

Energy Colonialism: Are Rich Nations Controlling the Green Revolution?

Nabib Bin Zahid¹



Source: Global Times²

Introduction

The global transition to renewable energy is widely regarded as an essential strategy for addressing climate change and fostering a sustainable future. However, beneath this progressive narrative lies a complex and often overlooked reality: the emergence of what scholars and critics increasingly identify as energy colonialism. This concept interrogates the ways in which powerful states and multinational corporations from the Global North assert control over the green energy transition, frequently to the detriment of the Global South and marginalized communities. Far from representing a clean break from exploitative practices of the past, the renewable energy boom risks reproducing historical patterns of domination and resource extraction. This commentary critically examines the academic discourse and practical

¹ Nabib Bin Zahid is a research assistant at Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies (BIPSS). He has completed his bachelor's in International Relations from University of Rajshahi.

² Times, Global. "Developed Countries' 'green Colonialism' Is More Covert, Hazardous Exploitation and Plunder." Global Times. Accessed April 9, 2025. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202308/1296064.shtml>.

manifestations of energy colonialism, with particular attention to its geopolitical, economic, and social ramifications.

Conceptualizing Energy Colonialism

Energy colonialism, also referred to as green colonialism or renewable energy imperialism, refers to the appropriation of land, resources, and decision-making power in the Global South by actors from the Global North under the guise of advancing clean energy solutions. The term draws parallels with historical forms of colonialism, where colonizing powers extracted natural resources from peripheries to fuel their own development. In the contemporary context, energy colonialism critiques the tendency of industrialized nations and global corporations to dominate the renewable energy sector—particularly in developing countries—by exploiting land for solar, wind, and bioenergy projects without adequately considering the rights, needs, and voices of local communities.³

This dynamic is evident in numerous international initiatives where green energy projects are implemented through top-down processes, often bypassing democratic consultation and environmental justice frameworks. While these projects are justified in the name of climate action, they frequently result in the displacement of indigenous populations, loss of agricultural livelihoods, and ecological degradation.⁴

Geopolitical Dimensions

The geopolitics of energy colonialism are rooted in the broader global power asymmetries that have historically defined relations between the Global North and South. As the demand for critical minerals and rare earth elements—such as lithium, cobalt, and nickel—intensifies due to the proliferation of batteries and electric vehicles, a new scramble for resources is underway. Many of these essential materials are located in the Global South, including countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Bolivia, and Indonesia.

³ Daggett, Cara. "Petro-masculinity: Fossil Fuels and Authoritarian Desire." *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 47, no. 1 (2019): 25–44.

⁴ Avila, Sofia. "Environmental Justice and the Expanding Geography of Wind Power Conflicts." *Sustainability Science* 13, no. 3 (2018): 599–616.

Multinational companies from the United States, China, and Europe are investing heavily in mining operations in these regions, often under conditions that mirror colonial extractivism. For instance, the DRC supplies over 60% of the world's cobalt, but mining operations there are frequently linked to child labor, unsafe working conditions, and environmental degradation.⁵ Meanwhile, local populations see little benefit from these ventures, as profits are repatriated and governance structures remain opaque and unaccountable.

In addition to material extraction, energy colonialism manifests in the control over technological infrastructure and intellectual property. High-income countries often dominate the innovation and manufacturing of renewable technologies, creating dependency structures where low-income countries are relegated to the role of raw material suppliers and consumers of foreign technology.⁶ This reinforces a neo-colonial global division of labor, stifling the capacity of developing nations to build their own green energy sectors.

Economic Implications

From an economic standpoint, the green energy transition risks replicating the extractive economic models that have long undermined sustainable development in the Global South. Large-scale renewable energy projects, such as solar farms in North Africa or wind parks in Latin America, are frequently financed by international financial institutions and development banks that impose conditionalities prioritizing investor returns over local benefit.⁷

In many cases, land is leased or acquired for renewable energy infrastructure without proper compensation or consent from affected communities. The displacement of people and disruption of traditional livelihoods, such as farming and herding, reflect a familiar pattern of exploitation under the guise of development. Additionally, revenue generated from these projects is rarely reinvested locally. Instead, profits flow back to foreign investors, leaving behind environmental and social costs borne by the host communities.

⁵ "Democratic Republic of Congo: 'This Is What We Die for': Human Rights Abuses in the Democratic Republic of the Congo Power the Global Trade in Cobalt." Amnesty International, June 1, 2021.

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr62/3183/2016/en/>.

⁶ Bridge, Gavin, Stefan Bouzarovski, Michael Bradshaw, and Nick Eyre. "Geographies of Energy Transition: Space, Place and the Low-Carbon Economy." *Energy Policy* 53 (February 2013): 331–40.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.enpol.2012.10.066>.

⁷ Baka, Jennifer. "Making space for energy: Wasteland development, enclosures, and energy dispossessions." *Antipode* 49, no. 4 (2017): 977-996.

Moreover, the framing of green energy as a universally positive force often obscures its embedded inequalities. Renewable energy technologies require vast tracts of land and access to water and other local resources, leading to competition with existing uses and increasing social tensions. These issues are compounded when governments, under pressure to meet international climate commitments, prioritize foreign-led mega-projects over decentralized, community-driven renewable energy systems that could better serve local needs.

