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SUSTAINABILITY

Transition bonds – New funding for a greener world

KEY MESSAGES

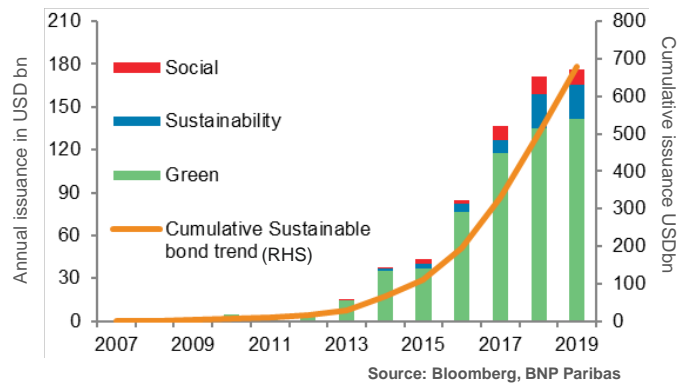
We think transition bonds can be the next evolution in helping allocate capital towards a low carbon economy.

A brand new asset class, these bonds are not to be confused with green bonds, which can only be used for sustainable allocation of capital. Rather, less-green companies can use them to shift to greener business activities.

We expect the broader scope of the use of transition capital to make them an attractive prospect, with transparency key to their success.

Further, we anticipate firms will use science-based targets and key performance indicators to build investor trust.

Fig. 1: Green, social and sustainable bond issuance YTD 2019



From brown to green: Transition bonds are a new asset class for industries with high greenhouse gas emissions – ‘brown industries’ - that will allow them to raise capital specifically to become less brown.

These bonds differ from green bonds, which are designed for green industries alone. The firms likely to issue transition bonds are brown industries that will continue their business activities as society and governments rely on them for growth, eg industrials, utilities and transport.

However, we expect growing societal and governmental pressure to force these companies to shift to less-brown business activities where possible, as part of the global effort to keep the increase in the global average temperature to 2°C above pre-industrial levels, or even 1.5°C (as agreed under the 2015 Paris Accord). We are currently on track to reach an increase of between 2.9°C and 3.4°C.

Not green bonds: Brown companies cannot issue green bonds to raise capital for this shift, because they are not green industries, but they can issue transition bonds, which will allow them to continue their business activities while having access to capital they can deploy to lower their GHG-emitting activity.

We note that some darker brown companies, such as coal mining, will never be able to transition successfully to a greener business, and as such are likely to be excluded from issuing transition bonds.

A brand new asset class with high potential: To date there have been three transition bond issuances – from an oil company, a utility and a beef producer – but there is not yet an established market.

Investors know there is demand for a market-based solution to sustainable finance – the sustainable bond market rose 25% between 2017 and 18 (Figure 1), driven by European corporate and sovereign green bonds, and we forecast it will grow by slightly more this year, finishing above USD220bn.

As environmental, social and governance (ESG) shifts from being a gauge of corporate social responsibility to a significant driver of investment strategy, we think transition issuance can play a major role.

Indeed, given its broader potential investment base, we think the transition market could outgrow the green bond market by the mid-2020s.



The benefits and the challenges ahead

Advantages: Aside from the global push toward sustainable practice that also drives the sustainable bond market, we see the following advantages that are specific to transition bonds:

- They will allow brown industries to attract capital to transform into less GHG intensive businesses, not necessarily become totally green, which is unlikely to be possible for some brown industries.
- There will be more choice on the greener targets linked to transition issuance. These might be lower GHG emissions set at company level, or broader targets tied to the nationally determined contributions (NDC) under the Paris Accord or the UN's sustainable development goals (SDGs). For more details on global sustainability see the [BNP Paribas Sustainability Primer](#) published on 8 April 2019.
- They will create a market with more investment options. The EU has set a goal to be carbon neutral by 2050, a target so far signed up to by 12 countries including Germany, France and the UK. These governments will therefore push for businesses to become greener.
- They will reduce the risk of 'greenwashing' – claims that a company is more eco-friendly than it really is – creating more confidence in the ability of brown industries to convert to a greener business and in the transition market.
- They will allow green bonds to retain their 'purity' as capital set aside for purely green business activities.

