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Advancing community engagement in Africa

Barrier or catalyst for renewable energy infrastructure expansion?

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Abstract

This paper examines the governance challenges associated with the accelerated deployment of renewable energy projects in the context of the global energy transition. As countries accelerate deployment in response to international commitments under the Paris Agreement, the Sustainable Development Goals, and COP28, weak and inconsistent approaches to community engagement are emerging as significant social, environmental and governance risks. Poor community engagement is contributing to legal challenges, reputational risks, financing uncertainty and the exacerbation of existing inequalities.

These risks are concentrated at the intersection of land use and local impacts, where renewable energy infrastructure is expanding into and around existing communities. Across jurisdictions, however, there is no consistent standard for meaningful engagement or benefit sharing, creating uncertainty for investors and developers and increasing the likelihood of conflict.

Focusing on the African context, the paper highlights how inadequate engagement practices can exacerbate inequality and undermine social acceptance. It argues that the G20 provides a practical platform to align expectations through a common due diligence framework grounded in environmental and human rights safeguards. Such an approach could reduce risk, strengthen trust in supply chains and support more inclusive and scalable renewable energy transitions.

Introduction

The accelerated rollout of renewable energy projects in Africa is creating new governance challenges that, if left unaddressed, risk delaying projects and undermining the energy transition.

As a signatory to the Paris Agreement, South Africa has committed to accelerating the transition to renewable energy in line with global targets to limit warming to well below 2°C and ideally 1.5°C. Together with the Sustainable Development Goals and COP28 commitments to triple renewable energy capacity by 2030, these frameworks are driving the rapid expansion of renewable energy infrastructure.[1] To achieve the scaling up of renewable energy, there are several challenges that need to be addressed to facilitate its accelerated deployment. These include issues around the siting of the projects, faster permitting processes, leasing agreements and grid connections. Renewable energy projects will need to be built closer to and around existing communities, which will result in land-use conversion. This may heighten the risk of local opposition, risking delays in new projects due to concerns over safety and adverse impacts on the environment and livelihoods.[2]

While the energy transition has the potential to be a catalyst for socio-economic development, African countries must ensure responsible and sustainable governance principles are implemented in the different stages of renewable energy supply chains from extraction to project development. Community engagement and benefit sharing have so far been implemented in an unsystematic and incoherent manner between companies and jurisdictions, for example in terms of minimum requirements, resourcing, standard practices, transparency and monitoring.[3]

The paper thus underscores the importance of social acceptance in the process of decentralised renewable energy projects and grid infrastructure expansion. It is important to establish robust partnerships between renewable energy developers and local communities to ensure an efficient transition. This requires effective community engagement and arrangements that enable local communities to benefit from renewable energy projects.[4]

The paper highlights that the intersection of land and renewable energy is high risk. Prevalent issues in renewable energy projects include gaps and inconsistencies in legal frameworks, weakening social and environmental regulations to support the acceleration of renewable energy projects, inadequate community consultation and consent, negative impacts on land and natural resource-based livelihoods, disproportionate impacts on Indigenous peoples and the risk of exacerbating inequalities between communities.[5] As energy infrastructure expands, it requires resource allocation that affects communities and also has far-reaching impacts on local businesses, labour and ecosystems.

Failing to engage communities meaningfully is not only a social risk but a delivery risk. It is associated with project delays, potential cancellation, legal challenges, negative media coverage and investor pressure, with direct operational, financial and reputational consequences. Establishing trust through meaningful consultation is an opportunity rather than an obstacle for businesses to avoid all these potential risks. It is not only important to ensure the sustainability of a project in its lifecycle, but it is also important for aligning benefit-sharing strategies with the needs of communities.

A major challenge is that there are incoherent requirements imposed across jurisdictions to enable the customisation of community engagement standards.[6] In some jurisdictions companies are responsible for developing their own guidelines and strategies, leading to uncertainty about what qualifies as satisfactory

engagement. Thus, the G20 offers an important arena to establish a commitment to develop unified standards around community engagement. It includes the participation of a diverse group of countries, the world's major and systematically important economies and two continental unions, accounting for 85 per cent of global gross domestic product, 75 per cent of international trade and two-thirds of the global population. The incumbent Presidency also has the prerogative to invite guest countries each year. Commitments made in the G20 can be carried over to other multilateral processes such as the UN Binding Treaty on Business and Human Rights – possibly bridging the gaps that exist between the Global South and Global North.

