



RENEWABLE ENERGY AND THE RIGHT TO DEVELOPMENT: REALIZING HUMAN RIGHTS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Key Messages



UNITED NATIONS
HUMAN RIGHTS
OFFICE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER

RENEWABLE ENERGY AND THE RIGHT TO DEVELOPMENT: REALIZING HUMAN RIGHTS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Energy production and use account for two-thirds of the world's greenhouse gas emissions. Transformation of the energy sector into one based on renewable energy must therefore be at the heart of efforts to address climate change. States and communities seeking to realize the right to development are weighing the economic costs of this transformation against the environmental and human rights harms they will suffer if it does not happen, and they are finding that the benefits of renewable energy far outweigh the costs. Renewable energy, its equitable distribution and affordable access can contribute to achieving several goals and targets of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda and to realizing the Right to Development. OHCHR's Key Messages on "Renewable Energy and the Right to Development: Realizing Human Rights for Sustainable Development" include policy recommendations on production and access to renewable energy, addressed to States as primary duty-bearers; international organisations and lenders; the private sector; and international as well as national civil society actors.

01

Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all

An enabling economic and financial environment for equitable access to clean and renewable energy requires urgent scaling up of long-term, reliable and sustainable public and private investment in the transition of energy production from fossil fuels to clean energy. Increasing investment in, and equitable access to renewable energy, supports State efforts to meet their human rights obligations to prevent and mitigate the adverse impacts of climate change.

An investment push to meet the Sustainable Development Goal 7 of universal access to renewable energy and for renewables to constitute the primary source of energy globally by 2030 is feasible. However, it will require allocations of financing several times larger than the current investments in renewable energy and infrastructure as a whole. According to the [World Energy Outlook 2021](#), \$30.3 trillion of investment is needed by 2030. States, as primary duty-bearers, should play a leading role in formulating financial sector policies, to ensure the creation of a conducive investment climate for renewable energy. For instance, the formulation of central bank lending guidelines can help ensure standardization, predictability and reliability in renewable energy projects. At the same time, private actors need to underscore the centrality of climate mitigation action in their business models in order to achieve the transition to a zero-carbon society while investing in research and development for environmentally sound technologies that are affordable and scalable.

Creating the right conditions for equitable access to clean and renewable energy, while protecting and promoting human rights and mitigating climate change for all will require the creation of a broad mix of policies, including fiscal policy, trade and investment policy, research and innovation policy, industrial policy, labour policy, and renewable energy policy. Policy planning and action must take place at all levels, from local to global, and with the active participation of a wide range of stakeholders including governments, utilities, international development agencies and financial institutions. National policymakers must be willing to promote renewable energy and new facilitating technologies on a much wider scale among all actors in society, from consumers to economic enterprises. States, as primary duty-bearers, should play a leading role in formulating policies to ensure the creation of a conducive climate for a just transition to renewable energy.

02

Formulate and implement policies for renewable energy expansion

Job creation is critical to foster social and economic development. It can impact human development positively and should be the cornerstone of the energy transition to renewables. The energy sector transition to renewables is projected to create more employment, with the number of new jobs in the renewables sector offsetting job losses in fossil fuels. Hence, new renewable energy technologies have the potential to generate economic opportunities in commerce and employment, which in turn have the ability to support the achievement of the right to livelihood and decent work. The transition, however, involves a significant shift in employment structure. This will require supportive and comprehensive policies, including skills retraining programmes, educational opportunities and state-directed assistance for social protection and insurance programmes. Inclusion is indispensable to a just transition, as the success of any policy plan is in great measure linked to generating the confidence that people need for backing structural change. As such, policy plans need to be constructed through social dialogue with relevant stakeholders at the national and municipal levels and with workers and their unions at the industry and enterprise level, in accordance with the International Labour Organisation (ILO) [Guidelines for a just transition towards environmentally sustainable economies and societies for all](#).

03

Support a just transition through decent work opportunities for all

A just transition from fossil fuels to renewables should be grounded in a human rights and development-oriented approach that would work toward fulfilling human rights for all including the Right to Development. As such, a just transition works in tandem with climate change mitigation policies, contributes to economic growth, livelihoods and decent work opportunities, improvement in human welfare and health and improved standards of living for people living in poverty through increased access and affordability of renewable energy sources. Only by integrating human rights in climate actions, including policies empowering people to participate in policy formulation, can States promote sustainability and ensure the accountability of all duty-bearers for their actions. Energy policies and renewable energy projects need to be designed, financed, constructed, and integrated into energy systems taking into account human rights and social implications, especially on vulnerable populations.

