3.2.2. Protection: access to rights

Once a migrant enters another state's territory, they are entitled to a catalogue of (civil, political, socio-economic, cultural) rights under national, regional, and international human rights frameworks. However, their access to rights protections – legal and procedural avenues to uphold these rights and challenge violations – and entitlements such as durable settlement and employment rests on factors such as their method of entry, the validity, basis, and duration of the visa/permit, and different juridical statuses within labor markets (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, pp. 115–116). Thus, a migrant worker's

legal status determines their socio-economic vulnerability by creating 'legal borders' for the rights and safeguards they can legitimately claim (Osso 2025b).

For migrants residing based on work, the rules of stay depend on the nature of their employment – unless other grounds such as asylum, education, or family reunion exist. In the EU, those working on a temporary, fixed-term basis hold temporary residence permits, while seasonal workers are issued visas or permits for up to 9 months, which are not designed for indefinite stays and generally do not lead to permanent residence. Therefore, employment-based permits restrict migrants' autonomy by conditioning residency on requirements such as stable income and binding them to specific labor contracts (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, p. 116),[4] thereby instrumentalizing foreign labor by linking their stay directly to continuous economic utility.

In addition to a right of residence, work-based permits provide a degree of social security and labor rights, including non-discrimination and adequate working conditions (Acosta *et al.* 2025), typically as per the host state's national law and human rights obligations. For instance, Articles 5–6 of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (UNGA 1965) prescribe States Parties to protect foreign workers against racial discrimination, as well as ensure equal pay for equal work and just, favorable working conditions for everyone, including migrant workers. However, the type and duration of residence and employment significantly shape migrants' ability to access legal protection mechanisms, meaning their legal statuses largely determine their protection against precarity and workplace exploitation beyond mere physical presence. Although membership in a labor union – an internationally recognized right offering protection through collective bargaining – exists (Acosta *et al.* 2025), many migrants, irrespective of their status, face challenges to unionize due to language barriers, short-term employment, lack of knowledge, and fear of deportation or intimidation (Wagner 2018, p. 67). Consequently, structural injustices facing migrant workers persist due to their ambiguous legal status and weak enforcement of protection mechanisms.

In short, conditional access to protection and residence, tied to employment and specific legal statuses, frames foreign laborers through their economic utility. This compels especially already vulnerable migrants (low-skilled, irregular, temporary) toward labor exploitation, undesired jobs, or informal markets to maintain residency, thereby exacerbating their precariousness. Thus, legal borders not only hinder the subaltern migrant's access to civil, social, economic, and cultural rights and robust protection mechanisms but also limit their pathways to long-term integration.

### 3.2.3. Integration: access to society

A migrant's entry and durable, legal stay in the host country offer opportunities for socio-economic and cultural integration, which facilitates the exercise of their rights. Similar to entry and stay, integration remains a site of struggle: migrants, framed as an object of difference, continue to be targeted by the borders of integration until, at least, their naturalization (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, p. 155). Simultaneously, their physical movement from one country to another requires migrants to continuously negotiate their identity and traverse cultural, personal, and social boundaries (Van Houtum and Van Naerssen 2002, p. 132).

This unremitting struggle underscores the fact that migrant integration outcomes are shaped not only by prevailing official discourses and attitudes that create 'social borders,' but also by the formal laws that these borders underlie. Visible or invisible signs such as nationality, race, gender, skill, legal status, and duration of residence play a significant role in determining who is included in the host society and labor market, and to what extent. While dominant discourses and attitudes inform the boundaries of migrant integration, they also often underpin the expansion of border barriers and stricter laws governing migrants' entry, stay, and integration (Osso 2025a, 2025b).

