

# BEST PRACTISES

## THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY

### RENEWABLE ENERGY COOPERATION IN AFRICA

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## Renewable Energy in Africa – The Current State

1.

Many African countries had been experiencing rapid economic growth before COVID-19. Despite that, energy-related carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) emissions in Africa represented only about 2% of all global emissions (IEA 2019). Africans, meanwhile, have been suffering disproportionately from climate change and heightened risks to their food, health, and economic security. The pandemic has even increased this trend with compound risks. At the same time, Africa struggles to address immediate challenges, such as universal energy access. In 2018, 55% of Africans lacked access to electricity, while 80% of sub-Saharan African countries suffered frequent electricity disruptions and 70% lacked access to clean cooking (IEA 2019). The situation is further complicated by Africa's population growth that more than doubles the global rate, while electricity demand is expected to triple by 2030 (IRENA 2015, IEA 2019). This was, at least, the expectation of key observers before the pandemic. Today, African countries have the youngest and most rapidly growing population in the world. Within this is the dual challenge of providing access to the 595 million people currently lacking, while at the same time reaching the millions born every year in areas with no access to electricity. According to the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA 2015), investments annually averaging USD 70 billion between now and 2030 will be required in order to meet this energy demand. The lack of access and growing demand pose tangible threats to Africa's development and to achievement of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 7, for ensuring 'access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all' by 2030 (United Nations 2015 p. 21).

### The challenges are massive, but so are the opportunities.

African countries have considerable and largely untapped potential in renewable energies (IRENA 2015), with significant solar resources abundant all over the continent, theoretical potential for wind that exceeds demand by orders of magnitude, large hydro sources in Central and East Africa, and rich geothermal resources in East Africa (IRENA 2015, IEA 2019). Although Africa's renewable energy (RE) power potential is substantially larger than the continent's current and projected power consumption, to date, there has been limited use of this vast potential. For instance, although Africa has the richest solar resources on the planet, only 5 gigawatts (GW) of solar photovoltaics have been installed thus far; less than 1% of global capacity. In total, Africa has only 50 GW of installed renewable capacity, mostly in the form of hydropower, the least climate-resilient form of RE. RE deployment – and even more importantly, decentralised RE – thus far has been constrained by limited access to financing, underdeveloped grids and infrastructure, unstable offtake financial arrangements, and an uncertain policy environment.

The above, however, is changing. The huge potential and urgency spurred by climate change are enhancing the investment attractiveness of Africa's RE sector, and large investments are already being made. Total installed solar power capacity, for example, increased more than tenfold from 2009 to 2014 (IRENA 2015). For the first time ever, from 2014 to 2018, the number of people gaining access to electricity in Africa outpaced population growth (IEA

2019). Progress was made with utility-scale projects entering service in countries such as Egypt, Ethiopia, and Morocco. Meanwhile, around 15 million people in Africa are now connected to mini grids (World Bank 2019). Additionally, African countries with a latecomer advantage have the potential to move faster towards 100% RE than most industrialised countries. This is because most energy infrastructure has yet to be built; therefore, the fossil fuel trap can be avoided (Onyeji-Nwogu 2017).

### Development trajectories for people and planet

African countries have the potential to leapfrog to smart, participatory, distributed energy systems of the future without locking themselves into stranded fossil fuel assets and overly centralised energy systems. Thus, African countries can show the way to the future through bold plans and on-the-ground implementation. It is also in African countries' interest to avoid the mistakes of the development models that both the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and emerging economies have pursued, and instead champion development trajectories that will benefit both people and planet in the short and long term.

Many African countries have in fact already begun to fill Africa's role as a global leader for such energy systems of the future. The COVID-19 pandemic might make RE investments more difficult at the moment, but at the same time, it is better understood how RE contributes to resilience, especially in rural areas, and that such investments should be increasingly fostered.

## Energy Initiatives on the African Continent

2.

Numerous programmes and initiatives have been implemented to harness RE's immense potential on the African continent. A report by the Africa-EU Energy Partnership (EUEI PDF 2016) identified 58 major multi-country programmes and initiatives active at the continental or regional level. Amongst them are high-level initiatives such as the Africa Renewable Energy Initiative (AREI), SE4All (Africa Hub), Africa Power Vision, and the Program for Infrastructure Development in Africa (PIDA). The report only included officially launched initiatives, those supported by Pan-African public actors and/or international development partners (donors and implementers), and those with high ambition in terms of anticipated results and confirmed funding. Traditional bilateral and multilateral

international cooperation, conducted by implementers (i.e. technical assistance providers, development banks, consultants, civil society) on behalf of donors, which in and of itself represents a major component of official development assistance (ODA) in the African energy sector, was not included. The ever-growing number of energy initiatives and programmes, together with a lack of coordination amongst them, creates a complex and increasingly confusing situation in the context of African energy.