Challenges: The biggest challenge in establishing a solid transition bond market in our view will be issuer transparency capable of gaining investor trust.

Part of the challenge faced by the sustainable bond market has been the lack of globally-accepted definitions or verification, and transition bonds potentially face the same issues. The three transition issues seen to date had varying degrees of success with investors.

However, we think the need and desire of brown firms to lower their GHG emissions and, specifically, their desire to be compliant with future regulation, such as the EU Taxonomy, which will be rolled out from 2022, means transparency will have to be built into the transition bond market as it grows.

The EU taxonomy is a common standard between investors, issuers and policymakers that shows investments are meeting environmental standards and policy commitments in line with the Paris Agreement on climate change.

As such it delivers a blueprint for brown business to map its shift to a lower carbon footprint. For an activity to be eligible, it needs to demonstrate that it makes a substantial contribution to one of the EU's six environmental goals without having a detrimental impact on any of the other five (see box opposite on EU taxonomy criteria).

EU taxonomy criteria

1. Climate change mitigation
2. Climate change adaptation
3. Sustainable use of water and marine resources
4. Transition to a circular economy, waste prevention and recycling
5. Pollution prevention and control
6. Protection of healthy ecosystems

While the EU taxonomy will not be enforced until the beginning of 2022, the trend being set is for companies to consider the impact on the environment of the full product life cycle of their business activities, and for investors to consider this same product life cycle when making investment decisions.

In our view, the Use of Proceeds (UoP) statement that accompanies green issuance is not necessarily the best way to prove transparency for transition bonds, as it is typically best suited to well-defined, specific projects that evidently provide green credentials.

Firms could instead effectively demonstrate the impact of their transition bonds using a two factor approach:

1. **Policy goals.** Demonstrable lower GHG targets would be a key way for companies to disclose these ambitions to investors during a roadshow to showcase the attributes of the transition bond issuance.
2. **Science-based targets (SBT) and Key Performance Indicators (KPI).** These are encouraged by EU regulators to demonstrate concrete adherence to the EU taxonomy. They would allow issuers to show the achievement of precise milestones and objectives, which would in turn provide investors with clarity on how the ambitions of a company match its ambitions as an investor.

For example, investors may have a target to follow the EU taxonomy, looking for investments that achieve a max emissions rate of 100 gCO₂/KWh, while the KPI set by a utility company for the transition bond seeks to achieve a goal of 95 gCO₂/KWh. In this case the transition bond would represent a good fit for the investor, but note that the proof is based in a specific measurable metric, adding validity to the ambitions of the issuer.

Long-term duration bonds (10y+), could include specific SBTs built in as milestones, with the inclusion of step up coupons if the targets are not met.

For example, a utility company may state it will reduce its carbon emissions per kilowatt per hour of power generated from 190gCO₂/Kwh today, to 95gCO₂/KWh in 15 years.

The benefits and the challenges ahead

The future of transition bonds is likely to become more nuanced, as data become more accurate and readily available for SBTs and KPIs, and the acute effects from climate change are further felt.

It is important to consider the duration of the transition bond and to ensure it aligns to the achievement of the goal. For example, a transition bond with a duration of five years with a KPI that is to be achieved in ten years is a clear mismatch.

Similarly, as governments face more pressure at the annual Conference of Parties (COP) sessions on climate change, transition bonds can start to be aligned towards country goals.

Countries set their own Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC), to reduce GHG emissions, typically set in five-year increments. In the future, companies could look to issue transition bonds, raising capital to fund projects that will help them align to their local country's NDCs.

In this way, companies can start to use SBTs and NDCs to demonstrate their alignment to a 2°C scenario, or preferably a 1.5°C scenario.

