



COMMUNITY-LED JUST TRANSITION

LEARNING FESTIVAL

9th - 10th
October 2025

Workshop Report

A two-day learning festival hosted by groundWork ¹

Introduction

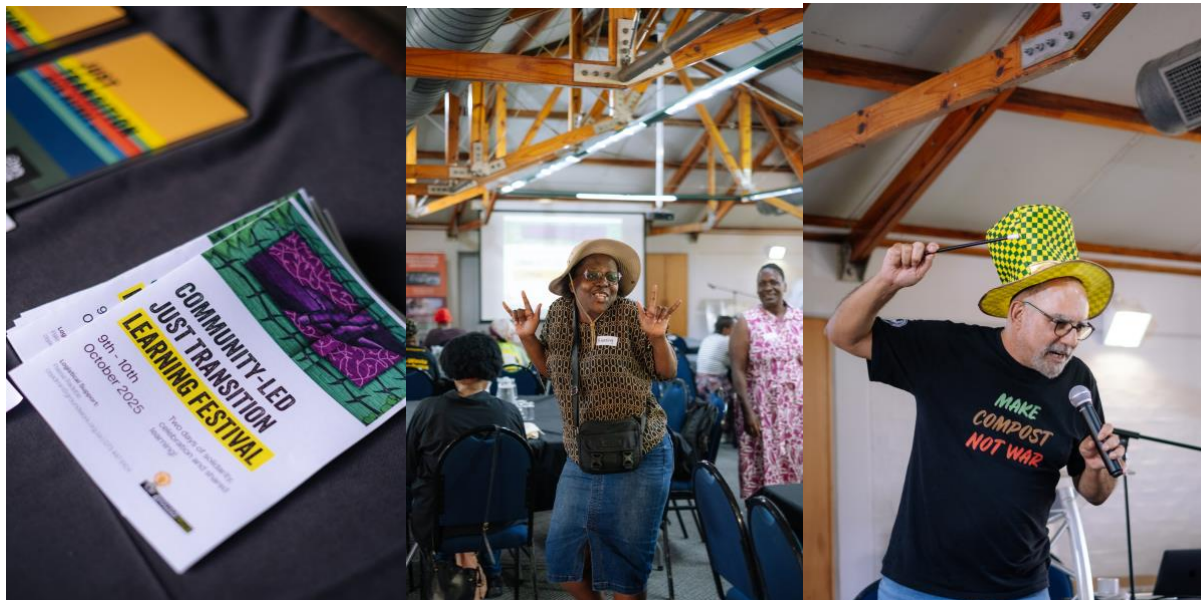
The Community-Led Just Transition Learning Festival was held in Durban on 9–10 October 2025 as part of the Building Regenerative Economies in Fenceline Communities project. This event brought together close to 90 participants, including activists, campaigners, workers and others from across five case studies — initiatives focused on Zero Waste, Energy Democracy, People’s Planning for the Right to Housing, Community Activist Research, and community-led Health and Air Quality monitoring. These case studies represent diverse but interconnected struggles that hold many important lessons about community-led just transitions. After months of deep, reflective work through a series of knowledge-mapping workshops, this festival created a dedicated space to share lessons, processes, and practices across case studies.

The intention of the Learning Festival was not only to exchange knowledge but to build solidarity and collective imagination around what a community-led just transition looks like in practice. The learning festival was designed as a celebration of the work already

¹ Report written by Dr. Taryn Pereira; Design elements by New Noise; Photographs by Natasha Hosken, Amehlo Productions

happening in communities — a gathering filled with joy, music, creativity, and the everyday forms of hopeful resistance that shape grassroots movements. Importantly, this first Learning Festival was intended as a ‘safe space’ within civil society, intentionally crafted to allow candid and honest conversations about organising, strategy, and power. A second learning exchange will be held in 2026, where representatives of government, industry, funding organisations and other role players in the Just Transition space, will be strategically included.

The two-day programme was designed as a ‘market place of ideas’, combining dialogue, presentation, performance, practical workshops and creative role play. Throughout the festival, participants explored their own lessons and those of others, deepening their understanding not only of their own campaign but also of the broader movement. This process enabled activists to see how their work connects: for example, how waste pickers’ knowledge links with energy democracy struggles; how Zero Waste composting approaches intersect with air-quality campaigns; how community-led research strengthens every aspect of the just transition; and so on.



The Learning Festival created time and space for reflection, allowing activists and organisers to step back from their day-to-day struggles and recognise the depth of their own knowledge. It also served as a catalyst for a collective articulation of a community-led just transition — a shared set of ideas that will inform future advocacy, funding strategies, and movement-building efforts, and help translate the Open Agenda for a Just Transition into real, grounded practice.

Above all, this festival affirmed that communities are not waiting for an invitation to contribute to the just transition: they are already doing it. The Learning Festival offered a reflective and creative space to recognise this work, strengthen connections, and grow the shared political imagination needed for the road ahead.

Festival Overview

Day 1 – Thursday 9 October | Durban Botanical Gardens

Day 1 opened in the Durban Botanical Gardens with a lively Market Place, where each of the five case studies hosted a table. These stalls — brought to life with posters, photographs, pamphlets and banners, and ‘hosted’ by core team members from those case studies — invited participants a chance to wander around, ask questions, and get a feel for each other’s work. The Market Place served as a living demonstration of grassroots organising, and facilitated vibrant and in-depth dialogue.



After the market-place, we moved into one of the highlights of the festival - a fun, high-energy podcast-style panel, hosted by scholar-activist-creative Princess Sibanda, who stepped into the role of a charismatic “Just Transition influencer.” Audience members held up cardboard emoji signs — hearts, thumbs-up, — to show their appreciation and support for the speakers. The guest line-up included Happy Skosana, Thandeka Thusini, Buyisiwe Kunene, Promise Mabilo, and Bobby Peek, each sharing reflections on what a community-led just transition looks like in practice.



