

Apr 24 2017

Human Rights and Renewable Energy: A Critical Link

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2016 was the year that, according to the World Economic Forum (WEF), renewable energy finally became a viable market alternative to fossil fuels. In a [press release](#) for the [report](#) "Renewable Infrastructure Investment Handbook: A Guide for Institutional Investors," the WEF states that "the cost of generating energy through solar and wind sources has dropped to the point of being competitive against coal and natural gas." This is good news for those of us concerned with the climate and the crucial link it shares with human rights.

The connection between climate and human rights is well established. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights recognizes an [explicit link](#) between the two issues, and clearly [states](#) that "climate change impacts, directly and indirectly, an array of internationally guaranteed human rights." The National Resource Defense Council (NRDC), which is one of the leading global authorities on environmental science, has [highlighted](#) that renewable energy is one of the strongest tools to combat climate change. Therefore, a step toward renewable energy is a step towards improving human rights.

A strong case for leading market innovation is to show new efficiencies, which directly applies to renewable energy. The WEF [highlights that](#) "just ten years ago, solar costs would be around \$600/MWh, much above the widely-used coal and natural gas sources at \$100/MWh. However, solar costs were halved five years later, and compressed again to around \$100/MWh today. Wind costs are around \$50/MWh". The chart below shows the cost in cents to produce a kilowatt hour of energy via land-based wind, wind offshore, solar photovoltaic, small hydro, coal, and nuclear options. Several of the renewable energy options (assessed globally) are close or equal to the cost of coal.

Renewable energy resources have been able to reach this point of cost effectiveness, largely due to an influx of investment (a [projected](#) amount of \$285.9 billion in 2015). It is important to note that this advantage of renewable energy is not based on mass subsidies. The International Energy Agency [states](#) that in 2014, of the \$493 billion in subsidies that were provided to fossil fuels globally, only one quarter of this amount was necessary for renewable energy subsidies. Renewable energy also provides greater [stabilization](#) of market energy costs, and has less volatility. Renewables are particularly [attractive](#) for the developing world, where in countries like Chile the cost of creating electricity was estimated at \$29.10 per megawatt hour in January 2016, roughly half the price of coal. Interestingly enough, Bloomberg Technology [states](#) that the cost of creating large-scale renewable energy projects is more expensive in wealthier nations, as it has to compete with pre-existing "billion dollar coal and gas plants."

If access to energy is a [human right](#), then renewable energy and the more efficient distribution of energy is clearly advancing this cause. In fact, Greenpeace and Amnesty International released a [joint statement](#) in December 2015, showcasing that "protection of human rights from climate change requires [an] urgent shift to 100% renewable energy for all." Access to energy is [critical](#) for the reduction of poverty, and is listed as [Goal 7](#) of the 16 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

The development of energy is still a business, and business needs to be conducted responsibly. There have been several instances where renewable energy projects have [jeopardized](#) the human rights of communities much in the same way as fossil fuel distributors. The Business and Human Rights [Resource Center](#) does tremendous work to chronicle "both negative and positive case studies concerning the impact of renewable energy on human rights," and platforms such as this are crucial to keep businesses honest in their practices.

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