Energy Transition in Africa: Ensuring Inclusivity and Climate Justice for Indigenous and Vulnerable Communities

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Kariuki Muigua

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Kariuki Muigua*

Abstract

This paper discusses how Africa can ensure inclusivity and justice in its journey towards energy transition. The paper argues that energy transition is a key priority for Africa towards actualising the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the goals and aspirations of African Union's Agenda 2063. It posits that Africa has immense potential to achieve energy transition due to several favourable factors including the abundance of renewable sources of energy in the continent and the availability of energy transition minerals. Despite its immense potential to actualise energy transition, the paper argues that energy transition in Africa is fuelling justice, equity and human rights concerns. In particular, the paper notes that indigenous and vulnerable communities are often excluded from decision-making processes with their rights also being violated. In light of these challenges, the paper argues that it is imperative to foster equitable energy transition in Africa. It examines how Africa can ensure inclusivity and climate justice for indigenous and vulnerable communities in order to achieve equitable energy transition for Sustainable Development.

1.0 Introduction

Energy transition refers to the transformative shift in how energy is produced, distributed and consumed, with the aim of moving away from fossil fuels towards an energy system centred on clean and sustainable sources of energy such as renewable energy[1]. In addition, energy transition has been described as the global energy sector's

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[1] United Nations Development Programme., 'What is the sustainable energy transition and why is it key to tackling climate change?' Available at https://climatepromise.undp.org/news-and-stories/what-sustainable-energy-transition-and-why-it-key-tackling-climate-change (Accessed on 19/09/2025)

shift from fossil fuel-based systems of energy production and consumption including oil, natural gas and coal to renewable energy sources like wind and solar[2]. It has been argued that energy transition involves the shift from an energy mix based on fossil fuels to one that produces very limited, if not zero, carbon emissions, based on renewable energy sources[3]. The concept of energy transition therefore involves shifting energy production, supply and consumption away from fossil fuels and towards clean and sustainable energy sources, with a focus on renewable energy, without derailing economic growth[4].

Fast-tracking energy transition is a vital agenda globally for both people and planet. For instance, it has been noted that burning of fossil fuels like coal, oil and gas is the primary cause of climate change[5]. The United Nations points out that fossil fuels are by far the largest contributor to global climate change, accounting for over 75 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions and nearly 90 percent of all carbon dioxide emissions[6]. Fossil fuels also have devastating impacts on human and environmental health. They have been linked to air pollution with severe impacts on people and planet[7]. In addition, since fossil fuels are non-renewable, they can be depleted and therefore, placing too much reliance on them can affect global energy security and supply[8].

Actualising energy transition therefore provides numerous benefits in the quest towards Sustainable Development. It has been argued that achieving energy transition presents a

[2] S & P Global., 'What is Energy Transition?' Available at https://www.spglobal.com/en/research-insights/articles/what-is-energy-transition (Accessed on 19/09/2025)
[3] The Energy Transition., Available at https://www.enelgreenpower.com/learning-hub/energy-transition (Accessed on 19/09/2025)
[4] The Energy Transition., Available at https://www.pwc.com/id/en/services/energy-transition.html (Accessed on 19/09/2025)
[5] United Nations., 'What is Climate Change?' Available at https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/what-is-climate-change (Accessed on 19/09/2025)
[6] United Nations., 'Renewable Energy – Powering a Safer Future' Available at https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/raising-ambition/renewable-energy (Accessed on 19/09/2025)
[7] Solomon. B., & Krishna. K., 'The Coming Sustainable Energy Transition: History, Strategies, and Outlook.' *Energy Policy* 39 (2011) 7422-7431
[8] Ibid

unique opportunity to address key global challenges including climate change, energy access disparities, poverty, inequality, and health impacts of the energy sector therefore laying the foundation for a sustainable, inclusive and more resilient future[9]. The ideal of global energy transition is envisioned under the United Nations *2030 agenda for Sustainable Development*[10]. Under the Agenda, Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 7 seeks to ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all including through substantially increasing the share of renewable energy in the global energy mix[11]. Despite its crucial role in the Sustainable Development agenda, it has been argued that global energy transition is undermined by several challenges including renewable energy disputes, human rights violations and injustices against indigenous and vulnerable communities who are often excluded from decision-making processes and displaced from their ancestral lands[12]. In light of these challenges, it is imperative to ensure just, equitable and inclusive energy transition for Sustainable Development.