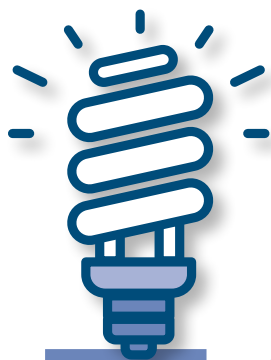
### The need for concerted actions and coordination

The overarching goal amongst the initiatives is to ensure universal access to modern, affordable, efficient, reliable, and environmentally friendly energy for all Africans. Virtually all of the 58 energy initiatives included in the 2016 report focused on promotion of RE and (mostly grid-connected) electricity (EUEI PDF 2016). Less attention, however, is paid to cooking energy, although around 900 million Africans lack access to clean cooking and the use of hazardous traditional biomass remains a major challenge in many African countries. Only about one-third of the existing initiatives focus on clean cooking, underscoring the need and potential for more programmes addressing safe and sustainable cooking energy. Additionally, most initiatives focus on grid-connected renewable electricity, whilst far fewer focus on mini-grids and stand-alone off-grid applications. Existing initiatives thus pay far too little attention to the promotion of distributed, smart, flexible, diverse, and citizen-based energy systems, which can be seen in

**58**   
**initiatives**  
 officially launched, high-level initiatives active at the continental or regional level

contrast with conventional approaches favouring grid-based systems with centralised control. Additionally, investment in RE is heavily concentrated in a few African countries, mostly in North and East Africa, while the least developed countries of Central Africa lag especially far behind (EUEI PDF 2016).

These gaps clearly evidence the lack of coordination and of sharing information and knowledge amongst initiatives. This can lead to unnecessary redundant efforts and ultimately to a lack of impact on the ground. In many cases, this lack of coordination likely results from institutions working in silos, unnecessary competition, inadequate information sharing, low levels of transparency, and disjointed monitoring and evaluation at the regional and continental levels. Concerted action is needed from here forward to enable synergies and guarantee that initiatives actually accommodate African communities' most urgent needs. ➔

  
**70** **billion \$**

Needed investments in the power sector per year until 2030 to meet the electricity demand in Africa.

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### The need for multi-stakeholder engagement and civil society participation

Frequent and empowering civil society engagement is critically important for ensuring RE initiatives on the African continent are fit for purpose and perform for Africa's people. As of now, the energy system transformation in many African countries is occurring mostly through a top-down approach, wherein the government, in cooperation with large energy companies, implements large-scale RE projects, choosing a centralised, grid-based approach to electricity. In fact, governments and private sector actors alone are implementing most of the RE initiatives on the continent, with only minimal consideration of local needs and energy uses (EUEI PDF 2016). Often, actors such as academia, civil society, youth, and women are left out. In the 58 initiatives, regional organisations and civil society organisations were the least-engaged sector, only participating in a third of the initiatives (Fig. 1).

The energy transition cannot take place without the support of all stakeholders, starting with the consumers. Indeed, large, utility-scale RE projects are important towards powering a green, sustainable economy, especially for bigger cities and industries. It is, however, vital to ensure thorough, participatory assessment processes, and if projects are deemed acceptable, to complement such large-scale investments with small-scale, individual or community-owned off-grid projects (Opfer et al. 2019). For participation to be effective, it should never merely be an afterthought or lip service. Instead, the inclusion of all relevant stakeholders must be fundamentally integrated into all decision-making processes from the outset. Such multi-stakeholder engagement

and civil society participation has the potential to ensure buy-in, prevent external interests from driving RE development, and guarantee that development is designed with a thorough understanding of the local context, social norms, values, and customs. In close cooperation with governments and the private sector, civil society, youth, women, and academia must be leading the work, both as idea generators and as watchdogs.

