



Reframing South Africa's  
Energy Diplomacy:  
An African imperative and  
geopolitical strategy  
for Just Energy Transition

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### Abstract

In response to the ongoing threats posed by climate change, South Africa has joined the rest of the world in advancing decarbonisation efforts. As one of the signatories to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and to the Paris Agreement, South Africa is committed to a transformational transition to a net-zero emission economy by 2050 through its energy diplomacy. This article presents a comprehensive examination of the important role of energy diplomacy in the current geopolitical context. As nations increasingly face challenges related to energy security, sustainability, and climate change, energy diplomacy has emerged as a vital instrument for fostering international cooperation and collaboration. This study, therefore, showcases South Africa's successful energy diplomacy initiatives, including strategic partnerships between the Global North and the Global South. It also examines the impact of multilateral agreements such as the five-year Just Energy Transition Investment Plan (JET IP) from 2023-2027. However, given the existing socio-economic challenges that are exacerbated by the climatic changes, it is imperative to conduct a qualitative content analysis of South Africa's energy diplomacy. A content analysis is adopted as a research methodology to uncover

pathways that can enhance trade relations and facilitate conflict resolution to climate-induced conflicts. This study identifies key factors driving South Africa's energy diplomacy, including economic interests, technological advancements, and regulatory frameworks that contribute to a Just Transition. The findings suggest that effective energy diplomacy can pave the way for innovative approaches that can meet the global energy demands positively, whilst influencing international relations. In conclusion, this article makes recommendations for policy implementation and future research. It also emphasizes the need for a deeper understanding of energy diplomacy's role in strengthening global energy governance when addressing critical environmental challenges. Thus, advocating for a leveraged energy diplomacy as an imperative strategic tool to create sustainability in future energy transformation through regional and global collaborations.

**Keywords:** Climate Change, Decarbonisation, Energy diplomacy, Energy Transition Plan, South Africa

## Introduction

South Africa is undeniably rich in mineral resources, just like the bulk of other African nations. The distinction, however, lies in the fact that, unlike other African states such as Mozambique and Zimbabwe, since its democratic transition, South Africa has been able to retain and exploit its political stability to advance numerous national and regional strategic interests in a bid to transform its energy sector. For decades, nations of the world, both in the Global North and the Global South, have been relying on a mix of sources of energy dominated by fossil fuels. However, with the increased modernisation processes in the energy sector, the dependency on fossil fuels has decreased substantially. In fact, since the 1970s, there has been a consistent drop in the reliance on fossil fuels due to the environmental implications of carbon dioxide emissions (Griffiths, 2019). In the case of South Africa, despite embarking on a renewable energy project since 1998, the dividends for a Just Energy Transition are still ongoing, given its continuous renewable energy transformation journey. It has become increasingly significant to accelerate South Africa's renewable energy production to counter its heavy reliance on coal-fired power plants. By 2021, studies on South Africa's renewable projections indicated that only 5% of South Africa's renewable electricity was drawn from hydroelectric power, while coal-fired power plants made up 90% of energy generation (Besada, 2021).

By 2023, South Africa embarked on a slight transition from coal dependency to a diversified use of renewable energy sources, ranging from solar power, wind, hydroelectric plants, nuclear, to open-cycle gas turbine (Ukoba, Jen and Yusuf, 2025 and CSIR, 2025). As a result, South Africa has been able to balance its national electricity

demands with power generation of about 245,000 GWh, which enables it to export about 12,300 GWh to Southern African neighbouring states such as Botswana and Zimbabwe whilst maintaining its power imports from Mozambique to 10,800 GWh (Ukoba, *et al.* 2025). South Africa plays a crucial role in shaping the dynamics of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) regional energy security imperatives through its energy diplomacy. Thus, enabling it to navigate the complexities of the ongoing just energy transition in South Africa, through energy diplomacy. Therefore, South Africa seeks to secure energy resources by fostering international partnerships to attract global investments in renewable technologies. This article reframes South Africa's energy diplomacy employing a qualitative content analysis of peer reviewed documents whereby with a narrative review will aid the study to explore the significance of energy diplomacy. As a critical component of the nation's strategy to transform South Africa's energy sector while addressing socio-economic concerns and promoting equitable development, this study is three-fold. Firstly, it provides guidelines on the study's methodology and contextualises South Energy Diplomacy. Secondly, it examines South Africa's multilayer governance approach and key factors advancing the Just Energy Transition as critical pathways for sustainability, diversity, and internationally supported energy solutions that adhere to climate actions. Finally, this paper concluded with valuable recommendations that offer insights for policy implementation and discussions for future research strategy.

## Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research methodology adopting a narrative approach to content analysis of South Africa's Energy Diplomacy. To carry out

this study relevant documents were reviewed drawn from scholarly databases such as JSTOR, ACADEMIA, EBSCOhost, Google Scholar, Science Direct, Taylor & Francis, in addition to Institutional Repositories from Emeris and the University of South Africa. These databases were instrumental in enabling extensive analysis of Agenda 2030 SDGs, the African Union Agenda 2063 bulletins and EU-SA partnership agreements supporting the Just Energy Transition. Other Peer reviewed materials such as journal articles and books were also analysed to further engage the study with the unfolding energy diplomacy engagements in international relations. The subsequent section delves into the conceptualisation of South Africa's Energy Diplomacy which also elucidates realist theory as an underpinning theoretical framework.

### Conceptualising South Africa's Energy Diplomacy

Energy diplomacy has emerged as a vital aspect of international relations, underscoring the intersection of states' production of source of energy, consumption, and trade that the geopolitical dynamics of both the Global North and the Global South countries (De Pous, Heilmann, and Fischer, 2020). Traditionally, diplomacy has been practiced by states as the main actors. However, with the increased multilateral engagements in international relations, a state-centric approach to international affairs has become increasingly complex due to multiple actors that influence the outcome of diplomacy.

On the one hand, realists view states are rational actors with reasonable power and security interests capable of recognising risks and opportunities in international relations (Grieco, Ikenberry and Mastanduno, 2022). Essentially, this theory frames South Africa's energy diplomacy as a strategic move driven by national interests and power struggles required to advance its economic development and sustainability. Since Realism emphasizes the role of state actions in a competitive global system, its theoretical underpinnings also demonstrate how energy resources can enhance national security and economic power. South Africa's participation in energy diplomacy, can be interpreted seen as a strategic quest for influence amid a changing geopolitical landscape.

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On the other hand, energy diplomacy remains an “under-operationalized and under-defined” concept (Chaban & Knodt, 2015: 458). This is the case despite conceptually presenting a relevant multistakeholder model of diplomacy. A model that illustrates the dynamics of energy interactions between a supranational actor, such as the European Union (EU) with major energy consumer countries from the Global South, such as South Africa.). These major Global South countries also happen to be members of the BRICS bloc, specifically the main founding nations, including Brazil, India, China, and South Africa. Although, according to Najam (2020), the Global South is made up of two distinct organisational memberships from the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the Group of 77 (G77) that continue to complement the self-determination interests and economic development agenda of the Southern Hemisphere.

Through energy diplomacy, both supranational nations and resource-producing countries use state power to enable their energy-producing companies to attain a competitive leverage whilst accessing energy markets. In the case of South Africa, the country's energy landscape comprises both traditional and renewable sources as the country navigates growing energy demand,

coupled with rising reliability concerns, and a decisive transition plan toward sustainability.

Nonetheless, at its core, energy diplomacy refers to the strategic negotiation and collaboration among countries to secure energy resources, to address energy security concerns, such as energy poverty experienced in South Africa due to periodic “major electricity cuts and prices soaring 10% in real terms” (Bond and Rempel, 2024:136). As such, finding mechanisms to foster sustainable energy transitions through energy diplomacy has become vital, specifically as the world grapples with climate change. The urgent need for renewable energy transition has equally become increasingly paramount, in international relations, given its ability to not only to contribute to global economic development but also to sustain equitable energy sources that are less environmentally harmful to the ozone layer (Merdjanova, 2020 & Adeniran and Onyekwena, 2020).