Participants then moved outside to the Butterfly Dome for an extraordinary performance led by Mpume Mthombeni and the Durban waste pickers. This piece of live theatre combined

storytelling, and real-time waste sorting to illuminate waste pickers' daily struggles and the depth of knowledge they carry.



After lunch, participants regrouped for two parallel practical workshops:

- **Zero Waste: Growing a Green Heart** — a hands-on composting workshop that linked organic waste practices to broader systems of community care, regenerative economies, and environmental health.
- **People’s Planning: Mobilising and Engaging Government** — a practical session on mobilisation strategies, coalition building, and navigating political complexities in just transition work.

These sessions were both deeply political and practical, offering concrete demonstrations and nuanced strategies for building collective power.



Day 2 – Friday 10 October | Sica’s Guesthouse

Day 2 began with an energising welcome and a brief presentation by Carina Conradie from Life After Coal on the **Open Agenda for the Just Transition**, grounding participants in the shared principles that underpin civil society’s vision for a more just and regenerative future. Facilitators then introduced the creative process for the morning: poster-making and collaging as a way to bring together the lessons each case study had surfaced through their knowledge-mapping workshops.



Poster & Collage Process: Bringing Lessons to Life

In small groups, each of the five case studies — Zero Waste, Energy Democracy, People’s Planning for Housing, Community Activist Research, and Health & Air Quality — worked with photographs, reports, and image cut-outs to assemble visual posters capturing their



key learnings. Each group then had a chance to present their posters, which distilled the experience, creativity, and strategy embedded in each case study.



The facilitators helped to identify some of the **cross-cutting themes** that ran through all five case studies.

Key themes included:

- Turning crisis into collective action, using moments of crisis as catalysts for organising and solidarity.

- The importance of slowing down, taking time to build trust, relationships, and deep participation.
- Practising open, bottom-up democracy, where all voices — especially those of marginalised groups — shape decisions.
- Ensuring all key stakeholders are involved, from informal workers and youth to researchers, unions, and local government.
- Recognising that process matters: transformation is slow, relational, and requires patience and care.
- Valuing local leadership, with responses shaped by context rather than externally imposed solutions.
- Prioritising safety — emotional, physical, and psychological — as essential for sustainable activism.
- Using community media and storytelling to communicate lived realities and influence public understanding.
- Strengthening capacity-building and training so that learning circulates widely within movements.
- A strong emphasis on youth leadership, especially young women, as core to long-term movement-building.



These reflections deepened the sense that, despite working on different issues, the five case studies are bound together by shared practices, shared values, and a shared commitment to community-led change.

Afternoon Workshops

The afternoon offered two parallel sessions that brought the day's earlier themes into more focused conversation:

- A **film screening of the UMI-ED documentary**
- A **community-led research workshop** using performance and role-play to explore how research often gets it wrong, and how community-led research needs to be valued and at the heart of learning for the just transition.



Marimba Band Performance

One of the most memorable moments of the entire festival came in the late afternoon, when a **marimba band** took the floor. The gathering erupted into a full on dance party. This performance captured the joyful, celebratory spirit that organisers hoped the Learning Festival would embody.



Looking Ahead towards Learning Exchange 2

The day closed with discussions and reflections about the next Learning Exchange, to be held in 2026. Participants contributed to flipcharts under the themes of ‘who should be there?’; ‘what should we do and what are our key messages to share at Learning Exchange 2?’ and ‘what did we enjoy and what can be done better next time?’.

Who should be there?

- Government departments (ideally Ministers and Directors!): Department of Human Settlements; Department of Mineral and Petroleum Resources; Department of Energy and Electricity; Department of Forestry, Fisheries and Environment;

Department of Water and Sanitation; Department of Basic Education; representatives of local and provincial government;

- Other civil society organisations, including other environmental justice organisations, organisations representing people with disabilities, LGBTQI+ and feminist organisations, Gift of the Givers
- Health care workers, the Nursing Council, Air Quality Officers
- Funders
- The PCC
- The polluters: mining and industry
- Economists and Finance sector
- SA Human Rights Commission
- Human rights defenders
- Traditional healers

What should we do at the next Learning Exchange?

- Make sure government officials and other stakeholders (beyond environmental organisations) are there
- Have hands on sessions (including a solar energy demonstration)
- Have site visits
- Have a session on media / writing to cover community context, to avoid media greenwashing
- Develop an action plan

What should our key messages be?

- Meaningful participation takes time and is worth the effort
- There is knowledge and expertise at community level
- Government officials need to listen to us
- Together, united, we can do big things

What did we enjoy and what can be done better next time?

- We enjoyed the collective voices of people's projects for justice; the market-place (there is so much to learn from all the projects); the waste picker play; the composting and soil testing session; the community research plays; the collage session; the jargon jar; the music; all the very interactive sessions; all the sharing of community experiences

- Next time, the communication around logistics (especially for those travelling from far away) could be better; we should do site visits.

Conclusion

The Community-led Just Transition Learning Festival showed “how ordinary South Africans are already leading innovative efforts toward a just transition”, as articulated in the media article about the event (link below). The 2 day gathering underscored that real change comes from the ground up — through recognition, and solidarity with those already imagining and practising alternatives.

Link to Social Media coverage of the Learning Festival developed by New Noise media:

https://www.instagram.com/reel/DPmBh8kjOwQ/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==

https://www.instagram.com/p/DPokW6UjP0u/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==

https://www.instagram.com/reel/DPosJB0DCif/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==

Link to Daily Maverick article:

<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2025-11-13-from-the-ground-up-sa-citizens-leading-innovative-efforts-toward-a-just-transition/>