Background Paper

Committee: United nations Environment Programme (UNEP I)
Topic B: Should governments make stricter laws to protect forests and endangered animals?
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For over a century, the global economy has relied heavily on fossil fuels such as coal, oil, and natural gas to sustain industrial development, transportation, and overall economic growth. However, this dependence has come at a significant environmental cost. The continuous combustion of fossil fuels remains the largest contributor to greenhouse gas emissions, which drive global warming and intensify climate change. Scientific consensus warns that climate change is accelerating, evidenced by rising temperatures, melting glaciers, extreme weather events, droughts, and biodiversity loss. As these impacts worsen, the international community faces an urgent question: should the world completely abandon fossil fuels and transition to renewable energy sources?

Renewable energy sources such as solar, wind, hydroelectric, and geothermal power—offer a sustainable and cleaner alternative that can mitigate environmental damage while meeting global energy needs. In recent years, technological progress has made renewables more accessible and cost-effective. According to the International Energy Agency, renewable capacity grew by 50 percent in 2023, marking the fastest expansion in history. This shows that a large-scale transition is both technically and economically possible. However, progress remains uneven across regions. Developed nations have the financial and technological resources to invest in renewable infrastructure, while many developing countries still rely on fossil fuels as a primary source of income, employment, and energy security. An abrupt phase-out of fossil fuels could destabilize economies, increase unemployment, and deepen social inequalities in nations dependent on oil and gas exports.

This situation presents a moral and diplomatic dilemma. Environmental advocates urge for rapid decarbonization to avoid catastrophic climate consequences, while governments in fossil-fuel-dependent nations call for a gradual transition supported by international funding. The concept of a “just transition,” promoted by the United Nations, emphasizes that climate action must be equitable, realistic, and inclusive, protecting vulnerable workers and communities. Moreover, the issue raises questions of fairness and historical accountability: should all nations be required to move at the same pace, or should wealthier countries—those historically responsible for the majority of emissions—take the lead and assist developing nations financially and technologically?

Delaying decisive action will only magnify the consequences. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) warns that to limit global warming to 1.5°C, global emissions must decline by 43 percent by 2030—an objective unattainable without drastically reducing fossil fuel use. At the same time, an immediate global ban on fossil fuels is unrealistic without coordinated international cooperation and substantial investment in innovation, infrastructure, and training. The debate is no longer centered on whether renewable energy is necessary, but rather on how the transition should occur, who will finance it, and how to ensure global participation. In this context, UNEP plays a vital role in fostering dialogue, guiding environmental policy, and promoting collaboration among governments, industries, and scientific institutions.

Achieving a balance between environmental responsibility and economic stability will determine the success of this global transformation. The future of energy depends not only on technological advancement but also on diplomacy, shared commitments, and financial equity. Whether the world can successfully transition away from fossil fuels without leaving any nation behind remains one of the most pressing questions in international climate policy today.

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 legally binding treaty requiring emission reductions from industrialized nations. Later, in 2015, the Paris Agreement united nearly every country in a shared commitment to limit global warming to 1.5°C. In 2021, during COP26, several nations pledged to phase out coal, though major oil and gas producers declined. By 2023, UNEP confirmed that the world was not on track to meet its climate goals. In 2024, renewable energy experienced record growth, yet fossil fuel subsidies remained higher than clean energy investments. The year 2030 is seen as the critical deadline for achieving substantial emission reductions, and 2050 marks the target year for most countries to achieve net-zero emissions.

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