



# Navigating Africa's Energy Transition: A Call for Social Justice

BY MELANIA CHIPONDA, OCT 2024

Energy transitions in Africa are highly contested as social justice advocates raise critical questions on how to ensure that the continent does not carry the disproportionate burden of the global energy transition. Globally, Africa is sitting on a sizeable amount of critical energy transition minerals with 55% of cobalt, 47.65% of manganese, 21.6% of natural graphite, and much more. Africa is facing a triple crisis - with more than 600 million lacking access to electricity[1], climate change, and poverty. This is not evenly distributed as women on the continent carry the disproportionate burden of energy poverty, climate change, and deprivation. Hosting the largest lithium deposits on the continent[2], Zimbabwe is a typical example of a country that is negatively impacted by the ongoing global shift to renewable energy due to increased extraction. The debt-trapped country is experiencing one of the most devastating droughts in its history which has resulted in food price hikes, water shortages, and other challenges associated with drought.

The community of Bikita, which hosts the country's largest lithium find, has been living with the severe impacts of lithium extraction since the 1950s without access to modern energy services. As lithium extraction is expanding, the community lives in fear of losing their lands, rivers, and livelihoods. As the call to shift to renewables is intensifying, the 'just' part of the energy transition is getting lost as focus is placed on the technologies. The shift should not be merely about replacing fossil fuels with renewable energy sources. It embodies a transformative process that has profound implications for social justice, particularly for women. The biggest question that needs to be addressed is how to protect the communities' lands, rivers, livelihoods, human rights, and dignity as we transition. Should the need to transition to renewables justify injustice to communities hosting the critical transition minerals, those in the informal sector, those in precarious work, and people who live outside of the protection of the law? Is a just transition achievable within an extractivist development model?

A lot has been said and done about rethinking development, decolonizing, and reimagining development but in the meantime, communities are losing their lands and territories and becoming impoverished in the most violent ways, to allow for the same people who have access to energy now, continue to have access as we move to renewables. The current situation calls everyone to action. There is a need to have space for the co-creation of knowledge that brings together the impacted community groups, the feminist movements, NGOs, faith-based organisations, the philanthropy world, the private sector, and leadership from local to global to drive the energy transition process in ways that center justice to the most vulnerable. The role of indigenous and local knowledge and traditional practices in energy transition should not be overlooked. Most communities in Africa, particularly the indigenes and those living in rural areas have long relied on indigenous knowledge systems to manage natural resources. Integrating this knowledge with modern energy technologies can result in innovative solutions that respect cultural practices while enhancing energy access. Philanthropic efforts should support initiatives that recognize and elevate local expertise, particularly those led by women, to ensure that energy solutions are culturally relevant and community-driven.

Women in communities taking leadership in community-based energy initiatives lay the foundations for effective energy transitions in Africa. Women experience energy poverty differently and more severely due to unpaid care work, and creating spaces for women to lead community energy initiatives enables them to address these challenges directly while fostering local ownership and sustainability. By prioritizing local women's leadership, embracing climate justice, and valuing local knowledge, philanthropic organizations and institutions can play a pivotal role in shaping energy transitions that build women's power and promote social equity. As Africa navigates its energy future, the commitment to inclusivity and justice is critical in realizing a sustainable energy landscape that benefits all.

