



SPOTLIGHT SERIES

LINKING CLIMATE,
ENERGY, AND
DEMOCRACY BUILDING
AGENDAS IN AFRICA.

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SPOTLIGHT SERIES: CLIMATE AND ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE PROGRAMME (CEGP)

Welcome to the Spotlight Series of Democracy Works Foundation's Climate and Environmental Governance Programme (CEGP). This series casts a light on the critical work we undertake to strengthen climate and energy democracy across Africa. As the continent navigates increasingly complex climate risks, energy transitions, and governance challenges, our efforts are grounded in a commitment to inclusive, accountable, and participatory governance that centres local voices and prioritises long-term resilience.

Through this series, we highlight key interventions, partnerships, and emerging lessons from our work. From building the climate literacy of civil society organisations and local governments to facilitating community-informed policy engagement and fostering democratic accountability in renewable energy investments. Each instalment connects our programme activities to broader regional and global conversations thereby, drawing from and contributing to, cutting-edge thought leadership on just transitions, adaptation finance, environmental justice, and democratic renewal. The Spotlight Series aims to not only document impact but also offer a space for critical reflection, knowledge exchange, and collective strategy toward sustainable and democratic climate futures.

Climate, energy and environmental democracy is fundamentally about reclaiming political power over energy systems, climate finance, and environmental governance, from purely elite interests, and returning it to the communities most impacted by climate change. Over the past decade, the concept of energy democracy has gained significant momentum across academic, activist, and policy circles. While initially surfacing in the Global North, where it emerged as a critique of technocratic and market-driven climate responses[1], African and Global South activist and thought leaders are redefining it's meaning to meet local realities, development priorities, and democratic aspirations.[2] This spotlight is meant to revive conversations around what energy democracy means within an African context. As a starting point, we explore the concept of energy democracy as inextricably linked to climate democracy – viewing the climate moment as an opportunity to build more democratic systems of governance and achieve broader social development agendas.[3]

[1] Szulecki and Overland (2020) Energy democracy as a process, an outcome and a goal: A conceptual review. Energy Research and Social Science

[2] Osei Opoku and Acheampong (2023) Energy justice and economic growth: Does democracy matter? Joournal of Policy Modelling

[3] Heinrich Böll Stiftung (n.d) Climate Democracy. <https://us.boell.org/en/climate-democracy>

Linking energy, climate, and democracy building agendas

Despite consistent public support for democratic systems, democracy in Africa is under strain. The 2024 Afrobarometer flagship report finds that 66% of Africans still prefer democracy, but satisfaction with democratic outcomes is in decline.[4] Much of this dissatisfaction stems from a failure to deliver tangible improvements in citizens' lives, particularly in economic performance, public service delivery, and accountability. This disillusionment presents a dual crisis and opportunity for energy and climate governance. Without clear socio-economic benefits and participatory planning, Just Energy Transitions (JETs) risk becoming top-down and extractive like is often seen in current mining sector community engagement.[5] While climate and energy governance, traditionally dominated by technocrats and international actors, often sidelines the very communities most affected by environmental degradation and energy poverty, this trend in fact reflects broader democratic deficits, where decisions are made for people rather than with them, and where systems intended to support participation often end up creating more bureaucracy and barriers.

The Just Energy Transition (JET) offers a unique opportunity to correct this imbalance. In South Africa, for example, civil society organisations have begun to mobilise around demands for more transparent and participatory climate governance. Initiatives like the Climate Justice Charter Movement and local platforms such as the Vukani Environmental Movement[6] in Mpumalanga have linked the fight for clean energy access with broader struggles for public accountability, air quality, and economic dignity - especially in coal-affected communities. In South Africa and Senegal, both engaged in high-profile JET investment programmes, there is an urgent need to avoid centralised, elite-driven transition models and instead build governance systems that embed local knowledge, support bottom-up participation, and deliver measurable improvements in adaptation, service access, and socio-economic wellbeing.

