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The Green Colonialism of Norway's Wind Power Boom

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With new economic opportunities emerging in renewable energy, oil-rich Norway is now pursuing an aggressive scaling of the country's wind energy capacity. However, this approach comes at a cost to indigenous communities and local representation.

Norway's energy sector is riddled with paradoxes; it is the 3rd and 15th largest exporter of oil and gas respectively, as well as a leading producer of renewable energy with hydropower supplying most of its electricity.

The seeds of wind power were sown in Norway in the 1990s, but it was around 2010 that the industry blossomed and gained momentum. For decades, wind power was considered unnecessary and unprofitable in Norway. That changed when they launched, with its neighbour Sweden, a green certificate scheme, to support wind projects with state subsidies. In 2015, the Norwegian government amended its tax policies to make investments in wind energy more lucrative for developers. In the meantime, the technology improved in efficiency. With the government changing its policy on renewables and the technology improving, wind power began to take off in Norway.

While Norway has earned international praise for developing its renewable energy, its achievement isn't without controversy. In 2018, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination asked Norway to suspend the construction of one of the Fosen Vind wind parks, dubbed Storheia, while they assessed its potential impact on the Saami, the Indigenous population residing across Nordic countries. Disregarding the UN request, the Norwegian Ministry of Petroleum and Energy (OED) proceeded with development.

In 2021, a Norwegian Supreme Court ruling invalidated the licenses granted to Storheia's wind farm for violating the cultural rights of the Saami to herding. Despite the ruling and continued calls from activists to dismantle the wind farm, the government has kept the turbines running.

Meanwhile, Norway's oil exports have been growing since Russia's invasion of Ukraine; in 2022, it exported 80 million standard cubic metres (Sm^3) of crude oil to Europe, 4,8 million Sm^3 to China, and 9,1 million Sm^3 onshore in 2022. Norway's oil export revenue surged from 27 billion euros in 2021 to 121 billion euros in 2022.

With Norway expanding its oil business while presenting itself as a leader in renewables, it is worth asking why wind power is being pursued aggressively and how environmental injustice flourishes in such circumstances. Primary data for this article was collected in the summer and autumn of 2021.

Wind energy governance in Norway

All wind projects must follow a three-step process: project notification, application by the developer, and then a decision by the Norwegian Water Resources and Energy Directorate (NVE). With the high volume of applications, some informal practices have emerged in the sector. For instance, wind construction

companies outsource the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) – mandatory under EU law – to private consultancies, even though this is an important requirement for a license.

Wind farm projects are required to evaluate the impacts on biodiversity and concerned populations, including on Indigenous communities and livelihoods. Several proposed wind farm projects were expected to disrupt key grazing spots for reindeer, endangering reindeer herding practised by the Saami. However, current EIA practices conducted flawed analyses of energy projects' impacts on the reindeer and Saami livelihoods. Consequently, a group of Saami decided to establish their own consultancy to conduct complementary impact assessments.

Following an amendment to the Planning and Buildings Act (PBA) that transferred local powers over energy to the national government, the government and private companies have the final say on licensing and municipalities can be consulted on environmental impacts on a voluntary basis. While the ministry is unlikely to approve an application that a municipality strongly opposes, municipalities cannot veto a government decision to go ahead with a project it disapproves. The rules for licensing, therefore, allow the government and developers to ignore local concerns.

These constraints on local power benefit energy developers and give them an advantage over other industries that operate under stricter rules. Fosen Vind is a good example of how the rules undermine oversight rather than strengthen it. The town of Åfjord received the first notification about a wind power plant in their locality in 2006 yet the farms were not built until 2017. In the meantime, the developers changed the design, resulting in taller but fewer turbines being installed. The municipality was not consulted about these modifications because the 2008 PBA amendment did not require such consultations. A local development official explained that inhabitants were shocked when they saw the size of the turbines that were passing through their town to be set up in the nearby environment. He believes that many Åfjord residents withdrew their support of the project because of the turbines' size.

Green colonialism

Susanne Normann, a Senior Researcher at the University of Oslo's Centre for Development and the Environment, characterised renewable energy development as a modern form of the violent assimilation strategies and "Norwegianization" endured by the Saami historically. She defines green colonialism in the Nordics as the "current trends of renewable energy development with historical processes of dispossession and subjugation inflicted on the Saami." The Alta Dam conflict in the 1970s can be seen be viewed as an earlier incarnation of "green colonialism".