04

Integrate human rights in renewable energy policies

05

Support global renewable energy development through international cooperation

The delivery, accessibility, and affordability of a renewable energy transition to individuals and communities will rely on effectively engaging all stakeholders in society, which includes ensuring participation, inclusion and access, and equitably distributing the full welfare potential of renewable energy. Affected individuals and communities must participate, without discrimination, in the design and implementation of any climate change adaptation or mitigation measure. States should undertake all necessary measures to ensure equality of opportunity for all in access to renewable energy services and consumption. To this end, States must play a proactive role in addressing structural inequalities and barriers to access and participation and enabling an environment for renewable energy investment, infrastructure, distribution, and pricing policies. International organisations and civil society organisations are also needed to support measures aimed at achieving equitable access for all in their lending and projects for clean and renewable energy services and consumption.

Taking into account the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities, States should cooperate to address the global effects of climate change on the enjoyment of human rights around the world with a view to advancing climate justice and equity for all. For climate actions and sustainable development to achieve their objectives, they must be informed by human rights, including the rights of present and future generations to a healthy environment. In alignment with the Paris Agreement and [Article 4.2 of the Declaration on the Right to Development](#) on the imperative of effective international cooperation to provide developing countries with the means and facilities to foster their comprehensive development, States, international organisations and civil society organisations should support and promote multilateral investment and lending policies, technology transfer, and technical assistance that serve the development and growth of renewable energy globally, as well as the necessary infrastructure to this end.

06

Ensure participation and equality of opportunity for all in access to renewable energy services and consumption

The lack of sustainable and clean energy impacts women, men, girls, boys, and persons with diverse gender identities differently across multiple dimensions, including through economic, social, health, and security-related effects. For example, lack of access to clean and renewable energy can, especially in rural areas of developing countries, have particular negative human rights impacts on women and girls. However, despite often being at the centre of household energy management, women and girls may encounter exclusion from discussions about energy plans and policies. Participation in the renewable energy industry for women entrepreneurs is challenged by multiple intersecting inequalities, many of which take the form of discrimination in law and practice. In the context of energy access, engaging women as active agents in deploying off-grid renewable energy solutions is known to improve sustainability and positive gender outcomes. It is key to the overall success of renewable energy programmes. Hence, energy projects must adequately consider gender impacts in their planning, financing, and execution. An enabling environment that supports equitable access to renewable energy options can only be created by integrating a gender perspective into climate actions and policies.

07

Ensure gender equality in energy access and use

Vulnerable populations, such as people living in poverty, migrants, older persons, refugees or persons with disabilities need renewable energy for cooking, heating, education etc. All actors have a responsibility to ensure that clean solutions are relevant and adapted to populations in vulnerable situations and that suggested solutions are both financially and environmentally affordable. For instance, an increase in energy prices or the intermittency that comes with some renewable technologies can have a bigger negative impact on older people who rely on medical equipment and people who live in poverty. Disaster risk reduction, emergency and crisis recovery planning should include sustainability concerns, as well as access to renewable, clean and affordable energy. All actors should strive to reduce the dependence of marginalised communities on polluting technologies, and instead promote more efficient technologies such as solar power. Capacity building efforts should also be conducted in a format that is adapted to people in vulnerable situations such as older persons and persons living with disabilities.

08

Ensure equal access to renewable energy to those in vulnerable situations

09

Ensure that renewable energy installations do not cause human rights harm

The transition to a net-zero carbon economy is a human rights imperative for all people, but cannot come at the expense of the most vulnerable. The deployment and expansion of renewable energy technologies can sometimes come at a cost for workers and local communities. Killings, threats, intimidation, land grabs, dangerous working conditions, poverty wages and harm to the lives and livelihoods of indigenous peoples comprise just some of the many human rights abuses documented in relation to renewable energy projects that have taken place around the world in the last decade. Private actors should adopt and implement policies that align with the [United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#) and other international standards. This includes promoting the meaningful and effective participation of indigenous communities and other stakeholders, identifying and correcting abuses in supply chains, and adopting policies to protect those who are defending human and environmental rights. Investors, governments and international financial institutions should ensure that companies have clear policies that respect human rights, including the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment. Workers and local communities should also have access to both non-judicial redress mechanisms and legal remedies when renewable projects cause harm.

The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights states that everyone has the right to enjoy the benefits of science and its applications. States should actively support the development, dissemination and transfer of new renewable energy related technologies. Environmentally clean energy should be accessibly priced and its benefits should be shared between and within countries. States and other stakeholders should also take steps to ensure that global intellectual property regimes do not obstruct the adoption of renewable energy, while at the same time ensuring that they create appropriate incentives to help meet sustainable development objectives.

10

Guarantee that everyone enjoys the benefits of science and its applications