This results in the differentiated inclusion of migrants into the labor market and society (Mezzadra and Neilson 2011, 2013), where migration governance mechanisms, through well-managed entry and settlement, selectively filter 'useful' individuals based on their perceived value, prioritizing economic utility over migrants' integration and exercise of rights (Van Houtum and Van Naerssen 2002, p. 128, Shachar and Hirschl 2013, p. 79). In particular, developed states often perceive refugee integration as a burden while prioritizing 'highly skilled' migrants to address labor gaps and ensure talent attraction and competitiveness in the global knowledge economy (Shachar and Hirschl 2013, p. 107). These priorities undermine the broader integration of disadvantaged migrants, such as refugees facing skills misrecognition as low- or middle-skilled (Wikström and Sténs 2019) or 'irregular migrants' lacking legal status to enter the formal economy (Homberger *et al.* 2022, p. 9). Consequently, these migrants, despite accessing the host state's territory, encounter social borders that restrict their living spaces (e.g. limited access to welfare services), ultimately aimed at driving their return to their home countries (Homberger *et al.* 2022, p. 12). However, even if the highly skilled are considered a more protected stratum, both skilled and unskilled workers share similar struggles and some degree of precarity – due to barriers like discrimination, structural racism, limited human capital, and weak social networks (Martin and Prokkola 2017, p. 145). If unaddressed, these barriers risk compromising the durable integration of migrants working or seeking work in the green economy, irrespective of skill levels.

## 4. Towards 'just access' in the green transition

This section turns to the 'just access' framework, a practical tool for systematically analyzing how top-down migration laws and policies perpetuate injustices for migrant workers in the green economy to expose the green transition's contradictions and limitations (Table 1). For the subaltern migrant, contesting these governmental logics of justice involves challenging the borders that manage their mobility and rights beyond established legal frameworks (Mezzadra and Neilson 2011, pp. 189–190). Therefore, while their justice struggles occur at the national level (entry, rights protection, and integration), their claims remake the boundaries of the public sphere in a post-Westphalian sense.

Identifying the subaltern migrant in the green transition requires analyzing which workers the current frameworks socio-economically *im/mobilize*, culturally and geographically *in/visibilize*, and politically *silence*. These frameworks stratify workers based on nationality and economic utility (Mezzadra and Neilson 2011). Native workers (except citizen minorities) hold an advantage with full rights and immunity from deportation upon unemployment, meaning their residency and rights are not contingent on their labor market utility. Among migrants, workers with refugee backgrounds often have restricted rights to work and face difficulties proving their skills due to a lack of valid documents, frequently leading to their misclassification as low- and middle-skilled. For instance, non-European refugees in the EU (unlike, for example, Ukrainians) typically lack immediate access to work and encounter greater social stigmatization (Osso 2022, 2025a). The law reflects this discursive formation, rendering them in/visible, im/mobile, and silenced. This group is commonly considered culturally or religiously 'too different' (Shachar and Hirschl 2013, p. 77), becoming simultaneously invisible and hypervisible, which undermines their access to full membership in host societies. Although physically mobile as on-site workers in isolated locations, their residency is strictly tied to work contracts, rendering them immobile. Consequently, they are voiceless – unable to participate in decisions concerning labor migration and the green economy due to linguistic, geographical, or political barriers, often lacking networks or resources to join unions or assemblies for representation (Fraser 2008, p. 14).

The sustainability of a just green transition for migrant workers is linked to a transformation in their governance and framing, moving beyond treating them as passive objects to recognizing them as active subjects with inherent rights and voice in decision-making processes. This comprehensive change must address systemic injustices that hinder migrants' inclusion, enabling their access across three levels: just entry (state territory), just protection (rights), and just integration (society).

