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Environment

African leaders call for equity over minerals used for clean energy

'Crucial' UN resolution attempts to avoid repeat of injustices produced by Africa's fossil fuel sector

A cobalt mine in Likasi, Democratic Republic of Congo. The country produces two-thirds of the world's cobalt. Photograph: Schalk van Zuydam/AP

Caroline Kimeu *in Nairobi*

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In an attempt to avoid the "injustices and extractivism" of fossil fuel operations, African leaders are calling for better controls on the dash for the minerals and metals needed for a clean energy transition.

A resolution for structural change that will promote equitable benefit-sharing from extraction, supported by a group of mainly African countries including Senegal, Burkina Faso, Cameroon and Chad, was presented at the UN environmental assembly in Nairobi on Wednesday and called for the sustainable use of transitional minerals.

"This resolution is crucial for African countries, the environment and the future of our population," said Jean Marie Bope, a delegate from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which supported the resolution.

Demand for transitional minerals and metals, which are used to build renewable energy technologies such as solar plants, windfarms and electric vehicles, has surged over the past decade as the world transitions refined elsewhere, often in China, which does the bulk of global minerals processing and production.

A growing push from mineral-producing African countries seeking to capitalise on economic growth and job creation from the green minerals race has meant several countries imposing restrictions on raw mineral exports in recent years, to support domestic processing. Agreements that promote technology transfers, and raise local countries' processing capacities and workforce skills, are necessary for an equitable transition, leaders said at the assembly.

"Our experience of exporting them raw has shown us that there is no benefit for the continent in that," said Bope, who participated in drafting the resolution. "Africa's minerals are enough to power the clean energy transition, but we don't want to do things how we have done them in the past."

Environmental campaigners echoed calls for benefit sharing. While expressing support for the global shift towards low-carbon technologies, they said that the clean energy transition risks replicating existing inequalities across the African fossil fuel sector. The region exports roughly 75% of its crude oil, which is refined elsewhere and re-imported as petroleum products, according to the African Union. It exports 45% of its natural gas, which contributes only minimally to regional energy needs, even as 600 million Africans remain without access to electricity.

"We need to make sure that industrialisation happens here and that we're not just serving another continent's industrialisation plan," said Seble Samuel, head of Africa campaigns and advocacy at the fossil fuel non-proliferation treaty initiative. "We cannot afford to replicate the same injustices and extractivism that's happened with the fossil fuel economy."

Inger Andersen, UNEP's executive director, called on governments and businesses to use responsibly sourced minerals in their clean energy transition, and on mineral-rich countries to enter into contractual arrangements that safeguard against "colonial models" of resource and labour exploitation.

Campaigners also raised environmental and rights concerns around the

Solar power

World's largest solar manufacturer to cut one-third of workforce

China's Longi looks to slash costs as renewable energy sector faces tough headwinds from inflation

A worker at Longi, which makes wafer components for solar panels, checks a module at its plant in Xian, Shaanxi, central China. Photograph: Muyu Xu/Reuters

Alex Lawson

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The world's largest solar manufacturer has slashed nearly a third of its workforce after a cost-cutting drive that included telling staff to only print in black and white fell short and as a chill ripples through the renewable energy sector.

China's Longi is to cut as much as 30% of its workforce, in an acceleration of cost reductions that began late last year, Bloomberg reported.

It is unclear exactly how many jobs will be lost at the company, which employed 80,000 at its peak last year, as an internal function allowing employees to see the total number of staff has reportedly been disabled.

The renewables industry is facing significant headwinds in the fallout from Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in early 2022. Moscow's reduction in gas supplies into continental Europe left governments scrambling to beef up domestic power generation, accelerating a shift towards renewables.

However, the resulting higher energy bills pushed up inflation rates, adding costs to renewables supply chains already under pressure from the surge in demand. Meanwhile, oil and gas companies have retrenched from green projects in favour of traditional high-margin fossil fuel projects.

As a result, renewables companies have been pausing projects and cutting jobs in an attempt to rebalance their portfolios. The solar industry has a history of boom-and-bust cycles, dictated typically by government policies.

China is the centre of the world's solar supply manufacturing industries and a proliferation of new factories dedicated to the technology has created fierce competition.

Longi manufacturers wafers - a component used in solar panels. The company, based in Xi'an in central China, has been forced to suspend investment plans while also cutting prices.

Before the job cuts, the company previously tried to reduce costs through a series of smaller measures. These included cancelling free afternoon tea, cutting business trip budgets and informing staff that they must only print in black and white unless they received permission, Bloomberg reported. Longi's Shanghai office has reportedly stopped offering free coffee.

The solar company's net income fell sharply last year, down by 44% to 2.52bn yuan (£275m) in the third quarter of 2023. Its shares have fallen about 70% from their 2021 peak.

Longi has been contacted for comment.