Towards a Just Energy Transition from the Global South

Safeguarding Land, Indigenous and Environmental Defenders Rights and Promoting Epistemic Justice

Knowledge Alliance for KALLIED Environmental Defenders

Executive summary

This report synthesizes the insights from the T20 South Africa side event, "*Towards a Just Energy Transition from the Global South*". Key findings include:

- **Deeply entrenched barriers**. Communities face shrinking civic space, extractive violence masked as *green* development, digital and physical threats to defenders, water scarcity, and transactional FPIC processes, all of which threaten Indigenous, land, and environmental defenders' rights.
- **Epistemic injustice**. Local and Indigenous knowledge systems are often marginalized, with communities being portrayed as passive recipients rather than leaders or co-governors of their land and futures.
- **Emerging opportunities**. In response, communities are proactively advocating for stronger, enforceable FPIC processes; digital defenses; grievance mechanisms; and community energy cooperatives. Cross-regional solidarity, particularly through Global South networks, is demonstrating tangible impact.
- **Framework for a just transition**. The report outlines nine interconnected guidelines for a just energy transition in the Global South, anchored in human rights, participation, and equity.
    1. **Human rights-based transitions** ensure that policies incorporate firm obligations, enforce a zero-tolerance policy for reprisals, and hold States and private actors legally accountable.
    2. **Effective FPIC implementation** ensures clear definition of rights holders, guarantees transparent engagement at all stages of a project, and provides ongoing consent, withdrawal rights, and corrective mechanisms.
    3. The **elevation of local and Indigenous knowledge** involves a shift from token consultation to co-governance, recognizing, compensating, and embedding community expertise in decisions, and supporting community-led research.
    4. **Transparent, accountable, and inclusive governance** mandates independent audits, public disclosure of human rights and environmental assessments, and accessible national and international grievance mechanisms with external monitoring.

5. **Benefit-sharing and energy democracy** require community ownership, employment opportunities, and equitable energy access, supporting cooperatives over extractive models.
6. **International solidarity and South-South learning** are key to building cross-movement alliances for shared advocacy, evaluation, and reinforcement among defenders, Indigenous, feminist, and environmental groups.
7. **Digital rights and inclusion** ensure defenders, especially youth, receive digital literacy, security support, and safeguards against technology-based discrimination.
8. **Legal reform and defender capacity-building** reinforce civic space through training in legal, psychosocial, and digital skills, as well as the establishment of multilateral-funded rapid-response protection systems.
9. **Sovereignty in global energy transitions** advances just, democratic processes that protect the rights of local populations and the environment by challenging donor-driven, top-down models and neo-colonial resource control.

These guidelines serve as a roadmap for a rights-based transformative plan that guides energy transitions based on principles of justice, inclusion, and community leadership.

Introduction

As stated in the final declaration of COP 28, the commitment to achieving a "just, orderly, and equitable transition" aligns with global efforts to address climate change. The objective is to encourage nations to commit to three key goals: increasing their use of renewable energy, doubling their energy efficiency, and phasing out fossil fuel subsidies. However, these measures often prioritize the interests of the Global North, placing a higher value on technological solutions and infrastructure growth than on systemic justice, transparency, and participation. Despite ongoing efforts, the current pace of reducing greenhouse gas emissions is insufficient to meet the Paris Agreement goals. As a consequence, the establishment of resilient, sustainable economies remains postponed. Amidst mounting geopolitical tensions, competition over resources, and entrenched patterns of environmental and social injustices disproportionately impacting the Global South, the need for transformation is urgent.

As we transition away from fossil fuels and expand renewable energy sources, it is crucial to understand the implications for environmental and land defenders, as well as indigenous and local communities. This transition presents opportunities and risks that must be managed carefully. These groups are often at the forefront of extractive industries and large-scale infrastructure projects related to the energy transition. Despite bearing the brunt of environmental impacts and rights violations, they receive few benefits. Such projects can even harm vulnerable social groups and Indigenous communities by undermining their land rights and restricting their access to resources, leading to their dispossession and displacement.