The shift to a green and clean energy approach to sustainable development sets the tone for an effective Just Energy Transition (JET). As states strengthen their energy diplomacy through various levels of engagement, they also endorse international cooperation and multilateral agreements that support the Agenda 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). For instance, South Africa's JET plan can only be sustainable with strong regional and international partners. Regionally, the adoption of the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) addresses both the global Agenda 2030 and the African Union Agenda 2063. The AfCFTA is thus a pan-African initiative positioning Africa's regional integration on a path toward an accelerated collective response to socio-economic and climate imperatives. This significant trajectory is necessary for the establishment of effective urbanization and sustainable development processes (Woolfrey, 2021).

Internationally, energy partnerships such as the EU Clean Trade and Investment Partnership, which addresses SDG7 – Affordable and Clean Energy, are equally paramount for Africa's renewable energy transition. South Africa's Energy Diplomacy has been strategically progressive in securing a groundbreaking EU-SA green transition partnership. For example, the €4.7 billion JET investment to fund critical drivers of economic growth sustainability, such as clean energy,

technological connectivity, and health sectors, has shown the EU's commitment to the Just Energy Transition Partnership, which sets a precedent for continuous EU-Africa trade agreement (ESG News, 2025).

In essence, bilateral and multilateral agreements between countries advance participation in global forums addressing collective environmental challenges, such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The latter framework forms the basis for collective negotiations shaping international climate agreements like the Paris Agreement, which does not impose but compels signatories of the convention to strengthen efforts to reduce toxic emissions in the environment (Kuh, 2018). These efforts take the form of global responses to the multifarious threats that climate change poses to nations' sustainable development and initiatives toward poverty eradication (Mbatia, Burton, & Ouma, 2023). To this end, energy diplomacy is critical as it fosters a collaborative approach to combat climate change challenges such as air pollution, droughts, and floods. As nations strive to meet the targets set by international agreements, including the Paris Agreement, cooperative efforts in renewable energy development, technology transfer, and financial investments become essential (Harris, 2022). This collaborative dimension ensures that energy diplomacy is not merely about competition for resources but about promoting shared goals for a sustainable future, especially since African states are far behind in decarbonizing their local and regional economies (Smith & Jones, 2021).

As Mbatia et al. (2023) observed, African states' economies are particularly at a loss, specifically states whose economies rely on natural resource extraction, such as Tanzania and Mozambique. In these nations, the diversification of economic resources is vital to broaden their domestic industrialisation and renewable energy pathways. As such, strengthening multilateral cooperation between asymmetric states, meaning cooperation between states with clear, distinct economic capabilities and distinct responsibilities in the context of climate change contributions, remains critical. The concept of Energy Diplomacy also emphasizes the importance of exercising soft power (Kuh, 2018: 506). In essence, soft power is used to leverage states' energy resources as a

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means to exert global influence and relationship-building (Hoffmann, 2021). For instance, countries rich in renewable energy technologies can export clear energy solutions to developing nations. By so doing, they would be enhancing their geopolitical standing while aiding other nations in expanding energy transitions (Käkönen, 2019).

In the context of South Africa, energy diplomacy takes on a unique form as the country seeks to balance its energy needs with its commitments to renewable energy and sustainability. Over the years, the government has been engaging in various international partnerships to enhance its renewable energy capacity while addressing local socio-economic realities (Gumede, 2020).

This strategic approach highlights the multi-faceted nature of energy diplomacy, which involves understanding its role as a strategic tool necessary to navigate the complexities of global energy markets and the dynamics of collective environmental responsibilities. In most cases, states' domestic considerations intersect with global imperatives due to the interplay between energy security, economic development, and the need for environmental sustainability. For instance, in the case of South Africa, the long years of dependence on coal, which accounts for approximately 80% of its electricity generation, saw the need to form global coalitions to collectively address environmental challenges (Department of Energy, 2019). The challenges that include the reduction

of greenhouse gas emissions affecting the air quality and public health cannot by any means be addressed unilaterally. Hence, South Africa continues to strategically work towards improving its energy security. To this end, conceptualising energy diplomacy is vital for it serves as a crucial framework for countries' enhancement of their energy security while contributing to a sustainable global energy transition. Thus, the diversification of national energy sources, through regional integration and global accessibility to modern energy carriers, is often enhanced through bilateral and multilateral partnerships. For instance, with South-China bilateral partnership, an increase in China's development of green and low-carbon energy projects that include wind and solar in South Africa has contributed to "at least eight hydropower projects financed by the Export-Import Bank of China (CHEXIM), which represent 26% of all hydropower lending, not only in South Africa but across the African continent (Klomegah, 2024).