For example, energy projects that replace coal fire powered generation with natural gas powered generation and utilising carbon capture storage (CCS), could be one example of how of a company transitioning to a low carbon economy, with the goal to become greener over time.

Further, transition bonds could be used to help companies with poor social standards and weak governance to begin improving these parts of their business activities.

For example, companies could look to improve working conditions in their supply chain, or companies could look to evaluate improved governance metrics to attract a more diversified pool of investors.

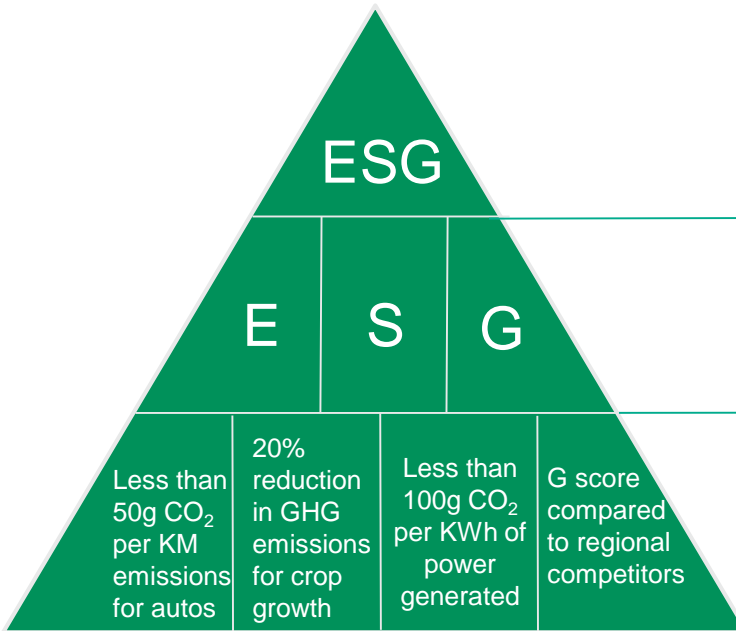


In brief: How companies can ensure the success of the transition bond market:

- **Future vision:** Companies need to state their policy objectives and how the company intends to evolve its business and lower its GHG emissions.
- **Project identification:** Companies need to select the GHG-intensive parts of their business that they will begin to transform with capital infusions.
- **Goal setting:** Firms need to define SBTs that can be tracked as milestones to help them demonstrate their commitment to a low-carbon economy.
- **Chart pathway:** Overlaying milestones showing how the new GHG emissions output will help the company align to the Paris Accord.
- **Estimating the value of transition:** Companies can use financial models and adopt new metrics, such as natural and social capital models, to assess the potential value of the transition, both in monetary terms and in terms of impact avoidance.
- **Report annually:** Transparency is key for investors to maintain trust that the issuer will achieve its targets.
- **Final value of transition** – companies can use financial models and adopt new metrics, to assess the true value of the transition and reconcile this to the original estimates, providing value feedback on the efficacy of the transition.

The context

Fig. 3: A hierarchy for incorporating SBTs into transition bonds



Source: BNP Paribas

Total ESG score – total ESG score at company level. For example, if you are investing only in a subsidiary, the ESG score should be at the subsidiary level. If you are investing at the group level then the ESG score should be at the group level.

Individual environmental, social and governance scores can help differentiate investment strategies and identify areas of risk. Total ESG scores can sometimes mask a particularly low individual E, S, or G score.

Key performance indicators can provide granular detail around how a company is changing its business activities. This is where SBTs can help identify how a company can align to a low-carbon economy, or contribute towards the fulfilment of the UN's sustainable development goals. The three examples here that include emissions are examples from the EU taxonomy.

The context: Scenarios for climate change impact, based on a rise in the earth's temperature, are essential in providing context for the current trajectory to which the economy is aligned.

This alignment is the blueprint that will help us understand how far business will need to transform itself to align the planet to a trajectory that will mitigate climate change impact.

