

India and just energy transition

The possibility to advance
Sustainable Development Goals
in climate change mitigation

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The world depends critically on India's ambitions and actions for meeting the goals of the Paris Agreement and the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). With a multilevel perspective, the research project **INDGREEN: India's ambitions and possibilities of becoming a global leader** finds that new climate partnerships enable India to play a more multifaceted role in global climate governance, but the domestic implementation of international SDG commitments continue to face some challenges, particularly related to ensuring inclusion. The insights from INDGREEN research may be useful for understanding India's role in global climate governance and can also inform the design of policies that ensure a just energy transition domestically.

Key findings

- We find that India has put efforts into speaking as a strong and legitimate voice on behalf of the Global South, especially at the COP26 in Glasgow. This role is, however, also challenged by increasing conflicts of interests among Global South countries.
- In local level studies, we find that the historically constituted inequality in India, where some groups of society are marginalised culturally and in terms of socio-economic indicators (e.g. gender, class, caste and ethnicity), is often overlooked or poorly understood in policymaking and implementation focusing on climate change mitigation.
- While there are many synergies between domestic energy transition and SDGs, there are also important trade-offs, especially related to the risk of maintaining existing societal inequalities.
- India has examples of utilizing the energy transition as a window for societal transformation through schemes that combine implementation of renewables with gender equality (e.g. gender reskilling like 'Solar Mamas' or renewables for women's livelihood and Self-help groups). Such schemes can challenge existing inequalities, while addressing aspects of energy poverty and more sustainable energy.

Justice and sustainability

Being the world's most populated country, and the third largest emitter of greenhouse gases, India is a very good case for studying synergies and trade-offs between SDGs and energy transition. By analysing energy justice internationally (between countries), and domestically (in relation to existing inequality), INDGREEN contributes to understanding the relationship between India's domestic low-carbon development and its role in international climate governance. The project contributes with knowledge urgently needed in the context of sustainable development, concerning how energy transition processes impact justice for society, environment, and people.

To advance this research frontier, it is important to analyse whether India's commitment to 'leave no one behind' in international fora is reflected in the design and implementation of domestic energy policies. To investigate this, we studied to what extent the current policies for energy efficiency in the brick production sector in Bihar enable transformative justice, and the justice implications of the implementation of the PM-KUSUM scheme for small grid-connected solar power in Rajasthan. In both cases present policies focus on regulations and financial incentives relevant for entrepreneurs with pre-existing skills, network and financial resources. For instance, the energy efficiency policies lack attention to mechanisms reproducing socio-economic inequality of the brick labour force and implications for balancing different livelihood and environmental objectives.

New geopolitical changes may enable a broader climate role for large developing countries. Given its own experience, size, and history, India is, to some extent, uniquely positioned to enhance trust in global energy transition. This role could potentially be accomplished through the International Solar Alliance (ISA) and other ministerial partnerships.



Recommendations

For policymakers:

- To obtain a more socially just energy transition, domestic renewable energy policies should incorporate mechanisms that promote inclusion, such as targeted subsidies, recognizing land ownership inequalities, and inclusive decision-making.
- In the Indian brick sector, there is a need for integrating a wider variety of social dimensions and relevant support schemes to overcome inequality barriers and safeguard the environment for future generations.
- Internationally, India could make use of geopolitical changes to promote procedural justice while also positioning itself as a trustworthy partner in energy transition partnerships.



For researchers:

- With emerging changes in international relations, procedural justice and trust in bi-, mini-, and multilateral partnerships is an important research field for understanding how global energy transitions can contribute to strengthening sustainable development and avoid replicating global inequalities.
- To provide actionable research-based input to just energy transitions at different levels of governance, we need enhanced understanding of the political economy of inequality. Resource and land ownership, labour conditions, trade relations, and political connections and trust all create contexts that play into actors' and countries' abilities and willingness to transition away from fossil energy in a sustainable way.
- Research on just transition and competing demands from different climate and development goals need to address historically constituted inequality (e.g. gender, class, caste, ethnicity) to provide relevant knowledge for enabling societal transformation in the low-carbon transition.

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