

**Input by the Raoul Wallenberg Institute of Human Rights and Humanitarian Law
on the
UN Secretary-General's synthesis report on Just Transition and Human Rights**

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This submission, prepared by experts at the Raoul Wallenberg Institute of Human Rights and Humanitarian Law (RWI), showcases challenges, lessons learned and recommendations relevant to just transitions and the full realisation of human rights. It focuses on specific examples from selected countries and regions of focus for RWI's work. RWI is an independent academic institution that combines multi-disciplinary human rights research with education, support and outreach to contribute to a wider understanding of, and respect for, human rights and international humanitarian law. Currently, we have offices in Lund, Addis Ababa, Bangkok, Harare, Jakarta, Nairobi, Phnom Penh, Stockholm and Yerevan.

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*Our main recommendations to the UN Secretary General and the global policy community are to **1) approach just transitions with a broad systemic and [preventive perspective](#) that moves beyond a narrow focus on green energy transitions; 2) closely consider the interactions between energy-related just transitions and other sustainability pathways such as food systems transitions; and 3) address the key drivers of unsustainability such as inequality.***

1. Transitions in plural: the role of biosphere defenders in just transitions

Challenges

Biosphere defenders - individuals and groups who actively protect and advocate for the Earth's biosphere - often face threats, violence, and discrimination for their work. Latin America, the Caribbean, and Asia are among the most dangerous regions for biosphere defenders. Over the past decade, restrictive laws have curtailed the rights of freedom of expression and opinion and rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association. In Southeast Asia, a report by FORUM-ASIA entitled "[Defending in Numbers](#)" highlights the rise in human rights violations, increasingly in the form of judicial harassment and oppressive legislation. Despite this alarming trend, the current [draft of the ASEAN Environmental Rights Declaration](#) appears to fall short—or is on the verge of abstaining entirely—from explicitly recognising and protecting the rights of environmental human rights defenders (EHRDs) and Indigenous peoples. In Latin America and the Caribbean, while the Escazú Agreement marks a significant step in recognising and protecting defenders' work through participatory rights, challenges persist in ensuring the full participation of women, Indigenous communities, Afro-descendants, and local communities.

Lessons learned and recommendations

Beyond only a reactive approach to human rights violations in the context of just transitions, human rights law can also play a critical role in preventing mass violations of human rights and injustices in the first place. This involves a focus on obligations that States have to carry out due diligence, for instance, before approving projects such as a new mine or a dam supplying water to the mine and respecting, protecting and fulfilling the rights of [biosphere defenders including the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment](#). [Biosphere defenders as agents of change for tackling climate change and ecosystems degradation](#) play a key role in just transitions. The [Defend-Biosphere framework](#), in particular, can be used as a tool to frame just green transitions in plural—an approach essential for navigating sustainable development pathways. This framework that unites sustainability science insights with international human rights law serves to understand and catalyse the work of defenders in promoting positive social-ecological outcomes by facilitating open information, public participation, and access to justice. It has been applied in case studies in Colombia and Argentina. A [discussion paper](#) building on this framework provided inputs and recommendations to the Escazú Agreement's Draft Regional Action Plan on Human Rights Defenders.

In Southeast Asia, an example of a good practice is the [regional consultations](#) catalysed by civil society organizations with human rights and environmental expertise in order to produce a joint consolidation of inputs to inform the regional framework on environmental rights currently being discussed by Association of the Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). ASEAN has recognised the right to a safe, clean and sustainable environment under the Articles 28 and 35 of the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration. Recognising and supporting EHRDs' efforts is crucial not only for defenders themselves but also for society at large, as their advocacy elevates marginalised voices and fosters truly just transitions in a context of interconnected planetary challenges. In interpreting human rights in the context of just green transitions, States must adopt this broad and preventive approach supporting defenders' role in catalysing positive change in a broad range of transitions such as from fossil fuels energy dependence to renewables, and food systems transitions.

2. From fossil fuels dependence to renewable energy

Challenges

The transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources such as solar, wind, and hydropower pose significant human rights challenges. For example, risks to public health have arisen as a result of copper mining - a critical mineral needed for renewable energy technologies. In contexts such as Armenia, conflicts have also been sparked among various groups. One of the reasons is shortcomings in national law concerning obligations regarding ensuring public participation timeframes for public consultation and clear thresholds for activities requiring Environmental Impact Assessments under the [Aarhus Convention](#). Similarly, in Indonesia, despite ambitious renewable energy targets under its [General National Energy Plan \(RUEN\) 2020–2060](#) which has set a national energy mix target of 51% renewable energy by 2060, the implementation of human rights principles in renewable energy projects often falls short of international human rights standards, adversely impacting human rights including environmental rights and labor rights.