This paper discusses how Africa can ensure inclusivity and justice in its journey towards energy transition. The paper argues that energy transition is a key priority for Africa towards actualising the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the goals and aspirations of African Union's Agenda 2063. It posits that Africa has immense potential to achieve energy transition due to several favourable factors including the abundance of renewable sources of energy in the continent and the availability of energy transition minerals. Despite its immense potential to actualise energy transition, the paper argues that energy transition in Africa is fueling justice, equity and human rights concerns. In

[9] United Nations Development Programme., 'What is the sustainable energy transition and why is it key to tackling climate change?' Op Cit

[10] United Nations General Assembly., 'Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.' 21 October 2015, A/RES/70/1., Available at https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/21252030%20Agenda%20for%20Sustainable%20Development%20web.pdf (Accessed on 19/09/2025)

[11] ibid

[12] United Nations Environment Programme., 'Critical Energy Transition Minerals' Available at https://www.unep.org/topics/energy/renewable-energy/critical-energy-transition-minerals (Accessed on 19/09/2025)

particular, the paper notes that indigenous and vulnerable communities are often excluded from decision-making processes with their rights also being violated. In light of these challenges, the paper argues that it is imperative to foster equitable energy transition in Africa. It examines how Africa can ensure inclusivity and climate justice for indigenous and vulnerable communities in order to achieve equitable energy transition for Sustainable Development.

2.0 Energy Transitions in Africa: Opportunities and Challenges

Energy transition is a fundamental goal in Africa. For example, energy access remains a key challenge in the continent with millions of people lacking reliable, affordable, sustainable and modern energy services[13]. It is estimated that nearly half of Africa's population lack access to electricity which is more than 80 per cent of the global population without access to electricity[14]. Further, it has been observed that Africa accounts for majority of the world's population without access to electricity and clean sources of cooking[15]. According to the International Energy Agency (IEA), enhancing access to energy is a crucial goal for Africa, where nearly 600 million people live without electricity and roughly 1 billion people lack access to clean cooking sources[16].

The continued reliance on fossil fuels and bio-energy sources such as charcoal, wood fuel and dung for cooking is fueling environmental and health concerns in Africa. For example, fossil fuels are causing and worsening the impacts of climate change in Africa[17].

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[13] United Nations Sustainable Development Group., 'Decoding Africa's Energy Journey: Three Key Numbers' Available at https://unsdg.un.org/latest/stories/decoding-africa%E2%80%99s-energy-journey-three-key-numbers#:~:text=600%20million%20Africans%20without%20access,access%2C%20according%20to%202022%20data. (Accessed on 19/09/2025)

[14] Ibid

[15] World Bank Group., 'Energy Access in Eastern and Southern Africa' Available at https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/afr/brief/afe-energy (Accessed on 19/09/2025)

[16] International Energy Agency., 'World Energy Investments 2024: Africa' Available at https://www.iea.org/reports/world-energy-investment-2024/africa (Accessed on 19/09/2025)

[17] Muigua. K., 'Towards Energy Justice in Kenya.' Available at https://kmco.co.ke/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Towards-Energy-Justice-in-Kenya-00000005.pdf (Accessed on 19/09/2025)

Africa is the most vulnerable region globally to climate change and its impacts and therefore effective responses including adopting renewable sources of energy are required in order to confront climate change in the continent[18]. In addition, majority of the population in Sub-Saharan Africa lack access to clean and affordable energy and depend on traditional fuels for cooking[19]. The use of traditional fuels for cooking in Africa is destroying nature through deforestation, destruction of habitats and biodiversity loss, and climate change[20]. In addition, the use of bio-energy sources for cooking is also linked to more than 500,000 annual deaths globally due to indoor pollution[21].

In light of the foregoing challenges, achieving energy transition has become a vital sustainability and development objective in Africa. It has been argued that in order to address energy access, climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution concerns in Africa, energy transition is an essential and transformative process aimed at reducing the continent's carbon footprint, safeguarding the environment and fostering socio-economic development[22]. The ideal of energy transition in Africa is well captured under African Union's *Agenda 2063*[23] which portrays the vision of a Continent where renewable energy including wind, solar, hydro, bioenergy, ocean tidal waves, geothermal and other

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[18] United Nations Environment Programme., 'Responding to climate change' Available at https://www.unep.org/regions/africa/regional-initiatives/responding-climate-change (Accessed on 19/09/2025)

[19] Bildirici. M & Ozaksoy.F., 'Woody Biomass Energy Consumption and Economic Growth in Sub-Saharan Africa' *Procedia Economics and Finance* 38 (2016) 287 – 293.