### The need for good governance

Past experiences demonstrate that RE initiatives, unless carefully designed and implemented, may increase inequality, consolidate corporate power, turn into means for green-washing, and ultimately harm both the African people and the ecosystem. The AREI presents an especially good example for how an initiative that was hailed at its inception at COP21 in Paris as one of the most inspiring and ground-breaking initiatives, can soon turn into a disappointment due to undue governance and a lack of effective leadership (Adow 2020). General key principles of good governance therefore need to be upheld to ensure that RE initiatives serve the people and the planet. These key principles include:

- 1) Leadership:** The initiative's leadership should provide a clear vision and ethical, strategic guidance that inspires and encourages. Meanwhile, it should simultaneously enforce necessary rules and regulations, including non-discrimination and equity.
- 2) Transparency:** Comprehensive, reliable, up-to-date, and appropriate information must be made publicly available via regular reports, updates, and other information channels, such as websites. All official institutional actors (e.g. host and supporter governments) and other stakeholders involved, particularly public and/or private financial institutions, are responsible for sharing and updating information. Additionally, the actors should agree upon and transparently disclose a clear definition of responsibilities and terms of reference of all actors within the initiative.
- 3) Participation:** Diverse and meaningful public input in policy-making is necessary to ensure that decision-makers consider different issues, perspectives, and options in their policies' formulation, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. The required elements include providing a formal space for participation in relevant forums, applying appropriate and democratically sufficient mechanisms to invite representative participation, ensuring inclusive and open processes, and taking the accumulated input properly into account.

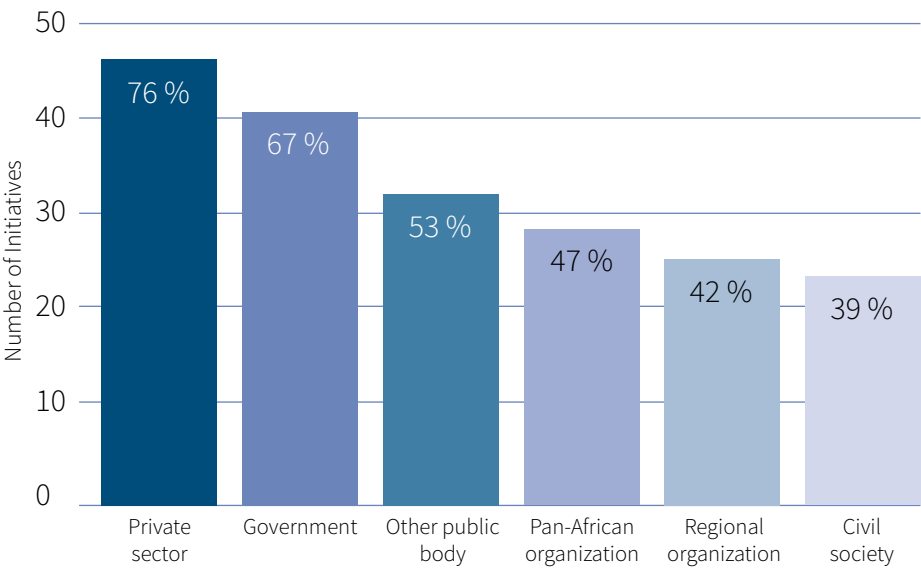


Fig. 1: African partners involved in a total of 58 initiatives and programmes (EUEI PDF 2016).

participation in relevant forums, applying appropriate and democratically sufficient mechanisms to invite representative participation, ensuring inclusive and open processes, and taking the accumulated input properly into account.

**4) Accountability:** All the RE initiative's institutional stakeholders – including governmental institutions, the private sector, and civil society organisations – should be held accountable. Systematic

monitoring of RE initiatives and related processes must be conducted to allow for a clear and justified basis for decisions and investments. Reliable legal systems are necessary for upholding public and investor interests.

**5) Empowerment and capacity:** Capacity building and empowerment, both on the local and national levels, are needed to enable government bodies to practice good governance, and for civil society to

engage effectively in decision-making. This includes enabling the availability of suitable human and financial resources.

**6) Human rights, ethics:** Social and environmental safeguards should be placed at the RE initiative's core, and all undertaken activities should be implemented in line with a rights-based approach, the precautionary principle, and assurance that negative side-effects are avoided – the do-no-harm principle.