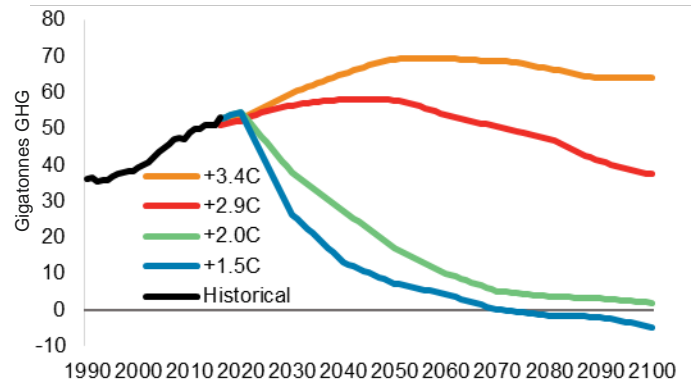
Figure 4 shows four key scenarios. The 1.5°C scenario shows a very steep decline in GHG emissions during the 2020s, and a continued decline, reaching carbon neutrality around 2050.

While this scenario will provide the most protection against climate impacts, it also is the scenario that will need the most coordination across the globe, and will need to be implemented almost immediately to achieve the 1.5°C target.

Figure 5 shows the potential effects if the transition is significantly delayed. Not only will the trajectory to decarbonise steepen, but GHG levels will need to go below neutral and stay negative for the foreseeable future.

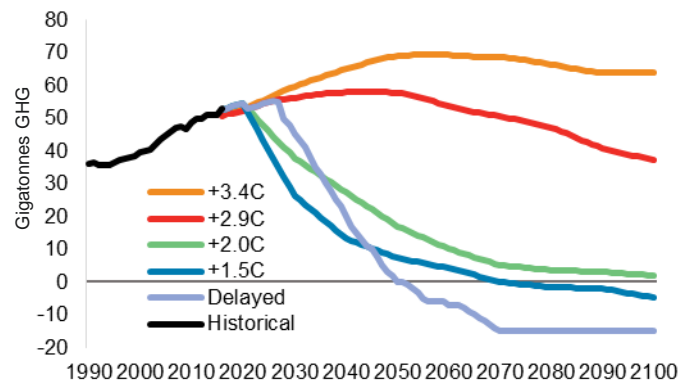
Transparency is key to ensure objectives are met, and using SBTs to align with the Paris Accord goals will show how much action is needed within a given timeframe.

