

Towards Energy Democracy: A Vision Statement **Adopted at Bijli Vikalp Sangam at Bodh Gaya, Bihar, March 2016**

A large group of civil society organizations including experts, energy practitioners, think tanks, peoples' movements, academics, and entrepreneurs - came together as part of Bijli Vikalp Sangam in Bodh Gaya, between 4th to 6th March 2016. We reflected upon and explored sustainable equitable practices on energy, with a focus on electricity. This was aimed at building a continuing critical dialogue with the state and other stakeholders in order to build a just and equitable energy future.

There are several serious social, environmental, technical, and economic issues with implications for future generations, if the business-as-usual approach continues. We acknowledge that future energy scenarios must factor in realities such as limited natural resources, accelerated environmental degradation, growing populations, climate change, and high energy poverty.

Roughly two thirds of India's population do not enjoy energy security. About a quarter of India's population has no access to any source of electricity despite a massive increase, of more than 200 times, in power generation capacity since Independence. Many of those with access suffer from erratic supply. The fact that Delhi's per capita electricity consumption is more than 10 times that of Bihar is representative of the inequity in consumption in the country.

Our continuing reliance on large centralized power generation, through conventional sources, will continue to exacerbate climate change impacts, displacement, biodiversity loss, water stress, destruction of forests, and pollution of air, land, water and sea. This commodification of our commons will further compromise our energy security and undermine the universal right to energy, including electricity. There is increasing evidence that nuclear power is neither clean, affordable, nor safe; coal power is not only dirty, but also adds greatly to our carbon footprint; and large hydro is massively destructive. Therefore none of these can be long term solutions for our country.

The government, in its recent policies, has announced fairly ambitious targets for renewable energy, although much of it is centralized and corporate controlled. However, there are worrying indications of significantly expanding coal, nuclear and large hydro. While the grid is a reality of present day electricity access, a far more democratic and decentralized governance of the grid becomes an imperative.

Unlimited growth and consumerist culture is incompatible with a finite world. We call for an urgent paradigm shift, from the currently dominant model of consumption-led development, to creating frameworks of human and ecological well being. This transition should be defined by the principles of sustainability, equity, and justice. This requires special attention to the needs of the most marginalized, including women, Dalits, Adivasis, small & marginalised farmers and particularly vulnerable tribal groups.

Therefore, with respect to the electricity sector, we call for action on policies and practices to:

- Mainstream and prioritize renewable energy to meet all future electricity needs. This should include decentralized solutions including micro grids, stand alone systems etc. According to a UN report, this will also help in creating more green jobs than the conventional sector. Direct investments towards the above objectives
- Focus on ensuring sustainable, universal access to electricity, which is affordable. This will require a redistribution of available electricity, equitably, to facilitate a good quality of life
- Build consensus for a new energy paradigm driven by social and individual responsibility, to limit our energy consumption and make lifestyle changes, that are consistent with shrinking planetary resources
- Ensure that the new imperatives are integrated into all appropriate educational and skill development activities
- Improve efficiency of existing electricity infrastructure to match global best standards
- Prioritize demand side management and energy conservation, particularly of large energy guzzling sectors
- Develop a time bound transition plan to phase out coal and nuclear, while ensuring displaced workers are appropriately re-skilled and re-employed. No construction of large new hydro plants. True cost of renewables and energy efficiency is much lower when compared to the total cost including social, environmental costs of nuclear, coal and large hydro
- Make cumulative, sectoral, social and environmental Impact Assessment compulsory for all power projects including renewables.
- Technological and innovative transitions will be necessary across all sectors. These must take place through fair and equitable processes that avoid lock in. Though technology will play a role, solutions for society should not be techno-centric.
- Implement comprehensive cost benefit and options analysis, including externalities for any power related decision making
- Mandate free, prior, and informed consent of all concerned communities before initiating any power project

The search for solutions should be guided by principles of direct, radical, and ecological democracy in which citizens, including the marginalized, are involved in decision making. This also requires providing mechanism and spaces for such direct citizens' involvement.

We resolve to take this message to a nationwide audience. This group looks forward to constructive engagement with the decision making process of public policy.

(Issued on behalf of participants by the Sangam organisers Kalpavriksh, CEED, Greenpeace India, SELCO, and Oxfam India)

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