[20] Energy Access in Africa., Available at https://wwf.panda.org/discover/our_focus/climate_and_energy_practice/what_we_do/changing_energy_use/energy_access_africa/ (Accessed on 19/09/2025)

[21] United Nations., 'Advancing SDG 7 in Africa.' Available at https://sdgs.un.org/sites/default/files/2023-06/2023%20Advancing%20SDG7%20in%20the%20Africa-062923.pdf (Accessed on 19/09/2025)

[22] Boucetta. M., 'Towards a Just Energy Transition for Africa' Available at https://www.policycenter.ma/publications/towards-just-energy-transition-africa#:~:text=To%20address%20climate%20change%2C%20the,demand%20by%20altering%20consumption%20patterns. (Accessed on 19/09/2025)

[23] Africa Union., 'Agenda 2063: The Africa we Want.' Available at https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/33126-doc-framework_document_book.pdf (Accessed on 19/09/2025)

renewables claim more than half of the energy consumption for households, businesses and organizations[24].

Africa has immense potential to achieve energy transition. For example, the continent is rich in renewable energy with wind, solar, hydro, bioenergy, ocean tidal waves, geothermal among other renewables being abundant throughout the continent[25]. It has been pointed out that Africa is rich in renewable energy resources, including abundant sunlight, strong winds, and geothermal energy which can be harnessed to fast-track energy transition and Sustainable Development[26]. In addition, Africa has viable deposits of critical raw materials including cobalt, bauxite, manganese, graphite, lithium, chromium and rare earth elements[27]. It has been argued that the transition from fossil fuels to clean energy sources globally depends on the availability and sustainable use of critical energy transition minerals including copper, lithium, nickel and cobalt which are essential components in many of today's rapidly growing clean energy technologies including wind turbines, solar panels and electric vehicles[28]. Due to the abundance of these vital resources in Africa, it has been argued that the continent is at the heart of a low-carbon future[29].

Africa therefore has several favourable factors that can be harnessed towards achieving energy transition. As a result, there has been a growth of investments in renewable energy in Africa. It has been observed that the production of renewable energy is growing in Africa with hydro, solar, wind, geothermal, biofuels and biomass accounting for a

[24] Ibid
[25] Ibid
[26] AUDA-NEPAD., 'Empowering Africa: Enhancing Access To Electricity Through Renewable Energy' Available at https://www.nepad.org/blog/empowering-africa-enhancing-access-electricity-through-renewable-energy (Accessed on 19/09/2025)
[27] Mo Ibrahim Foundation., 'Africa's Critical Minerals: Africa at the Heart of a Low-Carbon Future' Available at https://mo.ibrahim.foundation/sites/default/files/2022-11/minerals-resource-governance.pdf (Accessed on 19/09/2025)
[28] United Nations Environment Programme., 'Critical Energy Transition Minerals' Op Cit
[29] Mo Ibrahim Foundation., 'Africa's Critical Minerals: Africa at the Heart of a Low-Carbon Future' Op Cit

significant percentage of the total primary energy produced on the continent[30]. It has been argued that energy transition is beginning to bear fruit in several African countries with wind and solar power dominating non-hydro renewable energy generation and installed capacity[31]. Further, there has been a significant growth in mining activities aimed at extracting critical raw materials in Africa towards actualising energy transition[32].

Despite the foregoing efforts, energy transition in Africa is fuelling several concerns against indigenous and vulnerable communities. For example, wind and solar farms, hydroelectric dams, and geothermal plants needed to adopt renewable energy all require significant land and water resources, often leading to disputes with indigenous and vulnerable communities over land rights and environmental impacts[33]. In some instances, renewable energy projects have been implemented in Africa while overlooking the rights of local communities and indigenous peoples who bear the brunt of the environmental and social impacts[34]. Investors have often been accused of violating the Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) of indigenous and vulnerable communities during the implementation of renewable energy projects[35]. Renewable energy projects in Africa have come at the expense of human rights, including the loss of land, livelihoods and other rights of indigenous peoples including the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment[36].

