

Parallel Transformations, Converging Practice: The Politics of Justice in Vietnam's Green and Digital Transformations

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Abstract

Vietnam is frequently portrayed as a climate governance frontrunner among Global South countries, having adopted an early Net Zero-emission-by-2050 pledge and multiple decarbonization policies. In parallel, the government has launched a digital transformation agenda with similarly bold ambitions. Although equity and inclusion language accompanies both agendas, they operate within a one-party political system marked by bureaucratic fragmentation and a strong economic development emphasis. This article examines how justice is articulated in Vietnam's green and digital transformations and identifies factors shaping these outcomes. It analyzes key policy documents and leadership speeches through a three-dimensional framework, encompassing recognition, distributive, and procedural justice, complemented by expert interviews. The findings indicate that while the green transformation is slightly more vulnerability-sensitive than the digital transformation, both ultimately follow similar structural patterns. While early green strategies are more people-centered and attentive to disadvantaged groups, these features are diluted in implementation and converge toward the digital agenda's consistently managerial-developmental pattern. Across both agendas, welfare-enhancing measures risk imposing adjustment burdens, while participation remains largely passive and symbolic. These uncoordinated agendas converge under shared structural constraints: policy integration limits, leadership influence, and international reputational-financial dynamics. The article develops this as the *parallel transformation* concept, an alternative to the twin transformation model, which associates such justice limitations with the market-oriented conditions of Global North liberal democracies and looks to departures from these conditions for a remedy. That they recur in Vietnam, a near-antipode of these settings, suggests their presence is not the cause of weak transformational justice, nor their absence its cure.

Keywords

Global South; green and digital transformation; just transition; parallel transformation; Vietnam

1. Introduction

Since the late 2010s, a global shift towards a low-carbon economy has been underway, often termed the green transformation (Kinley, 2017). In parallel, technological advances have accelerated a digital transformation of economic sectors, social services, and public administration (Priharsari et al., 2023). While their substance varies across countries, both processes are now widely analyzed through the lens of a just transition, whether as a goal, a co-benefit, or an organizing principle (this article uses “transformation” by default, reserving “transition” for proper names and the established term “just transition”). However, the justice dimensions of the two transformations are typically examined through different lenses: decarbonization-justice scholarship centers on who bears adjustment costs and who benefits from climate action, whereas digital-justice scholarship focuses on access and literacy, data privacy, and labor disruption from automation (Diodato et al., 2023; Pang et al., 2024). The two are thus rarely assessed against a common justice framework, even though, in many countries, state-led greening and digitalization proceed simultaneously and compete for limited resources in ways that directly affect the fairness of both. This is particularly relevant in developing countries without a liberal democratic governance system, where politico-economic constraints may exacerbate existing inequalities through rapid structural shifts.

At the same time, defining what constitutes a “green” or “digital” transformation remains contested. In climate governance, ambitious Net Zero pledges under the Paris Agreement are accompanied by modest policy implementation. In the digital sphere, the absence of a binding global regime gives governments wide discretion in defining what constitutes a “transformation” (Priharsari et al., 2023). Many countries thus adopt the rhetoric of transformation without undertaking structural reforms, which makes case selection consequential: meaningfully comparing justice across the two agendas requires a setting where both are backed by dense policy frameworks rather than rhetoric alone. Vietnam meets this requirement and allows the justice dimensions of its green and digital transformations to be analyzed through a single comparative framework within a one-party, developing-country setting. Since the Paris Agreement, Vietnam has approved a green transformation agenda comprising multiple green growth and climate policies, coupled with an early Net Zero-by-2050 pledge at COP26 in 2021 (Urban et al., 2018). In parallel, it has advanced an ambitious digital transformation agenda covering e-government, public services, e-commerce, and cybersecurity, positioning itself as an advanced digitalizing state relative to other lower-middle-income countries (Politburo of the Communist Party of Vietnam, 2024). Vietnam’s significance is not only empirical but theoretical. It governs both agendas through state-led developmentalism that absorbs every emerging policy domain into centralized planning (Benedikter & Nguyen, 2018); it is highly responsive to and actively courts international climate finance; and its one-party system under the ruling Communist Party falls squarely outside the ranks of liberal democracies. Existing scholarship that studies the green and digital transformations together has rarely elevated these structural factors to the analytical foreground, predominantly focusing instead on market-based, liberal democratic settings in the Global North while leaving their justice dimensions substantially unexamined. Vietnam, therefore, opens a broader theoretical question whose relevance extends beyond its Southeast Asian location: whether the pursuit of justice in these transformations is shaped less by the liberal democratic market conditions taken as baseline by the dominant scholarship than by a state-led developmental logic influenced by external financial incentives. This article therefore asks:

RQ: How is justice articulated in Vietnam’s green and digital transformations, and how can the observed patterns be explained?

To answer the research question, the study conducts a qualitative analysis of key policy documents and leadership speeches, complemented by expert interviews, through a three-dimensional green-digital justice framework encompassing recognition, distributive, and procedural justice. The findings show that while the two transformations differ in emphasis, they ultimately converge in their structural justice patterns, with both operating within a developmentalist governance framework. The digital agenda consistently recognizes justice as inclusion in digital services and economic platforms, with distributive measures benefiting generic, undifferentiated social and economic actors. While some green strategies acknowledge decarbonization-driven socio-economic disruptions and vulnerabilities facing disadvantaged groups, these elements are mostly diluted in sectoral implementation plans, bringing them closer to digital justice patterns. Across both agendas, there are many distributively ambivalent measures presented as welfare-enhancing while potentially imposing adjustment burdens; procedural justice, meanwhile, remains symbolic with a weakly identified participant base. Despite a near-absence of cross-agenda coordination, these converging justice patterns reflect the structural influence of policy integration constraints, the role of national leaders, and international reputational-financial dynamics.

These findings allow the article to make two contributions. Conceptually, it develops the “parallel transformation” concept: a governance configuration in which green and digital transformational agendas advance simultaneously under shared structural constraints yet without meaningful coordination, as an alternative to the integrated “twin” model. Theoretically, it shows that the justice limitations that the “twin” transformation scholarship ties to the market-based conditions of Global North liberal democracies can also arise in their near-antipode, indicating that those conditions are neither the cause of weak transformational justice nor their absence its cure.