Lessons learned and recommendations

To address these challenges, an enabling environment for people most disproportionately affected by energy transition such as workers, local communities, Indigenous Peoples, and marginalized groups is needed. This should include tailoring policies to local needs and priorities providing practical solutions to workers affected by the transition, such as training and reskilling programs for those in the fossil fuel workforce and assurances of adequate working conditions. Integrating human rights into renewable energy transitions requires collaboration between duty-bearers and rights-holders. Through legal and environmental analysis, public dialogue, and networking between academia and civil society organizations across distinct countries, for example Armenia, Georgia and Sweden, [effective public participation in environmental decision-making in the EU and Eastern Partnership](#) can be fostered. This kind of initiative can also help influence policy and legal reforms in the context of the mining sector, promoting social and judicial awareness in practices that may significantly affect nature contributions to people. Complementary to regional and national efforts, actions at subnational levels are also important. Initiatives inspired by the [Human Rights Cities](#) model and guided by the [Gwangju Principles](#) can be one of the means to promote social justice by engaging local communities including families with young children, elderly, people with disabilities and migrants in renewable energy planning and implementation at the city level so that energy transition projects do not exacerbate negative impacts such as energy poverty. Catalysed by a locally-led initiative, [Bandung](#) - one of the metropolitan cities in Indonesia - is one of the cities which has declared itself as a Human Rights City. These strategies are entry points for weaving human rights law with climate action for transitioning from fossil fuels to renewable energy while respecting human rights.

3. From unsustainable food production and consumption to sustainable and just food systems

Challenges

About [21–37% of total greenhouse gas \(GHG\) emissions](#) are derived from the current food systems. Limited interpretations of just transitions that focus solely on energy transitions overlook critical issues such as food system transformations, which are integral to sustainability and the realization of human rights including the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment. Current [unsustainable food production systems](#) exacerbate environmental degradation and social inequities, failing to meet sustainability goals and violating children's rights. Problems such as malnutrition, child labor, and pesticide exposure demonstrate the urgent need for change. By ignoring food transitions within the framework of just transitions, opportunities to address these interconnected challenges are missed, undermining efforts to create a truly sustainable and just future.

Lessons learned and recommendations

Research shows that [integrating a children's rights-based perspective can contribute to drive systemic changes in food production and consumption](#). This approach promotes participatory processes that elevate children's perspectives and needs, fostering inclusive policy-making and contributing to implement the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. By addressing key issues such as food security, ethical labour practices, and environmental safety, this model reimagines food systems as engines of equity and social-ecological resilience. Expanding the concept of just transitions to incorporate food systems ensures that sustainability efforts not only mitigate climate change in the energy sector but also support the realization of the right to a healthy environment which is vital for the rights of people today and future generations to come.

4. Transitions and people vulnerable to displacement

Challenges

Human mobility is deeply entwined with transitions, often spanning a spectrum from voluntary to forced movement within and across borders. Many factors, including disasters, sea-level rise, and climate initiatives, drive displacement or compel unsafe mobility pathways. These challenges expose individuals to trafficking, exploitation, and poverty, while restrictive immigration policies and discrimination exacerbate vulnerabilities, particularly in the context of climate change and extreme events.

Lessons learned and recommendations

A rights-based approach to mobility focuses on reducing harm, promoting safe pathways, and addressing vulnerabilities. Efforts include [urban-focused responses to climate displacement in African cities](#), and regional collaborations like the [Asia-Pacific](#) and [Nordic networks on disaster and climate-related mobility](#). Justice-driven initiatives like [Climiglaw](#) further advocate for legal reforms to support climate-related human mobility, ensuring transitions are sustainable, just, and equitable.

5. Transitions and environmental democracy in an interconnected world

Challenges

The challenges and opportunities in advancing environmental democracy and just transitions highlight several critical issues that require bridging knowledge and co-creating solutions that are locally relevant and at the same time consider drivers of change at global and regional levels. One pressing problem lies in the interconnected relationship between just transitions, environmental democracy, and human rights across regions. The Escazu Agreement in Latin America and the Caribbean and its intersection with EU economic law present a complex scenario. While the agreement has the potential to advance the right to a healthy environment in LAC, its full capacity to facilitate environmental democracy depends on efforts not only from this region but also the impacts that European countries, China and others have in the region. China's growing influence in global energy transitions poses challenges and the socio-environmental impacts of Chinese investments in LAC, Asia and Africa are significant. Yet there is insufficient understanding of Chinese actors among policymakers, academics and local communities on how to navigate them. This knowledge gap hampers effective engagement and negotiations, while the lack of robust environmental regulations and limited community involvement in projects in host countries exacerbate the challenges.

Lessons learned and recommendations

Addressing transitions and environmental democracy in an interconnected world requires a multi-faceted approach that considers dynamics across regions. Research initiatives, such as the [Safeguarding Biodiversity and Human Rights through Law and Regulation](#), offer opportunities to assess European trade rules and their impact on biodiversity and human rights globally. In the case of the Escazu Agreement, a deeper analysis of its innovations alongside EU economic law can illuminate pathways to foster [synergies between the LAC and EU law and policy](#), ultimately strengthening environmental democracy and human rights transnationally. [Multi-actor dialogues](#) can also play an important role in transparency and access to information about complex dynamics between trade and investment, human rights and green transitions. China has become a crucial actor in energy transitions impacting regions like [Latin America and the](#)

[Caribbean](#) and [Southeast Asia](#), where two workshops were conducted to explore the challenges and implementation of these transitions through a human rights approach. Participants in the workshops emphasized the need to understand the diverse landscape of Chinese actors to elicit better informed decision making in host countries in LAC and Southeast Asia, particularly as host governments play a critical role in shaping the effects of Chinese investments in people, nature and associated human rights. Furthermore, transparency and access to information by the public of these transnational dynamics is critical so right-holders can meaningfully participate in environmental decision-making and realise their human rights in an interconnected world.

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