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[30] United Nations Conference on Trade and Development., 'Commodities at a Glance: Special Issue on Access to Energy in Sub-Saharan Africa.' Available at Available at https://unctad.org/publication/commodities-glance-special-issue-access-energy-sub-saharan-africa#:~:text=Access%20to%20energy%20is%20defined,be%20scaled%20up%20over%20time (Accessed on 19/09/2025)

[31] United Nations., 'Advancing SDG 7 in Africa.' Op Cit

[32] Mo Ibrahim Foundation., 'Africa's Critical Minerals: Africa at the Heart of a Low-Carbon Future' Op Cit

[33] The Role of Fossil Fuel and Renewable Energy Projects in Conflict Across Africa., Available at https://www.accord.org.za/analysis/the-role-of-fossil-fuel-and-renewable-energy-projects-in-conflict-across-africa/ (Accessed on 19/09/2025)

[34] Ibid

[35] Ibid

[36] Impact of renewable energy projects on Indigenous communities in Kenya., Available at https://iwgia.org/en/kenya/3534-impact-of-renewable-energy-projects-on-indigenous-communities-in-

In addition, unsustainable extraction of critical raw materials is a major threat to the environmental rights of indigenous peoples and vulnerable communities since it leads to environmental degradation, deforestation, pollution, climate change and biodiversity loss[37]. The extraction of critical raw materials needed to actualise energy transitions both globally and in Africa has had negative impacts on indigenous people's rights who are often displaced from their ancestral lands[38]. Energy transitions in Africa can therefore undermine the rights of indigenous and vulnerable communities. It is imperative to ensure inclusivity and justice for indigenous peoples and vulnerable communities in order to achieve equitable energy transition in Africa for Sustainable Development.

3.0 Ensuring Inclusivity and Climate Justice for Indigenous and Vulnerable Communities in Energy Transition in Africa

Energy transition is a crucial goal for Africa. It has been argued that energy transition will continue transforming the global economic landscape in terms of regulations, energy investments, and technological solutions in the coming decades[39]. With its abundant renewable sources of energy and critical raw materials, Africa is poised to play a significant role in energy transition while addressing its own Sustainable Development needs[40]. It has been argued that Africa can harness its abundant potential of increasingly cost-competitive renewable energy to service the growing demand for electricity in the continent while avoiding the negative impacts of fossil fuels including oil, gas and coal[41]. By realising energy transition, Africa can create new jobs, accelerate economic growth

kenya.html#:~:text=Kenya's%20ambitious%20plan%20to%20transition,energy%20by%20this%20year%2C%202020. (Accessed on 19/09/2025)

[37] United Nations Environment Programme., 'What are energy transition minerals and how can they unlock the clean energy age?' Available at https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/what-are-energy-transition-minerals-and-how-can-they-unlock-clean-energy-age (Accessed on 19/09/2025)

[38] United Nations Environment Programme., 'Critical Energy Transition Minerals' Op Cit

[39] Boucetta. M., 'Towards a Just Energy Transition for Africa' Op Cit

[40] Ibid

[41] The Renewable Energy Transition in Africa: Powering Access, Resilience and Prosperity., Available at https://www.giz.de/en/downloads/Study_Renewable%20Energy%20Transition%20Africa-EN.pdf (Accessed on 19/09/2025)

and mitigate the adverse impacts of climate change[42]. With the world shifting towards a more sustainable future through energy transition, Africa has the capacity to emerge as a key player in the global renewable energy mix[43]. Energy transition is therefore an achievable dream for Africa.

Africa therefore has immense potential to achieve energy transition. However, it is imperative to ensure inclusivity and climate justice for indigenous peoples and vulnerable communities. Indigenous and vulnerable communities are usually sidelined in renewable energy projects while also facing human rights threats including dispossession from their ancestral lands and environmental degradation[44]. As a result, there is need to ensure inclusivity and participation of indigenous and vulnerable communities in energy transitions including through upholding their right to FPIC[45]. The concept of FPIC is a legal principle that seeks to protect indigenous peoples' collective rights including their right to self-determination, their right to be consulted, their right to participate in decisions that may affect them, and their rights to their lands and resources[46]. It has been argued that FPIC is a process where indigenous peoples and vulnerable communities who may be affected by a project are meaningfully engaged in project design, implementation and decision-making, are fully informed and are able to grant or deny consent at any stage[47]. By promoting FPIC for indigenous and vulnerable communities, it is possible to ensure that energy transition is just and equitable including