The rest of the article proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews research on the green and digital transformations and the Vietnamese case within each, examines these literatures against the emerging twin transformation scholarship, and introduces the three-dimensional justice analytical framework. Section 3 sets out the methodology, Section 4 presents the findings, and Section 5 explains the observed patterns. The conclusion reflects on the study’s implications for governing a just, parallel transformation in a developing-country context.

2. Vietnam’s Green and Digital Transformations in the Context of Justice

This section analyzes research on the green and digital transformations and the Vietnamese case within each, examines the emerging twin transformation scholarship, and introduces the justice framework that guides the analysis. Although Vietnam’s transformations are often invoked in official speeches and state-affiliated media, neither has a formal legal definition specifying its scope, which shapes the limitations of existing research. They differ, however, in that the green agenda is anchored in an international regime and clear sectoral boundaries, while the digital agenda is not, a contrast that conditions how justice can be traced in each. Against this background, the section asks whether the integrated twin model fits the Vietnamese case and proposes “parallel transformation” as an alternative.

2.1. Green Transformation

Given the green transformation's focus on socioeconomic decarbonization, this article attends to policy-induced injustices. While no universal definition of a "green transformation" exists, commitments to limit global warming to 1.5°C by 2050 under the Paris Agreement offer a widely accepted benchmark. Under this framework, countries submit progressively more ambitious nationally determined contributions (NDCs) specifying mitigation targets across multiple greenhouse gas-emitting sectors, whose boundaries provide a basis for identifying national green transformation policies and assessing their justice implications.

Even so, the scope of national green transformations varies, with countries prioritizing different emitting sectors and maintaining overlapping green growth, energy, and sustainable development strategies, as in Vietnam (Urban et al., 2018). To ensure analytical clarity, this article conceptualizes Vietnam's green transformation as comprising two policy clusters: green growth and climate change mitigation, each anchored in national strategies and action plans (Khoi-Hoang, 2023). Although adaptation and sustainable development goals strategies exist, the former is excluded because this study focuses on mitigation-induced socioeconomic restructuring, and the latter predominantly recycles existing sectoral commitments (Minh-Ha, 2023).

Climate justice scholarship highlights the disproportionate impact of climate change on groups that contribute the least and possess the weakest coping capacities. When mitigation policies themselves impose burdens on vulnerable groups, this produces a "triple injustice" (Krause, 2018). Existing research on Vietnam's green transformation rarely addresses justice and faces two limitations. First, conceptual definitions vary widely. Some studies treat the transformation expansively, encompassing circular economy and traditional sectoral policies, while others equate it narrowly with energy transition (Minh-Ha, 2023). Second, most works either catalog policies or run ex ante scenario modeling; few critically analyze the corpus, much less provide causal explanations. An exception is Khoi-Hoang (2023), who finds stronger justice commitments in the National Green Growth Strategy than in the National Climate Change Strategy. Despite numerous action plans since, the literature has not moved beyond these original strategies' theoretical implications. Given Vietnam's bureaucratic fragmentation (Benedikter & Nguyen, 2018), whether early commitments survived implementation is a crucial question this study addresses by analyzing strategic and sectoral documents through a unified framework, tracing how justice commitments travel across almost five years of implementation.

2.2. Digital Transformation

Unlike the green transformation, there is neither a coherent international digitalization regime nor a widely agreed long-term objective comparable to carbon neutrality. Digital transformation, therefore, lacks clearly defined sectoral boundaries and is conceptualized differently across development contexts. In middle-income countries, digital transformation typically prioritizes infrastructure, digital public services, cashless payments, and national databases (Priharsari et al., 2023), a profile reflected in Vietnam's key policy documents such as the National Digital Economy and Society Strategy (Prime Minister of Vietnam, 2022c) and the Resolution on Scientific Development and National Digital Transformation (Politburo of the Communist Party of Vietnam, 2024).

Adopted after Covid-19 underscored digital technologies' potential, Decision 411/QĐ-TTg defines the transformation as the digital economy (e-commerce, digital contracts, workforce development) and the digital society. The latter combines social metrics, such as use of digital public services, online medical consultations, and digitalized teaching, with economic indicators like smartphone ownership. Resolution 57 further embeds digital transformation within the broader "era of national rise" political vision, emphasizing its role in national modernization and competitiveness. Cybersecurity and data localization also receive central emphasis, as Vietnam's Public Security Ministry has actively pushed through legislation in these fields to ensure political stability under Communist Party leadership (Dien, 2022). On this basis, this article delineates Vietnam's digital transformation as comprising three major domains: (a) digital public services; (b) digital economy; and (c) cybersecurity and data protection.

Digital justice debates frequently center on inclusion, privacy, labor disruption, and the digital divide (Diodato et al., 2023; Pang et al., 2024). However, what constitutes "justice" in digital transformation remains more diffuse than in climate governance due to the absence of binding global objectives and sectoral delineation. This ambiguity means that digital justice scholarship often focuses on discrete technologies or issue areas rather than examining sectoral and thematic policy domains. Existing research on Vietnam's digital governance focuses primarily on media censorship and facial recognition technologies (Dien, 2022). These studies illuminate digital governance's most intrusive aspects but rarely situate justice within the broader transformational agenda. Moreover, no study systematically compares justice patterns across digital and green transformations within one governance system. Increasingly, however, the two are theorized not in isolation but as a single coupled process, a literature this study must situate itself against.

2.3. *Twin Transformation*

The green and digital transformations, long studied as separate domains, have increasingly been linked under the notion of a twin transformation (Diodato et al., 2023). This emerging scholarship includes optimistic accounts, which treat digitalization as an enabler of decarbonization, alongside critical strands that examine the power relations and economic interests underpinning the twin transformation. Across both strands, the social and justice dimensions of the transformations have received comparatively little systematic attention relative to their environmental and economic ones (Paraná & Santaella-Gonçalves, 2026).