**Table 1.** 'Just access' framework for migrant workers in the green transition. Source: Author.

| ACCESS \ JUSTICE | | | *WHAT & HOW* | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | **Fair Shares (Redistribution)** | **Fair Respect (Recognition)** | **Fair Voice (Representation)** |
| *WHERE & WHY* | ***the border*** **(physical borders)** | **Just Entry (State Territory)** | **Redistribution of opportunities to enter and access the green labor market**, ensuring access to visas, permits, and recruitment for green jobs. | **Recognition of migrant skills** at the point of entry, regardless of background, origin, or the perceived value of skills. | **Representation in advocacy and decision-making on entry**, allowing migrant agency in shaping decisions governing their mobility and access to green jobs. |
| | ***the law*** **(legal borders)** | **Just Protection (Rights)** | **Redistribution of the resources and burdens of the green transition under the law**, ensuring equal pay, decent working conditions, and equal access to social security. | **Recognition of the full spectrum of rights in law and practice,** ensuring migrants in green sectors can exercise them without discrimination and misrecognition. | **Representation before the law**, allowing migrant workers to effectively use their agency to protect their rights through legal and political channels. |
| | ***the social*** **(social borders)** | **Just Integration (Society)** | **Redistribution of the resources and burdens of the green transition in society**, ensuring fair access to long-term living and services (e.g., education, community support, and housing). | **Recognition in society**, promoting diverse cultures and identities in migrants' access to services, rather than pushing for assimilation into the host society. | **Representation in society**, ensuring migrant workers are meaningfully included in civil society and local community decisions that affect their lives. |
| ***WHO IS THE SUBALTERN?*** | | | im/mobilized | in/visible | silenced |

### 4.1. Just entry (state territory)

The first-level concerns 'just entry' (or access to state territory). As entry initiates an encounter with the host country's political community, migration policies can either facilitate or constrain the political inclusion of migrant workers in this community and the green labor market. Selective entry, such as through regulatory frameworks prioritizing the highly skilled based on their perceived economic benefit, may create early injustices for certain groups (Van Houtum and Van Naerssen 2002, p. 128, Shachar 2006, p. 155).

Examining the justness of regulatory frameworks governing access to territory and green labor markets (visas, admission, and recruitment) requires analyzing their impact on migrants' entry into host countries for green jobs. The three dimensions of social justice – redistribution, recognition, and representation – are examined at this 'access' point:

(a) Fair shares in access to territory: *Do legal and policy frameworks ensure equitable allocation of resources and opportunities for everyone seeking access to green jobs?* This dimension focuses on assessing opportunities and resources for access to state territory at the point of entry. It examines whether laws and policies governing entry (visas, admission, and recruitment for green jobs) allocate opportunities on a non-discriminatory basis. It investigates how restrictive entry, visa, or permit policies deprive migrants of access to the host country's territory, thereby blocking safe and legal migration routes for entry into green labor markets.
(b) Fair respect in access to territory: *To what extent do these frameworks respect all types of skills and backgrounds at the point of entry?* This dimension focuses on the recognition of skills and qualifications regardless of cultural background or nationality. While formal legal boundaries concerning skill levels may be obscured in cross-border mobility, migrants' access to green jobs matching their skill levels is ultimately hindered by the lack of effective skills recognition mechanisms (Mezzadra and Neilson 2011, p. 193). This is compounded by the influence of factors like language, culture, and religion (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, p. 106). The dimension examines how this misrecognition – perpetuated by legal and policy frameworks that often frame migrant workers merely as instrumental 'talent' – is exacerbated by informal biases and systemic flaws in recruitment for green jobs.
(c) Fair voice in access to territory: *To what extent do migrant workers or their groups have effective agency in shaping these entry frameworks?* This dimension focuses on analyzing migrant voice and representation in advocacy and decision-making processes concerning migrant

mobility and access to green jobs. Recalling Malkki (1996, p. 393), 'voice' is understood not as a symbolic act, but as the capacity to establish a narrative authority over one's circumstances and to claim an audience in institutional settings. The dimension thus investigates the formal and informal mechanisms that either grant or obstruct this necessary representation in decisions, assessing the extent of migrant agency (individual or through labor unions) to effectively influence policy outcomes.

Finally, it is essential to address who is excluded from regulatory frameworks, identifying groups overlooked or disadvantaged by entry and labor market policies. Such groups may include migrants from low-income countries requiring visas or permits, those whose qualifications are unrecognized, or those (such as refugees) unable to prove their skills due to a lack of documents, hindering their access to higher-skilled green jobs despite being qualified.