South Africa's energy diplomacy, therefore, positions South Africa as a strategic catalyst for the expansion of green electricity through its regional and global energy dialogues that shape both climatic changes and climate policies. In essence, the discourse surrounding South Africa's energy diplomacy imperatives maximises opportunities for a strengthened Global North and Global South energy partnership despite the complexities in balancing the path towards a Just Energy Transition.

### **Energy Diplomacy: Opportunities for Global North and Global South Partnerships**

It is undeniable that the trajectory of South African energy diplomacy is highly framed within the context of the Global North-Global South economic interests in decarbonising the environment. Despite being a major emitter of greenhouse gas (GHG) in Africa, South Africa and the entire global community are increasingly embracing green energy transition strategies. Collectively, the signatories of the Paris Agreement have shown commitment to the binding target in limiting the temperature rise below 2 °C as an effort to reduce the environmental challenges caused by the transboundary nature of climate change (Salman, Wang, Qin and He, 2024). For these reasons, some scholars argue that the negotiated climate change actions as prescribed by the Paris Agreement

have become an “irreversible transition to a low carbon world” specifically because the signatories of the Paris Agreement are unanimously phasing out the reliance on coal as the main source of energy (Amusan and Olutola, 2016:396). Partly, this ‘irreversible’ phenomenon is also due to the collective impact that fossil fuels pose to the environment. Carbon-driven energy sources create adverse consequences to human security, ranging from air pollution to health complications such as “cardiovascular, respiratory and neurological disorders” resulting from toxic chemical deposits (Tladi, Kambule & Moodley, 2024: 1).

Hence, to accelerate the just energy transition, South Africa relies on its global partners, both in the North and the South, through its membership in global forums such as the G20 and BRICS. By engaging with countries such as Brazil, China, and other EU member states, such as Germany, which account for the key largest carbon-reduction drivers, South Africa advances the global Agenda 2030 whilst positioning itself strategically to bridge the financial gap between the Global North and the Global South nations (Naidu, 2025). For instance, although in 2022, countries from the Global North pledged about \$100 billion towards the Global South climate finance to reduce the environmental disparities between low and middle-income states, the disparities continue to persist (World Economic Forum, 2025).

Historically, developed nations benefit the most from climate finance provisions. This, in turn, inhibits emerging markets and developing economies (EMDEs) as well as least developed countries (LDCs) from participating equitably in climate change mitigation efforts. An equitable approach is vital as it is aimed at reducing dependency on fossil fuels, which impacts the health of society across nations and their environmental conditions (Brazilian G20 Presidency and the G20 Sustainable Finance Working Group, 2024). For instance, between the 2021-2022 financial years, the United Nations Trade & Development (UNCTAD, 2024) reported that developed nations acquired a considerably higher percentage of climate finance, about 44%, in comparison to the 14% allocated to emerging markets and 2% to least developed countries. This evident disparity places the Global South nations at a disadvantage, particularly when climate finance is tied to conditionalities required to deliver

certain climatic priorities. For these reasons, global financial structures and economic governing systems require reforms to address the systemic inequalities. It is worth noting that, even though the Paris Agreement adheres to “common but differentiated responsibilities,” where despite the existence of agreed shared climate change actions, states still present distinct actions based on their different regional and national positions (UNCTAD, 2024 & United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), 2021).

It is, therefore, critical that continued Global North and Global South collaboration remains a priority to balance not only the uneven financial distribution needs for mitigation and adaptation efforts but also to regulate the debt crisis that most African states are entangled in. Odimegwu (2025) advocates for an integrated approach that combines both strategies of mitigation and adaptation, highlighting their effectiveness in addressing to the climate-induced challenges while promoting long-term sustainability and resilience. However, the acceleration in the implementation of clean energy transition across geographies, specifically within the African context, requires a “common framework for dealing with debt relief” because the higher debt rate amongst Sub-Saharan African states (Mbatia et al, 2023:36).