Given these circumstances, the T20 South Africa side event, organized by Asuntos del Sur as part of the Kallied community of practice, convened experts from Latin America, Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East[1]. The event focused on the experiences and insights of those directly impacted by these global processes. The objective was to identify guidelines for a just energy transition rooted in the Global South.

[1] The side event began with introductory remarks from Matías Bianchi (Asuntos del Sur, Argentina) and Adrian Di Giovanni (IDRC, Canada). The panel discussion, titled "Challenges and Opportunities for a Just Energy Transition," featured Wilmer Reyes (RDS-Honduras), Mattie Balagat (Center for Environmental Concerns, Philippines), Daniel Kobei (Ogiek Peoples' Development Program, Kenya), José Aylwin (Observatorio Ciudadano, Chile), and Luna Miguen (CELS, Argentina). Lucia Martelotte (Asuntos del Sur), Mai Taqueban (Legal Resource Center, Philippines), Francis Colee (Green Advocates International, Liberia), and Yasmina El Amine (Arab Reform Initiative, Lebanon) participated in the panel "Proposed Guidelines for a Just Energy Transition". Tanya Bandula-Irwin (IDRC) and Ignacio Lara (Asuntos del Sur) were responsible for the concluding remarks and call to action. In addition to the shared views and experiences, this document was further enriched by suggestions and comments from Mona Khechen of The Policy Initiative (Lebanon), who is also a Kallied member.

In line with COP30 in Brazil and the growing demand for an integrated perspective from the Global South in transition discussions, this report summarizes the major consensus themes that emerged among the participants. It illustrates the shared challenges and innovative proposals that aim to ensure that the transition to a decarbonized future will be based on a commitment to justice, sustainability, dignity, and inclusion for all.

Shared challenges, barriers and threats in the energy and climate transition

A primary issue emphasized by the panelists was the difficulties encountered by environmental, land, and indigenous defenders, who are up against a wide array of obstacles and dangers as the energy transition progresses. These threats are often structural and are shaped by the intersection of longstanding inequalities and new dynamics introduced by the transition.

The first type of threats involves the criminalization of defenders and using violence against them. Evidence from different world regions show that defenders are increasingly targeted online and offline. They experience harassment, intimidation, surveillance, threats, and even lethal violence. These attacks often go unpunished and can be carried out by state and private sector actors, particularly when local resistance endangers the interests of influential entities involved in extractive and energy projects. **Mattie Balagat** of the Center for Environmental Concerns stated that opposition to mining and renewable energy projects in the Philippines commonly results in state-sanctioned violence and impunity, especially as *development aggression* encroaches on indigenous territory.

Another identified area of concern was the shrinking civic space and global trend toward authoritarianism, which have increased vulnerabilities for human rights defenders. Many operate in environments where governments restrict civic space by enacting laws and deploying security forces to suppress protests, limit access to information, and stifle dissent. This issue is further compounded by the securitization of energy policy and the prioritization of investment over human rights. **Yasmina El Amine** of the Arab Reform Initiative cited Tunisia as an example of how authoritarian shifts and presidential decrees can override community land protections and advance large-scale projects without substantial consultation or community consent. Local resistance is often the only means by which communities can assert their rights or contest extractive agreements.

Additionally, participants discussed the urgent issues of digital threats and gender-based violence. While technology and social media have the potential to mobilize people, they also present challenges. These include cyberattacks, surveillance, and gender-based violence. These issues disproportionately affect young, digitally active defenders and female activists.

Participation by youth exacerbates their exposure to risk, while digital divides limit access to protective measures. **Daniel Kobei** of the Ogiek Peoples' Development Program stated that indigenous defenders in Kenya face threats and digital harassment while protecting land and forests. This results in widespread psychological harm, withdrawal from advocacy, and fractured movements.