[4] Afrobarometer (2024) African insights 2024: Democracy at risk – the people's perspective

[5] Thombs (2019). When democracy meets energy transitions: A typology of social power and the energy system scale. Energy Research and Social Science

[6] <https://www.endaenergie.org/>

While the JET focuses mainly on transitioning a centralised grid to renewable energy, decentralised energy solutions are also being positioned as a pathway to energy democracy, resulting in increased community ownership over their energy futures. For example, a panel discussion hosted by Enlit Africa on solar energy highlighted how decentralised solar solutions can support energy democracy by giving communities direct access to clean energy, reducing dependency, and promoting local ownership. Speakers emphasised that solar is not just a technology fix, but a tool to drive economic inclusion, create jobs, and improve daily life – especially in irregularly planned areas or those that are hard to reach with grid infrastructure. In Senegal, the deployment of renewable energy has been framed within a broader democratic agenda.

Local CSOs like Enda Energie^[7] have worked to ensure that energy reforms, particularly solar expansions, are shaped by inclusive consultation processes and reflect the needs of rural communities. These groups advocate for participatory planning mechanisms and have helped create community energy committees that directly input into municipal decisions.

This not only deepens local democratic participation but also helps to institutionalise climate resilience within existing governance structures.

Democracy Works Foundation's Climate for Growth – Fostering Inclusive Growth Through Climate Change Champions project demonstrates how democratic governance and climate action can be mutually reinforcing. Under this programme area, DWF has promoted participatory processes in the renewable energy economy by strengthening the ability of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) to influence municipal planning and development. It prioritises community-driven development by ensuring that climate adaptation and mitigation goals are shaped by local voices, not imposed from above. The programme adopts an intersectional approach, mainstreaming climate action across diverse social sectors and enabling CSOs from various domains, to articulate how climate change affects their work and communities. Under the programme, we also work with the public and private sector to effectively mainstream community-based climate considerations into broader governance, policy, and investment frameworks.

[7] <https://www.endaenergie.org/>

A key innovation in this work, has been leveraging the mandatory Socio-Economic Development (SED) spend of Independent Power Producers (IPPs) to fund community-identified priorities. This approach embeds democratic accountability into energy transition investments and ensures that renewable energy projects support both climate goals and socio-economic equity. By building the capacity of local government staff, convening an information steering committee, and promoting participatory action research, the project helps institutionalise inclusive governance frameworks and positions climate and energy democracy as central to South Africa's just transition.

What these examples demonstrate is that climate and energy democracy is not an abstract principle, but a practical approach to development that strengthens democratic culture, improves governance outcomes, and centres community knowledge and agency.





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ACHIEVING CLIMATE, ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENTAL DEMOCRACY IN OUR LIFETIME

With the support of the African Climate Foundation and Ford Foundation, Democracy Works Foundation launched the Climate and Environmental Governance Programme (CEGP) reinforcing and consolidating our climate governance work into a distinct programme area. Over the last six months we have worked to define, safeguard, and celebrate African models of climate and energy democracy. The programme anchors our belief that democratic processes must shape climate transitions.

Key activities over the last six months include:

- Developing Principles of Climate and Energy Democracy through consultations with policymakers, community leaders, researchers, and CSOs across Africa. This includes our [Africa @ the G20 podcast](#) series, which explores Africa's permanent membership at the G20 and what this means for democracy development (including climate and energy democracy) on the continent.
- We co-hosted the 2025 [Climate Solutions Forum](#), where we facilitated a session on "Governing Sustainability: Climate and Energy Democracy for a Just Energy Transition." The session brought together experts to explore solutions in fostering democratic climate governance in South Africa, Brazil, and Indonesia.
- Conducting Research to assess the state of climate and energy democracy in South Africa and Indonesia, identifying institutional gaps and community priorities.
- Exploring opportunities to expand our FIGCCC (Climate for Growth) work through convening and capacity-building across IPP catchment areas. This work aims to strengthen community-based organisations' ability to assess the impact of climate change on their work and participate meaningfully in local government decision-making.

At Democracy Works Foundation (DWF), we recognise that climate and energy democracy in Africa is embedded in the continent's complex socio-political context and ongoing debates around democracy, governance, and public service delivery. Drawing on the growing collaboration among South-South and South-North actors committed to climate action (including advocacy networks) we recognise the importance of climate and energy democracy. This means ensuring that energy and climate transitions are governed in ways that are equitable, inclusive, and transparent at all levels of decision-making. The Climate and Environmental Governance Programme Strategy, defines four key principles of climate, energy and environmental democracy – using these to guide our work across the continent and beyond.