Two interconnected limitations pervade this emerging scholarship. Geographically, it is centered on the EU and, more broadly, the Global North, largely because the EU is the first to have adopted an explicit official twin transition agenda, making it both the empirical and normative template for the field (European Commission, 2022). Epistemologically, the literature identifies the market-based, corporate-led organization of the transformation as the source of its justice failures, so that even its prescriptive contributions are framed as departures from that market-based status quo (Paraná & Santaella-Gonçalves, 2026). These two tendencies manifest together across three connected lines of inquiry. First, much critical scholarship concentrates on US-based Big Tech and the market-oriented framing of change, exposing how corporate actors steer the transformation toward their own benefit (Paraná & Santaella-Gonçalves, 2026; Rikap & Weko, 2025). Second, injustice is construed as one-directional, with Global North corporations extracting value from or imposing technological dependency on the Global South; this casts Southern societies chiefly as victims and overlooks Southern governments' agency in directing their own populations through state-led transformation (Moore et al., 2026; Paraná & Santaella-Gonçalves, 2026). Third, the alternatives proposed to

remedy this market-led transformation do not reform it from within but seek to move beyond Big Tech-driven market dynamics altogether, through commons-based or democratically planned arrangements advanced in European debates. It is unclear, however, whether these proposals are relevant in settings that are not market-driven to begin with, but are instead state-led and developmentalist (Durand, 2026; Nardelli & Santaella-Gonçalves, 2025).

Furthermore, this scholarship reveals a fundamental tension: in invoking a twin transformation, it presumes that the two processes are converging or have already converged, yet it continues to approach them separately, so that the green and digital research strands remain largely unconnected even when included in the same study (Müller et al., 2024). Where it does acknowledge their separate development, it tends to treat this as a deficiency rather than a condition worth examining in its own right, or as a transitional stage for latecomer economies to outgrow by aligning the two strategies (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2023), or as a gap to be filled through coordinated research and government interventions (Daehlen, 2023).

Because parallel development is approached as a deficiency, it has not been examined as a governance configuration with a logic of its own. Integration on this scale demands a coordination capacity that even the EU has struggled to achieve, making the twin transition a normative goal rather than an empirical outcome (Aloisi, 2025). Consequently, developing countries with thinner capacity, such as Vietnam, are even less likely to pursue it as a deliberate strategy. Moreover, because the twin model presumes the market-based and liberal democratic conditions of its European origin, it travels poorly to settings shaped by different political and economic logics. This suggests that parallelism should be reconsidered not as a short-term defect but as a stable transformational model in its own right. This article, therefore, proposes the concept of *parallel transformation*, where green and digital agendas advance simultaneously under shared structural constraints yet without meaningful coordination. It is offered as a category potentially better suited than the twin transformation model to settings such as Vietnam's. An alternative that the empirical analysis then assesses.

2.4. Green and Digital Justice: An Analytical Framework

To analyze justice across these parallel transformations rather than presume their integration, this study applies a common framework. Three dimensions commonly structure justice analysis in transformational policies: recognition, distributive, and procedural justice (McCauley et al., 2013). Frequently applied in climate and environmental research, they have clear parallels in digital justice scholarship, where the same dimensions concern protected values, inclusive governance, digital divides, and beneficiaries' identification (Kolotouchkina et al., 2024; Pang et al., 2024).

2.4.1. Recognition Justice

Recognition justice concerns whether the values, needs, and preferences of social groups are acknowledged and embedded in policy design (Schweiger, 2019). Though often associated with identity politics (Murphy et al., 2022), recognition directly shapes material and representational (in)equalities and underpins fair redistribution and participation (Walker & Day, 2012).

The first recognition component examines a policy document's prevailing policy discourse, which influences the legitimation of socioeconomic concerns and the identification of groups targeted for distributive

measures and involvement in policy deliberation processes. Following Di Gregorio et al. (2017), this article distinguishes three framings: ecological/digital modernization, civic environmentalism/civic digital transformation, and green/digital governmentality. Modernization emphasizes win-win growth and state steering, in a weak form focused on technological fixes and modest reforms or a strong form entailing broader institutional change and more democratic decision-making. Civic framings prioritize empowering diverse groups in a reformist form that includes excluded groups as participants or a radical form that holds the prevailing order inherently inequitable and in need of fundamental transformation. Governmentality centers on techno-scientific expertise and administrative optimization, in an elitist variant emphasizing top-down control and a reflexive variant allowing some social engagement (Di Gregorio et al., 2017). While modernization has long dominated Vietnam's official environmental discourse, there are signs of a shift towards a more people-centered narrative, which justifies applying this tripartite framework to both green and digital transformation policies (Khoi-Hoang, 2023).

The second component assesses recognition, misrecognition, and non-recognition. Recognition explicitly acknowledges which social, cultural, environmental, or economic concerns are considered relevant in the transformation (Murphy et al., 2022). Misrecognition captures cases in which a document does engage a need or value but defines it vaguely, forcibly imposes it, or misaligns it with the predominant preferences of affected groups, while non-recognition denotes documents that acknowledge no needs or values at all (Schweiger, 2019). Together, these components reveal how policy discourses shape which needs and values are deemed legitimate in Vietnam's green and digital transformations.

2.4.2. Distributive Justice

Distributive justice in a transformational context refers to efforts to equitably spread the benefits and burdens of decarbonization and digitalization. In climate mitigation scholarship, it addresses the risk of shifting mitigation costs onto those least responsible for emissions and least able to bear adjustment burdens (Krause, 2018). In the digital realm, distributive justice addresses both access and work. The former concerns the unequal distribution of digital infrastructure and skills, the focus of digital-divide debates. The latter concerns how digitalization reshapes employment itself: automation, on-demand platform work, and crowd work concentrate value with platform owners while leaving workers with precarious, variable, and weakly protected jobs (Valenduc, 2019).

Distributive policies can either promote benefits or lessen the burdens engendered by transformational changes. Although both directions aim to ensure citizens' welfare, they risk perpetuating climate-digital injustice if benefits are delivered to already advantaged groups and ills are distributed to those with the least coping capability. Thus, the distribution dimension can be divided into promotion of benefits, mitigation of vulnerabilities, and ambivalent distribution. The last category is needed because some measures, framed as unequivocal benefits or rights, in practice, extend government oversight or shift adjustment costs onto recipients, functioning as burdens themselves.

Each category is further divided into distribution targets and distributive measures. Justice scholarship stresses not only what is distributed but also who receives it, guided by criteria of merit, needs, and equality. Whereas recognition concerns the material and socio-cultural conditions to be achieved, distribution concerns the measures that mitigate losses or improve benefits used to achieve them.

