

SDG 7: ASSESSING AND ADDRESSING THE HUMAN RIGHTS IMPACT OF RENEWABLE ENERGY PROJECTS (La Defensoría del Pueblo de Colombia)



Hydropower is the world's primary renewable source for electricity generation, providing 71% of all renewable electricity. Achieving 1,064 GW of installed capacity in 2016, it generated 16.4% of the world's electricity from all sources.²⁴ However, hydroelectric dams displace people worldwide, submerge large areas of land causing ecosystem damage and threaten human life if they collapse due to poor construction.

SDG 7 promotes access to energy for all and calls for a substantial increase in the availability of renewable energy (target 7.2). While this is a crucial step towards mitigating the impact of non-renewable energy on the environment and climate, respecting the rights of communities when building green energy projects is just as essential to achieving the 2030 Agenda as combatting climate change.

In Colombia, the El Quimbo Hydropower Energy Project located in the District of Huila has been a source of controversy since 2009. Its construction resulted in the displacement of 17,000 people. The Colombian Defensoría del Pueblo (Defensoría)²⁵ was alerted to this case through several complaints received from communities and NGOs, media attention, and complaints from the regional government and environmental authorities which led to an investigation into the hydropower sector in the country.

In 2017, the Defensoría published the results of the investigation in a report titled, 'Socio-Environmental Impacts and Possible Impact to Rights Due to Hydroelectric Production in Colombia'. The results showed that people's rights were affected by factors such as the lack of resettlement regulations, deficiencies in national and regional authorities' coordination with respect to land planning, low institutional capacities to monitor and control, and company interests. The report provided recommendations on public policy, regulations, and institutional strengthening to guarantee the effective enjoyment of human rights.

The Colombian NHRI brought stakeholders together by organising roundtables, delivering questions and concerns from communities to authorities, explaining and teaching about human rights (participation, environmental rights, responsibilities, etc.) and raising awareness of private actors and authorities on activities that could harm human rights. In doing so, the Defensoría addressed an important element of the transition to renewable energy that has not been captured in the text of SDG 7 - the adverse human rights impact of these projects on affected communities.

²⁴ See more at the report from the World Energy Council: <https://bit.ly/2mWMosE>

²⁵ This case has been published in detail at the report 'Remedy in Business and Human Rights Cases: the Role of National Human Rights Institutions', available at: <https://bit.ly/2FF2xeB>