Principles of Climate and Energy Democracy

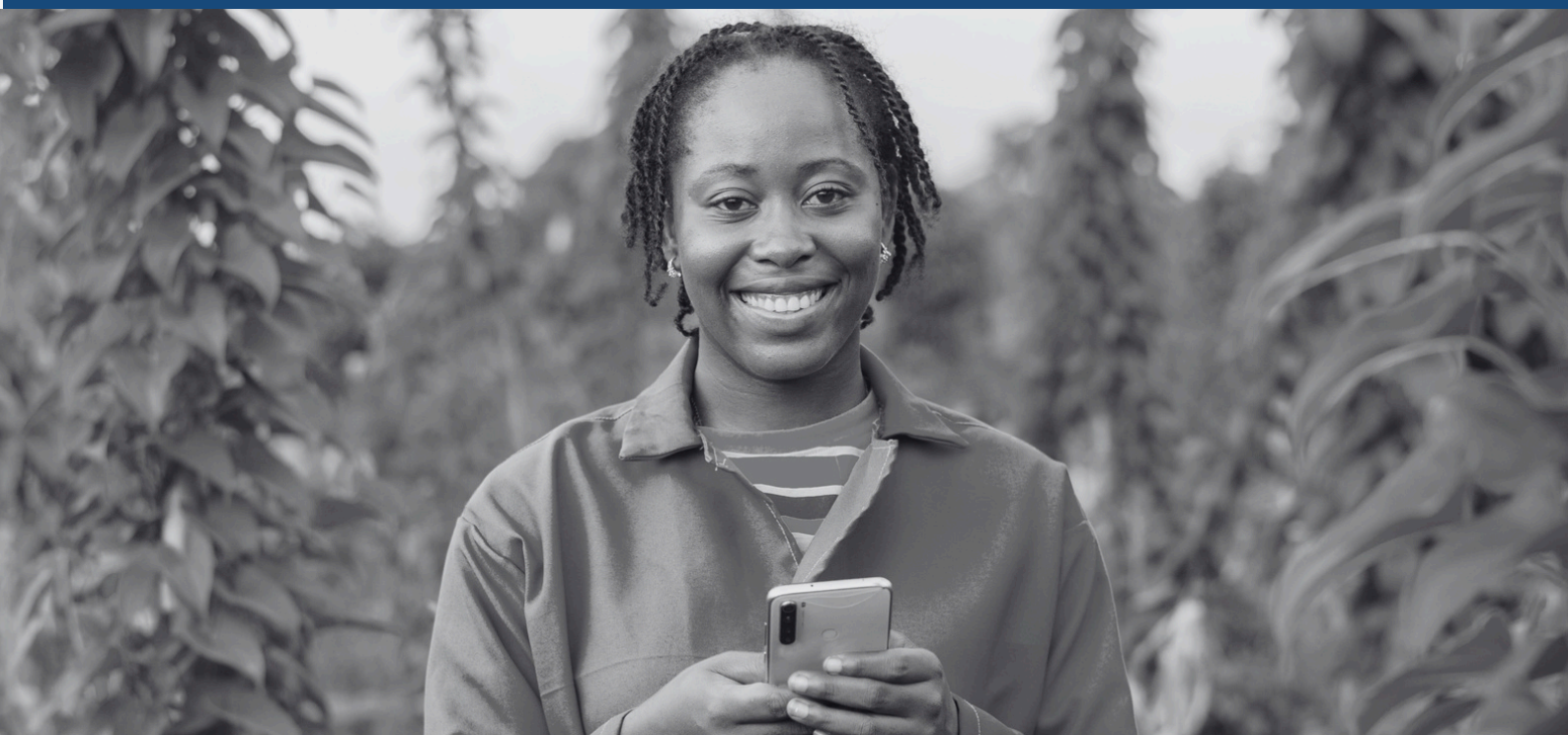
These principles inform our project design, strategic partnership formation, and advocacy agendas, and include:

1

INTEGRATING ADAPTATION INTO THE JUST ENERGY TRANSITION (JET)

Every mitigation investment (whether public or private) must resource, or unlock resources for, local adaptation and resilience.