2.4.3. Procedural Justice

Procedural justice refers to fairness in the process through which diverse social groups participate in the governance of transformational policies that affect their livelihoods. The literature often employs three pillars for analysis: information disclosure, participation in decision-making, and access to legal process (Walker & Day, 2012), which are in turn based on the 1998 Aarhus Convention. Information disclosure equips communities to adapt and influence policymaking, participation methods let them shape policies affecting their identity and livelihood, and access to legal process allows them to monitor implementation, challenge decisions, and seek compensation.

Based on such insights, this study operationalizes procedural justice through two components: procedural rights and participant base. The first component identifies the information, participation, and legal access rights that empower actors in the policy process, as discussed in the preceding paragraph. Although some Vietnamese documents group information mechanisms together with distributive instruments (Politburo of the Communist Party of Vietnam, 2024), they are treated here as participatory instruments consistent with academic usage (McCauley et al., 2013). The second component refers to the various social segments empowered to take part in the governance of the two transformations, often identified in the same textual provisions as the first component.

3. Methodology

This study applies qualitative thematic analysis to 47 policy documents and leadership speeches on Vietnam's green and digital transformations, guided by a green-digital justice framework, and then uses 15 expert interviews to explain the patterns found. Thematic analysis is well suited to identifying patterns across a large body of policy texts while preserving the discursive detail in which justice claims are made. It can also operate at both the semantic level of explicit policy provisions and the latent level of underlying discourses that shape which provisions are made and what they treat as just (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The framework is applied deductively in coding, with both corpora coded against the same pre-specified categories so that their justice patterns are directly comparable, while the explanation of those patterns in Section 5 is built up from the interview and contextual evidence.

3.1. Data Collection

For the analysis, 47 policy documents and leadership speeches were selected: 26 in the green corpus and 21 in the digital corpus. Green transformation materials mostly include national green growth and climate strategies, follow-up ministerial action plans, and prime ministerial directives. Digital transformation materials include Communist Party resolutions, laws, strategies, and action plans across the domains identified in Section 2. Five public speeches by the prime minister and the Communist Party's general secretary are also included. All policy documents and speeches are included in Supplementary File 1.

All documents, except the English-language Just Energy Transition Partnership Resource Mobilization Plan (JETP-RMP), are in Vietnamese. In addition, 15 semi-structured expert interviews were conducted between 2024 and 2026 with central-government policymakers, academics, and representatives of development agencies, research institutes, business associations, and civil-society organizations involved in the two

transformations. These interviews serve two roles. Their primary role is explanatory—because interviewees are directly involved in advising on or drafting these policies, they can account for why justice provisions took the form they did. This explanatory evidence is developed in Section 5. Their secondary role is triangulation—where a document's intent is ambiguous or where formal provisions appear to diverge from practice, interview testimony corroborates the textual reading, as in the analysis of consultation processes in Subsection 4.3.

Both the documentary corpus and the interviewees were selected purposively. Documents were chosen to cover the strategic and sectoral instruments across the green clusters and digital domains delineated in Section 2. Interviewees were selected for their position and expertise relevant to these transformations; most were introduced to the author through established contacts in the field, notably a senior researcher at the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, with a small number of further referrals who met the same criteria. As experts on national policy, they are predominantly based in Hanoi, Vietnam's capital. While most interviews centered on the green transformation, several respondents raised the digital transformation of their own accord. Two further interviews, conducted in early 2026, focused specifically on the digital transformation.

3.2. Data Analysis

A three-dimensional green-digital justice framework guides the analysis of collected policy documents and speeches, based on the insights discussed in Section 2 (see Table 1). The detailed codebook and results can be found in Supplementary File 2. Because the article is concerned with domestic implications, international justice provisions are not included.

Provisions for the three dimensions typically appear within a single Vietnamese policy document. Recognition framing, priorities, needs, and values appear in introductory principles and objectives; distributive provisions under “tasks and solutions” or “responsibility assignments,” which identify target groups and mechanisms; and procedural elements partly alongside distributive provisions and partly under organizational responsibilities.

Coding was conducted using NVivo from November 2025 to January 2026 by the author and an assistant coder. An intercoder reliability test on five documents yielded over 85% agreement. All coding was subsequently reviewed by the author. Identified justice patterns are then explained through interview evidence and scholarship on policy integration, justice, and Vietnam's political economy.

Table 1. Three-dimensional green and digital justice analytical framework: dimensions, components, and their operationalization.

Justice dimension	Definition	Components	Operationalization
Recognition (see Subsection 2.4.1)	Acknowledgement of economic, governance, cultural values, and needs deemed socially relevant	(a) Dominant policy discourse	1. Ecological/digital modernization – Strong form – Weak form
			Or
			2. Civic environmentalism/civic digital transformation – Reformist form – Radical form
			Or
Distributive (see Subsection 2.4.2)	Allocation of benefits and burdens	(b) Recognized needs and values:	3. Green/digital governmentality – Reflexive form – Elitist form
			– Non-recognition
			Or
			– Recognized needs and values – Misrecognized needs and values
Procedural (see Subsection 2.4.3)	Empowering social segments to participate in policy development and implementation	Benefit-promotion	– Distribution targets – Distributive measures
		Loss-mitigation	– Distribution targets – Distributive measures
		Ambivalent distribution	– Distribution targets – Distributive measures
Procedural (see Subsection 2.4.3)	Empowering social segments to participate in policy development and implementation	(a) Procedural rights	Information disclosure; participation in policymaking; access to legal process
		(b) Participants	Social groups involved in governance process

Note: Each dimension's categories are defined in the subsection indicated.

4. Findings

All three justice dimensions receive heavy coverage across both transformations, with every document referencing at least one. Despite slight initial differences in emphasis, the transformations' overall justice patterns converge (see Table 2).

4.1. Fragmentation and Consistency

Vietnam's transformations are development-oriented but occupy different positions along a continuum. The green transformation displays a relatively stronger civic orientation and attentiveness to transformation-induced vulnerabilities, whereas the digital transformation is more consistently developmentalist, prioritizing qualities that advance the transformation itself. This does not imply that green

Table 2. Summary of coded justice patterns across Vietnam’s green and digital transformations.

