



Climate Action Network

Position: The transition to 100% renewable energy must be just, equitable and rapid

September 2023

Climate Action Network (CAN) is a global network of more than 1,900 civil society organisations in over 130 countries driving collective and sustainable action to fight the climate crisis and to achieve social and racial justice.

Introduction

The escalating impacts of the climate crisis are already alarming, as they impact people and ecosystems worldwide now. People and communities in the Global South who have done the least to cause this crisis are facing some of the first and worst impacts. If governments fail to act and allow global average temperatures to rise by 1.5°C or beyond, the consequences will become even more catastrophic.

Three quarters of the total greenhouse gas emissions emitted since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution have been directly from burning fossil fuels.¹ The lack of urgency from global leaders, in particular in the wealthy, industrialised countries, to end fossil fuel production and consumption and transition towards 100% renewable, zero-carbon global energy systems is an outrage. There is no justification for this delay.

CAN-International calls for COP28 to adopt a comprehensive energy package that reflects the need for urgent and concerted action, by recognising the need for:

- A clear call for a fair, full, fast and funded phase out of fossil fuel production and use;
- Targets to massively scale up nature-positive, human rights compliant renewable energy growth; and
- Measures to reduce global energy consumption by at least a quarter by 2050.

As we phase out the fossil fuel system of the past and transition to the renewable energy system of the future, we must ensure that this is a just transition and does not replicate the centralised, extractivist energy system of the fossil fuel era that has undermined human rights, damaged lives and livelihoods and wreaked havoc with our planet's ecosystems. By replicating the current energy model we are at risk of serving the ever-increasing demands of the very wealthy, while leaving more than a billion people in energy poverty.

On top of being responsible for the vast majority of the loss and damage caused by climate change, fossil fuel pollution is responsible for as many as 1 in 5 premature deaths worldwide,² with the most recent IPCC Synthesis Report noting that the economic benefits to

¹ Global Carbon Project. (2020). Supplemental data of Global Carbon Budget 2020 (Version 1.0) [Data set]. Global Carbon Project. <https://doi.org/10.18160/gcp-2020>.

² Vohra, K. et al. (2021). Global mortality from outdoor fine particle pollution generated by fossil fuel combustion: Results from GEOS-Chem. Environmental Research: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envres.2021.110754>.

human health related to air quality improvement likely offset – and potentially far outweigh – the costs of mitigation.³

Consequently, COP28 must recognise the need to ensure that the deployment of renewable energy is done in a way that puts people and nature first, rather than repeating the mistakes of the past – including sufficient grants-based funding by the rich OECD countries for this energy transition in lower income countries.

This paper sets out CAN's proposal for a framework to ensure that the transition to renewable energy is a just transition that: actively supports fossil fuel workers and those currently dependent on fossil fuel based systems for their livelihoods to play an active and productive part in the zero-carbon clean economy; that cleans up legacy pollution from fossil fuels and avoids negative impacts on ecosystems and biodiversity and communities living in these ecosystems ; that ensures energy access and secured energy supply , and that does not further replicate colonial and racial injustices.

CAN acknowledges that, if done badly, renewable energy systems have the potential to harm people, communities, and ecosystems, and to violate human rights. This is avoidable. For example: accelerated uptake of electric vehicles in the Global North is already having implications for lithium extraction in the water-scarce salt flats in South America, putting the rights of Indigenous Peoples and other communities at risk, and destructive strip mines for bauxite taking farmland in parts of Africa; large expanses of land for wind or solar can undermine local land rights or food production systems; and demand for renewable hydrogen production in countries in the Global South may mean large scale renewable energy prioritised for hydrogen exports at the expense of local energy access and supply.

To avoid these negative impacts, the renewable energy system of the future must be built on a system transformation. Instead of replicating past energy systems that benefited the wealthy few at the expense of the many, renewable energy deployment must be part of a new system that minimises its footprint on materials, land, people and planet, while providing democratic and human rights-compliant energy systems that provide clean, safe energy for all.

CAN International proposes a **framework to promote a just, equitable and rapid transition to a new 100% renewable energy** system, that provides fair access to clean energy for all.

³ IPCC AR6 SYR, C.2.4.

