

(EM)POWERING THE FUTURE

OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUTH IN A JUST TRANSITION IN AFRICA

Climate change is one of the most pressing issues of our time and is seen as a ‘threat multiplier’ that exacerbates existing inequalities, especially those of vulnerable communities in the Global South. Despite having contributed the least to global warming, Africa remains the most vulnerable continent to climate change impacts. Africa is also the youngest continent, and it is estimated that by 2040 the continent will have the largest youth workforce in the world. A shortage of decent employment opportunities for Africa’s youth comes with great risks for stability and inclusive development and approaches to stimulate youth employment have as such become a priority in policy and practice. The “greening” of economies through a process of low carbon transition (LCT) is seen as a hopeful solution to the multiplex challenges of climate change, poverty and inequality, while also enabling countries to create decent jobs and accomplish an inclusive economic transformation.

At the same time, it is increasingly recognised that a low carbon transition will be disruptive as it will destroy jobs even as it creates new ones. Consequently, the concept of a just transition, which entails greening the economy in a way that is as inclusive as possible by creating decent work opportunities and leaving no one behind, is gaining traction in policy and programming circles as it promotes sustainability on both environmental and social dimensions. Despite the widespread optimism associated with the just transition discourse, however, the evidence linking the green economy to improved youth employment in Africa is still thin and increasingly critical voices are heard that question whether the ‘just transition’ is just at all.

This publication explores this question by sharing insights from the project ‘A Green and Just Future for Youth in Africa’, a collaborative research programme between the

International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and INCLUDE. Presenting the latest insights from research and practice, this project aims to strengthen the evidence base on LCT in Africa by looking at the African energy sector and its complexities in order to understand where opportunities for youth employment are most pronounced and what systemic barriers need to be addressed to create an enabling environment for youth to thrive and drive a truly just transition in Africa.

Applying an inclusive development lens, the research presents an important contribution to the debate, shedding light on both supply and demand sides of the labour market, as well as the often less visible aspects of the low carbon transition in the Global South, such as opportunities for youth in the informal economy. The applied just transition framework considers the three core elements of justice: distributive, procedural and recognition justice, which also include political economy dimensions and meaningful participation of youth in decision-making processes. The research recognises youth heterogeneity and intersectionality as important dimensions to youth employment research and in this

regard specifically also focuses on spatial and gender disparities in the analysis.

Building on a review of academic and grey literature, coupled with case studies and stakeholder engagements in South Africa and Nigeria, this publication highlights the main insights and knowledge gaps regarding youth employment in LCT in Africa. These insights will serve as a basis for an inclusive research agenda on low carbon transition pathways in the Global South. It also serves as a call for urgent action to ensure that the process of low-carbon transition is just and inclusive, especially for youth, women and other marginalised groups on the African continent.

Key Messages

1 Contextualisation is key

The discourse on low carbon transitions has been mainly focused on high-income countries in the Global North which are predominantly geared towards changes in



energy production, redesigning grids and increased efficiency of consumption towards net-zero goals. However, Africa's energy supply landscape differs substantially from the rest of the world. Over 50 percent of the continent's population - around 600 million people - do not have access to electricity. Moreover, although Africa is often characterised as a continent already in a state of carbon neutrality, the reality paints a different picture. African energy supply is the result of a complicated mix of formal on-grid and off-grid-energy coupled with 'traditional' and informal energy sources. There is also a high dependence on (unsustainable) biomass burning, mainly used for cooking, and only a very small share of other 'modern' renewable energy (RE) sources in the mix.

Rather than focusing on net-zero goals, an LCT in Africa is about developing transition pathways that are grounded in contextual-realities and are based on different structures within industries, workforce composition, social and political economy factors. Importantly, considering the loosely defined state of carbon neutrality on the African continent, as well as current energy supply and demand landscape, an LCT will have to focus on the cleanest electricity generation possible, the sustainable use of biomass and providing equitable access to clean energy without adding to energy poverty. In this regard, a phased approach will be needed to balance the goals of reducing emissions and a more sustainable energy mix, while at the same time increasing access to electricity, especially for marginalised communities.

To support these conversations, this report proposes an alternative conceptualisation of a low carbon transition, one that is rooted in African realities and focuses on justice, addressing systemic barriers and taking advantage of Africa's potential: See box 1.