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## The Role of Civil Society for Africa's Energy System Transformation

3. Civil society is a complex realm of heterogeneous, non-for-profit activity operating apart from the state and the business sector. It includes social movements, NGOs, and unions. All are pressing for rights through protest and holding especially governments and businesses accountable for their actions. They serve as thought leaders for innovation and engaging in or initiating cooperation with actors such as governments and businesses (Schwarz and Bals 2019). Civil society continues to be an indispensable actor in Africa's energy system transformation. Environmental civil society has a long history of challenging the views of energy policy and business elites, and of providing innovative ideas. This is seen in the long-running debates on 'soft' and 'hard' energy paths (Lovins 1977). Unfortunately, numerous uncertainties and misunderstandings have riddled the relationship between the state and civil society in Africa, especially at a time when multiparty democracy had been gaining

ground there. The ruling elite typically have seen any divergent view from civil society either as a 'long hand of the opposition' or 'manipulation from abroad.' Arguably, over time and as civil society gained more experience and began articulating challenges from an African perspective, the characteristic hostility of this relationship started to decline. Moreover, a new generation of civil society actors emerged, basing their advocacy on empirical evidence and with the aim of objectively contributing to the common good.

Africa's energy sector generates only 2% of global carbon emissions, yet the African people are suffering disproportionately from the climate crisis that is not of their own making. While limiting global temperature increase to 1.5°C is critically important for Africans, justifying the importance of transforming Africa's energy system requires more than simply contesting climate mitigation objectives. A robust and just energy system transformation entails proactive

engagement of civil society organisations (CSOs), which will inevitably influence social change in the direction of a globally and regionally just transition at every level of society, starting with the consumer. Civil society thus plays essential and diverse roles in energy system transformation on the African continent.

**Civil society as advocate**  
Grassroots innovation, citizen science, and initiatives aimed at green consumption thus far have been niche-oriented civil society activities. Consumer boycotts, protest and lobbying, and green standards are all instruments whereby CSOs seek to unsettle incumbent provision regimes. Awareness raising and alternative visions help constitute landscape pressures for change (Smith 2010). Civil society has the unique opportunity to advocate for Africa's energy system transformation at the local, national, continental, and global levels (Table 1).



Engagement Level	Advocacy Opportunities
Local	<p>Local-level African CSOs could advocate project implementation in the following areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Social and environmental impacts or, more generally, the social embeddedness and rights-based implementation of RE projects.</li><li>• Raising awareness amongst local communities regarding RE projects’ potential and impacts.</li><li>• Raising awareness amongst project implementers regarding local communities’ livelihood situations and local benefits’ relevance.</li></ul> <p>Given that projects are socially and environmentally sound, this approach could ensure local communities’ acceptance of them.</p>
National	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Raising awareness amongst national governments about RE initiatives and their potential.</li><li>• Lobbying for sound RE laws, regulations, and enabling environments, and, by doing so, ensuring long-term support for RE.</li></ul>
Continental	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Raising the profile of RE initiatives at all continental events, such as AMCEN, AU Summits, and CCDA, to ensure special attention is paid to the initiatives in the deliberations.</li><li>• Organising special campaigns/initiatives to have the critical mass of stakeholders engaged in RE initiatives’ decision making at all levels.</li><li>• Engaging the African Parliamentarians so that they scrutinise all RE initiative-related investments in their countries in order to ensure transparency and accountability, and that the initiatives accommodate the actual needs of people on the ground.</li><li>• Ensuring the process remains an African-led initiative by allying with people’s representatives at all levels to avoid hijacking by foreign interests.</li></ul>
Global	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Collaborating with Northern CSOs, especially those from the funding countries, to ensure transparency and accountability in the projects in which the funds are used.</li><li>• Conducting joint campaigns and studies on RE initiatives so as carry out informed advocacy.</li><li>• Conducting joint activities with Northern CSOs to ensure that climate or RE partnership arrangements are effective and fair.</li></ul> <p>Within the initiatives, African CSOs could:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Provide a type of feedback loop and input for social and environmental safeguards.</li><li>• Owing to their independence, monitor progress with regard to programmes and projects concerning the need to implement a diversity of projects, taking into account scale, RE type, geographical balance, and local communities’ specific needs. Additionally, non-African CSOs, especially from donor countries, should monitor the initiative, such as with regard to financial commitments, technological cooperation, and bidirectional capacity building.</li></ul>

Table 1: Advocacy opportunities for civil society at different engagement levels

Civil society as a watchdog

Africa has experienced bad governance characterised by, for instance, corruption, maladministration, nepotism, and poor accountability. This has been identified as a key reason for unsuccessful and inadequate provision of public services, and in this way, it has hampered socioeconomic development. The overabundance of sustainable energy initiatives on the African continent will not bring about the much-needed transformation unless good governance is demanded and monitored. It is insufficient to guarantee access to sustainable RE yet simultaneously maintain a system based on bad governance. This will ultimately harm both the African people and the ecosystem. Civil society, as independent forces for the common good, is likely to be free from commercial or power interests and therefore capable of representing the African people and their interests. From here forward, civil society will inevitably fulfil a watchdog role, uncovering unwarranted procedures and misuse of power while demanding good governance based on the above-mentioned six key principles.