### 4.2. Just protection (rights)

The second level, 'just protection' (or access to rights), concerns the search for legal inclusion following successful entry. This level necessitates examining laws, policies, and practices governing migrants' legal status, rights, and social benefits in green jobs once inside the host country, and whether these are hindering or facilitating durable stay and labor market participation:

(a) Fair shares in access to rights: *Do legal and policy frameworks ensure equitable distribution of the green transition's resources and burdens regardless of migrants' origin, enabling their exercise of rights?* This dimension analyzes how the resources and burdens of the green transition are distributed *under the law*. It examines whether regulatory frameworks grant migrant workers in green jobs equal access to livelihoods and economic resources (such as equal pay for equal work, decent working conditions, and social security) for them to secure their residence and living expenses in the host country, irrespective of nationality.

(b) Fair respect in access to rights: *Do these frameworks fully recognize the identity and differences of migrant workers in green sectors, ensuring the exercise of rights without discrimination?* This dimension addresses whether the (socio-economic, civil, political, cultural) rights of migrant workers in green jobs are fully respected and recognized *under the law*, regardless of diverse identities, qualifications, or legal status. Beyond formal legal guarantees, it examines how practical barriers, such as ineffective recognition of foreign qualifications

(such as skill testing in the host country's language) and cultural biases related to soft skills (language, culture, religion), undermine equal access to rights. Analyzing these exclusionary practices, which also persist in green sectors, is important to unpack that rights are not only legally guaranteed but also practically accessible for migrants in green jobs. The core issue concerns how *the law* perpetuates systemic misrecognition of migrant workers, which limits not only access to better jobs (as discussed in Section 4.1.b. above) but also their access to protections, namely the ability to exercise their rights. The ultimate question is whether these workers are framed as rights-bearing subjects or merely as temporary labor utilities (Martin and Prokkola 2017), as this instrumental framing enables misrecognition and thereby determines the extent of their legal protection and access to rights.

(c) Fair voice in access to rights: *Do these frameworks ensure the agency of migrant workers in green sectors to effectively use legal and political avenues to protect their rights?* This final aspect examines how migrants in green jobs can access and utilize legal and non-legal grievance mechanisms (e.g. courts, non-judicial venues) and political avenues (e.g. unions, public demonstrations) to advocate for their rights once they are inside the host country, without fear of deportation or loss of livelihood.

Ultimately, it is crucial to investigate who is missed, paying particular attention to groups whose rights or protections are inadequate under current laws. These groups include migrants unaware of their rights, those in irregular situations who avoid appearing before authorities (including unions and protection against exploitation/trafficking), and those who hesitate to seek justice due to reasons such as temporary employment (e.g. seasonal workers) or their refugee status.

### 4.3. Just integration (society)

The final level, 'just integration' (or access to society), analyzes migrant workers' search for integration and participation in host communities, focusing on the effective exercise of their rights. The framework identifies integration as a two-way process, thereby opposing the premise of 'recognition by assimilation' that burdens migrants with adaptation to host societies (Spivak 1988, p. 91, Goksel 2018, p. 85). Assessing whether access to society is equitable for migrant workers in green sectors necessitates applying the justice dimensions to regulatory frameworks shaping societal integration – including services, housing, and education – and the ways to promote this

through community involvement (Williams and Doyon 2019, p. 150, Gray and McArdle 2025, pp. 198–199):

(a) Fair shares in access to society: *Is practical access to resources and services equitable for the durable social inclusion of migrants working in green jobs?* This dimension involves the economic aspect of integration – specifically, whether resources and burdens of the green transition are fairly distributed in *host societies*—by focusing on practical access to resources for long-term living (such as housing) and services (such as education and community support) that uphold migrants' durable stay and the effective exercise of their rights.
(b) Fair respect in access to society: *Does the host country promote respect for diverse cultures and identities in migrants' access to services, or does it push for assimilation?* This analyzes how the diverse identities and contributions of migrants in green jobs are recognized. While many Western liberal countries prioritize labor market integration, socio-cultural integration is equally significant (Goksel 2018, pp. 86–87). The analysis focuses on the structural mechanisms that enable the mutual recognition of cultures, assessing whether migrants are compelled to forfeit their linguistic, cultural, or social identities to access services (Castles 1995, p. 297).
(c) Fair voice in access to society: *Can migrant workers effectively participate in community decisions that affect their lives?* This dimension analyzes the available avenues for migrant workers in green jobs to participate effectively in civil society and local decision-making – through local/municipal councils and organized groups that represent their interests – to voice their concerns regarding their lives in host societies. As Gray and McArdle (2025, p. 199) argue, such active community participation 'can foster more deliberative democratic approaches to energy transition that are fairer and more successful.'