Box 1: An African and youth-centred definition of a just low-carbon transition

A just low-carbon transition in Africa provides pathways for scaling up clean energy supply and creating decent employment opportunities for youth and women, while at the same time improving access to affordable and reliable electricity and ensuring that no-one is left behind. Recognising the diversity of contextual realities, (systemic and infrastructural) barriers and drivers of LCT, programmes and policies focussing on LCT in Africa have to consider the unique technical, social, economic, and political contexts as well as national needs for development. For Africa's young men and women, a just transition requires investing in skills, gender equality and meaningful engagement in decision-making processes to ensure they are not only ready to embrace current employment opportunities, but can also shape the future of work in the low-carbon economy.

2 Leaving no-one behind

The second key observation is that there is a lack of attention to inclusive development in both processes and outcomes of LCT. The lack of representation of women and youth in decision-making processes in Africa leads to male-dominated and non-youth-specific energy transition policies and projects. And while there is an observed positive trend in engaging youth in the climate discourse within multilateral organisations like the United Nations and the African Union, it is unclear what the effectiveness of this involvement is.

Increased effort must be made to promote meaningful engagement at the multilateral, continental, and national levels to address the exclusion of women and youth in

decision-making processes related to energy transition policies and programmes. Specifically, a just energy transition agenda should promote intergenerational and gender justice by acknowledging the diversity and intersectionality of women and youth, giving them the opportunity to contribute to the transition in their own way.

3 Be/Being mindful of political economy dynamics

Thirdly, low carbon transitions do not take place in a social and political vacuum and it is increasingly recognized that the pathway to low carbon development is disruptive by nature, transforming the materiality of energy production and land-use systems while undermining entrenched economic interests and political institutions along the way. While African countries embark on an ambitious and transformative transition agenda, many energy projects classified as “clean” have economic, environmental, and social implications that jeopardise the wellbeing of those already vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Impact of new (especially large-scale) RE investments and energy infrastructure have the capacity to disrupt communities and generate conflict, while jobs created are often not benefiting local communities directly and sustainably due the temporary nature of the work and a mismatch in skills.

In addition, political economy dimensions, interest structures and power dynamics on a national and international level are at play and influence the way LCT pathways take shape and the extent to which LCT policies and programmes can be successfully implemented. The need for strong domestic, continental and international partnerships is key, which requires a careful balancing act for African governments between investment and

exploitation. If not managed properly, international LCT policies and practice could turn into another scramble for Africa’s resources.

4 Highlight job decency

One of the main premises of a just low-carbon transition is that it can provide employment opportunities for Africa’s youth. However, the evidence about the energy job market is still very thin and even where data is available, it does not pay enough attention to the diversity of impacts according to different social groups and contextual realities, nor does it take the blurred lines between formal and informal jobs into account. What is known is that an LCT will bring new opportunities for youth and women that can be direct, indirect and induced.

The informal sector, although often ignored in discussions on LCT, is an important part of the puzzle, as it drives the realities of Africa’s economies. A significant part of job creation in LCT is envisioned to be in the informal economy, particularly in sectors that require low-skilled labour. Due to their temporary nature, however, there is concern about job quality and sustainability. Job decency should therefore be at the centre of a just LCT in Africa.

5 Address the skills mismatch

Hampering opportunities for youth in the green economy is the skills mismatch that exists between the needs of the private sector in a changing labour market, and the educational background and skill-set of youth and women. Providing access to training opportunities for youth and women and ‘greening’ TVET curricula by combining more

technical, green skills with foundational and digital skills will be crucial to equip youth with the skills and knowledge for the future of work.

6 Promote gender justice

Another key intervention area lies in the aspect of gender justice as part of an inclusive LCT in Africa. While women are well-positioned to take up green jobs in many sectors, they are currently concentrated in sectors that create more low-end jobs and the majority of projected new employment opportunities are in male-dominated sectors. Moreover, social norms and child care responsibilities often put women at a disadvantage in the labour market. Having a gender-responsive approach and providing access to skills development and funding will therefore be crucial in ensuring a gender just LCT.

7 Support an inclusive research agenda

Although there is an increasingly growing body of literature on low carbon and just transitions, the integration of youth employment analysis into climate research is still largely missing and the empirical evidence - particularly from African contexts - is particularly thin. A knowledge agenda that contextualises and addresses questions around intergenerational and gender justice in low carbon transitions in Africa will be key to provide the foundation for inclusive LCT policies and programmes. This publication aims to support this conversation and the development of an inclusive research agenda that is grounded in the realities of those part and parcel of a low carbon transition in Africa.

INCLUDE



THE BROKER

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