

## ENLENS: Energy Transition Through the Lens of SDGs

1. **Title:** Exploring energy justice and multi-species rights in Southern Africa: a comparative study drawing on indigenous perspectives
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### 3. Societal case

The urgency of transitioning to sustainable energy systems is undisputed, yet the pathways to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 7 (SDG7) often overlook the complex interdependencies between human societies and between humans and other species. Instruments like the Paris Agreement underscore the importance of a just transition and rights-based climate action, but fall short of advancing a multi-species approach to rights and justice. Nonetheless, climate litigation pursued in domestic courts around the world increasingly uses human rights as a ‘hook’ for advancing arguments around multi-species justice.<sup>1</sup> Multi-species justice perspectives are also being developed within international law practices, particularly in advisory proceedings on climate change currently pending before international courts and tribunals.<sup>2</sup> These developments appear to be relevant for indigenous communities in Southern Africa, where the development of renewable energy projects, such as green hydrogen and lithium-ion batteries, may threaten indigenous livelihoods and bio-cultural practices. Arguably, a just energy transition requires a holistic approach that considers the interconnectedness of social, economic, epistemic and ecological systems, and the rights and well-being of all species.<sup>3</sup>

This project seeks to explore how energy justice and multi-species rights are understood and conceptualised by different indigenous groups in Southern Africa, focusing on three comparative case studies: the Boegoebaai green hydrogen project in South Africa, lithium mining in Zimbabwe, and a water desalination project tied to hydrogen production in Namibia all of which entail dispossession and exploitation of indigenous ecologies. By examining these cases, we aim to shed light on the potential conflicts and synergies between renewable energy development, indigenous rights, and the rights of nature. Our interdisciplinary research will explore the role of multi-

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<sup>1</sup> A prominent example is the lawsuit filed by Māori climate activist Mike Smith in New Zealand against several major corporations, including energy corporations, demanding that they reduce their emissions in line with New Zealand’s commitments under the Paris Agreement and the SDGs. Smith’s legal challenge is premised on the principle of inter-species equity, emphasising not only the rights of human beings but also the rights and well-being of non-human species affected by climate change. This aligns with Māori cosmologies that do not draw sharp distinctions between humans and other forms of life, seeing all as interconnected and deserving of protection. See *Mike Smith v. Fonterra Co-operative Group Limited et al* [2021] NZCA 552. See further Caroline E Foster, ‘Novel Climate Tort? The New Zealand Court of Appeal Decision in *Smith v Fonterra Co-Operative Group Limited and Others*’ (2022) 24 *Environmental Law Review* 224.

<sup>2</sup> Notably before the International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, and the International Court of Justice.

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. Danielle Celermajer and others, ‘Multispecies Justice: Theories, Challenges, and a Research Agenda for Environmental Politics’ (2021) 30 *Environmental Politics* 119; Petra Tschakert, ‘More-than-Human Solidarity and Multispecies Justice in the Climate Crisis’ (2022) 31 *Environmental Politics* 277; Erin Fitz-Henry, ‘Multi-Species Justice: A View from the Rights of Nature Movement’ (2022) 31 *Environmental Politics* 338.

species justice in advancing a just energy transition that aligns with the SDGs, respects human rights, cognitive justice and promotes the well-being of all species.

#### **4. Scientific case**

Our research questions are: How do indigenous communities in Southern Africa conceptualise energy justice and multi-species rights in the context of renewable energy projects? What are the implications of these perspectives for advancing a just energy transition that aligns with the SDGs and respects the rights of both humans and non-humans? How might Dutch and European funded energy transition-related projects in southern Africa provide opportunities to learn how to change colonial practices of extraction that reproduce inequality and pollute indigenous environments?

Through comparative case studies, we will explore the lived experiences and perspectives of indigenous communities in relation to the three renewable energy projects. Anthropological fieldwork will document the socio-ecological processes surrounding these projects, with particular attention to the ways in which indigenous understandings of multi-species justice, rights of nature, and human rights are articulated and negotiated in specific national and regional contexts. Concurrently, legal analysis will examine the relevant legal frameworks, such as the UN Declaration on the Rights of indigenous Peoples and the emerging recognition of the right to a healthy environment, and their potential to advance energy justice and multi-species rights in the context of renewable energy development.

By bringing these lines of analysis together, the project aims to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the role of multi-species justice in advancing a just energy transition. This interdisciplinary approach will contribute to the growing body of research on the interconnections between the SDGs, human rights, cognitive justice and the rights of nature, and provide a foundation for policy recommendations that promote a more inclusive and sustainable approach to renewable energy development in Southern Africa. Intended outputs include an academic article in a leading interdisciplinary journal, three policy briefs co-produced with stakeholders, and a concept note for a larger comparative project.

#### **5. Contribution to ENLENS**

A. This project will provide the foundation for a larger comparative study of energy justice and multi-species rights across multiple countries. We will develop a funding proposal for this project that can be submitted to NWO or the ERC.

B. The cross-faculty collaboration between law and anthropology enriches interdisciplinary sustainability research at the UvA. We will actively draw connections with other ENLENS projects, e.g. to discuss how the normative developments we study could shape policy and practice around biomass and hydrogen.

C1. We will collaborate with indigenous communities and civil society partners engaged in advocacy around the selected case studies, ensuring that their perspectives, experiences and aspirations inform our research and outputs.

C2. We will involve LLM and research master students in fieldwork and legal analysis through a seminar on energy justice and multi-species rights in Southern Africa.

C3. We will present findings at academic conferences and public events, publish open access articles, and communicate insights via media commentaries, with a focus on amplifying the voices of indigenous communities.

## **6. Budget**

We request a total amount of €45k, to be used as follows. An amount of €15k per faculty (FdR and FMG) will be used to cover research time of the involved researchers. In addition, we would like to request €15k for data acquisition/preparation. These additional funds would be used to cover the costs of fieldwork during which data will be collected (€10k), and to hire a student assistant, to be located at FdR but working collaboratively with the three lead researchers, to aid with the data collection (€5k). This seed funding not only facilitates a pilot project that could have significant academic and societal impact potential, but also enables crucial groundwork and stakeholder engagement for a larger comparative project aligned with ENLENS' objectives.