The party, the rising debt impact negatively on African states’ economic sustainability and investor confidence. Moreover, most Global North states, such as Germany and Canada, have been at the forefront of decarbonisation efforts due to their higher private sector financial contribution of about 64% whilst the EMDEs and LCDs nations rely on multilateral climate funds (MCFs) finance, which remains very low, as indicated earlier (Buchner et al. 2023). These financial discrepancies accentuate barriers to the aspired accelerated renewable energy transition. However, it is worth noting that the need for progressive governance amongst state-owned power utilities such as Eskom, in the case of South Africa, is extremely essential to ensure that political interference on international investments is kept at bay whilst increasing participation of the private sector on renewable energy efforts that enhance the flow of domestic capital and boost investor reliability and partnership confidence. South Africa has successfully secured a multilateral financial investment of about \$8.5

billion from European partners such as France, the United Kingdom, and Germany in a bid to move away from its 80% dependency on coal for electricity generation into a clean energy transition model (European Union, 2021). Through this Just Energy Transition Investment from the Global North, South Africa is expected to reduce its gas emissions over the next 20 years. This green transition anticipates an acceleration in the commitment to lower emissions to less than 1-1.5 gigatonnes whilst advancing resilience to climatic changes and promoting sustainable development as prescribed in the Paris Agreement.

### **The impact of multilateralism in the Just Energy Transition Investment Plan (JET IP)**

As a collective practice by states to forge international collaborations through global institutions, international forums, and agreements critical to accomplish shared objectives (Hoffmann, 2021 & Peters, 2024). The African Renewable Energy Initiative (AREI), as well as the JET IP, are multilateral forums through which South Africa collaborates with other nations in sharing knowledge and resources in an effort to advance a sustainable energy future. Furthermore, multilateralism seen in the JET IP collaboration between South Africa and global EU investors is set to achieve a wider economic diversification. To some extent, this continuous partnership leads to environmental benefits that impact affected communities through the coal transition to greener ecosystems. However, this does not in any form mean that multilateral engagements between developing and developed nations forfeit the national interests. To the most part South Africa often chooses to act collectively with international partners to address environmental vulnerabilities (Najam, 2020).

Regenerating mining-affected land specifically in Mpumalanga province is essential, considering that this province is one of South Africa's toxic gas emissions hotspots (Kamolane-Kgadima and Kathi, 2024). The global energy landscape shifts have compelled South Africa to diversify its energy sources. In addition, it also reduces reliance on fossil fuels, which have largely impacted mining communities directly. In some communities, water pollution affects their health and human security. In the same vein, the prevalent injustices in accessibility to green energy in some peri-urban

settlements, such as in Qandu-Qandu, in Cape Town, accelerate the necessity for just energy transition (Mirzania et al, 2023). By establishing relationships with developed countries that possess advanced renewable energy technologies, South Africa is set to multilaterally bolster and diversify its energy resilience. This approach is set to redress the historical environmental challenges, such as deforestation, forced displacements, and hazardous residues found in mining areas (Gumede, 2020 & Kamolane-Kgadima and Kathi, 2024). Multilateralism in this regard is significant in a context where climate change poses substantial risks to energy systems. Thus, international collaboration is essential for collective environmental solutions that yield a reliable supply of green energy in spite of the complex climate change vulnerabilities plaguing the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Harris, 2022).

### **Navigating socio-economic challenges impacting the international energy landscape**

The geopolitical dynamics of South Africa's energy diplomacy present both opportunities and challenges required to navigate the complex elements surrounding the nation's socio-economic challenges and the continuous commitment to global climate change imperatives. Historically, South Africa's socio-economic challenges date back to the tumultuous legacies of the Apartheid regime that have presented existential challenges

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to governance systems and eroded social cohesion (DIRCO, 2025). Although the Apartheid regime has officially ended with South Africa's government democratic transition, in 1994, the racial and cultural cleavages of Apartheid have left visible environmental cleavages, particularly amongst black communities.

