social development

Department:
Social Development
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

CONCEPT NOTE

Ensuring Just Energy Transition in practice: finding equitable solutions to renewable energy projects

The Second World Summit for Social Development, Doha 4-6 November 2025

Solutions Session (In-person Side-Event)

4th November, 2025 16:45-18:00 Rm 105

Abstract

The transition to renewable energy often entails social costs at community level. The prospects of losing land and livelihoods cause initial protests and conflicts, and while communities may receive some compensation when solar and wind parks are established, such once-off compensation does not recover loss of land nor ensure sustainable livelihoods. Thus, paradoxically, the implementation of SDG 7 (affordable and clean energy) and SDG 13 (climate action) conflicts with SDG 10 (reduced inequality). Some countries are engaging in Just Energy Transition Partnerships (JETP) to find equitable and socially inclusive solutions to renewable energy projects. South Africa, for instance, has since 2011 implemented a public tender system requiring private energy investors to deliver on community ownership and social development interventions. Policy guidelines are clear, but ensuring social development at community levels is difficult in practice. Research indicates that truly transformative effects of policy interventions need to adequately address socio-economic vulnerabilities, which are best defined through community involvement. Nevertheless, how to best establish community involvement and good private-public-community engagements is still an open question. The aim of this side event is to share experiences on the social components of just transition energy projects. Countries involved in JETP will share both workable policies and persistent practical challenges in ensuring equitable solutions to renewable energy transition. The presentations and following discussion will allow governments to strive towards new solutions for truly just energy transitions for social development.

Background

Equity and social development may deteriorate when countries move towards sustainable energy to address global climate challenges. The expansion of renewable energy (RE) capacity, such as solar and wind, often takes place with little regard for local communities in a process of ‘green extractivism’. Investments in RE often share characteristics with traditional mining and can undermine local livelihoods, leading to extensive social and environmental costs. The much-used practice of compensating local communities for loss of land by offering monetary incentives or infrastructural development, often as one-off interventions, are unsatisfactory from the community point of view, as they lead to a loss of rights and livelihoods, exclusion, and conflicts between RE investors and communities. Consequently, RE investments often hinder a path to social development that ensures the equitable distribution of collective resources and the representation of all affected individuals.

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New approaches to community involvement in the global transition towards RE are being implemented, often under the heading of 'just transition', and sometimes involving social ownership of the investment to align incentives. For the Global South, RE projects require particular attention to the broader community context and must be designed with a focus that is specifically relevant to the community's social needs if they are to succeed. South Africa, for example, has since 2011 implemented the Renewable Energy Independent Power Producer Procurement Programme (REIPPPP), which uses a public tender system to leverage very large private RE investments. At the same time, as an innovation it requires partial community ownership of the RE projects and mandates private investors to deliver an ongoing range of social development interventions. Hence, on paper, REIPPPP aims to strengthen social development within RE investments through more inclusive community involvement.

Research and knowledge on the social and community development aspects of RE investments is only now emerging. Initial case studies point to a relatively high frequency of 'white elephants', as social projects fail to meet their expectations thereby illuminating a gap between policy ambition and reality. Moreover, it is still an open question whether and how private RE investments, including their social components, can affect inequality and be a model for a different and more effective public/private partnership in social development. For truly transformative social development it is important to understand not only the distributive consequences of social interventions, but also how citizen participation, usually within community settings, can affect their effective distribution and implementation.

Sharing experiences on Just Energy Transition projects is central for social development as entails:

- The identification of solutions to sustainable social interventions at community level
- A better understanding of the workings and challenges of partial community ownership of the RE projects
- Provide linkages to the question of asset-based social protection
- Provide a fruitful debate across global south and north experiences as RE investments are ongoing everywhere
- A cross-cutting theme with implications for poverty eradication, decent work and social integration.

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