Dimension	Green transformation	Digital transformation
Recognition justice	<u>Framing:</u> Early civic/reflexive governmentality; later technocratic modernization <u>Recognized needs/values:</u> Decarbonization-related disruptions; some development qualities	<u>Framing:</u> Digital modernization, elitist governmentality <u>Recognized needs/values:</u> Transformation-enabling qualities; limited attention to disruptions
Distributive justice	<u>General logic:</u> Primarily benefit-promotion; sporadic vulnerability-mitigation; some ambivalence <u>Measures:</u> Indirect financial, employment, and educational instruments <u>Targets:</u> Mainly equality-based; limited need-based	<u>General logic:</u> Consistent benefit-promotion; strong ambivalence <u>Measures:</u> Direct state provision of services/platforms <u>Targets:</u> Predominantly equality-based; limited merit-based
Procedural justice	<u>Procedural rights:</u> Predominantly information provision, minimal consultation/legal access <u>Participants:</u> Generic base; limited vulnerable-group inclusion	<u>Procedural rights:</u> Predominantly information provision, minimal consultation/legal access <u>Participants:</u> Rhetorically broad but substantively generic

policies are inherently people-centered; rather, it reflects discursive fragmentation within the green agenda and the more uniform framing of the digital agenda.

Within the green transformation agenda, recognition framings are unevenly distributed. The ecological modernization frame appears in only 3 documents, in its weak form, suggesting that co-opting decarbonization for growth is not the prevailing rationale. Five documents display the reformist tendency in civic environmentalism—including the National Green Growth Strategy, JETP-RMP, and speeches by Vietnam’s prime minister. Policy documents tend toward a more technical-managerial, developmentalist discourse the more concrete they get: ministerial action plans discuss sectoral greening benefits almost to the exclusion of societal ones. Finally, four green documents contain no discursive frame, against only one in the digital corpus.

Digital documents exhibit a stronger, more consistent nationalist-developmental orientation, concentrated around digital governmentality (14 out of 21 documents) and digital modernization (seven out of 21 documents). High-level resolutions, national strategies, and leadership speeches frame Vietnam’s digital transformation as a new “mode of production” closely linked to economic growth, administrative efficiency, and national security (To Lam, 2024). A recurring theme is the use of technology to enable an “era of national rise” (Politburo of the Communist Party of Vietnam, 2024). While civic digital transformation is non-existent, nine documents elaborate on technological applications’ role in increasing citizens’ satisfaction and comfort, a reflexive form of digital governmentality.

These frames shape the needs and values each agenda recognizes. Green policies emphasize basic socioeconomic conditions affected by decarbonization, energy and food security, green jobs, and, in later

documents, income security and mobility, whereas digital policies prioritize needs that facilitate the transformation itself, privacy and data protection, access to science and technology, digital jobs, and platform inclusion.

Both agendas show considerable non-recognition and misrecognition: eight green and two digital documents identify no needs or values tied to any social segment, and six green and five digital articulate them vaguely or contestably. In the green transformation, misrecognition often frames pollution from private road transport as an urban public health concern (Prime Minister of Vietnam, 2025). This downplays emissions from coal power and industry and disregards the mobility needs of residents who commute mainly by gas-powered scooters, making clean air less a social concern than a legitimating device for vehicular electrification. In the digital corpus, misrecognition often takes the form of imposing standardized cultural values. The National Strategy for Digital Economy and Society (Prime Minister of Vietnam, 2022c), for instance, defines the Vietnamese digital culture through measurable engagement with online public services, digital healthcare, and education, while tasking the state with guiding citizens to “selectively absorb” global values and avoid digital risks. Such framings narrow recognition to behavioral and economic alignment with policy objectives rather than pluralistic empowerment.

4.2. Universalization of Benefits

Two distinct distributive patterns stand out across Vietnam’s green and digital transformations. First, distributive justice is overwhelmingly conceived as the promotion of benefits rather than the mitigation of vulnerabilities. Second, a considerable subset of distributive measures is framed as improving welfare but, in practice, imposes new compliance and adjustment burdens.

Benefit-promoting measures appear in 23 green and 18 digital documents. In the green transformation, they are largely enablement-oriented, dominated by capacity-building, education, financial support, and green public procurement measures. By contrast, the digital transformation assigns the state a more interventionist role, led by e-government services, technical training, platformized education and healthcare, cashless payment, and e-commerce systems. Thus, green policies tend to facilitate adaptation to decarbonization, while digital policies view distribution as the provision of access to state-coordinated systems and infrastructures.

Recipients are predominantly universalistic, most often the “whole of society,” alongside broadly defined skilled and business actors. The first reflects an equality-based logic, with benefits presumed to reach all citizens through awareness-raising, education, and public services; the latter two carry a limited merit-based dimension, extending capacity-building and financial support to actors presumed able to contribute. Yet even here, categorization remains generic: “skilled actors” are loosely defined as researchers or professionals, while “business actors” are not differentiated by size or state/private ownership. Needs-based targeting is even rarer. In the green agenda, farmers, workers, and specific regions are sporadically identified as recipients of financial, educational, or self-management support, extending benefits beyond already advantaged groups. In the digital agenda, medical patients, social security recipients, and students are mentioned, but mainly for access to digitalized services embedded in sectoral plans rather than in higher-level documents. Both agendas thus sit at the equality-based end of the distributive spectrum introduced in Subsection 2.4.2, with benefits presumed to reach all citizens alike, rather than directed to those least able to bear adjustment costs.

Only six green and three digital documents contain instruments to alleviate the distribution of transformation-induced burdens, and none is dedicated exclusively to vulnerability mitigation. Even where a burden is clearly identified, the remedy offered is often one that would not obviously lessen it. The National Strategy for Digital Economy and Society, for instance, qualifies as loss-mitigating because it seeks to lessen the poverty of ethnic minorities amid the disruption that a digital economy brings to their livelihoods; yet its proposed remedy, e-commerce training to “make each citizen an entrepreneur,” does not shield them from that disruption but instead enlists them in the very process driving it (Prime Minister of Vietnam, 2022c, p. 2). This typifies how the digital agenda treats labor throughout: work appears as talent attraction, job creation, and e-commerce entrepreneurialism, while the disruptive dimensions in digital-justice debates such as automation, job degradation, and the precarity of platform-mediated work are effectively absent; only Resolution 50 acknowledges technological displacement as a risk, and there merely as a general commitment to minimize it without concrete measures (Government of Vietnam, 2020). The green agenda is similarly thin: most job-related measures remain abstract, as in the JETP Resource Mobilization Plan, the National Green Growth Action Plan, and the National Climate Change Strategy, with only sparse concrete loss mitigation, such as exemptions from ecosystem-service fees for struggling households (Government of Vietnam, 2022b).

