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An agreement ends resistance to a renewable energy plant in French Guiana... but is it energy justice?

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Forest covers more than 90% of French Guiana. AlixMillet/Shutterstock

In French Guiana, a community of indigenous Kali'na began actively resisting plans for the world's first baseload renewable power plant using hydrogen technology – the [CEOG project](#) – [in November 2022](#). The energy company, Hydrogene de France (HDF Energy), had touted the plans as an initiative that would deliver jobs for the local community, support a village's self-sufficiency, serve the nearby power grid and leave plenty of free land for the locals' use.

However, the Kali'na community saw it differently. For them, the site – just two kilometres from Prospérité, their village of 230 people – was [a direct attack on their identity and way of life](#).

After two years of resistance, an agreement was reached between the Kali'na community of Prospérité and HDF Energy. A joint statement issued on August 30, 2024, said both parties will benefit: HDF Energy secures the continued development of its hydrogen [power plant](#), while the Kali'na community gains commitments to [sustainable development projects](#). These include the creation of employment opportunities for Kali'na youth, particularly in the renewable energy sector, initiatives to protect the local environment and improvements to local infrastructure. Additionally, the agreement promises ongoing dialogue between the company and the community, with a focus on ensuring that the plant's operations align with the Kali'na's cultural and environmental priorities, allowing for a more inclusive and sustainable future for both parties.

Plans for an electric plant in Prospérité, located in West French Guiana, were first floated in 2018, with an investment amounting to €170 million. The Kali'na were worried the project would lead to deforestation, destruction of the natural environment, disruption of their traditional hunting practices and a loss of the transmission of traditional practices to future generations.

The CEOG project underscored a deep divide between the indigenous inhabitants and the proponents of the project. Striking a balance between fostering equitable energy futures while protecting the Amazon rainforest – which covers 95% of French Guiana – and safeguarding the rights of indigenous people became a central issue in the Prospérité case.

A division of interests solved by a partnership?

As academic researchers, our focus is to analyse this case through the lens of energy justice (EJ). Over the last decade, a worldwide movement has developed around applying concepts of justice (fairness, equity and inclusiveness) to slash the negative impacts of energy development. Specifically, energy justice principles aim to protect citizens' rights and wellbeing in today's economy. A new social contract between project developers and indigenous peoples based on these principles is needed to move forward. At the heart of such a contract should be genuine community engagement and a rebalancing of the relationship between energy sector stakeholders and society. But was this achieved in the recent agreement between the Kali'na and HDF Energy?

Seen through the lens of energy justice, several issues are present in the agreement:

- Procedural justice: The lack of transparency in the agreement is concerning. Very little information has been made publicly available, which affects other justice aspects that rely on proper procedure.
- Distributive justice: The assessment of what long-term benefits are being provided to the community through the life cycle of the project should be carefully considered, from commencement to decommissioning.
- Recognition justice: Concerns as to whether all stakeholders, including the Kali'na community, will continue to be involved once the project is operational, not just at the start, should be closely examined. This aligns with the “leave no one behind” principle of a just transition.
- Restorative justice: Ensuring that proper procedures are in place to prevent further harm and mitigate any environmental damage throughout the project's life cycle is crucial.
- Cosmopolitan justice: The broader responsibility of France to protect the Amazon – the “the lungs of the planet” – should be emphasised, especially in light of the Belém Declaration (an international treaty to protect the Amazon) and the Team Europe Initiative on Deforestation Value Chains. Arguably, policy initiatives like the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), an EU tax on imported carbon-intensive products, should also apply in this French overseas department.

As energy justice scholars, we question whether the agreement between the Kali'na and HDF Energy truly resolves the conflict and addresses the core concerns. In our view, energy justice principles remain insufficiently applied – distributive justice (revenue or benefit sharing) and procedural justice (transparency) are still murky. Could mediation be introduced to ensure greater community involvement throughout the CEOG project's life cycle? This could help future-proof decisions and maintain a just process, benefitting both the community and the project's long-term success.