Participants found common ground in their agreement that affected communities are not meaningfully included in decision-making processes related to energy and extractive projects. One example of a specific barrier is weak or non-implemented free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC). Legal recognition of FPIC — a core right under international law — is often circumvented or perfunctorily executed as a bureaucratic formality involving inadequate community consultation, information asymmetries, and token participation. **Francis Colee** of Green Advocates International has stated that, despite legal frameworks formally requiring FPIC, its implementation falls drastically short. Moreover, the non-recognition of many local communities as indigenous excludes them from protection. Likewise, the non-recognition of customary land rights sidelines holders of these rights from the decision-making process and leaves them vulnerable to displacement, as their land tenure is not legally acknowledged or protected. Where engagements take place, they are often superficial, consisting of consultations that operate more as inducement or intimidation than as genuine participation while environmental impact assessments are conducted only after contracts are awarded. **Yasmina El Amine** has also noted that presidential decrees and export-driven renewable energy projects in Tunisia circumvent democratic processes and local knowledge, impeding civic discourse.

Another issue raised was the marginalization of local knowledge. Decisions regarding planning and investment are predominantly influenced by centralized authorities and technical *experts*, which effectively sidelines the lived knowledge, cultural perspectives, and development visions of indigenous and local communities. Panelists across all regions noted this persistent epistemological bias, which is characterized by a top-down governance structure that reduces defenders to *information sources*. This approach does not enable defenders to co-create policies and solutions, further reinforcing epistemic injustice and knowledge erasure. In addition to the aforementioned exclusions from decision-making and FPIC, panelists emphasized regulatory and institutional gaps. Weak land rights, competing legal regimes, and incentives for large-scale investment combine to undermine community safeguards and create conditions in which displacement and expropriation become the norm.

The experiences shared also demonstrated that the pursuit of minerals and renewable energy infrastructure results in significant environmental and social impacts, disproportionately harming defenders and communities. The issue of land and water grabbing was also addressed in this realm. Competition for land, particularly in ecologically sensitive areas or indigenous territories with abundant natural resources, has led to dispossession, forced displacement, and loss of livelihoods. This issue is closely linked to water scarcity and pollution. The extraction of minerals essential to the energy transition, such as lithium, nickel, and copper, is highly water-intensive, which threatens already scarce resources vital to communities and ecosystems.

Finally, the erosion of rights and livelihoods has been mentioned, partly as a result of the preceding issues. Often, narrow economic incentives, special investment regimes, and security frameworks take precedence over local rights. Consequently, it can be difficult for communities to claim ownership of benefits or compensation for harm. The so-called *lithium triangle* is an illustrative example of the many barriers and challenges that panelists have identified. Spanning Argentina, Bolivia, and Chile, this region has become a global hotspot. There, the demand for batteries to support the energy transition conflicts with Indigenous land rights and poses existential threats to water resources and traditional livelihoods. States in the region compete to attract multinational investment and sometimes provide legal protections that shield companies from stricter environmental or social regulations. **José Aylwin** (Observatorio Ciudadano) and **Luna Miguens** (CELS) emphasized the lack of effective land titling and FPIC, as well as the systematic exclusion from benefit-sharing and increased criminalization of protest and mobilization in all three countries. Speakers from the Philippines emphasized the importance of addressing the socio-environmental impact of the mineral resources necessary for the energy transition. **Mattie Balagat** confirmed that nickel and lithium projects in Palawan and Mindanao have led to displacement, militarization, and deadly violence, contradicting FPIC obligations. **Mai Taqueban's** analysis (Legal Resource Center, Philippines) revealed that sourcing strategic minerals for renewable infrastructure in the Global North contributes to ecological and sociocultural violence, perpetuating resource colonialism.

Shared proposals and opportunities for defenders and communities

After discussing the challenges and threats currently facing environmental and land defenders, indigenous peoples, and local communities, the speakers turned their attention to the potential opportunities a just energy transition could offer the Global South.