The G20 provides a practical opportunity to address these challenges. As a forum representing the world's major economies, it is well positioned to align expectations on environmental, social and human rights safeguards through a common due diligence framework.[7] This can lead to a level playing field, enhance trust in sustainable supply chains and support more equitable global participation. Considering the possible impacts of energy transition technologies and infrastructure in upstream supply chains where most African countries are located, any due diligence standard should ensure community engagement underpinned by both environmental and human rights impact assessment.[8]

This paper examines the governance challenges associated with scaling renewable energy, drawing on insights from South Africa. It explores the impacts of projects on land and communities, analyses gaps in current engagement practices, and sets out the case for a G20-aligned due diligence framework to support more inclusive and effective energy transitions.

Background

In South Africa, since 2011 there has been early deployment of renewable energy and battery technologies consisting predominantly of pilot projects. These were catalysed by the launch of the government-led Renewable Energy Independent Power Producer Procurement Programme (REIPPPP) that paved the way for private sector participation in the market. At the same time, local municipalities have also taken steps to allow for small-scale embedded generation installations that combine solar and battery systems. As of 2025, the contribution of renewable energy technology was at 16.22 per cent.[9] This has been widely welcome in the context of a decreasing coal share, which stood at 74.31 per cent[10] of South Africa's overall electricity generation share in 2025 – down from 82 per cent in 2023.[11]

The renewable energy market share is set to reach between 5.4 TW and 10.8 TW as technology such as electric vehicles come on stream. Renewable energy market share is set to rise rapidly in South Africa with more than 13 GW of projects, comprising of private sector-led wind and solar projects, including small-scale installations and grid connectivity. This provides South Africa with the opportunity for development, social transformation and job creation while contributing to the country's Just Transition Framework.

The South African Renewable Energy Masterplan (SAREM) supports the development of a decentralised low carbon structure electricity supply system. In addition, it aims to promote deeper industrialisation through the localisation of key inputs, technologies and systems. This requires localised industrialised value chains, and while not necessarily within the ambit of SAREM, it includes the rollout of transmission and distribution infrastructure, including smart grids. The rollout of the transmission grid is planned for by

Eskom's Transmission Development Plan (2025–2034), with local inputs envisaged. Local substations also provide an opportunity for other inputs such as the construction of transformers.*

However, many South Africans still do not have access to renewable energy and storage technologies. Improving inclusivity is thus imperative to address energy poverty.[12] About 40 per cent[13] of South Africans live in energy poverty, a context that reflects the broader continent, albeit to a lesser extent. In this context, the expansion of grid infrastructure will also require open and non-discriminatory access to the grid.

The rollout of renewable energy has been constrained by grid limitations, making investing in grid expansion urgent. Eskom aims to roll out 14,218 km of transmission infrastructure between 2023 and 2032 through the National Transmission Company South Africa (NTCSA).[14] To do this, about R440 billion is required to fill Eskom's gaps.[15]

South Africa has also experienced an energy crisis in the form of load curtailment caused by ageing coal power infrastructure; as a result, the supply of energy cannot meet demand,[16] with a shortfall of about 6,000 MW.[17] This has had a significant impact on economic activity, with the South African Reserve Bank estimating that load shedding costs the economy between R204 million and R899 million a day.[18]

As a distributed electrical network, a grid has three components, namely generation, transmission and distribution. A stable grid is essential to ensure decarbonisation. As South Africa decommissions ageing coal power stations, a growing number of distributed renewable energy sources are being added to the grid.[19] The current transmission infrastructure is centralised in several parts of South Africa, leaving the Cape provinces, which have the most renewable energy potential, without any grid capacity. Those that are concentrated inland are over utilised.[20] In addition, distribution lines require significant maintenance across the country. There is, however, potential under the National Electrification Programme to foster mini-grids to provide for underserved and unserved areas. There is also an opportunity under community-owned projects to provide energy for low-income households, which the government plans to explore through pilot projects.

An easier first step to addressing grid stability is via micro-grids or small electric power systems that supply isolated areas. Thereafter, a small grid can be scaled up to a larger power grid that can sustain a lot of renewable energy, as implemented in countries like the UK and Germany. South Africa is currently gradually adopting a large-scale grid.[21]

Several ad hoc policies have been adopted that have paved the way for independent, private transmission projects to participate in the expansion of the grid.[22] The Transmission Development Plan lays the ground for private sector participation in transmission. Thereafter, the enactment of the Electricity Regulation Act,[23] which was promulgated in January 2025, was the first regulatory step taken to achieve this. These regulations have eased licensing requirements for new embedded-generation projects to unlock about 5,000 MW of additional power to address load shedding.