Kamolane-Kgadima & Kathi (2024) reveal some of the socio-economic challenges plaguing the post-Apartheid South Africa, specifically, in the context of climate change vulnerabilities posed by the environmental injustices in the Highveld and Secunda towns in Mpumalanga province. This North-eastern province of South Africa is notoriously known for its highest greenhouse gas emitter in Africa. This province hosts 12 fossil fuel-reliant stations, which weigh heavily on the socio-economic and environmental sustainability of the community whilst empowering Sasol's chemical and coal-based energy refinery (Kamolane-Kgadima & Kathi, 2024: 2).

Given the considerable direct environmental harm caused by the coal-driven power stations in the Mpumalanga surrounding areas, the democratic South African government has collaborated with both national and international corporations to find workable solutions to the environmental challenges at hand. Since South Africa's foreign policy has Africa's regional integration, political security, and economic development at the core of its interest. As such, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) serves as a regional forum through which South Africa accelerates its regional integration and advances multilateral trade and energy security interests (Zubane, Mlambo, and Shoba, 2021).

By so doing, South Africa continues to demonstrate its persisting commitment to equity in diversification of energy resources by engaging with both its neighbouring states, the AU, and other continents through South-South relations as well as North-South engagements. This strategic approach is critical in leveraging energy transition support domestically and internationally within the framework of the Paris Agreement. As such, whilst the country navigates its geopolitical dimensions that drive its shift from the longstanding coal dependency towards a more efficient and green energy, certain global targets, governance policies,

and climate change initiatives drive South Africa's global influence in the just energy transition on the continent (Ukoba, *et al.* 2025). To attain these targets, active engagement in global dialogues that address just energy transition enables South Africa to not only secure technical support, investment funding, and global market access to resources related to advancing renewable energy technologies but also to sustain its influential role on global environmental issues.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

To sum up, it is evident that South Africa's energy diplomacy has ushered in its prominence in acting decisively on both domestic energy transition needs and leadership roles in regional and global climate commitments. In light of realists' theoretical framework used to examine South Africa's energy diplomacy in the context of its competitive power to advance economic interests multilateral agreements such as the five-year Just Energy Transition Investment Plan form the basis for South Africa's stable pattern of global interactions. For instance, despite having secured large investment sums to support its JET IP from EU members, South Africa continues to collaborate with other emerging economies. This strategic approach to realise its interests is made possible through forums such as BRICS, G20, the AU, and the SADC regions. Conversely, this multilateral strategic approach continues to provide meaningful renewable energy interventions that create opportunities for expanded influence within the African continent and beyond.

Despite having successfully secured financial investments, which are critical for the implementation of the JET plans, it is equally vital that sustainable renewable energy practices are adopted within the contextual framework of the South African society. Although a blend with international practices also ensures economic sustainability. This approach fosters reliability and inclusiveness in decarbonisation and innovation-driven renewable energy development. Given the dynamics of the South African society; the impact of the just energy transition has a greater impact not only on the broader global environmental agenda that demands structural and policy reforms backed by the international community but must take into cognisance the socio-economic aspects.

Hence, an expansion of mechanisms advancing inclusive energy accessibility must remain pivotal, particularly in a highly divisive socio-economic context where rural communities remain marginalized. In most cases, such communities have limited clean sources of energy and, to some extent, are subjected to limited access to any form of electricity in comparison to the urban areas, which, despite periodic interruptions in power supply, tend to have stable access to electricity.

Therefore, to promote equitable and inclusive energy access to all members of society, this chapter recommends prioritisation of infrastructural development. This approach must not only be accelerated as a means to meet global standards but must also be implemented to address energy inequalities. Thus, extending just energy transition projects to rural areas where traditional biomass remains the primary source of energy. Continued reliance on such traditional energy sources not only heightens health and safety concerns but also hinders JET progress. The mitigation of coal-dependency and the adaptation of energy justice strategies is necessary to achieve the lower greenhouse gas emissions targets (1-1.5°C) – a critical renewables step for attainment of climate sustainability.

Conclusively, energy diplomacy goes beyond merely accelerating the green energy transition to reduce air pollution and other environmental threats posed by toxic gas emissions. It is more about advancing innovative solutions. Scaled up solutions that integrate technological advancements, financial diversification, and multilateral partnerships. In addition, these interventions should be carried out while also redressing the historical legacies that continue to underpin inequitable conditions affecting and perpetuating slow-paced socio-economic development in our society.

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