There was a strong consensus that human rights, including FPIC, must be at the core of energy transition policies and investments. This implies protecting legally enshrined rights. It is imperative to expand legal frameworks and ensure the effective implementation of standards such as FPIC, which must be free of coercion and include meaningful information provided in accessible formats in advance. This is crucial to ensure that communities have the agency to exercise their decision-making rights regarding projects that may affect their territories. Certain organizations are using international certification regimes, such as the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil in Liberia, along with legal action, to secure redress, force renegotiation, and challenge flawed consultation processes.

Additionally, placing human rights at the center of the transition requires a zero-tolerance policy for any form of retaliation. Several speakers emphasized the importance of adopting

and monitoring *zero tolerance* stances on retaliation, criminalization, and violence against defenders.

A second key area of opportunity was recognizing the value of local knowledge and positioning defenders as leaders. Participants advocated for an epistemic shift that includes local, Indigenous, community-based knowledge alongside scientific and technical expertise in project design, monitoring, and policy. There was a broad consensus that defenders and affected communities are key actors in innovation, governance, and sustainable resource stewardship, not merely victims. Yasmina El Amine cited Lebanon as a case that highlights both the potential and the contradictions of bottom-up energy initiatives. In the aftermath of state collapse, communal renewable energy projects emerged not purely as expressions of energy sovereignty, but as contested responses shaped by deep territorial inequalities, donor agendas, diasporic investments, and local patronage networks. While some of these projects reflect greater consultation and a degree of shared ownership, their emergence is often uneven and reflective of broader socio-economic hierarchies. Rather than a straightforward case of epistemic justice, they illustrate how energy access is co-produced through overlapping layers of power and exclusion. Nonetheless, they open important questions about alternative governance models and community-led adaptation, especially when situated within transnational knowledge-sharing networks. These cross-regional alliances—whether through agricultural cooperatives or solidarity coalitions—have enabled peer-driven policy experimentation and collective strategizing that push back against North-centric transition paradigms. Such networks align with Kallied's emphasis on epistemic equity and South–South solidarity.

This approach enhances the quality, equity, and sustainability of transition strategies. When monitoring, planning, and distributing benefits, it is essential to be prepared to integrate diverse forms of knowledge. In this sense, designing financial flows that incorporate royalty models, local employment quotas, profit-sharing agreements, and community energy ventures seems relevant. These models should prioritize gender equity, social safeguards (including labor), and retraining programs in just transition strategies.

For this reason, many speakers emphasized the importance of enhancing capacity building and empowering initiatives. Technical and legal support, digital literacy, and organizational strengthening are essential to empower defenders and communities to effectively participate in negotiations and co-governance. In Kenya, civil society organizations are providing digital security training to defenders and advocating for legal reforms that clarify land rights and extend FPIC protections to all vulnerable communities. Regarding digital and security capacity, in addition to Kenya, where digital literacy and security training are provided to youth and defenders, there is an opportunity to establish rapid-response networks offering legal, psychosocial, and logistical support during crises.

A third area in which to capitalize on the ongoing energy transition is establishing inclusive and transparent institutions. Enhancing the transparency, accountability, and inclusiveness of governance structures was a recurring recommendation. To achieve this, transparency must be prioritized, and effective grievance mechanisms with judicial portability must be established to ensure enforceability beyond national jurisdictions. Proactively disclosing project information (environmental and social impact assessments, concession contracts,

water usage, etc.) and making grievance redress systems accessible are crucial for accountability and enabling communities to seek recourse.

In Argentina, Bolivia, and Chile, environmental defenders are documenting harms and corporate practices, presenting evidence in national and international forums, and building networks with communities, regulators, and buyers to demand compliance with human rights due diligence. Participants from Liberia and Kenya recommended measures such as better defining indigenous groups, strengthening land laws, and deploying third-party audits and backstops to ensure accountability.