The limited civic framing in green strategies rarely translates into concrete provisions: high-level and internationally oriented documents acknowledge vulnerabilities but seldom include measures to address them, while sectoral action plans prescribe mainly benefit-promoting measures through modernization and governmentality logics. In contrast, the digital transformation exhibits stronger internal coherence: the dominant digital modernization and governmentality frames align consistently with its distributive model of system expansion and benefit diffusion to generalized citizens, business actors, and technically skilled groups.

Another noteworthy feature is the prevalence of ambivalent measures that promise benefits or harm prevention but potentially impose new burdens. While interventions to promote biofuels, electric vehicles, digital identification, and centralized databases are framed as unequivocal public goods, they, in practice, expand government oversight and shift adjustment costs onto citizens. For instance, to meet the NDC target on E5 ethanol-blended fuel, the Ministry of Transport emphasizes awareness-raising to stimulate public demand (Ministry of Transport of Vietnam, 2024). Yet adoption remains limited due to perceived safety concerns, turning the policy into a psychological-behavioral challenge. Ambivalence is even more pronounced in the digital agenda. Measures that promote inclusion in digital systems and services simultaneously entail heightened surveillance and ideological conformity. For instance, access to one’s own personal data in the national population database is framed as a right, even as state agencies retain unrestricted access (National Assembly of Vietnam, 2024). This recurring narrative of “both rights and duties” (*quyền và nghĩa vụ*) can also be found in other documents. It reveals a paternalistic version of the capability-based approach, which confounds the improvement of personal capability to achieve freedoms with the enforced promotion of such freedoms as defined by the state (Claassen, 2014).

4.3. Symbolic Participation

Procedural justice is the least developed dimension: documents often invoke citizen involvement without specifying mechanisms or participants, and procedural provisions are absent entirely in nine of 26 green and seven of 21 digital documents.

Where procedural elements are included, both transformations rely primarily on informational access and disclosure (16 green and 12 digital documents). These are typically grouped with educational, awareness-raising, and capacity-training measures (Government of Vietnam, 2022a), suggesting they facilitate policy execution rather than democratic governance. Although nearly all binding documents formally undergo public consultation (Interviewee 9, 2025), the procedures are rarely detailed in policy texts. These consultations are often substantively thin, providing little information about survey content or how feedback influences final decisions. Several interviewees therefore characterize these processes as largely symbolic, with limited impact on the policy cycle (Interviewee 6, 2024; Interviewee 12, 2025). Therefore, the analysis codes only explicit references to consultation, social dialogue, or co-production mechanisms, which appear in four documents in each agenda. Some of these documents include strong participatory language, promoting, for example, the “co-creation of values” in public service delivery, yet without specifying concrete methods (Prime Minister of Vietnam, 2021b). Regarding access to legal process, monitoring, or complaint mechanisms appear in four green and three digital documents. However, they neither involve independent adjudication nor clarify avenues for redress or compensation, falling short of fairness standards identified by the scholarship (Walker & Day, 2012). Consequently, across the three procedural pillars introduced in Subsection 2.4.3, provision is heavily skewed toward the first: information disclosure is common, while participation in decision-making and access to legal process, which would let affected groups shape or contest policy, remain thin.

The participants in both transformations are constructed in generic, undifferentiated terms, typically as “the people” and “business actors,” with only limited specification of vulnerable groups in the green transformation. NGOs and civil society groups are underrepresented even in the green agenda, only appearing in the earliest and abstract strategies (Prime Minister of Vietnam, 2021a, 2022b). Both transformations thus employ an equality-based identification logic, framing due process as broad permission to engage with transformational activities rather than as improving the representation of marginalized groups.

Overall, procedural justice remains largely symbolic, with a generic, weakly defined participant base. This minimalism mirrors the broader justice patterns identified earlier: although the green transformation displays a somewhat greater sensitivity to vulnerability, participation rarely extends beyond information disclosure and consultation rhetoric. The digital transformation, meanwhile, equates fair process with giving citizens access to information provision and inclusion in pre-designed digital systems, prioritizing passive compliance over genuine social empowerment.

5. Discussion

This section explains the justice patterns in the two transformations, drawing on interview data and relevant literature.

5.1. *Policy Integration and Intersectionality*

The observed patterns of justice can be traced to persistent limitations in policy integration, which operate in three interrelated ways: limited coordination between Vietnam’s transformations, fragmented institutional responsibilities within the green transformation, and the securitization of the digital transformation.

The green and digital transformations show little meaningful horizontal coordination, particularly in the social dimension. Interviewees involved in policy drafting confirmed that core strategies for both transformations were developed simultaneously to support sustainable development, consistent with their closely aligned release dates (Interviewees 2 & 5, 2024). However, this aspiration has not translated into formal coordination. In the green transformation, high-level strategies and leadership statements only briefly acknowledge the desirability of linking the two transformational agendas (Pham Minh Chinh, 2025; Prime Minister of Vietnam, 2022d). A few sectoral plans connect greening and digitalization activities, without discussing their spillover to other social domains. These include, for example, the State Bank of Vietnam's (SBV) task of developing environmentally friendly high-tech payment methods to reduce the use of banknotes (SBV, 2023). Meanwhile, the digital transformation is almost entirely silent on environmental concerns. Notably, the National Strategy for Digital Economy and Society conceptualizes digital development as comprising the digital economy and digital society, two pillars of sustainable development, without reference to the environmental pillar (Prime Minister of Vietnam, 2022c).

This disconnection is not peculiar to Vietnam. Concurrent multisectoral strategies in closely related domains, sustainable development, climate mitigation, and adaptation, have developed with little connection to one another even in Western European countries with longer traditions of coordinated planning (Casado-Asensio & Steurer, 2013). In Vietnam, the disconnection extends to the operational level. Even when a strategy is cross-sectoral and involves multiple ministries, task execution remains sector-specific. Both the Green and Digital Transformations frequently assign social sustainability tasks to the Ministry of Labor, whose abolition in a bureaucratic reshuffle in early 2025 led to confusion over responsibilities for social welfare programs (Interviewee 11, 2025). Some officials reported that greening efforts in their sectors were deprioritized in favor of urgent digitalization tasks (Interviewee 9, 2025). Even within the SBV, a coordination-minded organization, departments responsible for green and digital initiatives still operate separately (Interviewee 15, 2026). The lack of operational linkage leaves no institutional basis for aligning justice objectives across the two.