The South African G20, under one of its priority themes, "Harnessing critical minerals for inclusive growth", underscored the importance of renewable energy expansion and beneficiation. One of the key

* 14,000 km of transmission lines are planned to be built to connect renewable energy projects to the grid through the Independent Transmission Infrastructure Procurement Programme: https://www.itp-projects.co.za/.

outcomes of its Presidency was the 'G20 Critical Minerals Framework', which aims to develop secure, sustainable and transparent value chains for Africa's critical minerals.[24] The framework provides a co-operative framework for G20 members and partners to ensure shared prosperity, to complement and build on existing multilateral initiatives. This includes supporting Africa's energy transition, including integrating grids across the region to support renewable energy expansion and beneficiation. One of the key pillars of action for the framework is "Governance, standards and ESG [environmental, social and governance] to improve transparency, labour and environmental practice".[25] This pillar intersects well with renewable energy expansion while ensuring that the impacts of such are well contained in communities and on land.

However, coming from a Global South hosted G20, these commitments are at risk under the US G20 Presidency. In 2025, the Donald Trump administration made sweeping actions to reverse America's environmental agenda, including a withdrawal from international commitments, which largely undermined the global fight against climate change.[26] From surrounding himself with a pro-fossil fuel executive to declaring a "national energy emergency", to reversing many of the Biden-era environmental regulations to open more areas for oil and gas exploration – including considering deep-sea mining – Trump has undermined many multilateral processes that have achieved progress on these issues. One example is the move to expand oil and gas development in Alaska, effectively reversing the Biden-era restrictions on the 23 million-acre National Petroleum Reserve in Alaska and the reopening of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge for drilling. Having become known for his "drill, baby, drill" mantra, he is looking to take this globally as well.[27]

While South Africa was supposed to form part of the troika, where the preceding, incumbent and incoming G2O Presidencies reside, ailing bilateral relations between South Africa and the US have resulted in its formal exclusion by President Trump.[28] Effectively this means that the continuation of the Global South hosted G20 may be impacted – threatening the progress and commitments made especially towards issues around climate change. Now admitted as a permanent member of the G20, the African Union (AU) has the responsibility to take from South Africa's G20 and ensure Africa remains organised, influential and strategically positioned since South Africa has been excluded from participation by the US.

International co-operation is crucial, and post the first Africa-hosted G20, the AU should aim to establish global standards that support energy transition goals that go beyond just cutting carbon emissions to renewable energy initiatives that can create jobs, boost local economies and improve energy security. The global transition to renewable energy could lead to the creation of over 24 million jobs by 2030.[29]

Despite potential difficulty under the Trump G20 Presidency, the AU should take the opportunity to promote investments in renewable energy that provide employment opportunities in local communities; advocate small-scale projects that support decentralised energy solutions like mini-grids to empower rural and underserved areas to promote access to energy; and at the same time, encourage sustainable supply chains by ensuring the sourcing of materials and processes involved in renewable energy projects are both environmentally and socially responsible.[30] In addition, it should ensure the expansion of renewable energy minimises risks to communities to fast track the energy transition.

Impacts of renewable energy expansion – the importance of stakeholder engagement

Renewable energy projects include wind, solar, hydropower, biomass, hydrogen and battery energy storage – all with different impacts on land, people and workers.[31] As renewable energy expands, so will its impacts. There are a number of different impacts and these include:

1. Social impacts – Issues relating to equitable participation, meaningful consultation and proper representation in decision-making processes. Such concerns may involve the neglect of sovereignty and self-determination, as well as threats to culturally, spiritually and ancestrally significant sites and traditional ways of life, particularly for Indigenous communities. They may also include actual or perceived risks to health and safety.[32]
2. Economic impacts – This is associated with financial consequences, including declining property values and limitations on economic activities such as agriculture or tourism. Economic impacts may also stem from negative effects on visual appeal or reduced access to recreational areas, potentially diminishing tourism-related income.[33]
3. Environmental impacts – This relates to harm to endangered species, ecosystems and biodiversity. These can become more pronounced when communities rely directly on these environments for their livelihoods or when the affected areas hold cultural importance.[34]
4. Impacts arising from institutional uncertainty, complexity or conflict – These may emerge where legal or regulatory systems fail to adequately recognise, address or protect community interests, including land tenure rights. Such apprehensions may be driven by uncertainty, limited understanding, feelings of disempowerment or misinformation. In some cases, disputes over jurisdictional authority among local, regional, state, federal or intergovernmental bodies can further intensify challenges related to a community's right to self-determination.[35]