The energy transition cannot succeed without simultaneously building resilience to climate shocks - especially for vulnerable and underserved communities. While investments in renewable energy, green hydrogen, and electric vehicles are critical to achieve mitigation goals, they often overlook local adaptation needs such as food security, water access, and disaster preparedness. This principle demands a twin-track approach: every Pula, Rand or Euro spent on mitigation must either directly fund or mobilise additional resources for community-level adaptation.



STRENGTHEN LOCAL GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES

Local governance is at the frontline of climate impacts and natural resource management, and it should, therefore, be supported as a leader in mitigation and adaptation efforts.

Local governments are increasingly tasked with setting and delivering on climate change mandates. However, governance decentralisation in many African countries has not been coupled with meaningful capacity development and resourcing. For climate policy to be effective, it must be anchored in the statutory planning systems that govern land use, service delivery, budgeting, and infrastructure decisions, especially at local level. This not only creates more sustainable climate and environmental interventions but provides an opportunity to strengthen broader local governance infrastructure through climate investment. As responsibilities for service delivery, land use management, and infrastructure planning shift closer to the people, municipalities are emerging as frontline institutions in both climate mitigation and adaptation. This growing mandate is reinforced by their participation in global and regional environmental network governance platforms, such as C40 Cities, ICLEI, and the Covenant of Mayors for Sub-Saharan Africa — which provide technical support, policy guidance, and a forum for peer learning.



INTERSECTIONALITY AS EFFICIENCY

Tackling gender, youth, class, and spatial inequities together with climate change yields faster systemic change and higher social and economic returns on development investments.

Climate change is not a neutral force, but rather magnifies existing inequalities. Climate change both reflects and intensifies existing social inequalities, particularly in contexts where democratic and human rights frameworks are already fragile or unevenly applied. Women, youth, informal workers, rural communities, and people living with disabilities often face the harshest impacts yet have the least voice in decision-making. At the same time, they possess critical knowledge, networks, and capabilities that are essential for building inclusive and resilient systems. For example, the shift to renewable energy can widen energy inequality if it excludes poor communities or displaces workers in fossil fuel industries without adequate social protection or retraining. In coal-dependent areas like Mpumalanga, South Africa, workers and communities face uncertain futures as the country moves toward a low-carbon economy. In Southern Africa, shifting rainfall patterns have led to lower yields, threatening livelihoods and forcing migration, particularly in small-scale farming communities. Therefore, intersectionality is not just a value; it is a multiplier of programme impact. This principle rejects siloed approaches and instead adopts intersectional environmentalism as a core methodology. This principle moves away from working in isolation, where environmental issues are tackled separately from social or economic concerns, and instead embraces intersectionality, which looks at how environmental, social, and economic injustices are all connected. By recognising and addressing how multiple forms of marginalisation interact, we build more inclusive governance processes and unlock new forms of climate intelligence, innovation, and participation.

STRENGTH IN DIVERSITY

Collective impact platforms - linking CSOs, all tiers of government and companies - are essential for scale and legitimacy.

No single actor (government, civil society, or business) can solve the climate crisis alone. Fragmented action, even when well-intentioned, leads to duplicated efforts, misaligned priorities, and missed opportunities. Collective impact models, which bring diverse stakeholders together under shared goals and coordinated strategies, are essential to achieving transformational outcomes at scale. This principle prioritises structured collaboration and mutual accountability across sectors. CEGP fosters multi-stakeholder platforms, such as municipal-CSO-private sector steering committees, open data forums, and climate dialogue roundtables to build trust, align efforts, and pool resources. It also draws from global initiatives like the UN Global Compact, F20, and Industry Transition Coalition, linking local governance efforts to national and international frameworks for green industrialisation and just transition.



TRUST. TRANSITION. TRANSFORMATION.

