Rethinking Transition Minerals for a Just Energy Future in Africa: Advancing Energy Justice in Guinea, Namibia and Morocco

Summary

This policy brief summarises actionable pathways to achieve energy justice in Africa, drawing on case studies from Guinea, Morocco and Namibia. The three countries are rich in transition minerals but their extraction is leading to injustices such as community displacement, labour exploitation and environmental degradation. The brief argues that it is vital to integrate principles of distributive, procedural, recognitional, restorative and cosmopolitan justice into transition minerals governance frameworks. An energy justice approach moves beyond extraction-focused models, emphasising human rights, community participation and environmental restoration.

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Introduction

Guinea, Morocco and Namibia are central to the global energy transition due to the abundance of transition minerals, including cobalt, lithium, bauxite and rare earth elements found in these countries. While these minerals are vital for renewable energy technologies, their extraction has been associated with significant environmental and human rights impacts. Existing governance approaches have focused on attracting investment and scaling mineral output. This often perpetuates extractive inequities, fails to adequately protect vulnerable communities and externalises socio-environmental costs.

Problem Statement

Evidence from the three countries indicates a lack of distributive justice, as economic benefits from mineral resources often fail to reach local communities, instead enriching elites, foreign corporations and consumer countries. This inequity is compounded by procedural justice deficits, where community voices, particularly those of women, indigenous groups and rural populations, are routinely excluded from critical decision-making processes. Recognitional justice is not upheld, as the continued marginalisation of local identities, knowledge systems and customary tenure leads to social exclusion but also reflects a failure to recognise the value of these communities. These challenges are compounded by gaps in restorative justice, as weak enforcement of environmental and social safeguards perpetuates harm without accountability. Furthermore, the burden of resource extraction on African nations serves global decarbonisation efforts yet offers little in return, underscoring a cosmopolitan injustice that demands urgent attention and reform in global governance of transition minerals and energy systems.

Policy Options/Alternatives

Guinea, Namibia and Morocco have several policy options to consider for effectively governing transition minerals, each tailored to their unique realities and ambitions. The first option is the status quo (extraction-driven model), which prioritises exports and investment but offers limited reforms concerning community participation, environmental safeguards or benefit sharing. The second option, incremental reform, proposes small-scale improvements focused on enhancing transparency, implementing isolated compensation schemes, or adopting voluntary standards without a complete structural overhaul. In contrast, the final option, transformative justice-centred governance, advocates for integrating energy justice considerations throughout the mineral value chain. This approach emphasises rights-based frameworks, community ownership, strong environmental protections and redistributive policies, aiming for a more equitable and sustainable management of transition mineral resources.

Analysis

Namibia has a legal framework focused on sustainable development, shaped by an extractive model. Incremental reforms show signs of improving local benefits, but issues such as community displacement persist. Efforts towards transformative justice are emerging, though inequalities persist. In Guinea, the mining sector faces challenges, including corruption risks and limited community engagement. Driven by foreign investment, mining operations cause environmental harm and displacement. Discussions on reform are ongoing in Guinea, but implementation is slow, and marginalised groups are not recognised. Morocco is moving towards sustainable practices and reforming its mining sector to enhance local development. The country is beginning to embrace transformative justice by acknowledging marginalised communities, reflecting a shift towards equitable governance. Overall, Namibia and Morocco show progress in reform and transformative practices, while Guinea faces challenges but is beginning to consider necessary changes to meet community needs. Enhanced community engagement and recognition of human rights remain vital to equitable resource governance across all three countries.

Recommendations

1. **Ensure Fair Allocation of Benefits:** The three countries can channel revenues directly into rural electrification, infrastructure and community benefit-sharing programmes for communities affected or where mining operations take place.
2. **Strengthen Community Consultation and Participation:** The three countries can enforce binding, transparent consultation and engagement frameworks to ensure that communities can meaningfully participate in mining-related decision-making, and integrate community monitoring in mining project oversight.
3. **Build Governance Frameworks that Respect Land Rights and Local Knowledge:** The three countries can embed customary land tenure and gender equity in law, expand community ownership and technical training programmes.
4. **Repair Social and Environmental Harm:** Strong requirements for environmental bonds, rehabilitation plans and community-led monitoring can be put in place, as well as strengthening environmental and social regulatory agencies' capacity.
5. **Rebalance Global Energy Transitions:** Countries in the Global South can advocate for human rights due diligence across global value chains, ethical sourcing and fair pricing, and link market access to human rights compliance and fair benefit distribution globally.

Conclusion

Africa's transition minerals sector stands at a crossroads. Without an explicit justice orientation, the green energy revolution risks deepening historic injustices. By foregrounding energy justice, policymakers can transform resource wealth from a source of harm into an engine for equitable, sustainable and dignified development. Success depends not only on new laws and institutions, but also on genuine political will to democratise governance, empower local communities and reposition Africa as a strategic actor in the global response to climate change.

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