



Between Ambition and Implementation: Just and Inclusive Energy Transitions in Southeast Asia

By Margareth Sembiring



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SYNOPSIS

While ASEAN has embraced the vision of a just and inclusive energy transition, its latest planning documents do not adequately address the justice-related issues on the ground. As energy transitions accelerate, closing this gap will require a stronger focus on concrete participatory actions and greater regional accountability.

COMMENTARY

Two years after the Just Transition Work Programme was established at COP28 in Dubai, the adoption of the Just Transition Mechanism in the recently concluded COP30 in Belém, Brazil, signalled a decisive shift. Equity and inclusivity are no longer peripheral to the technical and financial aspects of energy transitions but rather sit at the core of global expectations in the transition to low-carbon energy sources.

While the Just Transition Mechanism adopted at COP30 was rightly hailed as a significant achievement in advancing rights-based energy transitions, its lack of clear timelines, technical functions, and financial commitments reveal a

significant gap between aspiration and concrete action. This gap is not unique to the global process but is also evident in Southeast Asia's energy transition planning.

People-Centredness Gap in ASEAN

A just transition is about moving toward a low-carbon future that aligns environmental sustainability with social and economic justice. Since its formal inclusion in the Paris Agreement ten years ago, countries and institutions have interpreted the concept of a just transition in different ways. Some emphasise the rights of workers affected by the shift away from fossil fuels, while others adopt a broader lens that includes fair access to the benefits of energy transitions.

Despite the varying terms used, with the G20 and the International Energy Agency more recently calling for "fair and accessible" transitions, the underlying thrust is pretty similar: energy transitions must be people-centred, grounded in fairness, participation, and inclusion.

In Southeast Asia, the idea has entered the regional energy policy vocabulary with the 41st ASEAN Ministers on Energy Meeting (AMEM) in 2023 formally adopting "just and inclusive energy transitions" in its declaration. The following year, AMEM adopted a theme for the ASEAN Plan of Action for Energy Cooperation (APAEC 2026-2030) that explicitly featured just and energy transitions in its title. This signified an effort to mainstream the concept to guide the region's energy transitions.

While the inclusion of justice and inclusivity has raised expectations for meaningful, people-centred measures, the final APAEC 2026-2030, released in October 2025, fell short of fleshing out these principles. Its ASEAN Power Grid (APG) programme does not explicitly mention plans to ensure fairness and equity and instead focuses almost entirely on infrastructure expansion.

Similarly, the ASEAN Community Vision 2045, launched in May 2025, does not translate the just and inclusive spirit into tangible operational frameworks to address justice-related issues. The ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) Strategic Plan 2026–2030, where the region's energy transition agenda is parked, emphasises technical aspects almost exclusively.

This AEC Strategic Plan prioritises targets to increase energy efficiency and renewable energy share, optimise decarbonisation technologies, and deploy carbon capture, utilisation, and storage, while largely leaving the people-centred dimension unaddressed. Similarly, the AEC goal on inclusivity is framed in broad economic terms rather than in ways that directly address energy transition risks.

The ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Strategic Plan also reveals a similar gap. While mentioning just energy transition and recognising the need for capacity-building for vulnerable groups, it does not specify the justice issues that require attention.

The weaker focus is a departure from earlier ASEAN documents released before the ASEAN Community Vision 2045 and the APAEC 2026-2030. The ASEAN Guide to Just and Inclusive Energy Transition, published in January 2025, openly acknowledges the ongoing socio-economic challenges faced by vulnerable communities and highlights persistent gaps in the participation of local populations and marginalised groups in the design and implementation of energy policies and programmes.

Likewise, the 8th ASEAN Energy Outlook, released in late 2024, flags the need to protect and include rural communities and ethnic minorities in grid expansion and integration efforts under the APG initiative.

Implications of the Gap

This gap in ASEAN's most recent documents mirrors the ambition-implementation gap in the COP30 Just Transition Mechanism. This is particularly concerning because justice-related issues arising from infrastructure development are lived realities for many communities in the region.

In Malaysia, communities in Bakun (Sarawak) and Ulu Geruntum (Perak) are affected by hydropower projects that disrupted their livelihoods and displaced them from their ancestral lands. In Thailand, the Salween water diversion and Kaeng Suea Ten Dam projects have faced decades of indigenous community resistance. In Indonesia, communities in Poco Leok – where a geothermal project is being developed – and on Rempang Island – where an eco-city and renewable energy supply-chain factories are planned – continue to protest over forced land acquisition and insufficient consultation.

These issues are likely to intensify as renewable energy expands. As seen in the ASEAN Renewable Energy Long-Term Roadmap published in October 2025, the region expects renewable energy to grow to 42-47 per cent of installed capacity over the next 20 years, with the APG playing a central role in enabling this growth.

This development will require more land-use conversion to support transmission line expansion and increased hydropower, geothermal, solar, and wind installations. If structural justice issues remain unresolved, contestation will deepen, leading to project delays, uncertain outcomes, reputational risks for project developers and governments, and potentially eroding investor confidence.

In view of regional energy cooperation, such as the APG, the implications can extend beyond the domestic level. Importing countries may hesitate to purchase electricity from projects linked to social conflict or environmental harm. As the APG scales up, these concerns will only matter more.

The Way Forward

Given these challenges, ASEAN can bring its renewable energy ambitions closer to a genuinely just and inclusive transition by focusing on more concrete actions in its planning.

First, countries in the region must strengthen participatory and consultative processes by ensuring meaningful representation of communities affected. This means early, continuous, and transparent engagement, with inclusive participation from project planning through to project monitoring. Environmental and social impact assessments must be made public, accessible, and open to genuine feedback before approval.

Second, countries must mandate Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC), especially for Indigenous and minority groups whose land, culture, and livelihoods are at stake. Instead of relying on one-off consultations, mechanisms to ensure continuous communication, grievance redress, and accountability must be put in place to resolve disputes early and maintain trust.

Third, compensation must go beyond land valuation and relocation to include benefit sharing through revenue-sharing schemes, community development funds, or even equity stakes for local communities.

Fourth, ASEAN should consider establishing common social and environmental safeguards for APG-connected projects to ensure that cross-border electricity trade is both environmentally responsible and socially legitimate.

As ASEAN's energy transition progresses, embedding participation, transparency, fairness, and community protections into project planning, execution and monitoring will align the region with the global momentum toward a truly just transition.

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Third, compensation must go beyond land valuation and relocation to include benefit sharing through revenue-sharing schemes, community development funds, or even equity stakes for local communities.

Fourth, ASEAN should consider establishing common social and environmental safeguards for APG-connected projects to ensure that cross-border electricity trade is both environmentally responsible and socially legitimate.

As ASEAN's energy transition progresses, embedding participation, transparency, fairness, and community protections into project planning, execution and monitoring will align the region with the global momentum toward a truly just transition.

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