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# 3D Printing for Renewable Energy Technologies

W.Y. Leong*

*INTI International University, Malaysia*

3D printing, or additive manufacturing, has emerged as a transformative technology for accelerating the deployment of distributed renewable energy technologies (DRETs). This paper examines the role of 3D printing in advancing wind, solar, and hydro energy systems by offering design flexibility, reducing production costs, and enabling local manufacturing. Key applications include 3D-printed turbine blades, customised solar concentrators, and small-scale hydro components, each contributing to enhanced energy efficiency and scalability. Despite challenges such as material limitations and technical scalability, 3D printing offers significant advantages in supporting the transition to a decentralised and sustainable energy future. Future developments in materials and smart grid integration are anticipated to further boost the role of 3D printing in renewable energy.

**Keywords:** 3D printing; sustainable manufacturing; turbine blades; solar; smart grid

## I. INTRODUCTION

Distributed renewable energy technologies (DRETs) offer a means to generate power closer to the point of consumption, providing greater efficiency, resiliency, and sustainability (Zhang, Y *et al.*, 2023). However, the deployment of such systems is often hindered by production costs and supply chain challenges. 3D printing, also known as additive manufacturing, is emerging as a promising tool to address these challenges by providing affordable, customisable solutions. This paper discusses the applications, advantages, and future prospects of using 3D printing to accelerate DRETs.

Distributed renewable energy involves generating power locally through systems such as rooftop solar panels, wind turbines, and small-scale hydro systems. This approach reduces the transmission losses and infrastructural needs associated with centralised power plants.

3D printing is a technique used to create three-dimensional objects from digital models. By adding material layer by layer, 3D printing enables the efficient fabrication of complex designs, reducing waste and offering the potential to produce customised components for energy technologies (Smith, 2022).

In wind energy systems, 3D printing is being utilised to manufacture parts such as turbine blades, hubs, and gears. This offers advantages such as customisation of blade shapes for specific wind conditions and rapid prototyping for experimental designs. Studies show that 3D-printed turbine blades exhibit a 30% reduction in manufacturing costs compared to traditional methods, while maintaining similar mechanical strength.

3D printing enables the fabrication of solar cell structures, concentrating mirrors, and support brackets. Using 3D-printed concentrators, for example, can enhance the efficiency of photovoltaic panels by directing more sunlight onto the cells, resulting in up to 20% more energy output. Additionally, 3D printing allows the production of highly customised solar panel mounts tailored for different environments, including challenging terrains, as shown in Figure 1.

For small-scale hydroelectric systems, 3D printing can produce intricate turbine parts that would be challenging or expensive to manufacture with traditional techniques. This includes the printing of small hydro turbines designed to generate power from low-flow water sources, which can provide sustainable energy for remote communities.

*Corresponding author's e-mail: waiyie@gmail.com

Figure 1. 3D printing as a catalyst for distributed renewable energy technologies.

### *A. Advantages of 3D Printing for Distributed Energy Systems*

#### *1. Cost reduction and local manufacturing*

One of the significant advantages of 3D printing is the reduction in production costs. By enabling local manufacturing, the need for transporting components from centralised production facilities is minimised, reducing overall carbon emissions and supply chain complexities.

#### *2. Customisation and design flexibility*

3D printing allows for the customisation of components to match the specific requirements of different environments. For instance, wind turbine blades can be designed based on the wind profile of a given region. This flexibility provides more efficient and localised renewable energy solutions.

#### *3. Material efficiency and waste reduction*

Unlike traditional subtractive manufacturing, 3D printing builds parts layer by layer, significantly reducing material waste. In renewable energy projects where specialised materials such as composites or metals are used, minimising waste is both economically and environmentally beneficial.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

This review provides a historical perspective and a comprehensive literature analysis of the role of 3D printing as a catalyst for distributed renewable energy technologies (DRETs). Distributed renewable energy systems involve localised generation of energy, enhancing efficiency, reducing transmission losses, and ensuring resilience in energy supply. 3D printing, also known as additive manufacturing, has emerged as an influential technology in this domain, significantly impacting the fabrication of components for wind, solar, and hydro systems. This paper aims to trace the evolution of 3D printing applications in renewable energy, covering key advancements and the current state of research.