Several laws have been put in place to redress discrimination by the state, namely: the Cultural Heritage Act (1978) which protects all Saami cultural heritage sites and buildings over 100 years old; the 2005 Finnmark Act which recognises the rights of the Saami to use land as a basis for their culture; and the adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the practice of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC). The Alta Dam conflict played a key role in the Norwegian government's decision to ratify the International Labour Organization Convention 169 which focuses on the rights of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples. Despite these protections in law, the Saami are still denied autonomy over their land and livelihoods.

The wind energy industry extends the colonial practice of erasing Indigenous voices, disregarding their concerns, and undermining their livelihoods.

Non-Saami Norwegians stereotype the Saami as primarily reindeer herders and see protecting this practice as a minority issue prioritised over green energy production. In reality, only 11 out of 96 wind power plant projects on reindeer grazing lands have been rejected.

The Fosen Vind project was fiercely resisted by the Saami for years. With growing contestation, the Norwegian government suspended licenses for new onshore wind power in 2020, but this resumed two years later. In the meantime, the construction of the Fosen Vind farm went ahead. Today, Fosen Vind turbines are fully operational and the state is marching on with more oil, gas and wind energy developments and shows little signs of slowing down.

Wind power for growth

Wind power development in Norway is driven by a strong commitment to green growth and the sector serves as a hub for emerging industries focused on climate change strategies.

Despite its energy and electricity production exceeding domestic demand, Norway is pursuing a large-scale expansion of its wind power capacity. This scaling of wind power is motivated by the new market and growth incentives around renewable energies.

The sector is attracting foreign investments to Norway's economy. While 90 per cent of hydropower projects in the country are owned by the state, county or municipality, 75 per cent of wind power projects are controlled by foreign investment.

Wind power is also seen as an opportunity to revive the economies of town, particularly those with mountainous terrain or coastline and experiencing a decline in population. Locations like Berlevåg (Raggovidda) or Åfjord (Fosen Vind) have served as a hub for new wind farms.

Åfjord serves as a prime example of how wind energy turned a local economy around. Estimates show that it attracts 65 million kroner annually by hosting the Fosen Vind farms. These fresh funds have enabled it to invest in key infrastructure including roads, schools and industry.

Local supporters enthusiastically point out that towns neighbouring Åfjord, which rejected hosting wind farms, face dismal economic prospects – unlike Åfjord. The implication is that Åfjord is a shining example of the benefits of hosting wind power infrastructure and how local economies can turn their fortunes today.

Furthermore, wind energy presents new energy export opportunities. Norway's connection to the European electricity grid mean that chunks of the wind energy produced beyond domestic needs are automatically exported. Berlevåg in the Arctic illustrates the intersection of these challenges many northern communities face. Climate change is disrupting traditional activities, its population is declining, and the local economy is weak. The economic and job opportunities from energy projects thus offer the region and its citizens hope. To some, this prospect make a compelling case for wind power projects in the Arctic.The Raggovidda farm produces more energy than the town of Berlevåg, or its surrounding region will ever need. Yet the parent company of the farm received authorisation to expand production.

While the economic dividends of wind power at both local and national level have incited demand for more construction projects, these have to be reconciled with the widening inequities between municipalities and co-option of land for an already over-producing energy sector.

The environmental injustice of wind energy

From a sustainability perspective, Norwegian wind power is difficult to justify based on the country's current path of energy and electricity consumption.

Large-scale wind power plants are also wrongly promoted as sustainable alternatives to current methods of using land, including those for Indigenous nature-based livelihoods.

Norway invests in wind power because of the immense export opportunities it represents. Those reaping the benefits of this new industry are the private sector, the national government, and municipal governments clinging to economic competitiveness. With their sights set on profit and the economy, the Saami remain overlooked.

The wind energy industry extends the colonial practice of erasing Indigenous voices, disregarding their concerns, and undermining their livelihoods. In the licensing and consultation process, the impacts on the Saami are inadequately assessed, and their demands are often misrepresented. The process also disregards UNDRIP, FPIC, and national laws protecting the Saami. The Saami are not only disproportionately affected by climate change, but they are also now forced to bear the burden of the government's response to it, exacerbating the injustices they already endure.

Anne Karam completed her Research Master's in International Development Studies at the University of Amsterdam in 2022. She is interested in questions of environmental justice in the era of mass renewable energy development and deployment, drawing from the discipline of political ecology and focusing on processes of capitalisation and the mainstreaming of the green growth model. Anne is currently a Gender Advisor at KIT, an applied knowledge non-profit in Amsterdam, where she works mainly on gender and capacity building in agriculture.

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