Policy integration is also weak within the green transformation itself, and this internal fragmentation is structural rather than incidental. The bureaucratic politics scholarship holds that cross-cutting, jurisdiction-spanning problems like climate governance become sites of contestation over ownership among agencies defending their bureaucratic turf (Peters, 2018). Vietnam is no exception to this logic despite its one-party system. Although frequently portrayed as a centralized developmental state under firm Communist Party control, its administrative reality features multiple decision-making centers with overlapping competences (Ortmann, 2017). Its bureaucracy favors preserving institutional autonomy over efficiency, and relations between policy documents remain ambiguous, settled in practice by the relative authority of the agencies involved rather than clear legal ordering (Benedikter, 2016). The green transformation's justice provisions are formulated and implemented within this structure.

The consequences appear between national strategies and the sectoral action plans responding to them. National strategies, produced mainly by the Ministries of Planning and Investment and of Natural Resources and Environment and the Prime Minister's Office, articulate relatively balanced narratives combining growth with social considerations. These commitments are inconsistently carried into sectoral action plans because of how legal mandates are distributed: central authorities define objectives, but line ministries retain exclusive mandates and instruments for implementation, each reconciling any single strategy with multiple

cross-cutting agendas beyond the two transformations (Interviewee 9, 2025). Abstract equity requirements imposed from above are therefore hard to operationalize, the more so given limited guidance from coordinating ministries, and each ministry interprets them through its own professional lens and interests. The green-jobs provision illustrates the result: the Green Growth Action Plan (Prime Minister of Vietnam, 2022a) assigns responsibility for green jobs to the Ministry of Labor, yet even those involved in drafting the plan were uncertain about the concept, which had been included only under international pressure (Interviewee 6, 2024). Left to interpret such objectives independently, line ministries produced uneven, fragmented outcomes, not because of opposition to the commitments but because the institutional structure provides no mechanism through which a cross-cutting justice objective survives translation into sectoral plans intact.

Finally, the securitization of the digital transformation, combined with broader political constraints, restricts the recognition of intersecting vulnerabilities. Three reinforcing conditions produce this effect. First, most domains of the digital transformation fall under the oversight of the Ministry of Public Security, whose framing isolates digital fairness from other justice concerns. Second, this isolation goes largely unchallenged outside the security establishment, because policymakers broadly share an entrenched belief that development's benefits outweigh its disadvantages. Thus, the challenges facing low-income, elderly, and minority populations, from digital literacy to cyber-fraud exposure, are widely acknowledged informally yet rarely recognized in policy (Interviewees 14 & 15, 2026). Third, ethnic minority affairs are in particular treated as politically sensitive, and linking them to other development issues is typically avoided (Interviewee 12, 2025). Even well-intentioned social projects therefore refrain from naming target groups, recasting politically structured disadvantage as a technical matter of generic beneficiaries (Li, 2007)—a project supporting 500 households should not specify “500 Hmong families” (Interviewee 12, 2025). Only one measure across the digital agenda explicitly targets a named vulnerable group, through digital commerce skills training for ethnic minorities (Prime Minister of Vietnam, 2022c). The combined result is a failure of recognition—disadvantages that compound across group memberships are dissolved into generalized development challenges.

5.2. National Leaders and Influence on Policy Design

National leadership decisively shapes the overall justice orientation of Vietnam's green and digital transformations. Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh and Party General Secretary To Lam are particularly influential in steering the green and digital transformations, respectively.

In the green transformation, the prime minister's personal leadership has been consequential, the more so after political turbulence saw all original deputy PMs of the 15th National Assembly replaced. Interviewees consistently identified the PM as the central political driver behind Vietnam's unexpected Net Zero-by-2050 commitment at COP26 and subsequent mobilization of the bureaucracy around climate and green growth objectives (Interviewees 4 & 7, 2024; Interviewees 9 & 13, 2025). The PM's early speeches, internationally-oriented statements, and national climate and green growth strategies frequently employed civic and people-centered language, emphasizing themes such as “no growth at all costs” and a “whole-of-society approach” (Pham Minh Chinh, 2021; Prime Minister of Vietnam, 2021a, 2022d).

The trajectory of this leadership, however, reveals the system's limits. The sudden escalation of mitigation ambition at COP26 caught the national bureaucracy by surprise, including the Environment Ministry itself (Interviewee 7, 2024). Furthermore, the justice rhetoric of the early speeches and strategies was closer to the civic, people-centered register typically advanced by NGOs and civil society groups rather than by government agencies (Di Gregorio et al., 2017), and the commitments it carried imposed tasks far removed from the bureaucracy's established professional repertoire. Combined with the integration problems documented in Subsection 5.1, the result was that early justice commitments exceeded administrative capacity and fragmented across the green policy mix.

In contrast, the digital transformation exhibits stronger top-down coherence under To Lam's leadership. Digitalization is embedded within broader institutional reforms and the "era of national rise" vision to make Vietnam a high-income country (Politburo of the Communist Party of Vietnam, 2024). Line ministry officials note that digitalization directives carry greater urgency than green ones, reinforcing internal alignment (Interviewee 9, 2025). This produces a consistent digital modernization and governmentality frame centered on economic growth, technological upscaling, and national security, across which the three justice dimensions are stably operationalized. Recognition prioritizes infrastructure access, digital skills, and innovation; distributive measures consistently benefit generalized citizens and business actors; and participation is symbolic and passive, with "the people" as adopters rather than makers of digital systems. Rather than proactively identifying vulnerabilities, inclusion is assumed to occur indirectly through a neoliberal logic of growth and service expansion (Interviewee 12, 2025; Interviewee 14, 2026).

5.3. International Dynamics: Reputation and Financing

Interviewees consistently identified international dynamics as a crucial factor shaping the uneven incorporation of vulnerability-oriented justice provisions in Vietnam's green transformation, and their near-absence in the digital transformation.