Some participants explored participatory benefit-sharing as a strategy for redistributing value to communities negatively affected by unequal resource distribution. This approach includes participatory budgeting, regional trust funds, and community-managed energy or resource initiatives. However, policy coherence is necessary for these measures to be fully implemented. In this regard, some speakers reaffirmed the importance of aligning climate, environmental, economic, and social policies to prevent disjointed or contradictory interventions.

Guidelines for a Just Energy Transition from the Global South

The following guidelines are proposed as the foundation for an effective and just energy transition for the regions and communities of the Global South. These recommendations are derived from the rich cross-regional perspectives and firsthand experiences shared during the side event and will be further refined.

1. **Human rights-based transitions**

   All energy transition policies, projects, and regional agreements must incorporate robust, unambiguous human rights language. This also implies a zero-tolerance policy for threats and reprisals against environmental, land, and indigenous defenders. States and private actors must be held legally accountable for intimidation, violence, and criminalization.

2. **Implementing and institutionalizing effective FPIC**

   FPIC is a non-negotiable standard that must be implemented genuinely. This includes recognizing who is entitled to FPIC, ensuring full transparency before, during, and after project design, and continuously engaging with all relevant parties. FPIC should apply to all affected communities where fundamental land, resource, or cultural impacts are at stake. Manipulation must be prohibited, and multilingual and culturally appropriate materials must be provided. Facilitating ongoing consent, enabling withdrawal mechanisms, and establishing corrective action mechanisms are also essential.

3. **Elevation and integration of local and indigenous knowledge**

   This guideline refers to the shift from consultation to co-governance models. Participatory co-design processes must be implemented as standard practice, acknowledging and compensating local and Indigenous knowledge holders. To this end, epistemic violence needs to be guarded against by ensuring that local realities, worldviews, and expertise are reflected in actual policy, regulatory, and operational structures, not just in consultation. Therefore, support should be provided for research ownership by local communities, and resources should be made available for local-led knowledge exchange and documentation.

4. **Ensure transparent, accountable, and inclusive governance**

   This underscores the necessity of implementing independent and transparent audit and disclosure protocols for all projects and associated investments. These protocols require assessments of environmental, social, and human rights implications, as well as the potential for retaliation. It is also paramount to ensure clear and accessible grievance mechanisms and recourse at both the national and international levels, as well as the use of independent monitors and public reporting.

5. **Benefit-sharing and energy access**

   Local populations should be at the heart of energy transition projects–not just as beneficiaries but as active participants with a stake (e.g., community ownership, employment opportunities, community-driven and community-centred revenue-sharing schemes, and improved energy access), and not just bear the costs. Alternative transition models that are rooted in community energy, public ownership, and energy democracy must be recognized and supported.

6. **International solidarity and learning**

   The objective is to establish and forge alliances among communities, organizations, and regions to facilitate mutual learning, advocacy, and defense. South-South learning and coordination platforms could counterbalance North-dominated policy processes. In this context, it is crucial to emphasize the importance of fostering relationships among diverse groups, such as defenders, indigenous communities, feminist organizations, and climate justice movements. This collaborative approach is essential for securing funding for participatory evaluations that extend beyond the project lifecycle.

7. **Digital rights and inclusion**

   Providing digital literacy and security support to defenders, especially youth, can help bridge the digital divide and ensure equitable participation. Similarly, regulating and monitoring technology is essential to prevent inconsistent or discriminatory impacts and ensure ethical and sustainable sourcing and usage.

8. **Legal reform and the strengthening of legal defenders' capacities**

   To reverse the trend of prioritizing business interests over community needs, legal frameworks that protect rights must be clear and democratized. Civic space and

participatory democracy are essential to a livable and just transition, so actions must aim to restore and defend them. Along these lines, it is equally important to allocate funding for training in digital, legal, and psychosocial domains, and to establish rapid-response systems through multilateral funds. Similarly, efforts must be strengthened to professionalize protection for defenders across local and international systems.

