

Conflicts over Renewable Investments on the Margins of the State: The Case of Kenya's Lake Turkana Wind Power Project

Ilse Maria Renkens

Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS) and Roskilde University

Abstract

From environmental destruction to displacement and conflict – the negative externalities associated with extraction of non-renewable natural resources are well established. Renewable energy projects do not immediately bring such negative externalities to mind, but they tend instead to be seen as a global common good. To mitigate climate change, renewables are increasingly implemented at scale. So too in Africa, they are being pursued to address not only energy sustainability, but energy equity and security concerns – for example as part of the Africa Clean Energy Corridor or the Africa Renewable Energy Initiative.

However, like non-renewable extractive projects, renewables may generate conflict with environmental and social impacts, including displacement, lack of due process, and increased insecurity. They frequently target natural resources at the margins of the state, impacting the livelihoods of marginalized populations disproportionately. When foreign investors begin operating in these spaces, they are often ill-prepared for what is required to bring a project to completion while also making sure that the rights of impacted populations – which may be poorly protected by the state – are respected in the investment process.

In the context of Africa, what conflicts arise and how are rights affected when a renewable investment requires the lands and resources of marginalized people who depend on them? To explore this question, I apply a political ecology perspective. Political ecology research, which addresses 'the condition and change of social/environmental systems' (Robbins, 2012: 20), considers power relations and structural inequalities as essential in shaping how land and natural resources are used and managed (Hornbach, et al., 2012; Knuth et al., 2022). The paper takes its point of departure in the framework developed by Sovacool (2021), which envisions a political ecology of climate mitigation as consisting of processes of enclosure, exclusion, encroachment, and entrenchment. Since Sovacool's framework is founded in multiple disciplines, additional insights and concepts from the energy and environmental justice literatures are used to deepen the analysis.

The paper applies Sovacool's framework to a single case study, the 365-turbine on-shore wind project Lake Turkana Wind Power (LTWP). Located in historically marginalized Marsabit County, Kenya, home to numerous pastoralist groups, the 310 MW project reached full commercial operation in 2019 after a lengthy development phase. In 2007, a 33-year land lease, twice renewable, was agreed between LTWP Ltd. and the Marsabit County Council for an area of 607km². However, the setting apart of this land was ruled unlawful in a 2021 court decision (Kenya Law, 2021). Empirical material on this recognized climate mitigation project consists of academic and grey literature review, as well as project documentation, including Environmental and Social Impact Assessments (ESIAs), investor policies, and court decisions. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews were conducted with stakeholders in the project: project investors, locally affected people, Kenyan civil society organizations, and academics and experienced consultants who have studied the case.

Based on empirical analysis, I argue that to manage conflict it is important for proponents of renewable investments, with their ability to claim national or global benefits, not to lose sight of potential negative impacts at the local level. Addressing Sovacool's (2021) concepts of enclosure, exclusion and entrenchment, brings such impacts to the fore in the case of LTWP. *Enclosure*, or the privatization of public assets, can be observed in pastoralists losing migration routes for their cattle when communally owned lands were leased to LTWP. *Exclusion*, or lack of due process and recognition, is evidenced from the 2021 court ruling that the highly contested land lease was illegal, as well as from allegations of subpar consultations and a failure to recognize affected people as indigenous. Furthermore, while the project committed to international standards and CSR efforts, this did not prevent persistent accusations that the project amplified

pre-existing insecurity and ethnic tensions, and worsened inequalities by providing benefits at the national and global levels in the form of renewable energy, while leaving local populations worse off (*entrenchment*). In unfolding the above processes, special consideration is given to power relations between key actors in natural resource investments (Buur et al., 2020) – ruling elites, investors, and local populations.

The case of LTWP shows that there is cause for concern about how the green transition will materialize on the African continent. Consideration of what is needed to manage potential conflict and avoid rights violations from renewables, is urgently needed, especially when developing projects at the margins of the state.

References

Buur, L., R. Hundsbaek-Pedersen, M. Nystrand, J. J. Macuane, T. Jacob (2020) 'The Politics of Natural Resource Investments and Rights in Africa: A Theoretical Approach', *The Extractive Industries and Society* 7(3): 918–930.

Hornborg, A., B. Clark, K. Hermele (2012) 'Introduction: Ecology and Power', in A. Hornborg, B. Clark, K. Hermele (eds) *Ecology and Power: Struggles over Land and Material Resources in the Past, Present and Future*, pp. 1–10. Florence: Routledge.

Kenya Law (2021) 'Republic of Kenya in the Environment and Land Court at Meru: Meru ELC Case No. 163 of 2014: Judgement', 19 October 2021.

Knuth, S., I. Behrsin, A. Levenda, J. McCarthy (2022) 'New Political Ecologies of Renewable Energy', *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* 5(3): 997–1013.

Robbins, P. (2012) *Political Ecology: A Critical Introduction*, 2nd Ed. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons.

Sovacool, B. K. (2021) 'Who Are the Victims of Low-Carbon Transitions? Towards a Political Ecology of Climate Change Mitigation', *Energy Research & Social Science* 73: 101916.