Social and Environmental Justice

Energy colonialism also intersects with issues of environmental and social justice, particularly for indigenous and marginalized communities. Across the world, there are numerous examples of resistance to green energy projects that have failed to respect land rights or cultural heritage. In Mexico, for instance, indigenous Zapotec communities have opposed wind farms in Oaxaca due to concerns about land dispossession and inadequate consultation.⁸



Source: Transnational Institute⁹

⁸ Kapoor, Nathan. "Wind and Power in the Anthropocene: Cymene Howe, Ecologics and Dominic Boyer, Energopolitics." *Technology and Culture* 61, no. 2 (2020): 686–89. <https://doi.org/10.1353/tech.2020.0060>.

⁹ Hamouchene, Hamza. "The Energy Transition in North Africa." Transnational Institute. Accessed April 9, 2025. <https://www.tni.org/en/article/the-energy-transition-in-north-africa>.

In India, large-scale solar projects in Rajasthan and Gujarat have similarly sparked protests over land acquisition practices and the exclusion of local voices from decision-making processes. These instances underscore the importance of adopting a justice-oriented approach to energy transitions—one that centers the rights and agency of affected communities and prioritizes inclusive governance mechanisms.

Environmental justice advocates argue that the benefits and burdens of renewable energy must be equitably distributed. This entails not only avoiding harm to vulnerable populations but also ensuring that these communities are active participants in designing, implementing, and benefiting from energy systems. Without such considerations, the green revolution risks deepening existing injustices rather than resolving them.

Resistance Movements

Across affected regions, grassroots movements have emerged to challenge green colonialism:

- In Mexico's Oaxaca region, indigenous groups are protesting against wind farms that encroach on their lands without adequate consultation or compensation.¹⁰
- Sahrawi activists continue to resist Morocco's renewable projects in Western Sahara as part of broader anti-occupation efforts.¹¹
- Environmental justice organizations across North Africa advocate for equitable transitions that prioritize local needs over external interests.¹²

These movements highlight the need for decolonial approaches to energy transitions—ones that empower local communities rather than exploit them.

Towards a Decolonized Energy Future

To counter the dynamics of energy colonialism, scholars and practitioners have called for a more equitable and inclusive approach to the renewable energy transition. This includes promoting

¹⁰ Sánchez Contreras, Josefa, Alberto Matarán Ruiz, Alvaro Campos-Celador, and Eva Maria Fjellheim. "Energy Colonialism: A Category to Analyse the Corporate Energy Transition in the Global South and North." *Land* 12, no. 6 (June 16, 2023): 1241. <https://doi.org/10.3390/land12061241>.

¹¹ Hamouchene, Hamza. "The Energy Transition in North Africa." Transnational Institute. Accessed April 9, 2025. <https://www.tni.org/en/article/the-energy-transition-in-north-africa>.

¹² Hamza Hamouchene, Katie Sandwell. "Dismantling Green Colonialism." Transnational Institute. Accessed April 9, 2025. <https://www.tni.org/en/dossier/dismantling-green-colonialism>.

community-owned renewable energy projects, strengthening local capacity for technology development and maintenance, and ensuring that resource governance frameworks are transparent and accountable.¹³

One promising example is the rise of energy cooperatives and decentralized energy systems in various parts of the Global South. These initiatives emphasize local ownership, democratic decision-making, and ecological sustainability, offering a potential model for more just and resilient energy futures. In South Africa, for instance, community solar projects have empowered residents to access affordable electricity while creating local jobs and reducing dependence on external actors.¹⁴



Sources: Energy Monitor¹⁵

International institutions also have a role to play in reshaping the governance of global energy systems. This includes reforming trade and investment agreements to prioritize environmental and social safeguards, supporting technology transfer and capacity-building in developing countries, and holding corporations accountable for human rights and environmental violations.

¹³ Sovacool, Benjamin K., Andrew Hook, Mari Martiskainen, and Lucy Baker. "The Decarbonisation Divide: Contextualizing Landscapes of Low-carbon Exploitation and Toxicity in Africa." *Global Environmental Change* 68 (2021): 102222.

¹⁴ Baker, Lucy, and Jon Phillips. "Tensions in the Transition: The Politics of Electricity Distribution in South Africa." *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space* 37, no. 1 (2019): 177–196.

¹⁵ Thompson, Nikki. "Geothermal Development: Fool's Gold or the Future of Energy?" *Energy Monitor*, March 28, 2025. <https://www.energymonitor.ai/sponsored/geothermal-development-fools-gold-or-the-future-of-energy/>.

Crucially, a decolonized energy transition requires a fundamental rethinking of development paradigms. Rather than treating the Global South as a repository of resources for the benefit of the North, a more just framework would recognize the right of all nations and communities to define their own energy futures in line with local needs, values, and aspirations.

Conclusion

The renewable energy transition holds immense promise for addressing climate change and advancing sustainable development. However, without critical reflection and structural reform, it also risks perpetuating the very injustices it seeks to overcome. Energy colonialism highlights the need to interrogate who controls the green revolution, who benefits from it, and who bears its costs.

By acknowledging and addressing the geopolitical, economic, and social dimensions of energy colonialism, policymakers and stakeholders can work towards a more equitable, inclusive, and genuinely sustainable energy future. This requires not only technological innovation but also a commitment to justice, solidarity, and the decolonization of global energy systems.