The impact of renewable energy projects can range from land grabbing and forced displacement to adverse impacts on food, health and water sources.[36] Other issues include working conditions where workers are paid below legal limits, especially for subcontractors and onsite contractors, and occupational health and safety risks. For example, in green hydrogen plants where there is high flammability risk and water scarcity issues, rights of Indigenous peoples and land rights for communities for livelihoods or agricultural purposes may be impacted.[37] Green hydrogen, while less land intensive, requires a large consumption of water for operations, which can carry significant implications for water access for surrounding communities.[38] With much of the world's non-commercially exploited land for renewable energy sources located in or around indigenous, customary or even informal land rights territories, due diligence processes to determine social and environmental impacts are important.[39] Pursuing unfair land acquisitions, resettlement of communities and changes in land use can lead to possible negative human rights impacts for local communities.

Despite having limited examples when compared to the fossil fuel industry, South Africa does have examples of renewable energy project impacts. The Eastern Cape's Inyanda-Roodeplaat Wind Farm in the Groot Winterhoek region, where BirdLife South Africa (with four other stakeholders) appealed against the decision to allow the development in 2018, offers some insights for renewable-specific projects.[40] BirdLife South Africa argued that the impact assessment came out amid criticism, controversy and allegations surrounding a manipulated outcome that hid the detrimental impact the farm would have on birds. This resulted in an environmental go-ahead. Research shows that birds collide with blades, particularly birds of prey, and the area included a number of vulnerable and endangered species.[†] In a major victory, the Acting Minister of the Department of Environmental Affairs (now Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE)) in South Africa upheld BirdLife's appeal. The case is under reconsideration by the Department. To quote BirdLife:

"Renewable energy is an important part of our climate change mitigation strategy … but it should not be at the expense of resilience to climate change. Resilience depends on healthy, intact environments. Through our work, we help achieve that balance."[41]

The Kwandwe Private Game Reserve, Wilderness Foundation Africa and the Indalo Association challenged government approval of the 25-turbine Albany Wind Energy Facility near Makhanda.[42] They claim that the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE) made unlawful and irrational decisions, including approving the project without final turbine layouts and an environmental management programme for its operation. As part of their challenge, they are seeking 11 turbines to be removed to

[†] The Verreaux's Eagle Aquila verreauxii (regionally Vulnerable), Martial Eagle Polemaetus bellicosus (Vulnerable, regionally Endangered), and the Black Harrier Circus Maurus (Endangered).

protect a Martial Eagle nest (also an endangered species) and argue that the wind farm violates bird protection standards.

The applicants noted that none of their comments were factored into the final environmental management programme, which resulted in the site layout being too close to the eagle protection no-go buffer zone. In addition, they noted that the reports by the DFFE's own specialists contradict those of the ground-truths including impacts on visuals, the impact on birds and groundwater, and on cultural and socio-economic aspects. The game reserves also assert that the wind farm will impact ecotourism, which is a significant contributor to the local economy and employment. Beyond the impacts of renewable energy, the Albany Wind Farm shows how lack of meaningful consultation can delay expansion of renewable energy, resulting in protracted legal battles. On 28 May 2025, the Supreme Court of Appeal overturned three environmental authorisations for wind energy facilities proposed by the Highlands companies in the Eastern Cape in favour of the Minister of DFFE, albeit with conditions that require public input and finalising layout plans and environmental management programmes, to protect the environment.[43] The decision has been lauded for ensuring that South Africa's sustainable future is supported by green energy projects that reduce climate change impacts while balancing this with strict environmental protections in place. Both of these examples elucidate the impacts of renewable energy on the environment, economy and social impacts – the importance of meaningful consultation.