**Key lessons from the Climate
Solutions Forum session on
Governing Sustainability.**

Key lessons from the Climate Solutions Forum session on Governing Sustainability

At the recent F20 Climate Solutions Forum, Democracy Works Foundation (DWF) hosted a dynamic and thought-provoking session exploring how governance structures can drive equitable, transparent, and accountable transitions. Focusing on both the supply and demand sides of climate and energy democracy, our dialogue brought together leading voices from across Africa, Asia, and Latin America to interrogate what truly just transitions require, beyond policy and into practice.

Reclaiming Climate Governance: Opening and Keynote Contributions

Opening the session, Raisa Cole, Climate Governance Lead at DWF, issued a powerful call for climate governance frameworks grounded in democratic principles: accountability, inclusivity, and transparency. As South Africa and many countries in the Global South face deepening climate risks, Cole reminded participants that climate governance does not exist in a vacuum, but is rather deeply embedded within broader political processes, power struggles, and governance frameworks.

In our keynote segment, Zarina Moolla (ICLEI Africa) shared implementation models for integrating climate action into city planning across seven African cities. She emphasised practical enablers, such as climate finance, multi-sector partnerships, and peer-to-peer learning, that can support local governments in delivering more climate-responsive development. This was followed by an address by Paula Leandro Quintas, who highlighted the importance of trust-based, networked governance, arguing that building resilience in Global South transitions requires systems rooted in collaboration, not competition.

Paula Leandro Quintas



Zarina Moolla



DIALOGUE 1

THE SUPPLY SIDE OF CLIMATE AND ENERGY DEMOCRACY

Embedding Participation in Governance Structures

Moderated by: Raisa Cole (Democracy Works Foundation)

Speakers: Ashraf Patel (The Institute for Global Dialogue), Irvan Tengku Harja (Habibie Centre, Indonesia), Brenda Martin (Independent Consultant, South African Energy Transitions), Dorah Marema (South African Local Government Association).





DIALOGUE 1

THE SUPPLY SIDE OF CLIMATE AND ENERGY DEMOCRACY

The first dialogue explored how climate and energy governance can better embed democratic principles, particularly on the supply side, where policies are designed, technologies deployed, and decisions made about who holds power in the transition. What emerged was a powerful critique of technocratic, top-down approaches that risk reproducing exclusion and deepening inequality, even in the name of sustainability.

The discussion began by challenging the persistent elitism in climate policymaking, where decisions are often taken in rarefied spaces, with minimal input from those most affected. Participants stressed the need to move beyond token gestures of inclusion and toward people-centred approaches that make participation structural rather than symbolic. In this framing, participation isn't just a box to be ticked, it must be woven into how priorities are set, how risks are assessed, and how benefits are shared. Concerns were raised about the social risks of energy transitions, particularly when new technologies are introduced without assessing their broader societal impacts. Governance systems, it was argued, have a dual role: they can either mitigate inequality or reinforce it. For transitions to be truly just, they must be accompanied by processes that account for public acceptability, accessibility, and the uneven ways that technologies land across different communities.

A particularly strong critique was levelled at the growing tendency toward command-and-control governance in energy planning. While often justified in the name of coordination and scale, such centralised approaches can sideline local voices and suppress innovation at the community level. In contrast, decentralised models, those that empower municipalities, cooperatives, and community-based institutions, were presented as more democratic, more resilient, and better suited to context-specific challenges.

The conversation also challenged the assumption that technical expertise only resides in institutions. Communities, it was argued, are not just stakeholders, but are experts in their own right, with deep knowledge of their contexts, needs, and solutions. Recognising them as co-decision-makers, rather than passive recipients or afterthoughts, is essential for building the trust and legitimacy that climate governance demands.

Across the dialogue, several clear messages emerged. Community trust and participation must be cultivated through long-term investment, not short-lived consultations. Local governance structures must be equipped to enable meaningful civic influence - spaces where voices are not just heard but have the power to shape outcomes. The risks of participation fatigue are real, especially when engagement does not lead to change. And ultimately, if civil society is to play a central role in transitions, it must be structurally embedded within governance frameworks, not as a courtesy, but as a cornerstone of democratic climate action.

