

What Human Rights can bring to SDG 7 on Affordable and Clean Energy

Key Messages

Climate change is accelerating - driving an urgent global demand for clean, renewable energy solutions.

From land tenure and Indigenous Peoples' rights to labour rights and social protection, environmental and social safeguards, and the rights to participation and to information, **nearly every aspect of the shift to sustainable energy touches on human rights**.

At the same time, a **rights-based approach to SDG 7 is essential to ensure that clean energy systems are sustainable, inclusive, and equitable**.

Just Energy Transitions: ensuring sustainability and equity with Human Rights

The energy transition is essential, as the fossil-fuel status quo generates severe environmental harm and long-lasting human rights harm on a massive scale: the current fossil-fuel-driven economic model is not only the primary driver of climate change and associated human rights harms but also the source of a wide range of human rights violations related to pollution, biodiversity loss, and other negative impacts pf fossil fuel value chains which contribute to a deepening planetary and social crisis.

A human right–based approach (HRBA) is critical to ensure the Energy Transition delivers its intended benefits and prevents or addresses any new negative externalities, so that equity, resilience and sustainability are upheld

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7 AFFORDABLE AND CLEAN ENERGY



When applied from the outset, a HRBA can enable a just transition that advances sustainable economies and societies by embedding human rights considerations into policies, planning and implementation.

First, it helps anticipate and mitigate potential negative effects linked to the technical nature of some renewable projects, which—if not properly managed—may undermine the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment (eg. large-scale wind and solar farms can affect biodiversity and land tenure; e-waste is a growing concern; geothermal projects may pose air and water pollution risks; and bioenergy raises environmental and climate concerns).

Second, placing human rights at the core of project governance is key to ensuring fairness. It helps prevent unequal benefit-sharing, discrimination, the exclusion of marginalized groups, and the emergence of conflicts or organized crime.

Some key recommendations to ensure a human rights-based approach:

At national level

- Conduct prior assessments, participatory planning, and public consultations, drawing on the best available science—including Indigenous, women-led, and traditional knowledge.
- Ensure responsible design, waste management, and decommissioning with clear standards and transparency.
- Require businesses to implement robust human rights due diligence practices.
- Ensure access to justice and to an effective remedy, including guarantees of non-recurrence.

Through international cooperation

- Developed States should expand fiscal space for developing countries through grant-based finance, debt relief, and measures to curb tax avoidance to free financial resources for the energy transition
- States should harmonize regulations, co-develop technologies, and share best practices.

See: Environmentally Sound Technology and Right to Development: realizing Human Rights for Sustainable Development – OHCHR pager

These measures directly reinforce SDG 7 targets by reducing conflict, enhancing equity and ensuring people-centered governance.

CETMs: A Human-Rights Imperative for Just Energy Transition and SDG 7

Critical energy transition minerals (CETMs) are essential to clean energy systems and to achieving SDG 7: solar, wind, battery storage, electrolysers, fuel cells and heat pumps all depend on these minerals, making CETMs central to global investment, trade and industrial policy.

The rapid expansion of renewable energy and storage depending on CETMs make their governance central to the broader economic transformation underway:



How CETMs are extracted, processed and traded will shape whether the energy transition delivers shared prosperity, or reproduces harmful extractive models that disproportionately affect marginalized groups.

These dynamics have direct implications for SDG 7.1 (energy access), 7.2 (renewables), 7.3 (energy efficiency), and 7.a/7.b (international cooperation and infrastructure in developing countries).

Why Human Rights Must Guide CETM Governance

A **human rights-based approach ensures that economic transformation is inclusive, equitable and socially sustainable**. Also, **respecting human rights strengthens and leads to more sustainable and effective outcomes** by ensuring sustainability, fairness, transparency and accountability across the value chain [as demonstrated by the AR6 IPCC AR6 Synthesis Report].

That is why the UN has established a clear rights-based framework for action: the voluntary ***Guiding Principles of the UN Secretary-General's Initiative on Critical Energy Transition Minerals***, which outline the integration of Human Rights across the CETM value chain as the first Principle, and environmental integrity, justice and equity.

The proper implementation of these principles supports SDG 7.1 (energy access), 7.2 (renewables), 7.3 (energy efficiency) and 7.a/7.b (cooperation and infrastructure for developing countries).

Risks When Human Rights Are Not Respected

Where human rights are not upheld, CETM extraction can exacerbate inequality, environmental harm and social instability. Documented abuses—including violations of land rights, labour rights, participation rights and Indigenous Peoples' right to Free, Prior and Informed Consent—demonstrate that governance of CETM is integral to a just transition.

Indigenous Peoples, women, migrant workers and human rights defenders face heightened risks. With over half of CETM reserves located on or near Indigenous territories, excluding affected communities from decision-making threatens both human rights and the success of the energy transition.

Strong governance, labour protections and environmental safeguards are therefore essential to ensure CETMs contribute to, rather than undermine, SDG 7.

Responsible Business Conduct strengthens the Transition

By respecting and advancing human rights, businesses can play a central role in ensuring CETMs advance a just transition.

Human rights due diligence, context-specific impact assessments and meaningful participation of affected communities help prevent conflict, enable responsible investment and ensure fair benefit-sharing.

These measures also reinforce public trust and the long-term resilience of energy systems.



Interlinkages between Just Energy Transitions and Poverty

Efforts to **expand sustainable energy** (SDG 7.2) must go hand in hand with **ensuring universal access** to affordable, reliable, modern energy services (SDG 7.1).

To accelerate the transition—which remains too slow—**Affordability is crucial**:

- Increasing the share of renewables in the energy mix (which can help reduce retail electricity prices), introducing **social tariffs**, and guaranteeing **minimum free energy allocations** can shield vulnerable households from energy poverty while encouraging broad uptake of clean and efficient energy solutions. Off-grid and mini-grid solar systems can expand energy access in remote areas where large on-grid solutions are not viable, supporting livelihoods and rights to education and to health. They request to overcome technical, policy and incentive barriers—and to adopt inclusive governance models that involve communities in site selection [see A/80/188: A human rights-based approach to the energy transition].

Expanding sustainable energy while ensuring universal access are necessary to enable the **energy transition to effectively contribute to poverty reduction and to ensure that no one is left behind**:

- Renewable energy creates more jobs than fossil fuels, with a current estimated **net gain of 2.5 million jobs** compared to losses of about **400,000** in the fossil fuel sector. By 2030, if climate targets are met, transitioning to renewable energy could create a net gain of up to 24 million new jobs. These employment shifts must be accompanied by rights-based just transitions measures, including labour protections and social protection floors.
- Innovations like solar double cropping for example and other **decentralized energy systems** can raise rural incomes, empower communities including Indigenous peoples, rural women and informal economy workers, and better serve low-income households.

RESOURCES



- Report on a Human Rights–Based Approach to the Energy Transition issued by the Special Rapporteur on climate change [July 2025]
- Synthesis report of the UN Secretary-General on opportunities, best practices, actionable solutions, challenges and barriers relevant to just transition and the full realization of human rights for all people [sept 2025]
- The "just transition" in the economic recovery: Eradicating poverty within planetary boundaries issued by the Special Rapporteur on poverty