According to a Business and Human Rights Resource Centre (BHRRC) study, more than 200 allegations of adverse human rights impacts linked to renewable energy projects were recorded between 2020 and 2021 globally.[44] The study focuses on 15 of the largest publicly traded wind and solar power generation companies, including two investors with significant renewable energy holdings. About 44 per cent were attributed to wind and solar sectors.[45] Primary and policy indicators used in the study cover governance and policy commitment, embedding respect and human rights due diligence, and remedies and grievance mechanisms. In the study, nearly half of companies operating in the renewable energy sector scored below 10 per cent, with three-quarters scoring below 40 per cent in ensuring that the rapid expansion of renewable energy prevents environmental and human rights impacts for communities and workers.[46] Companies such as Iberdrola, Acciona, Orsted and Enel scored relatively highly in several indicators, offering examples of good practice in the renewable energy sector.

Of the impacts assessed by the study, land rights were the most frequently reported in the renewable energy sector. The sector has a high land footprint, and thus a high possible impact on land. The study demonstrated that companies had not sufficiently adopted policies that would indicate:

"whether companies commit to respect land rights in their own operations and with respect to business partners; whether companies disclose their processes for identifying legitimate tenure rights holders (and extends this disclosure requirement to their business partners); and whether the company follows IFC [International Finance Corporation] Performance Standard 5 with respect to using relocation only as a matter of last resort, and ensures Free, Prior, and Informed Consent where relocation is deemed necessary."[47]

The study also highlights the lack of environmental protection and human rights policies in several companies. With the renewable energy sector's high land footprint, meaningful consultation is fundamental to expand technological advancements. Thus, proactive and effective stakeholder engagement is required to address any potential conflicts and ensure that the advantages and disadvantages of the energy transition are distributed equitably.

The South African case

Stakeholder engagement and renewable infrastructure expansion

Renewable energy developers and independent power producers (IPPs) are required to align stakeholder engagement with national policy and law. For example, the REIPPPP explicitly requires each project to "contribute towards local community development through socio-economic and enterprise development, local ownership and local job creation" in the project area. This is to be done within a 50 km radius of the project, thus allowing renewable energy companies to ensure that they engage with the developmental opportunities and needs of the community around the project sites in which they operate.[48]

Similarly, the National Energy Regulator of South Africa (NERSA) and the Department of Minerals and Energy (DMRE)mandate that new generation capacity should support the country's developmental goals. These goals include securing supply, affordability, jobs and social upliftment in the areas where they operate. Furthermore, from a procurement perspective, under the Electricity Regulations on New Generation Capacity (2009), IPP bids are scored 70 per cent on price and 30 per cent on economic development, formally incentivising community benefit-sharing plans. While there are many obstacles to implementing the Act, there are projects that have involved local communities participating through shared ownership schemes. This is done by communities constituting themselves into trusts, with examples including the Tsitsikamma Community Wind Farm and the Amakhala Emoyeni Renewable Energy Project.[49] In practice, this means developers should prepare stakeholder engagement plans as part of their bids, participate in municipal Integrated Development Plan processes and comply with environmental impact assessments (EIAs). Conducting EIAs is already a requirement under the National Environmental Management Act (NEMA).[50]

Crucially, land-use agreements must consider and respect local tenure, which tends to be complex in the South African context, especially as it relates to informal land rights and communal land ownership.[51] In this context, for any proposal where insecure land tenure is concerned, including communal land, South African law requires the consent of the community. While the most common practice has been to consult traditional leaders only, it is no longer legal to do so, and land cannot be acquired without *meaningfully* consulting and engaging with the lawful occupiers of the land concerned.[52]

Meaningful consultation involves an extensive process with the goal of reaching consensus on the land use, which can be very difficult to achieve.[53] Mapping all affected stakeholders (eg landowners, lawful occupiers, tenants, farmers, local officials) and obtaining formal consent or lease agreements is therefore a regulatory precondition to project approval. Moreover, once stakeholders have been identified, it is important to classify and prioritise them appropriately to avoid any adverse impacts of renewable energy projects. From an environmental perspective, identifying stakeholders that may oppose or appeal environmental authorisations is also important. South Africa has seen an increase in these cases, especially for fossil fuel related projects but also in renewable energy projects, as discussed above.[54]

Developing coherent and standardised stakeholder engagement standards must be grounded in international human rights standards. South African IPPs should adopt the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs) model of human rights due diligence, which requires "meaningful consultation with potentially affected groups" when assessing impacts.[55] In African and South African

contexts, this aligns with the principle of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) drawn from the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Companies should fully inform communities in advance about project plans, obtain their voluntary agreement before proceeding and continue dialogue throughout the project's life.

