DISCUSSION PAPER: ENERGY AND CLIMATE JUSTICE

The lack of access to electricity is "the most pressing obstacle to economic growth, more important than access to finance, red tape or corruption", according to the International Energy Agency.¹ How energy is generated, who has access to it, and how it is governed has been a source of conflict ever since the industrial revolution. The mining and drilling for fossil fuels like coal, gas and oil are also highly destructive to the environment. Their use releases many gigatons of carbon dioxide into our atmosphere, driving climate change – an ecological injustice. Nuclear energy is not a safe or sustainable alternative. More than 635 million people in Africa – about half the population – still do not have access to electricity.² This stops them furthering their own development – a social injustice. Access to renewable wind and sun could provide us with the affordable energy that we need.

Faith communities around the world have recognised that burning fossil fuels could have catastrophic consequences for our common home and the Earth community.

| 80% of people in sub-Saharan Africa still rely on biomass for cooking³ | Sub-Saharan Africa’s entire generation capacity is less than South Korea’s⁴ | Africa enjoys 320 days of sunlight ideal for solar energy generation⁵ |

A faith perspective on energy and climate justice

Faith leaders around the world have joined the call for a just transition to an energy system based on the use of renewable sources. Increasingly, faith communities are signing up to the global divestment from fossil fuels campaign. In 2019, Tomás Insua, director of the Global Catholic Climate Movement, said "we're divesting because fossil fuels like coal, oil and gas are toxic to our planet and everyone who shares this common home." In 2015, a global Islamic climate change declaration stated “We are in danger of ending life as we know it on our planet”. In the same year, 15 of the world’s most senior Buddhist leaders issued a landmark call: “We need to wake up and realize that the Earth is our mother as well as our home ... when the Earth becomes sick, we become sick, because we are part of her.” Barbara Weinstein, associate director of the Religious Action Centre for Reform Judaism, noted that "we must seek the renewal of our earth, liberation from dependence on fossil fuels, and freedom from environmental justice that continues to plague the most vulnerable...".

Questions to consider from a faith perspective

- What role can or could your faith community play in promoting cooperation so that regional resources can be developed to improve energy access for all?
- How can faith communities lever funding for renewable energy infrastructure?
- How does or could your faith community work with government and others to roll out affordable eco-energy systems for daily necessities like cooking, lighting and the pumping of water?
- What can your faith centre do to become a centre of learning about energy efficiency and adaption to climate change?

Background to the energy and climate justice issue

Enabling access to energy is a social justice imperative and ensuring that the energy is produced sustainably is an environmental one. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 7 aims to “ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all”.

Existing energy infrastructure in sub-Saharan Africa is in general poorly maintained and lacks investment. Less than 2% of rural households in the region are electrified and daily outages are common in urban areas. In addition, while countries in the region have committed through the Paris Agreement to cut emissions, many do not have the institutional, technical or financial capacity to draft

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8 One Earth Sangha. 2015. *The time to act is now. A Buddhist Declaration on Climate Change*. oneearth sangha.org/statements/the-time-to-act-is-now.


and oversee implementation of relevant policies. This provides a strong motivation for the transition to renewables, for which Africa is well-placed given the abundance of sunlight and wind. Doing so would enable the establishment of localised generation through a variety of mediums (solar panels, wind farms, biogas digesters, micro-grids and more). This would democratise decision making around energy type and access.

Any investment in renewable energy provision provides socioeconomic returns and environmental benefits. These include the sense of security and ability to work at night provided by lighting; the ability to communicate (by phone and internet), which in turn supports education and entrepreneur ship; and access to hot water, which lowers the risk of illness and disease. The burning of biomass for heating and cooking is a key driver of localised deforestation, and emits greenhouse gasses. Cooking over wood fires, in confined spaces results in respiratory diseases. A transition would also provide opportunities to create green and decent jobs.

There will be consequences to transitioning from fossil fuelled power generation. Host communities near mines and power stations are likely to lose their most significant employer and buyer of services. Plans will need to be in place to reskill or upskill workers to ensure they are not unjustly affected in the transition.

Friends of the Earth chairperson Karin Nansen stated "This must be a just transition, founded on worker and community rights. It is not only about changing technologies and renewable energy, but about public and community ownership and control, addressing the root problems of a system that turns energy into a commodity and denies the right to energy for all. It requires equity and justice, especially for those already impacted by the changing climate in the global South." 12

We must call for the decentralisation of expensive energy sources and seek rapid adoption of mini-grids and renewable energy technologies that are accessed equitably.

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