Civil society as an idea generator

Another key role for civil society is as the generator of ideas. It is striking how ‘softer,’ often decentralised and conservation-oriented, energy initiatives that originated in the environmentalism arena are now beginning to gain mainstream interest and respectability, while still competing with large-scale, ‘hard’ technology alternatives, such as nuclear power, carbon capture and storage, large dams and barrages, offshore wind, and other ‘titan technologies’ (Byrne et al. 2009). Civil society is one of the key stakeholders, advocating for more people-centred and environmentally friendly RE initiatives that provide energy access to enable productive use. Such use includes small-scale agriculture; micro-, small-, and medium-

sized businesses; and community services, which form the backbone of African livelihoods and economies. Civil society can raise new ideas and work with decision makers at the policy and business level to implement them.

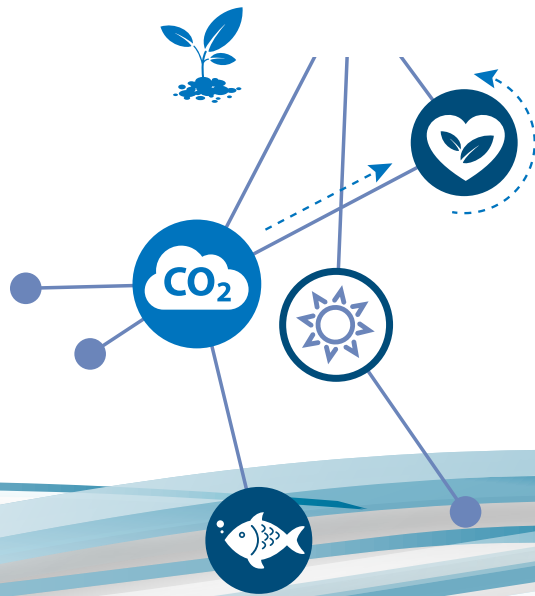
The AREI’s inception and conceptualisation is a recent example of civil society fulfilling the role of idea generator. The AREI was created as an Africa-owned, Africa-led initiative, with a people-centred approach for expanding RE use on the continent. It was the result of concerted effort by civil society and the African Group of negotiators and in 2015 during the COP 21 in Paris, was endorsed by the African Union as one of the continent’s flagship initiatives. Arguably, and unlike many other initiatives, the AREI bore Africans’ aspirations at all levels of society. Owing to the inclusive nature of its conceptualisation, it can be viewed as a ‘people’s initiative.’ Unfortunately the initiative has been captured over time by a few political elites, who run the initiatives against fundamental governance principles and even exclude civil society from further engagement. This clearly shows the need for civil society as a generator of ideas, yet also illustrates the importance of an independent and constructive-critical role of civil society in the implementation phase – an early warning system active whenever social or ecological, or other common good, interests are neglected.

Civil society as an initiator of cooperation and alliances

The enormous challenges Africa is facing to date are best addressed jointly. Civil society, having realised the power of joint action and cooperation, often plays the important role of initiating cooperation and alliances. Alliances show that challenges such as universal energy access and climate protection are major societal concerns and are supported by a broad societal coalition. Those wide-ran-

ging alliances also represent a counterbalance to the interests of many political and economic stakeholders and can thereby help in overcoming blockades present within politics. Alliances can work at a regional, national, continental or global level. The Climate Action Network (CAN), for example, is a worldwide network of 1,300+ CSOs in 130+ countries. CAN aims to restrict climate change to ecologically sustainable levels through coordinating the development of a joint strategy on international, regional, and national climate issues. In the African context, the Africa Coalition for Sustainable Energy & Access (ACSEA) is an important example. ACSEA is an alliance of CSOs, business and private sector operators, and academic and research institutions that jointly promote RE and energy transformation and access in Africa.

