



Background Paper

Committee: United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP I)

Topic A: Should the world stop using fossil fuels and switch completely to renewable energy?

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The global dependence on fossil fuels has shaped the modern world, powering transportation, industries, and economic growth for more than a century. However, the continuous use of oil, coal, and natural gas has led to severe environmental consequences, becoming the main driver of greenhouse gas emissions and global warming. Scientists and international organizations warn that climate change is accelerating, and its effects are already visible through rising temperatures, extreme weather events, droughts, and biodiversity loss. As the climate crisis worsens, the debate over whether the world should completely abandon fossil fuels and replace them with renewable sources has become increasingly urgent.

Renewable energy sources, such as solar, wind, hydroelectric, and geothermal power, offer a long-term alternative that does not contribute to atmospheric pollution. In recent years, renewable energy has grown at record speed, with costs decreasing and investments increasing in several regions. According to the International Energy Agency, renewable energy capacity grew by 50% in 2023, showing that the transition is technically possible for many countries. However, this progress is uneven. While developed nations have the financial capacity and technology to expand renewable infrastructure, many developing countries still depend on fossil fuels for employment, exports, and national revenue. A complete and immediate ban on fossil fuels could create unemployment, economic instability, and social disruption in countries whose economies rely on oil and gas production.

This situation creates an ethical and diplomatic challenge. While environmental groups demand rapid action to stop climate damage, governments from fossil-fuel-dependent nations argue that energy transitions must be gradual and supported financially in order to avoid harming their population. The United Nations has introduced the concept of a “just transition,” meaning that the shift to clean energy should be fair, realistic, and protect vulnerable workers and economies. The issue also raises the question of responsibility: should all countries transition at the same pace, or should wealthier countries—who historically produced the most emissions—take the lead and provide funding to others?

If the world delays action, the consequences will intensify. The IPCC warns that to keep global warming below 1.5°C, global emissions must drop by 43% before 2030, something impossible



without reducing fossil fuel use. At the same time, ending fossil fuels overnight is unrealistic without international cooperation and large-scale investment in technology, training, and infrastructure. The debate is no longer just about whether renewable energy is necessary, but how the transition should happen, who will fund it, and how to ensure global participation. UNEP plays a key role in supporting this dialogue, promoting sustainable policies, and encouraging collaboration between governments, industries, and scientific communities.

Finding a balance between environmental responsibility and economic stability will define the success of this global transition. The future of energy depends not only on technology, but on diplomacy, financial agreements, and shared commitments. Whether the world can move away from fossil fuels without leaving any nation behind is now one of the central questions for international climate policy.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. How can countries that depend economically on fossil fuels transition without causing unemployment and social instability?
2. Should all nations be required to phase out fossil fuels at the same speed, or should the responsibility vary based on development level and historical emissions?
3. What role should UNEP play in supporting a fair, global, and cooperative transition to renewable energy?

KEY TIMELINE

In 1973, the first global oil crisis exposed the vulnerability of economies dependent on fossil fuels. In 1997, the Kyoto Protocol became the first binding treaty that required emission reductions from industrialized countries. Later, in 2015, the Paris Agreement brought almost every nation together in a shared commitment to limit global warming to 1.5°C. In 2021, several countries announced coal phase-out plans during COP26, but major oil and gas producers refused to commit. By 2023, UNEP confirmed that the world was not on track to meet climate goals. In 2024, renewable energy experienced the largest growth in history, yet fossil fuel subsidies remained higher than investments in clean energy. The year 2030 is considered the deadline for major emission cuts, and 2050 is the target year for most countries aiming to reach net-zero emissions.



MLA Format

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International Energy Agency (IEA). Renewables 2024: Global Analysis and Forecast. Paris: IEA, 2024. <https://www.iea.org/reports/renewables-2024>

United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). Emissions Gap Report 2023. United Nations, 2023. <https://www.unep.org/resources/emissions-gap-report-2023>

World Bank. Global Energy Employment Report. World Bank Group, 2023. <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/099320406122317790/p1796850e6fbc70960be860e4d3bb8ea4b8>

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