
[The transition to a 'low-carbon' economy: a green camouflage for more destructive capitalism](#)

This bulletin aims to reflect on the extraction, violence and oppression related to the so-called energy 'transition' and its 'green' camouflage. A transition from what? And towards what?

The mainstream responses to the climate chaos and environmental devastation are triggering a continuous expansion of the capitalist economy. The discourses about 'green,' 'low-carbon' and 'sustainable' energy are essentially camouflaging what in fact is the continuation (and expansion, in some cases) of an economic and political model that is based on large-scale extraction. A model that is based, at the same time, on oppression, exclusion, patriarchy and racism directed at communities in the global South.

This bulletin reflects on some aspects of this 'green' camouflage and aims to expose interests, actors and threats that are hidden underneath.

The word *transition*, according to the dictionary, means "a change from one state or condition to another." So, which *change* do companies and governments talk about? Is it 'changing, so everything will stay the same'? A *transition* from what? And towards what?

The proposals on the table show that the *change* is largely about substituting some of the fossil fuel sources with so-called renewable energy sources; substituting some cars powered by petrol or diesel with electric cars; digitalizing agriculture, land tenure and forest conservation operations; certifying and promoting some energies and industrial processes as 'green,' 'sustainable' or 'carbon neutral'; and, of course, offsetting enormous amounts of greenhouse gas emissions and biodiversity loss that will continue to increase. The *change* that is promoted does not even start to challenge any of the root problems of the climate and environmental crisis, such as the economic model's over-production and consumption logic. This logic is intrinsically tied to fossil fuels and a centralized and violent energy matrix.

The energy *transition*, has been largely reduced to a debate about what technology or energy source to use, rather than focused on who controls and decides upon who controls and uses which energy sources. The current energy matrix that feeds first and foremost the industrial and corporate market needs, leaves millions of people without access to energy and heavily impacts vulnerable communities. Be it fossil fuel extraction or industrial renewable energy infrastructures, their multiple effects on people and life spaces are almost always devastating.

One article of this WRM bulletin highlights the dangerous impacts of gas extraction in Cabo Delgado, Mozambique, a fuel which is categorized in the framework of the 'green transition' as a 'clean fuel'. Other articles look at the impacts of mineral extraction for the increasing demand in batteries, electric cars and data centres in Indonesia, Brazil, the DR Congo (cobalt mining) and Zimbabwe (diamond mining). Another article explores the claims of generating 'green hydrogen' by using energy generated through mega-dams, wind and solar farms, with the example of the Gran Inga project in the DR Congo. Several articles highlight the effects of large-scale wind farms, such as the case of a

wind farm in the province of Ceará, Brazil and the growing logging of balsa wood in Ecuador, which is exported to China for the construction of windmills. Another article underlines the path of pollution and toxicity that hides behind the 'digital' economy. And another one highlights the use of certification as a strategy to legitimize the continuation of the very same economic model.

These articles underscore that what this transition *does not change* is the exploitative relationships and discrimination that is inherent to industrial-scale energy, irrespective of the technology used to produce this energy. The populations that co-exist and depend upon the territories sacrificed for this industrial energy matrix are carrying the heaviest burden. Industrial-scale renewable energy *does not change* the extreme violence and oppression brought about by the mega-infrastructure needed to extract and operate the energy system, nor the globalized economic model that it powers. Moreover, industrial renewable energy does not address the problem of excessive energy consumption, which is a key underlying cause of the crisis.

Where are these mega infrastructures being built? Where do all those metal minerals and other necessary materials come from? Who were displaced, violated, discriminated against? How much energy is used to build and operate such infrastructures? How much pollution and degradation will that provoke, and for whom? Where does the waste of these processes end up? Where does this 'energy' go to and where does it not reach? Which type of societies do these infrastructures enable? And which ones do they destroy?

Tariq Fancy, former chief officer for sustainable investing at BlackRock, the world's largest asset manager, affirmed that business "run for-profit machines that will operate exactly as you would expect them to do (...) Moving money to green investments doesn't mean polluters will no longer find backers. If you sell your stock in a company that has a high emissions footprint, it doesn't matter. The company still exists; the only difference is that you don't own them. The company is going to keep on going the way they were and there are 20 hedge funds who will buy that stock overnight. The market is the market." He also stressed how businesses are only investing in green assets in order for them "to not get caught up in the damage when it [climate change] hits." (1)

The reality is that the green camouflage of the so-called *transition* is to conceal that fossil fuel and coal companies keep expanding and profiting just as before. Banks and other investors keep providing finance to the leading fossil fuel companies developing new large-scale, contested coal, oil and gas projects. (2) And the excess production and consumption trend is also set to continue. In the last 120 years, the human population grew five times (from 1.5 to 7.5 billion) while the inputs processed in the global economy (biomass, fossil fuels, building materials, metals) grew approximately thirteen times, from 7.5 to 95 Gt per year. (3)

An urgent and drastic reduction of the industrial-scale, centralized energy production and consumption must be a priority. Hence, the discussion cannot simply be about switching from one source of energy to another or about using carbon offsets to claim that production has become 'low carbon'. The discussion should rather begin from recognizing the intrinsic exploitation and destruction embedded in the dominant economic model. It would be a necessary starting point for *change* towards more just and respectful economies, as well as fundamentally different concepts, understanding and uses of 'energy' to come forward.

The challenge is to open up space for debates from the bottom up to learn about different concepts of energy (4). This would enable a different discussion altogether about what energy is, and what energy sovereignty would entail. The transition currently underway towards a so-called 'low carbon' economy is only for a few and it strengthens the historical inequalities and injustices that are mostly

felt by those living in and around forests, fertile lands, peat lands, rivers and seas, as well as poor urban neighbourhoods.

- (1) The Guardian, 2021, [Green investing 'is definitely not going to work', says ex-BlackRock executive](#)
 - (2) [Five Years Lost. How Finance is Blowing the Paris Carbon Budget](#)
 - (3) Joan Martinez-Alier, [Mapping ecological distribution conflicts: The EJAtlas](#)
 - (4) Larry Lohmann with Nick Hildyard and Sarah Sexton. [Energy Alternatives. Surveying the Territory](#)
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