While initiating CSO alliances, civil society can also inspire cross-sector cooperation between unlikely partners. As forces for the common good, it can bring together different actors, such as political decision-makers, the private sector, researchers, and civil society. Such multi-stakeholder partnerships can coordinate the expectations of these actors and thereby enable changes that individual actors could not achieve. Examples of such changes include improved national and regional framework conditions, transformative business models for more innovation, and new technologies and instruments.



## Next Steps – Building an Energy Coordination Platform

10 Amongst the overwhelming number of RE initiatives in Africa, many lack coordination, often exclude important stakeholders, and are poorly governed. This demonstrates the importance of an improved coordination framework with coherent planning and steering at the continental, regional, national, and local levels so as to catalyse Africa's energy system transformation. In 2016, the African Union Commission (AUC) proposed establishing a platform for energy coordination (IRENA 2016), but this has yet to be realised.

Given the essential and diverse roles civil society plays in Africa's energy system transformation, it will inevitably lead the work and ensure the conception, establishment, implementation, and monitoring of such a coordination platform. Civil society is the actor that can most effectively raise awareness on the importance of such a platform, to enable synergies and guarantee that initiatives actually address African communities' most urgent needs. Civil society must therefore be active in the platform's inception and conception. From a civil society perspective, such a platform should:

### 1. Step

Allow information sharing: Information is not only vital for safeguarding and promoting the work and importance of the platform that coordinates all energy initiatives on the continent, it also helps the different initiatives avoid redundant efforts, build on other initiatives' strengths, and learn from their different experiences. Decisions on relevant information to share, and with whom and when, can profoundly impact the stakeholders. Information sharing can also ensure that the initiatives' targeted populations or

beneficiaries receive the appropriate services at the appropriate time, to protect the targets' rights.

### 2. Step

Create transparency through regular communication amongst stakeholders: Experience has shown that some well-intentioned initiatives in Africa have not succeeded because of a lack of, or insufficient, transparency that leads to stakeholder mistrust and suspicion against RE itself or the initiatives behind the projects. Such a platform's role is therefore to create or repair and maintain trust amongst stakeholders through proactive and constant communication. Through such good communication, there can be greater understanding of the objectives and overall goals of the different initiatives. This thereby enables the different stakeholders to review and adapt how they support the various initiatives to deliver these objectives and overall goals.

### 3. Step

Guarantee the participation of all relevant stakeholders, including the private sector, civil society, and academia, and ensure priorities and action plans are set cooperatively: The AUC has a political mandate from the African Union to steer strategic continent-wide coordination. It is important, however, that the coordination platform is established and implemented jointly with other key African institutions and actors in a multi-stakeholder partnership approach. As an example, Sustainable Energy for All (SE4ALL) has valuable potential for supporting coordination at different levels because it has the most comprehensive mandate

and strong alignment with SDG7 (EUEI PDF 2016). Other key actors include the African Development Bank (AfDB), specialised institutions such as the African Energy Commission (AFREC), UN agencies active in energy in Africa (e.g. UNEP and UNDP), as well as local, regional, and continental CSOs; academic institutions; and the private sector.

Multi-stakeholder participation and community focus must be situated at the centre of the new coordination platform. This will advance new forms of collaboration and position energy democracy at the centre of each energy initiative and partnership. Additionally, all relevant stakeholders' meaningful participation must be guaranteed to ensure buy-in, prevent external interests from driving RE development, and secure initiatives that are designed with a thorough understanding of the local context, social norms, values, and customs. Action must be taken in accordance with the principle that 'anything that is done for us, without us, is against us.' No matter how well-intended an initiative may be, if its priorities and action plans are not developed with the beneficiaries, it may not be a long-lasting solution to the problems it intends to address. This is a key feature of rights-based approaches: the government is tasked with identifying the people at risk of having their rights deprived, and thus gives them the opportunity to participate in the plans to overcome those risks.

### 4. Step

Ensure focus on transformative, programmatic, structural interventions: Rather than focusing on individual projects, the platform for energy cooperation should set visions and direction for the entire continent. It should do so by wor-

king closely with African governments and with stakeholders, including civil society, to enable the best possible policies and to enable environments that make possible a broad, bottom-up surge of socially and environmentally friendly RE throughout Africa. Civil society, in its watchdog role, should ensure that the energy coordination platform focuses on transformative, programmatic, structural interventions emphasising policy, long-term capacity building, and regulatory frameworks, rather than simply coordinating implementation of individual projects.



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