9. **Rethinking Sovereignty in Global Energy Transitions**

   Give due attention to the political economy of energy transitions and support interventions that uphold—rather than undermine—local sovereignty. This means shifting focus away from donor-driven policies, centralized State authority, and neo-colonial extraction of resources and benefits. Instead, the prevailing narrative should prioritize community participation, promote genuinely just and democratic processes, and challenge top-down energy transition models that marginalize local populations and damage their environments.

Conclusions

This report shows that the question is not whether the energy transition is necessary, but rather, how it can be reframed to be more just. There is a widespread agreement that justice is neither automatic nor marginal. It must be designed, defended, and demanded -especially by those whose lives, territories, and rights are most at risk or central to the transition. This requires a shift in policy, practice, and imagination from the Global North to the Global South, from experts to communities, and from consultation to co-governance.

As the closing remarks of the event stated, the next step is to transition from discussing evidence and recommendations to implementing and enforcing these guidelines, ensuring their realization at all levels.

The collective commitment of the T20 side event is to continue building alliances, producing evidence, and pressuring policymakers so that the ribbon of justice runs through the green transformation now underway.

About KALLIED

The Knowledge Alliance for Environmental Defenders (KALLIED) is a living community of practice that connects activists, researchers, and organizations across the Global South. Over the course of four years, and with the support of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), KALLIED is weaving together the experiences of environmental a land defenders in a shrinking civic space, a group confronting some of the most pressing challenges of our time.

At its heart, KALLIED is about strengthening collective power. It unites nine initiatives, thirty-two organizations, and partners in twenty-two countries to exchange knowledge, share strategies, and amplify struggles in national and global arenas. Through workshops, peer learning, and advocacy, we make sure that the voices of defenders and communities are not isolated, but connected to a broader movement for rights, democracy, and environmental justice.

KALLIED's work is rooted in defending land, natural resources, and human rights. Defenders across regions face escalating threats, including land grabs, forced displacement, gender-based violence, digital attacks, and enforced disappearances. The projects within this community of practice aim to help ensure that these struggles are visible and that communities can better resist and influence change by documenting these realities, producing evidence, and providing tools for advocacy.

The alliance reflects diverse contexts yet converges on common struggles. In Latin America, partners are exposing the human rights costs of lithium extraction and defending civic space in Central America. In Africa, organizations in Liberia and East Africa are advancing community power in climate and land governance. In the Middle East and North Africa, activists are sustaining environmental movements despite political repression and inequality. Across Southeast Asia, defenders are resisting harmful climate projects, while others are confronting online disinformation and attacks in Brazil, Kenya, Mexico, and the Philippines. Together, these initiatives form a global map of resistance, underscoring the urgency of protecting those who defend our collective future.

KALLIED also aims to be a platform for visibility and influence. Through the development of shared communication strategies, the production of synthesis notes, and the maintenance of a collective digital presence, we intend to amplify the reach of local struggles. Storytelling and policy impact training equips working groups to influence debates more effectively. Coordinated engagement in global spaces, such as the T20 and COPs, ensures that decisions with planetary consequences are challenged by those most affected.

Led by Asuntos del Sur, with Matías Bianchi as Project Leader, Ignacio Lara as Project Manager, Jennifer Cyr as Research Associate, and Ludmila Feldman as Project Assistant, KALLIED affirms a clear conviction: a just and sustainable future requires inclusive participation, respect for diversity, and the courage to defend our common home.

Led by:

Asuntos del Sur

Knowledge Alliance for Environmental Defenders

In partnership with:

AR

APNED Asia Pacific Network of Environment Defenders

APC Association for Progressive Communications

CELS Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales

dala institute for environment & society

Green Advocates International Inc. Liberia Green Advocates

ilrc Immigrant Legal Resource Center

المفكرة القانونية The Legal Agenda

minority rights group

Ogiek Peoples' Development Program

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