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NET ZERO AND JUST ENERGY TRANSITION IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA REGION DEVELOPMENT

Yasmine Barbir*

Annual Being the text of a keynote lecture delivered on April 27, 2024 at the Energy Experts Roundtable on Net-Zero and Just Energy Transitions organized by the University of Birmingham, Dubai, in partnership with the Association of Environmental Law Lecturers in Middle East and North African Universities (ASSELLMU) held at the University of Birmingham, Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

1. INTRODUCTION

Eminent Ladies and gentlemen. It is both an honour and a privilege to stand before you today at this pivotal energy experts' roundtable, convened by the University of Birmingham Dubai, UNESCO Chair on Environmental Law and Sustainable Development at Hamad Bin Khalifa University, and the Association of Environmental Law Lecturers in Middle East and North African Universities. Our gathering today is not merely a convergence of minds, but a testament to our shared commitment to shaping a more sustainable and just future for all.

There will not be a climate transition if there is not a social transition. There can't be climate justice without social justices. there are people that just can't afford what is today still very expensive renewable energies.
Former Danone CEO EMMANUEL FABER

The future of our planet depends on galvanizing a genuine leadership for climate action. Our only pathway is reducing emissions. If we want to have a legacy in the climate journey, changing mindsets in embracing sustainability as our core purpose and mobilizing the money where it should be, are indispensable. Protecting people and prosperity can't be decoupled from the political will of all actors to holistically look at all net zero enablers like Food systems "Regen Ag", Nature (our line of defense), Biodiversity, Energy, Climate Action, and everything in between.

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Some might think 2040-2050 are not under our watch. Why bother? It is too far. Who will witness? Well, the RISK is immediate. Urgent action is absolutely critical, and the world needs to come together innovatively & have bolder ambition. It is about decent survival and not extinction!

Now is the time to envision what kind of world and planet we want. A thriving or a shrinking one. We have to zoom out and rethink the whole systems. The well-being of economy and Growth, and most importantly our collective role as stewards on Planet.

The welfare and livelihoods of people, human rights, wellbeing of communities should be at the forefront of any decision in this journey. We are ancestors of the Future generations. What kind of ancestors we want to be?

Well, the clock is ticking. The latest report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has identified several planetary boundaries that are at risk of being crossed due to human activities that have warmed the atmosphere, ocean, and land. The current rate of biodiversity loss is unprecedented in human history and could lead to a collapse of the ecosystem. The rate of freshwater use is unsustainable and could lead to a global water crisis. The current rate of greenhouse gas emissions is not in line with the Paris Agreement's goal of limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius.

2. IMPACTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE NEED FOR GREEN TRANSITION

The effects of Climate change are witnessed and felt globally. Besides pandemics like COVID, weather events growing frequency and intensity like superstorms, wildfires, and heatwaves are already causing devastating impacts.

All those red flags form our wake up call. The world is converging to act yet still lacks the acceleration, appropriate international cooperation and funding to move the needle in the right direction.

As we reflect on the outcomes of COP28 and the global imperative for inclusive and just transitions, it becomes abundantly clear that the journey towards a net-zero energy future is as complex as it is urgent. The decisions made at COP28 recognized that the path to sustainability must be guided by principles of equity, justice, and inclusion.

Natural gas, solid minerals, and renewables play pivotal roles in the energy transition, serving as the bedrock upon which our sustainable future is built. However, as demand for these resources continue to surge like copper, lithium, cobalt, and rare earths to support the massive deployment of clean energy technologies like solar, wind, batteries, and electrolyzers for green hydrogen, we must ensure their responsible extraction, equitable exploitation hence balancing the imperatives of economic development with the need for environmental stewardship and social equity.

COP28 pledged of tripling renewable energy by 2030. We are moving in the right direction (predicting a trajectory of 2.5 times) but still lagging in unlocking the desired annual renewables capacity growth due to policy implementation, market/infrastructure conditions & gaps between ambition & deployment. An article published few days back, highlighted that Seven countries (Albania, Bhutan, Nepal, Paraguay, Iceland, Ethiopia and the Democratic Republic of Congo) now generate 100 per cent of their electricity from renewable energy. This signals hope.

Many countries are currently using a large amount of hydropower or wind energy, experts predict solar will take over other renewables in the near future. Experts believe Solar energy reached an “irreversible tipping point” & see it becoming the world’s main source of energy by 2050. Thanks to the technological and economic advances rendering the transition to clean energy not just reachable, but inevitable Insha Allah.

Zooming in to MENA, it has doubled its renewable capacity over the last decade. Renewables could meet 26% of the region’s needs by 2050, say experts.

They can also unlock a significant source of carbon credits for trading on carbon markets which could help countries meet their emission reduction goals committed to in the Paris agreement.

As per WEF, Our region can speed up its progress towards sustainable, secure and equitable future via 3 ways:

1. Increase investment in solar energy. MENA receives 22-26% of all sunlight that reaches earth. That's enough capacity to meet 50% of the world's electricity. Solar power production in MENA costs 1/5th of the global average
2. Boost investment in wind energy. Our wind resources are both significant and largely untapped but this sector is growing fast. Egypt for example plans to almost double its wind capacity by 2025.
3. Promote investment in innovative climate tech. This region is geologically suited to carbon capture and storage. It could store up to 154 bio tonnes of captured CO₂. Meanwhile green hydrogen can replace fossil fuels across the region. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Oman, Egypt and Morocco are already exploring this opportunity.

By tapping these resources and meeting its emission reduction targets, the MENA region can become a major supplier of carbon credits and a global RE hub.

The license to operationalize the climate resilience initiatives require securing funding and remains a formidable challenge, particularly for vulnerable communities and developing nations. Innovative financing mechanisms, such as green bonds, climate funds, and public-private partnerships, offer promising avenues for mobilizing resources and bridging the financing gap.

3. CONCLUSION

We must also address systemic access barriers and prioritize the needs of those most affected by climate change. Robust legal frameworks and governance structures are essential for guiding the transition to a net-zero economy. They should be the vehicle to promoting transparency, accountability, and public participation in decision-making, as well as

ensuring being adaptive, responsive, and grounded in principles of justice and equity.

Let us not forget the critical role of today's youth in driving positive change. I have a genuine appeal to all law school students and environmental law lecturers gathered here today. As guardians of justice and stewards of the environment, you have a unique role to play in shaping the legal frameworks and governance structures that will guide our transition to a sustainable future. Advocate for laws and policies fit for reducing net GHG emission and also that prioritize environmental justice, social equity, and human rights. Champion the rights of marginalized communities and vulnerable ecosystems. And above all, hold decision-makers and institutions accountable for their actions.

Remember that the choices you make today will have far-reaching implications for generations to come. Seize every opportunity to make a positive impact, be it through advocacy, litigation, policy development, or community engagement.

Finally, let us approach our deliberations today with a sense of purpose. The road ahead may be challenging, but it is also filled with opportunity and promise. Let us build a world where no one is left behind, and where the principles of justice, inclusivity, and regeneration guide our actions at every step.