Finally, it is necessary to identify the groups who struggle to integrate or whose voices are absent from local decision-making. These may include migrant workers who are socially marginalized, lack sufficient social networks, do not speak the local language, or reside in geographically remote or segregated areas (such as near green energy construction sites due to work assignments).

## 5. Labor migration and green transition in the EU: a nexus in the making?

The 'just access' framework offers significant opportunities for examining the perspectives, needs, and rights of foreign workers in the EU green sectors.

The implications of increasingly hardening migration governance rules, particularly since the so-called 'refugee crisis' in 2015 (Commission 2020), for migrant access to green jobs present a key topic of inquiry. Research should examine how changes in EU entry and residence rules after the New Pact affect migrant access to the green labor market. Similarly, the absence of legal definitions of 'green jobs' and 'green skills' in official EU instruments (such as the EGD) – despite existing definitions in the European Parliament's 2009 study, 'A Green New Deal for Europe,' and a 2021 report by the Commission advisors (Schepelmann *et al.* 2009, p. 28, Asikainen *et al.* 2021, p. 1) – creates a lacuna in regulating the role and rights of migrant workers in the green transition.

Studies may also investigate how migrant political representation (such as local/regional suffrage in Member States like Denmark, Finland, and Sweden) helps shape decisions critical for a just green transition in the EU, although this may be challenging to achieve at the EU level (Yilmaz and Wolffhardt 2024). Moreover, since just access to rights fundamentally depends on nationality, legal status, and residence, research should investigate how precarious or temporary employment in green jobs undermines migrants' ability to claim rights and protections in an EU country.

Just access to society is another vital point of investigation. While migrant integration is primarily governed by Member States, the EPSR sets principles for EU institutions and Member States to improve working and living conditions for *everyone* in European societies (Commission 2021). Scholars should examine whether these principles challenge regulatory frameworks that treat migrants as temporary labor utilities in specific Member States or regions.

Finally, literature should use the just access framework to identify the migrant groups overlooked or treated unfairly by the laws, policies, or practices concerning the green transition and labor migration (such as low- or middle-skilled, non-Ukrainian refugees, those in the informal labor market, the unemployed, or those lacking a voice or language skills to speak their concerns). Identifying these subaltern groups is essential, as they are more susceptible to shouldering the burdens of the green transition without receiving corresponding benefits.

## 6. Conclusion

This article introduces the 'just access' framework, integrating Fraser's three-dimensional account of justice with a three-level model of migrant access to examine the green transition's justice for migrant workers. Importantly, it moves beyond listing the 'what' of injustices (Wang and Lo 2021, p. 5) to explain why and how they are maintained, and which groups are more affected.

The framework shows how laws, policies, and practices enforce maldistribution, misrecognition, and misrepresentation at *the border*, in *the law*, and *in society*, thereby revealing the systemic reasons why the green transition risks perpetuating injustices for migrant workers. This structural diagnosis pinpoints the precise sources of injustices: *maldistribution* (unfair shares) results from unequal distribution of resources and burdens (e.g. lower wages, precarious residency), *misrecognition* (unfair respect) stems from viewing migrants as commodities rather than rights-bearing subjects (e.g. cultural hierarchy and devaluation), and *misrepresentation* (unfair voice) is caused by structural exclusion from power (e.g. lacking the right to vote or union representation). The framework links these injustices to their locus: restrictive laws on access to territory, conditional status rules on access to rights, or assimilationist policies on access to society.