[42] Ibid
[43] Ebatamehi. S., 'Top 10 African Countries Leading in Renewable Energy and Green Innovation in 2025' Available at https://www.africanexponent.com/top-10-african-countries-leading-in-renewable-energy-and-green-innovation-in-2025/ (Accessed on 19/09/2025)
[44] Impact of renewable energy projects on Indigenous communities in Kenya., Op Cit
[45] Ibid
[46] United Nations Development Programme., 'SES Supplemental Guidance: Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) on Applying Free Prior Informed Consent (FPIC)' Available at https://ses-toolkit.info.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke446/files/SES%20Document%20Library/Uploaded%20October%202016/FINAL%20FPIC%20FAQ%20Guidance%20-%20June%2015%202022.pdf (Accessed on 19/09/2025)
[47] Ibid

through the participation of indigenous peoples in renewable energy projects, respect for the land rights of indigenous and vulnerable communities and embracing sustainable and ethical mining practices while extracting critical raw materials[48].

It is also imperative to foster climate justice for indigenous and vulnerable communities in Africa. It has been argued that indigenous peoples both globally and in Africa are among the first to face the direct consequences of climate change, due to their dependence upon, and close relationship, with the environment and its resources[49]. Climate change worsens the difficulties already faced by indigenous peoples and vulnerable communities including political and economic marginalization, loss of land and resources, human rights violations, discrimination and unemployment[50]. Achieving climate justice for indigenous and vulnerable communities is therefore vital towards effectively confronting climate change. Climate justice focuses on how climate change impacts people differently, unevenly, and disproportionately, as well as redressing the resultant injustices in fair and equitable ways[51]. It seeks to reduce marginalization, exploitation, and oppression, and enhance equity and justice in climate action[52]. It involves putting equity and human rights at the core of decision-making and action on climate change[53]. Climate justice is key in achieving just and equitable energy transition that upholds the rights of the vulnerable including indigenous peoples and vulnerable

[48] United Nations., 'Securing Indigenous Rights in the Energy Transition: Preventing Harm, Ensuring Consent, and Promoting Equity in Transition Minerals Extraction' Available at https://social.desa.un.org/sites/default/files/inline-files/Galina_Angarova_EGM_2024_0.pdf (Accessed on 19/09/2025)

[49] United Nations., 'Climate Change' Available https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/climate-change.html (Accessed 19/09/2025)

[50] Ibid

[51] Sultana. F., 'Critical Climate Justice.' Available at https://www.farhanasultana.com/wp-content/uploads/Sultana-Critical-climate-justice.pdf (Accessed on 19/09/2025)

[52] Ibid

[53] United Nations Development Programme., 'Climate Change is a Matter of Justice – Here's Why.' Available at https://climatepromise.undp.org/news-and-stories/climate-change-matter-justice-heres-why (Accessed on 19/09/2025)

communities. By fostering climate justice, it is possible to achieve a fair and inclusive shift to clean energy across Africa, ensuring that the continent's most vulnerable populations including indigenous peoples are not left behind[54]. Ensuring climate justice is therefore vital towards just and equitable energy transition in Africa.

4.0 Conclusion

Energy transition is a key agenda both globally and in Africa towards protecting people and planet. Africa has immense potential to achieve energy transition due to several favourable factors including the abundance of renewable energy and critical raw materials[55]. However, energy transition in Africa can potentially undermine the rights of indigenous peoples and vulnerable communities. It is therefore necessary to foster just and equitable energy transition in Africa by protecting indigenous and vulnerable communities. Ensuring inclusivity and climate justice for indigenous peoples and vulnerable communities are urgent and achievable priorities towards achieving a fair and equitable energy transition in Africa for sustainability.

[54] Thematic Profile: Just Transition and Energy Access., Available at https://pacja.org/just-transition-and-energy-access-2/#:~:text=Overview,million%20without%20clean%20cooking%20solutions. (Accessed on 19/09/2025)

[55] Mo Ibrahim Foundation., 'Africa's Critical Minerals: Africa at the Heart of a Low-Carbon Future' Op Cit

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[1]Impact of renewable energy projects on Indigenous communities in Kenya., Available at https://iwgia.org/en/kenya/3534-impact-of-renewable-energy-projects-on-indigenous-communities-in-kenya.html#:~:text=Kenya's%20ambitious%20plan%20to%20transition,energy%20by%20this%20year%2C%202020

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