What might a just transition to clean energy look like? What do initiatives like the European Green Deal mean for the Global South? Freelance journalist Aruna Chandrasekhar prompted far-reaching discussion when she explored these questions in her recent guest lecture at ODID.

The European Green Deal announced in 2019 aims to provide a roadmap for the transition to clean energy. Linking technology and infrastructure investment with community involvement, the initiative brings together agendas from the climate and labour justice movements, previously often seen at odds. As it progresses from legislation to implementation, there is widespread recognition that a just transition to clean energy must be equitable and inclusive, taking everyone along. But what does this mean for the Global South? Drawing on her reporting on her native India over the past decade, Aruna Chandrasekhar’s lecture explored universal issues of social justice in the transition to clean energy.

Developed countries require the developing world to cut its appetite for fossil fuels, but countries such as India have pointed out the acute lack of finance for the technology transfer to help developing economies in this transition. Millions of workers in developing countries have their present as well as their futures tied to fossil-fuel economies. India’s coal industry employs 1.2 million people, and the sector also supports a much larger informal workforce. Yet local communities at India’s coal mines are excluded from consultation and decision-making around energy, even though they will be among those hardest hit by climate change. Many lost their land to compulsory acquisition for mining, in exchange for one job per family – jobs that are often menial or short-lived, as India moves from manual to highly mechanised mining. Women were left out entirely for a long time, banned by law from working underground.

With so many excluded under the current system, what would a just energy transition mean for indigenous people, for women or for those with small landholdings? How many jobs would be lost, and how would they be replaced?

Global policy commitments vs reality on the ground

India’s renewable energy story looks good on paper, with ambitious targets already achieved in terms of installed capacity to generate clean power – but this doesn’t mean the country’s electricity
will be produced from these resources. At COP 26, Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared India would achieve net zero by 2070, and the country’s environment minister spoke of phasing down coal use. Yet India is still subsidising production, seeking to expand both coal and renewables. Mining rights to 106 new coal seams were recently put to auction, and private mining companies are increasingly dominant compared to state-owned Coal India. People affected have little access to justice when their homes and land are appropriated for mining.

Will issues of social and environmental justice be addressed as the world moves to minerals needed for the energy transition, such as lithium, cobalt or graphite, or will the current extractive paradigm continue? The global energy transition is upending the world’s energy map. Countries and regions rich in fossil fuels may not be rich in these minerals. This already means a global mining boom as countries stockpile supplies to shield their own energy security and make plans to protect domestic industry. What shape will this boom take, especially in countries in the global South with rich mineral resources, questionable environmental governance, a history of extraction by Northern countries and greatest vulnerability to climate change?

**A different model for transition minerals?**

India’s government recently announced a substantial lithium discovery, but there have been protests in countries including Bolivia, Chile and Argentina on what mining for lithium means, environmentally and in terms of neo-colonialism. Following Mexico’s example, Chile has now nationalised its lithium industry. India’s bauxite belt has seen indigenous protests against large mining companies, suggesting the possibility of similar movements for transition minerals. India has responded by deregulating the mining sector and clamping down on activists. But is there a different approach?

Research shows there are ways to support a just transition, respecting indigenous rights and ecosystems by listening to communities and activists, replacing coal with renewables, and exploring approaches that reduce the need for transition minerals like lithium. Will India choose such a path, pursuing the more equitable resource use that it champions on the global stage? Or will the country repeat the model of extraction used in its coal and bauxite belts, continuing to subsidise fossil fuels and prioritise cars over communities? If India is serious about phasing down coal, why is it silencing voices that raise these issues in pursuit of just and equitable energy transition?

**Bridging gaps and linking silos**

Aruna’s insights prompted thoughtful questions from the audience. How can we connect global energy policy to local needs? Can a single policy for the transition to clean energy address the complexities of vast countries like India? In response, she highlighted the need to bridge gaps to achieve a just energy transition – gaps between global and local, and across sectors and issues. The complexity of the energy transition makes it hard to connect the dots from the extremely local to global policy choices and climate debates centred on countries and alliances. Global-level spaces don’t necessarily make room for national issues or what happens on the ground. Yet countries which haven’t yet met the Sustainable Development Goals face specific challenges when seeking to rapidly decarbonise in a post-COVID context, during a global recession. There is also need for space where local people can interact with global politics and business, and contribute to dialogue and decision-making.

Similarly, financial flows are negotiated at international level and directed to ministries responsible for investment, rather than those addressing social justice, and the two don’t have space to talk. These massive investment opportunities around the energy transition must be linked to social
justice. Research is still needed into how the energy transition can include as many people as possible, creating new types of jobs in new locations, and filling the information gaps at local level, so that people can use these findings to demand equity.

A gender-just transition?

Given that land appropriation for India’s largest solar park created jobs for men while forcing women to travel long distances to work in other people’s fields, is there scope for gender justice in the energy transition?

Women have been at the forefront of many movements – including litigation processes and documenting the impacts of mining and energy projects, but often their access to information and justice has been through men. To ensure they’re part of discussions and decision making, women will need full access to information and remedy. Some have managed to push for jobs in the energy sector, and others have tried to emulate them, but it’s a question of numbers.

A just energy transition centres on access to power, information, justice and remedy, Aruna concluded, in terms of voice, participation and decision making – and perhaps in reimagining what we’d like development to be.

Aruna Chandrasekhar is an award-winning climate journalist with Carbon Brief, covering stories at the intersection of agriculture, land, biodiversity, climate, science and policy. She is based in Mumbai, India. Aruna has been writing about climate change, land rights, environmental policy, energy, human rights, peoples’ movements and conflict for over a decade, in outlets including The Guardian, Scroll.in and the New York Times. She was a policy researcher at Amnesty International’s secretariat in London and covered the coal sector extensively as a senior researcher on business and human rights at Amnesty International India, while previously working with the mines, minerals & PEOPLE alliance of mining affected communities and organisations. Aruna has a master’s degree in environmental change and management from the University of Oxford. Follow her on Twitter @aruna_sekhar.

Watch a video of the lecture here.

By Stephanie Debere, ODID Blog Editor/Writer