By placing the state border at the center of the analysis, the framework examines how political, legal, and social bordering constrain spaces of justice. It argues that migrants' struggles to participate as equals in deliberations concerning the green transition create transnational publicity in the Fraserian sense, challenging the failure of political citizenship to respond to the justice claims of those who are not members of the national public (Fraser 2007, 2009, p. 95). This layered analysis of 'just access' offers insights into the systemic factors – including the reductionist framing of migrant labor for the rapid construction of green infrastructure – that reproduce injustices within the green transition, addressing key questions regarding migrants' admission, role, and inclusion in host countries.

Despite growing interest in climate justice, existing literature has overlooked a comprehensive, systematic socio-legal analysis of how green transition frameworks practically impact marginalized migrant groups. Without a multidimensional and critical approach, legal and policy frameworks risk reproducing systemic injustices in the green transition. Therefore, the 'just access' framework not only seeks to advance critical debates across environmental politics, migration law, critical border studies, and social justice studies but also offers crucial insights to actors who can affect change, including practitioners, lawyers, bureaucrats, civil society, human rights advocates, and migrants themselves (see Delaney 2015, p. 272). This analytical agenda introduces practical research avenues, such as analyzing 'just access' for migrant workers in the EU and Member States, particularly in peripheral regions (such as the Arctic or rural areas), or examining how gender may add another layer of complexity in the green transition. Ultimately, the framework demonstrates that the sustainability of a just green transition is contingent on future research and policymaking recognizing migrant workers as key agents – rather than passive objects of governance – thereby ensuring an inclusive and sustainable outcome for all.

## Notes

1. The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees defines the term 'refugee' as individuals forced to flee their home country due to persecution, while 'asylum seeker' refers to those who have applied for legal recognition of refugee status.
2. Political theorist Antonia Gramsci (1926/1978) coined the term 'subaltern' to describe the economically subjugated and discursively demonized working population in Italy's peripheries. The term was expanded by Spivak (1988, 2006), defining it as a subordinate and marginalized position due to differences in race, gender, or class, thereby lacking the capacity to speak, be heard, and be recognized. I understand the subaltern as a dynamic category of socio-economic, cultural, and political inferiority within hegemonic power structures, 'removed from all lines of social mobility' (Spivak 2006, p. 475), a status marked by systematic misrepresentation that excludes certain groups from power and denies them a voice (Fraser 2009).
3. From thirty-seven official EU documents, twenty-five were downsampled for analysis using the Atlas.ti software, with codes tracking recurrent keywords (proto-narratives) such as 'just/fair, green, inclusive, or sustainable transition', 'ageing population', 'labour/skills shortage', 'legal/work-based/labor migration', 'foreign worker/labour', 'attract(ing) skills/talent/workers', 'skilled labour/worker/workforce', 'vulnerable/underrepresented people/groups/workers', and 'stakeholder/public participation'. Six legislative texts and seven Commission and Parliament reports containing the highest density of relevant codes were then examined in depth to assess how migrants were represented – particularly regarding access to the EU, the labor market, and integration, especially in the context of the green transition. Key legislative documents include the EGD, the Council Recommendation on ensuring a fair transition towards climate neutrality (Council of the EU 2022), the Net-Zero Industry Act (European Union 2024), and those on labor migration and skills governance, such as the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR), the New Pact on Migration and Asylum (NPMA), and the 'Union of Skills' Communication (Commission 2017, 2020, 2025).
4. A typical example is the EU's recast Single Permit Directive (2024/1233) (European Union 2023), which restricts non-EU workers by tying the continuation of residence permits to employment status, allowing permit withdrawal and subsequent deportation after three months of unemployment, or six months for permit holders of over two years (Recital 45 and Article 11(4)).

## Acknowledgments

I would like to convey my sincere thanks to the 'Reconceptualizing Boundaries Together Towards Resilient and Just Arctic Future(s) (REBOUND)' project team and the organizers of the panel on 'Climate Politics and Regionalism in Europe' at the 28th IPSA World Congress of Political Science in South Korea for the insightful discussions.

## Disclosure statement

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

## Funding

This work was supported by the Strategic Research Council of Finland [grant number: 358482, 358501].

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