

## Panama city energy transition

Justice and inclusion are essential to the transition to clean energy, according to Rivera--especially in a region where, on the most basic level, too many people still lack access to electricity.

At first glance, the Latin American and Caribbean region would seem to be doing quite well in this area. The International Energy Agency estimates that 97% of the population in Central and South America had access to electricity in 2019; the World Bank puts the average for Latin America and the Caribbean at over 98%.

But in a recent interview, Rivera cautioned that statistics can mask deep inequalities, an example of what he called "the tyranny of averages." In Panama as a whole, he said, about 94% of people have access to electricity, but in the Comarca Ngöbe-Buglé--the ancestral lands of the country's largest indigenous populations--the proportion of households with electricity drops to just 4%.

Late last year, the Panamanian government approved a 10-year policy roadmap for the energy transition, which calls universal access to electricity "priority one." Although Panama has been working to expand rural electrification in recent years, new investments of around \$350 million will be needed to achieve universal access by 2030, according to the policy document.

"The last mile is the most difficult," Rivera said, noting that most of the estimated 93,000 Panamanian families without access to electric power live in small, remote communities located in mountainous or heavily forested terrain.

"For these individuals," Rivera said, "the energy transition ultimately means going from the 19th century to the 21st century, with everything that having access to energy represents in their lives."

Panama is certainly not alone when it comes to inequality; gaps in energy access can be found through the region. "There are parts of our populations that do not yet have access to sustainable and modern energy, which is also one of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals due to be met by 2030," Rivera said.

This is an issue Panama has been working on at the UN, as one of 30 "Global Champions" spearheading action on key thematic areas to be addressed at the upcoming High-Level Dialogue on Energy. (See story below.)

The ECPA ministerial meeting next February will be a "natural extension" of such efforts, Rivera said. The plan is for the region's energy ministers and other high-level officials to meet in person in Panama City, subject of course to any necessary changes due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The chosen theme of the ECPA meeting goes beyond simple access to electricity, according to Rivera. A focus



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on inclusion and justice also looks at social and economic impacts of the energy transition, to make sure that any benefits and opportunities reach people in all segments of society, including women and young people.

In the coming years, as more fossil fuel-related jobs are phased out, it will also be important to ensure that workers who are displaced in the transition get the support and training they need to work in renewable energy or other sectors. All this becomes even more urgent as the region seeks to recover from the devastating economic impacts of the pandemic, Rivera added.

In fact, Panama believes its energy transition agenda can be a key driver of its economic recovery. According to World Bank data, Panama was among the 10 hardest-hit economies in the world, with a gross domestic product (GDP) contraction of 18% last year.

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