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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

No Green Without Fair: Sustainability as an Equity Project

 DOWN TO EARTH

18 July 2026 ·

ENVIRONMENT

GS3

GS1

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GS3

GS1

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THE LIFT LINE

A sustainability that asks the poorest to sacrifice first and benefit last will not survive contact with democratic politics. Ecology and equity are routinely treated as rivals, one demanding restraint and the other demanding growth. The argument of this editorial is the opposite: **a green transition that is not fair is not durable**, and inclusion is not a soft add-on to environmental policy but the condition on which it stands or falls.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

Examiners increasingly reject the tidy separation of “environment questions” from “development questions” and reward candidates who can hold both together. The idea that sustainability is fundamentally a question of **who bears the burden and who reaps the benefit** is exactly the integrative lens the Mains paper looks for, and it lets you connect environment with social justice, the informal economy and India’s development trajectory in a single frame.

GS Paper 3: conservation, environment and the economics of a low-carbon transition. **GS Paper 1:** the social effects of change and the exposure of vulnerable groups.

For **Prelims**, hold the specifics: **Common But Differentiated Responsibilities and Respective Capabilities (CBDR-RC)** is a founding principle of the **UNFCCC (1992)**, recognising that all states share responsibility but not equally; a **just transition** ensures workers and communities dependent on carbon-heavy industries are not abandoned as those industries decline; the **Sustainable Development Goals (Agenda 2030)** carry the pledge to **leave no one behind**; **climate justice** and **intergenerational equity** frame fairness across groups and generations; India’s **LiFE, Lifestyle for Environment**, promotes sustainable consumption.

For **Mains**, argue that durable sustainability requires distributing both the costs and the gains of the transition fairly, and empowering informal workers and the poor rather than pitting ecology against their livelihoods.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The environmental movement long spoke the language of limits, of what humanity must stop doing. That framing has a blind spot: **the burden of both environmental damage and environmental restraint falls unevenly**. The poor live closest to polluted rivers, flood plains and heat-exposed worksites, and they have the fewest resources to adapt. When a coal region is asked to decarbonise, it is the miner and the daily-wage transporter, not the shareholder, who first loses income.

This is why global climate governance was built on **CBDR-RC**: the recognition that historical responsibility for emissions is concentrated in the industrialised world while the sharpest **vulnerability** is concentrated among the poor. The same logic that operates between nations operates within them. **Amartya Sen's** distinction between growth and development, and his **capability approach**, reminds us that expanding real freedoms, not merely raising output, is the measure of progress. A transition that shrinks the capabilities of the vulnerable, even in the name of the planet, fails on Sen's own test.

THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

The Poor Are Exposed First and Protected Last

Environmental risk is not distributed by lottery. Informal workers, street vendors, brick-kiln labour, waste-pickers and small farmers face heat stress, air pollution and climate shocks with almost no institutional cushion. They are the frontline of environmental harm yet are structurally invisible in most climate planning, which is designed around formal firms and measurable emissions rather than around exposed lives.

A Transition Without a Safety Net Breeds Backlash

When **decarbonisation** removes livelihoods without replacing them, it manufactures political resistance to the green agenda itself. A **just transition** answers this by financing reskilling, alternative employment and social protection for affected workers before, not after, the old industry closes. Sustainability that ignores this becomes politically brittle, undone by the very communities asked to absorb its costs.

Equity Is the Engine, Not the Brake

The rival framing says fairness slows environmental action by adding cost. The inclusion framing says the opposite: only a transition seen as fair will command the durable public consent that deep decarbonisation needs over decades. Distributing benefits, cheaper clean energy, green jobs, healthier air, to those who most need them turns the poor into stakeholders in sustainability rather than its opponents.

FRAMING	VIEW OF THE POOR	RESULT
Ecology versus equity	A cost or an obstacle	Backlash, brittle policy
Growth-first	Beneficiaries later, if at all	Deferred, uneven gains
Inclusion-first (just transition)	Frontline stakeholders	Durable, consented transition

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

Treat sustainability as a **distributive question layered on an ecological one**. For any green policy, ask two questions in sequence: does it reduce environmental harm, and **who gains and who loses from the way it does so**? A carbon levy, a coal phase-out or a plastics ban can be ecologically sound yet socially **regressive** if its costs land on those least able to bear them. The **capability approach** supplies the yardstick: a policy is genuinely sustainable only if it expands, or at least protects, the real freedoms of the most vulnerable while it protects the environment. Equity and ecology, read this way, are not two goals to be traded off but two tests the same policy must pass.

THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

Green transition -> if burdens and benefits shared fairly: public consent -> durable sustainability ; if costs dumped on the poor: backlash + lost livelihoods -> stalled transition

WAY FORWARD

- 1 Embed a just transition in every green policy.** Attach reskilling, alternative livelihoods and social protection to every phase-out plan, so no coal town or informal cluster is left to absorb the shock alone.
- 2 Make the informal sector visible in climate planning.** Bring waste-pickers, street vendors and small farmers into adaptation programmes with heat-action plans, insurance and worksite protection designed around their real exposure.
- 3 Distribute the benefits, not only the burdens.** Channel clean-energy savings, green employment and cleaner air first to the communities that have borne the greatest environmental harm, converting them into stakeholders.
- 4 Anchor policy in capabilities, not just output.** Judge sustainability measures by whether they expand the real freedoms of the vulnerable, using India's LiFE ethic to shift consumption at the top rather than restraint at the bottom.

PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

The Mains has repeatedly asked whether environmental protection and economic development are compatible, and has probed inclusive growth and the informal economy. This editorial gives you the integrative answer that refuses the trade-off and reframes fairness as the precondition of lasting sustainability.

Practice question: “Environmental sustainability cannot be achieved without social and economic inclusion.” Critically examine in the context of India’s low-carbon transition. (15 marks, 250 words)

Sources: Down To Earth: Climate change, UNFCCC: What is the CBDR-RC principle

Source: No Green Without Fair: Sustainability as an Equity Project — Ujiyari.com | Free UPSC & State PCS Editorial Analysis

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