This includes putting in place accessible grievance mechanisms and clear, mutually agreed protocols so that community feedback can influence decisions. By embedding FPIC and the UNGPs into practice, ensuring that rights to land, housing and development are respected, IPPs help realise South Africa's vision of a 'people-centred' just energy transition.[56] IPPs should aim to do more than ticking boxes: they must build ongoing, transparent partnerships that align with South African law, advance local development priorities (including land rights and benefit sharing), and uphold global human rights norms in every phase of a renewable project.

The UNGPs, while not enough for enforcement, indicate the emerging shift towards greater accountability for cross-border business operations.[57] They are also an example of how due diligence expectations are evolving globally. As the authoritative international human rights standard, they provide a flexible framework for identifying, preventing and addressing environmental and human rights risks in global supply chains. The AU should advance a recommitment to the UNGPs and support the further establishment of proper due diligence legislation across jurisdictions to ensure meaningful participation and accountability in energy supply chains.

Beyond meaningful stakeholder engagement: the importance of benefit sharing

Africa still grapples with energy poverty, and business benefit-sharing strategies should ensure that this issue is also on their radar to potentially address areas such as ensuring access to energy. In South Africa, vast rural populations remain deprived of electricity. Engaging community stakeholders can lead to an agreement on benefit-sharing strategies. These strategies include compensation that is rooted in what the community identifies as important, leading to mutual benefits that can be far reaching, including the social licence to operate.[58] Engaging with South Africa's socio-economic landscape to share benefits and combat energy poverty is an important consideration for any new renewable energy project. Developers should negotiate fairly with both traditional authorities and individual community members, ensuring that any community land leased or sold is done under terms understood and agreed by the people who live there. This will also support the expansion of renewable energy projects.

Benefit sharing can take the form of community benefit programmes, development of local infrastructure, local job creation, procurement of community co-ownership structures and local institutional capacity-building initiatives.[59]

In South Africa, the government considers the contribution of economic development and job creation when determining a preferred bidder for a renewable energy project. For a bid to be successful, a certain amount of revenue generated must be spent on socio-economic development (SED) and enterprise development (ED), and shared ownership with local communities.[60] Many IPPs establish community trusts or special-purpose vehicles (SPVs) to hold equity; although shares are typically modest (in the order of 5–10 per cent), this gives local people a direct stake in project revenues.[61] The mandatory SED and ED funds (often a few percent of project revenue) should be spent on community-prioritised projects – for instance training programmes, local business incubation, school or clinic improvements and grid extension or mini-grids to improve electricity access.[62]

However, in the early stages of the project, there is usually no meaningful consultation with communities on the SED plans.[63] This can lead to it becoming a simple tick-box exercise to gain government approval. In addition, employment from the local community is usually temporary. Beyond the EIA, there is no mandatory requirement for consultation with communities, limiting their participation in the decision-making process around local economic development investments. This is a gap that government will need to address.

Industry should work in an integrated partnership with government and civil society, convening local development forums or consulting with non-governmental organisations (NGOs), so that infrastructure upgrades and skills training align with community needs.[64] Transparent communication (in local languages) and early involvement of women, youth and marginalised groups help ensure promises translate into real jobs, procurement contracts and household electrification that reduce local energy poverty.

South Africa: the Eastern Cape's Wesley-Ciskei Wind Farm example

A community in the Eastern Cape Province, the Wesley-Ciskei Wind Farm offers a good example of the complexities that relate especially to South Africa's energy transition and its intersection with land

ownership. The project began 15 years ago and is situated in the former Transkei and Ciskei Bantustans.[65] EDF Renewables, a wholly owned subsidiary of the French utility EDF Group, after years of setting up lease agreements for all the family beneficiaries, came across several challenges including protests over unresolved grievances.[66]

The beneficiaries' municipal tariffs rose after a contentious re-zoning that reclassified land from residential to business use, resulting in higher rate payments for them. Despite the company's structural obligation to only a portion of the land, EDF agreed to cover the full property rates of the affected land retroactively. Other grievances included continued load shedding despite the proximity of the wind farm to the immediate community.[67] Of importance was the unfulfilled community goal to achieve off-grid status for the immediate community – which would open opportunities for empowerment such as chicken incubation and tunnel farming.[68]

The Wesley-Ciskei Wind Farm highlights several important issues. For example, while the Eastern Cape is an ideal location for wind farms, the government's renewable energy drive in the province has been lacklustre due to challenges in securing lease agreements, despite its wind and solar capabilities offering a good opportunity for decentralised distribution.