Fig. 4: A sample of likely earth-warming scenarios compared to GHG levels



Sources: Climate Action Tracker, BNP Paribas

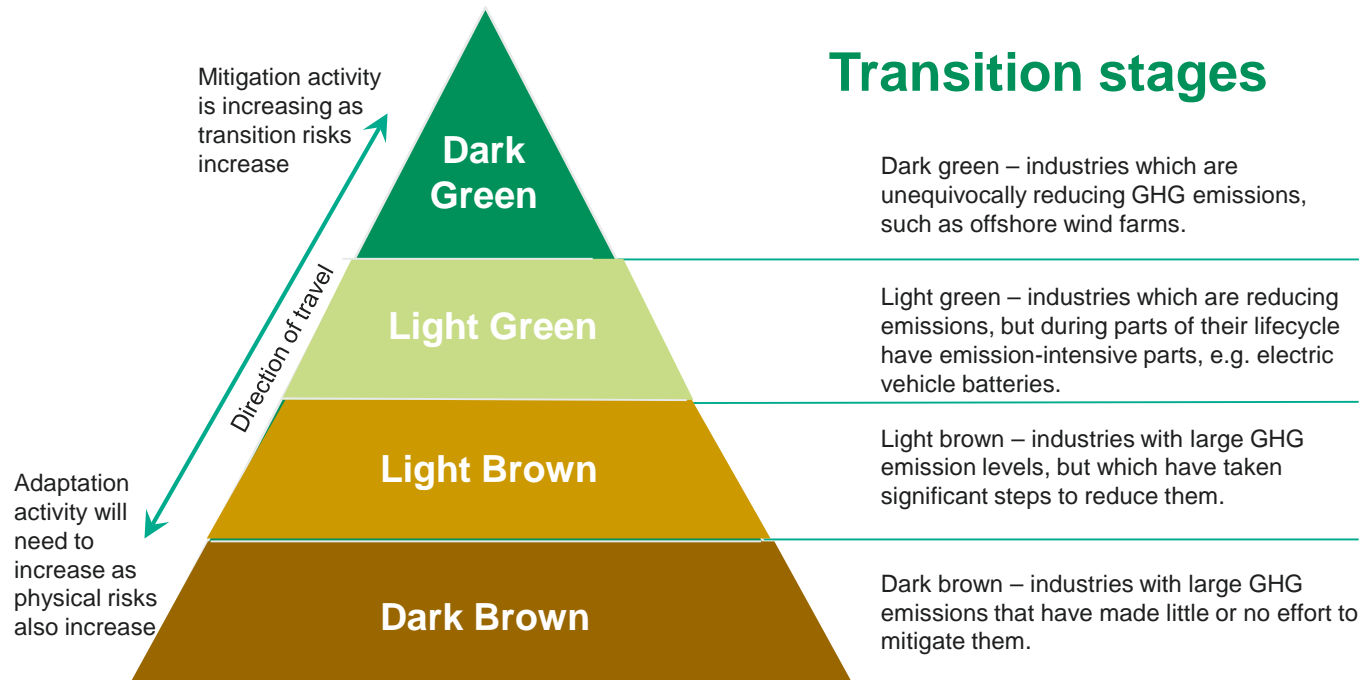
Fig. 5: Delaying transition requires more action later



Sources: Climate Action Tracker, BNP Paribas

The risks

Fig. 6: The risks for companies change as they become greener



Sources: TCFD, Cicero, EU Taxonomy, BNP Paribas

The risks: We expect transition bonds to be one of the key instruments helping to reduce GHG emissions over the next decade. However, we note that dark brown companies bear greater risk than their greener counterparts (Figure 6 ranks companies and their potential transition toward being a low-carbon firm, dark green in the pyramid).

According to the task force on climate-related financial disclosures (TCFD), led by Michael Bloomberg, two of the key risks for our economies and societies stemming from climate change are transition risk, and physical risk (see knowledge bar opposite).

Brown companies that resist transitioning will need to increase their efforts and allocate more capital to adapting to climate change, coupled with government efforts, to help society become more resilient to physical risks such as extreme weather, flooding, poor crop yields, disease, and glacier and coral reef destruction.

However, as more and more companies move up the pyramid, the physical risk for society as a whole, and the need for their individual adaptation will diminish.

Instead we will see a shift towards mitigation. This shift will accompany a pivot towards transition risk, with transition risk being much more manageable than its counterpart, physical risk.

It is also important to note that there is greater reputational and litigation risk for dark brown companies. Investors will want to identify these, as the reputational risks of companies can taint investors as well.

Knowledge bar:

Mitigation – actively reducing the amount of GHG emissions, drastically reducing the need for adaptation. Mitigation is closely linked with transition risk.

Adaptation – the need to ensure the economy and society are able to withstand the effects of climate change as much as possible. Adaptation is closely linked to physical risk.

Transition risk – the potential downside a company faces when trying to change its operations in order to lower its GHG emissions. The higher the GHG emission levels, the greater the need for the company to transition to lower carbon activities, but also the greater the potential for the company to struggle to change.

Physical risk – the increased likelihood of catastrophic weather events, caused by increasing emission levels, having a catastrophic impact on the economy, the environment and social welfare. The cost of physical risks are often absorbed by governments and insurance companies, and not borne by industry.

Sources: TCFD, EU Taxonomy, BNP Paribas

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