Essential elements for promoting a just, equitable and rapid transition to 100% renewable energy

1. Addressing energy poverty and ensuring universal, gender-just, and equitable access to sufficient energy for basic needs and to thrive
2. Equitable, efficient, and sufficient energy production and consumption
3. Building transparent, democratic and non-discriminatory energy systems, promoting energy sovereignty, local ownership and decent work
4. Well-managed and protected land, water, and marine resource use and governance, with remediation for any damage
5. Minimising the need for and impact of extraction of critical transition minerals for renewable energy
6. Upholding and protecting fundamental human rights, and the right to free, prior and informed consent of Indigenous Peoples, with fully participatory decision-making
7. Ecological restoration and regeneration, ecological integrity, and biodiversity
8. Adequate and fair climate finance from richer nations and no new debt for lower income countries from renewable energy investments.

1. The energy transition must address energy poverty and ensure universal, gender-just, and equitable access to sufficient energy for basic needs and to thrive

More than 750 million people have no access to electricity and over 2.6 billion people cook on dirty solid fuels such as wood, dung and charcoal⁴. Many more people can access or afford barely enough energy to meet basic needs, heightened by the recent energy and cost of living crises. Providing fair and equitable access to clean renewable energy must be a priority. The IEA Net Zero Emissions scenario demonstrates that renewable energy can better meet energy access needs and deliver a 1.5°C pathway⁵. Renewable energy access can also remove the health harms of fossil fuels, including both indoor and outdoor air pollution.

To accomplish universal access to electricity and clean cooking by 2030, energy policy and investment need to be aligned with energy transition pathways and the cost of achieving universal access to electricity and clean cooking fuels by 2030 (SDG 7), which is around USD 45 billion per year (less than 2% of overall spending on clean energy), should be secured from richer nations as a first priority⁶.

2 The new energy system must enable equitable, efficient, and sufficient energy production and consumption

Even with the shift to renewable energy systems, the current pace of growth of energy demand will still be a huge drain on the earth's resources and pose harmful impacts on ecosystems. Decarbonizing our economies and meeting universal access for basic needs must. But additionally we must squarely meet the challenge of curbing excessive, wasteful and unnecessary energy consumption, aiming to reduce total final energy consumption demand by at least a quarter by 2050 compared to today. This will require us to focus on

⁴ [SDG 7.1 - Access to energy | Sustainable Energy for All \(seforall.org\)](https://seforall.org/).

⁵ <https://www.iea.org/reports/global-energy-and-climate-model/net-zero-emissions-by-2050-scenario-nze>

⁶ <https://www.iea.org/reports/scaling-up-private-finance-for-clean-energy-in-emerging-and-developing-economies>.

energy efficient energy systems, shifting consumption patterns (such as shifting from individual vehicles to public transport or walking), and sufficiency, so delivering sufficient energy for all and suppressing excessive consumption.

3 The new energy system must be democratic, non-discriminatory and efficient, promoting energy sovereignty, local ownership and decent work

Renewable energy is very adaptable, with a combination of large and small scale grid and small scale, plus on- and off -grid technologies. Therefore, renewable energy systems are not only good for climate mitigation; they are also more appropriate for realising human rights, democratic control, decentralisation of production, ownership, and management, community and women's empowerment, income generation opportunities through productive end use, and access for remote areas. These systems can and should also support climate change adaptation, enhancing resilience to climate-driven disturbances and disruptions through a combination of diversification of energy generation, adaptable grid systems, decentralised energy, and other enhancements to improve reliability.⁷

It will be important for public and private entities involved communities in renewable energy development and to institutionalise robust stakeholder consultation mechanisms. Electricity and energy markets should work for people and communities, with the renewable industry and governments committed to providing decent work, as part of a just transition.

4. The energy transition must include systems to govern and protect land, water, and marine resource use

Climate change is already impacting food, water, and marine resource systems, exacerbating the global problems of hunger and malnutrition and lack of freshwater. The rapid transition to 100% renewable energy systems can involve a significant demand for land, water and the extraction of metals and critical minerals. There are vital concerns that need to be addressed to ensure conditions for renewable energy projects to be established in forest, agricultural and aquatic areas with minimal and manageable impacts on local communities and ecological systems. Policies on forest, land and water use and resource management must be established, which protect and promote the forest, land, water and resource rights of farmers and Indigenous peoples. Governments must adopt and enforce clear policies against deforestation and degradation for renewable energy projects.