DIALOGUE 2

THE DEMAND SIDE OF CLIMATE AND ENERGY DEMOCRACY

Investing in Tech4Democracy and Youth Participation

Moderated by: Lerato Maloka (Democracy Works Foundation)

Speakers: Mandisa Mathobela (International development and philanthropy consultant), Nyasha Mpani (Project Lead, Data for Governance, Idasa), Paula Ellinger (Director of Social Innovation, Fundación Avina), Karabo Chadzingwa (Researcher, African Peer Review Mechanism)

The second dialogue turned the spotlight onto the demand side of climate and energy democracy, focusing on how communities (especially young people) are using digital tools to shape governance from the ground up. The conversation unfolded against the backdrop of growing civic disillusionment and shrinking participation spaces, asking a timely question: how can technology be harnessed not just to connect or consult, but to truly **redistribute power**?





DIALOGUE 2

THE DEMAND SIDE OF CLIMATE AND ENERGY DEMOCRACY

It became clear that while civic tech holds enormous potential, it also carries risks—particularly when designed without deep engagement from the people it claims to serve. Too often, communities are invited to participate in processes that extract their time, stories, and knowledge without shifting underlying structures of power or resource allocation. When participation is treated as an add-on rather than a core function of governance, it can easily slide into exploitation. The dialogue challenged this dynamic head-on, arguing that participation must be intentional, resourced, and rooted in trust and justice.

One powerful insight that emerged was the idea that innovation isn't always about speed or scale but that it can also mean slowing down, listening closely and more attentively, and designing platforms that reflect lived realities. Civic tech should not be imposed on communities, but co-created with them. When technology is shaped in this way, it becomes a tool for accountability, visibility, and empowerment—not just another interface.

Examples from across Africa illustrated this point. Youth-led civil society organisations are already building digital platforms to amplify citizen voices, expose governance failures, and advocate for change. Yet despite their impact, many of these initiatives are unable to continue after initial funding dries up. This reveals a deeper structural challenge: the absence of long-term, intentional investment in grassroots innovation. Tools alone are not enough—what's needed are ecosystems of support that enable these tools to thrive over time. Another thread running through the discussion was the importance of civic literacy. Technology can open up new spaces for participation, but if people are not empowered to interpret and act on the data these tools produce, the promise of transparency remains unfulfilled. Governance doesn't improve just because platforms exist—it improves when citizens are supported to use those platforms to hold institutions accountable.

Reflections from Latin America added another important dimension. Civic tech, it was argued, is not simply a technical endeavour - it is deeply relational. Its effectiveness depends on collaboration across sectors, on partnerships rooted in shared values and mutual respect. The most successful initiatives are those that bring together governments, researchers, civil society, and communities to co-create solutions that respond to real needs and contexts.

Throughout the dialogue, the core message was consistent and clear: democratic innovation is already happening, often led by youth and grassroots actors. But its success hinges on how well we recognise and support it. Participation must lead to tangible influence, not just consultation. Technology must serve communities, not extract from them. And above all, we must resist the urge to reinvent what already works. The tools for more just, inclusive climate governance already exist; we must now commit to scaling them, resourcing them, and embedding them within broader systems of accountability.



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MEET OUR CLIMATE AND ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE PROGRAMME TEAM



Climate and Environmental Governance Lead: Raisa Cole

Raisa Cole is an intersectional environmental feminist committed to leveraging climate change focused investments to address broader development priorities. She brings with her, 10 years of experience in adaptation policy and practice, an MSc in International Cooperation and Urban Development, and a commitment to decolonial research and practice. She is currently completing her PhD in adaptation governance across Africa.



Engagement Manager: Lerato Maloka

Lerato Maloka is a dynamic Corporate Communication and Engagement Strategist with 14 years' experience driving impact through strategic messaging, stakeholder engagement, and digital communication across the region. A certified Digital Marketer, she brings extensive agency expertise in brand building and delivering results that resonate.



Programme Assistant: Ujen Dookie

With over 20 years of international experience across more than 15 countries, Ujen is a seasoned professional with a strong background in governance, leadership development, climate action, and human rights. Having lived and worked in the UK, India, China, and Uganda, he brings a global perspective and a deep commitment to advancing social justice and sustainable development, particularly in the Global South.

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