The former Bantustans represent about 40 per cent of the Eastern Cape's land mass, covering about 60 per cent of the population. For some developers, securing a lease agreement can take about three to four years, and they cannot continue with a bidding process until land is secured. Most of the land in these areas is unregistered state land, held under a former system of quitrent titles with ownership tracing back to up to four generations.[69] The land is also usually characterised by other pieces of land and is not just one big area. The land thus needs to be surveyed and registered by the state before a business proposal is made to the provincial vesting and disposal committee – administratively, this also takes time. The committee then usually recommends the minister to provide a long-term lease on the land.[70]

However, this can only occur once the community occupying the land has been consulted and is aware of the development and the revenue due to them. This requires careful stakeholder mapping and meaningful consultation with communities to inform the bidding process. This requirement is governed by the Interim Protection of Land Informal Rights Act – an interim legislation that requires any developer to have the consent of those people who occupy the land.[71]

This case highlights that developing a renewable energy project or related infrastructure at such proximity to the community without provision for grid independence, and amid continued load shedding, underscores the lack of alignment with benefit-sharing strategies that empower the community's economy. The case also emphasises that with meaningful consultation the needs of the community could have been identified and ranked accordingly. This includes the community's interest to achieve an off-grid status for the immediate community that could achieve chicken incubation and tunnel farming. Had these been identified in consultation with the community earlier, the resultant protests could have been avoided entirely. Supporting the development of community livelihoods also leads to more climate change resilient communities.

While issues such as fragmented land ownership, unresolved land claims and administrative delays in land tenure processes can result in complexities that may delay project implementation,[72] developers should not see this as an obstacle but rather an opportunity to ensure that there are no project delays. In addition, it should be seen as an opportunity to align benefit sharing with the needs of the community,

leading to long-term project sustainability. This should be done alongside government's role to ensure that there is more clarity about land rights in the former homelands without compromising the rights of the vulnerable in these areas.

Being aware of the social and environmental impacts by meaningfully consulting relevant communities should be taken as an opportunity to avoid risks of project delay and even project cancellation where community opposition rises. This will build trust with communities and the long-term sustainability of projects, avoiding any reputational risk for companies, negative media coverage, litigation and investor pressure.

Conclusion

The expansion of renewable energy infrastructure presents both significant opportunities and complex governance challenges, particularly in the African context. While global commitments under the Paris Agreement, the Sustainable Development Goals and COP28 have accelerated the transition towards renewable energy, this transition cannot be pursued at the expense of communities, livelihoods and environmental protections.

The South African case demonstrates that inadequate consultation, weak benefit-sharing mechanisms and unresolved land governance issues can undermine social acceptance, delay projects and intensify inequalities. At the same time, meaningful stakeholder engagement and community-centred benefit sharing can strengthen trust, enhance project sustainability and support more equitable development outcomes.

The paper therefore argues that community engagement should not be treated as a procedural obstacle to renewable energy deployment, but rather as a catalyst for a just and inclusive energy transition and scalable renewable energy deployment. Through platforms such as the G20 and the African Union, there is an opportunity to advance coherent standards on environmental and human rights due diligence grounded in principles such as Free, Prior and Informed Consent and the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.

Establishing a G20-aligned due diligence framework can create greater clarity for governments, investors and developers, reducing risk while supporting more transparent, accountable and socially responsible renewable energy supply chains. This is particularly important for ensuring that African countries and communities benefit meaningfully from the global energy transition. Ultimately, achieving long-term energy security and climate goals will depend not only on scaling renewable energy infrastructure rapidly, but also on ensuring that the transition is participatory, equitable and responsive to the needs of affected communities.

Current geopolitical dynamics, including the exclusion of South Africa from the current G20 host process, highlight the fragility of inclusive global governance and risk limiting Global South influence at a critical moment. In this context, the African Union has an important role to play in sustaining momentum, consolidating recent progress, and advancing the agenda for more equitable participation in global standard-setting.

Ultimately, achieving long-term energy security and climate goals will depend not only on scaling renewable infrastructure rapidly, but on ensuring that the transition is participatory, equitable and responsive to the needs of affected communities.

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