5. The energy transition must minimise the need for and impact of extraction of critical transition minerals for renewable energy

Even though transitioning away from fossil fuel production and consumption will mean that the total volume of resources extracted from the ground will fall, moving to 100% renewable energy will also entail new risks and dangers of extractivist practices and corresponding impacts from the supply of critical transition minerals. The accelerated development of renewable energy systems and the massive building or retrofitting of infrastructures (e.g. the transport sector) will require a proportionately massive rise in the scale and volume of the extraction of minerals and production of materials. The new 100% renewable energy system should aim to minimise the demand for minerals, through reduced energy consumption, decreasing energy intensity and innovative technology design; building recycling into the mineral cycle of every renewable energy technology; and holding all companies and entities (including international, national, and local public institutions) engaged in the mineral extractives industries accountable for violation of human rights abuses and undermining of

⁷ IPCC AR6 SYR, C.3.2

social and environmental safeguards, based on robust internationally enforceable human rights, labour and environmental standards.

6. The energy transition must uphold and protect fundamental human rights, with fully participatory decision-making

In the design and development of renewable energy systems, fundamental human rights for all must be secured, including for women, workers, communities, Indigenous peoples, peasants and small farmers, LGBTQIA+ people, differently-abled individuals, and other vulnerable and marginalised groups. There should be no discrimination based on gender, caste, identity, beliefs, race, etc. This will require fully participatory decision-making, with full access to information about implications and potential impacts of the energy transition project and access to appropriate and effective remedies for any human rights violations that occur during the renewable energy transition.

Governments must protect the right to free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) for Indigenous Peoples and local communities, respect the rights of Indigenous Peoples to self-determination, and ensure community participation in decision-making processes in renewable energy projects and systems both public and private, as well as effective mechanisms for grievance redress.

7. The energy transition must enable ecological restoration and regeneration, and protect ecological integrity, and biodiversity

Large-scale development can have serious ecological, human rights and social impacts, threatening ecological integrity, potentially undermining local ecosystems and species, and people who depend on them. In the face of unavoidable impacts, there must be mechanisms in place to minimise impact, protect, restore and regenerate ecosystems, while fully protecting the rights of all those affected. Ecologically sensitive areas should be recognized and protected by international agreements and supporting domestic laws formulated with a human rights perspective. Renewable energy systems must respect and contribute to ecological integrity including safeguarding ecosystems, biodiversity, water systems, native and endangered species, nature and biosphere reserves, and natural heritage. Those responsible for past, present and future ecological, human rights and social impacts must be held accountable for reparations and restoration.

Fossil fuel companies should also be held accountable for the damages caused by their products, applying the polluter pays principle. They should pay for remediation of legacy pollution from fossil fuels, as well as contribute to the costs of the clean energy transition.

8. There must be adequate and fair climate finance from richer nations and no new debt for lower income countries from renewable energy investments.

Up to five trillions of dollars are needed annually for the rapid, equitable and just transition to 100% renewable energy systems including energy efficiency, storage and grids as well as skilling people globally for this necessary transition. While this is a lot, it is only 5% of global GDP. One of the greatest challenges to meeting the requirements and achieving this transition is mobilising finance at the scale and speed necessary, especially in the Global South. Richer nations have an obligation to ramp up climate finance to meet this need.

At the same time, this clean energy transition should not increase the debt burden on the countries who have done least to add to the climate crisis. High debt levels are a major barrier to phasing out fossil fuels for many lower income countries and countries are in many occasions trapped in exploiting fossil fuels to generate revenue to repay debt. Debt

cancellation⁸ and other debt relief measures are urgently needed to help release funds for financing development programs, public services, and climate action, including the development of renewable energy systems. New renewable energy development in low-income countries should be in the form of grants and highly concessional loans.

⁸ <https://debtjustice.org.uk/news/new-briefing-the-debt-fossil-fuel-trap>