Justice provisions in Vietnam's green framework emerge from a bi-directional interaction between the state and international partners across reputational and material dimensions. Vietnam seeks recognition as a responsible member of the international community and a pioneer in sustainable development, leading to rhetorical alignment with global just transition norms. At the same time, international actors pressure Vietnam to incorporate equity, inclusion, and just transition principles as preconditions for partnership. This dynamic is most visible in early strategies and externally-facing documents, which closely mirror expectations of international partners (Government of Vietnam, 2023; Pham Minh Chinh, 2021; Prime Minister of Vietnam, 2022d).

Reputational incentives feed into financial design. Interviewees emphasized that the bureaucracy has deliberately made targeted distributive measures contingent on international financing, with quantifiable decarbonization targets in sectoral action plans functioning primarily as a benchmark for external financing needs under the Paris Agreement (Interviewees 9 & 10, 2025). Activities with significant social uplift potential are expected to rely on foreign support while less disruptive measures are financed domestically. For example, water-saving practices such as Alternate Wetting and Drying are state-funded only in well-equipped regions, with implementation in weaker areas contingent on foreign assistance (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development of Vietnam, 2023).

However, this emphasis weakens once policies move from strategic commitment to implementation. Members of the JETP consortium, including Global North governments, multilateral development banks, and United Nations agencies, actively promoted justice during negotiation of the Resource Mobilization Plan. Yet interview evidence indicates that equity concerns were rarely raised during subsequent discussions over grants and loans (Interviewees 1, 3, & 8, 2024). Justice provisions therefore appeared to function primarily as legitimating devices for Global North partners during agenda-setting but were deprioritized once negotiations shifted toward bankable projects (Interviewees 4 & 6, 2024). Similarly, foreign partners pressed for green jobs in the Green Growth Strategy over Vietnamese reservations. Once adopted, they offered little support to operationalize the concept in Vietnam's context (Interviewee 6, 2024). The cessation of external advocacy effectively removed both reputational and material incentives for Vietnamese authorities to operationalize vulnerability-mitigation commitments, as evidenced by their near disappearance in policy documents after 2023.

This international dynamic does not apply to Vietnam's digital transformation, which has been securitized and framed as a matter of national technological sovereignty rather than individual rights, leaving little space for meaningful external involvement (Huynh, 2024). This differs from how technological sovereignty is pursued in the EU, where the stated goal of reducing dependence on foreign technology has been undercut by investment directed at technology adoption rather than domestic production capacity, leaving that dependence largely intact (Gerbaudo & Haeusl, 2025). Vietnam's securitized variant, by contrast, achieves a measure of autonomy precisely by restricting external involvement in the digital domain. Unlike climate governance, it is not embedded in a dense international regime nor dependent on concessional financing. Consequently, international actors neither exert normative pressure to include justice commitments nor possess leverage to demand their implementation, and the data-localization efforts pushed by the Public Security Ministry foreclose external influence over justice provisions entirely.

5.4. Parallel Transformations, Converging Justice Outcomes

Together, the preceding subsections show that Vietnam's green and digital transformations, though they advance without coordination, arrive at strikingly similar justice patterns: both dilute recognition of specific vulnerabilities, distribute benefits to already-advantaged actors, and confine participation to passive or symbolic forms. Crucially, this similarity is produced not by any linkage between the agendas, which subsection 5.1 shows largely absent at both strategic and operational levels, but by structural conditions bearing on each separately. Each of the three factors examined operates in this way. Limited internal policy integration leaves justice commitments to fragment within the green transformation while securitization subordinates justice to political stability priorities within the digital transformation, with no mechanism aligning the two. National leadership sets the justice orientation of each agenda independently, overextending it in the green case and holding it to a stable managerial frame in the digital case. International dynamics likewise act on each separately, building and then withdrawing vulnerability-oriented provisions in the green agenda while being foreclosed by securitization in the digital one. The two transformations thus converge not because they are coordinated but because the same structural constraints, affecting each in isolation, push both toward equally thin justice provisions.

These findings substantiate the concept of parallel transformation proposed in Section 2: this is not a deficient or temporary form of the twin transformation model, but a distinct governance configuration for

concurrent transformations, in which shared structural conditions rather than coordination account for their convergent outcomes. Theoretically, the case speaks to a twin transformation scholarship that traces these justice limitations to the market-based conditions of the Global North liberal democracies on which it is built, and looks to departures from those conditions for their remedy (Paraná & Santaella-Gonçalves, 2026). That the same limitations also occur in Vietnam, a developmental one-party state, indicates that these conditions are not necessary for weak transformational justice, nor is their absence sufficient to prevent it.

6. Conclusions

This article has examined how justice is articulated in policies governing Vietnam's green and digital transformations. Across both agendas, the three justice dimensions follow similar structural patterns, though the green transformation is somewhat more vulnerability-sensitive than the digital transformation. The green agenda's early people-centered framing fades in later implementation plans toward the digital agenda's managerial-developmental pattern, with nominally welfare-enhancing measures across both imposing new adjustment burdens and participation remaining largely passive and symbolic.

These findings allow the article to make two academic contributions. Conceptually, the article proposes the concept of parallel transformation, in which two transformational agendas proceed without meaningful coordination, under shared institutional constraints, yet arrive at convergent justice patterns. Theoretically, the article shows that the presence of the market-based conditions of Global North liberal democracies is not the cause of weak transformational justice, nor their absence its cure—the same limitations the scholarship associates with those conditions also occur in Vietnam, their near-antipode.

The findings carry pragmatic relevance for transformational governance. The Vietnamese case suggests that pursuing ambitious cross-agenda synergies may be less feasible than often assumed (Diodato et al., 2023). Tightly integrating decarbonization and digitalization risks overstressing limited capacities in developing countries, potentially further diluting justice commitments. More modest coordination may be both more feasible and less likely to marginalize justice concerns, such as shared vulnerability assessments across the two agendas, common social safeguards for green and digital projects, and coordinated labor-market planning for transformation-affected groups. The analysis also highlights the significant leverage of international partners over justice standards, especially in the green domain. Global North governments, development institutions, and NGOs can therefore play a more constructive role by embedding equity requirements within financing agreements and policy partnerships across transformational processes in the Global South.

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ChatGPT is employed to fix spelling errors and improve writing flow. It is not used for generative purposes (i.e., finding references or formulating new arguments).

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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