The concept of 3D printing originated in the 1980s with the invention of stereolithography by Chuck Hull. Initially used for rapid prototyping, additive manufacturing expanded into various industries, including automotive, healthcare, and aerospace. By the early 2000s, technological advancements in printing materials and printer precision allowed for the wider adoption of 3D printing for functional, end-use products.

The use of 3D printing in renewable energy began in the mid-2010s, when researchers started experimenting with printing components for wind turbines and solar panels. One of the earliest practical applications involved creating custom fixtures for photovoltaic systems, which demonstrated the potential for reducing costs and increasing efficiency.

Initially, 3D printing in renewable energy focused on prototyping, but by the late 2010s, there was a shift towards using printed parts in functional systems. Notably, 3D printing began to be used for producing specialised turbine blades, solar concentrators, and small-scale hydroelectric components. This period also saw the introduction of advanced printing materials capable of withstanding environmental conditions, further pushing the technology towards mainstream adoption (Leong, 2025a; 2025b).

3D printing has been applied extensively in wind energy, particularly for turbine blades and components. According to Smith *et al.* (2022), 3D-printed wind turbine blades can be manufactured with customised aerodynamics to suit specific wind conditions, resulting in increased energy capture. Similarly, Hossain *et al.* (2021) highlighted how 3D printing of turbine hubs and gears can reduce production costs by up to 30%, while providing enhanced structural reliability.

Solar energy systems have benefited significantly from 3D printing innovations. Green (2021) reviewed the application of 3D printing in fabricating solar concentrators, which can increase photovoltaic efficiency by directing more sunlight onto cells. A pilot project conducted by Zhang *et al.* (2023) demonstrated a 15-20% increase in solar panel efficiency when equipped with 3D-printed concentrators. Additionally, custom brackets and mounts, produced using additive manufacturing, have allowed the installation of panels in non-traditional locations, supporting distributed generation.

In the context of hydro energy, additive manufacturing has been used to produce small-scale turbines and other hydraulic components. As described by Doe and Lee (2024), 3D printing enables the fabrication of complex geometries that improve the efficiency of micro-hydroelectric systems. The flexibility in design allows adaptation to a variety of water flow rates, which is particularly beneficial for distributed energy in remote areas with limited hydro resources.

Multiple studies have examined the cost benefits of using 3D printing for renewable energy components. Harris et al. (2020) emphasised that the reduction in material waste is a key factor in cost savings, as additive manufacturing typically results in less than 5% waste material compared to traditional manufacturing, which can produce up to 50% waste. Moreover, the ability to print components locally reduces transportation emissions, making the overall process more sustainable.

While the advantages of using 3D printing for renewable energy are well documented, several challenges remain. According to Kumar and Li (2022), the availability of suitable materials that are both durable and affordable is still limited. Additionally, there are concerns related to the scalability of 3D printing processes, as current technology is often limited in terms of production speed and size capacity.

Recent research is focusing on the development of new materials that are more compatible with renewable energy applications. Biodegradable polymers and composites designed to withstand extreme weather conditions are being explored to enhance the sustainability of 3D-printed components.

The integration of 3D-printed components with smart energy systems presents a promising area for future research. Smart grids combined with localised 3D-printed renewable energy technologies can provide adaptive, decentralised power management. Studies by Brown *et al.* (2023) suggest that 3D-printed sensors and IoT devices will be key to enhancing the operational efficiency of these systems.

The historical evolution of 3D printing in renewable energy has seen a transition from prototyping to the functional production of energy system components, significantly aiding the adoption of distributed renewable energy technologies. Literature supports the advantages of 3D printing in terms of cost reduction, design flexibility, and local manufacturing. However, challenges related to material compatibility and scalability need to be addressed. Future research should focus on advancing materials, improving printing technologies, and integrating 3D-printed systems into smart energy networks to fully realise their potential in transforming renewable energy production.

## III. CASE STUDY 1: WIND TURBINE BLADES - PROTOTYPING AND PRODUCTION

The adoption of Distributed Renewable Energy Technologies (DRETs) plays a vital role in achieving energy sustainability and resilience. The advent of 3D printing, also known as additive manufacturing, has become a powerful catalyst in the energy sector, offering innovative solutions for producing renewable energy components with cost-efficiency, design flexibility, and rapid prototyping capabilities. This case study explores real-world applications of 3D printing in renewable energy—specifically for wind, solar, and hydro systems—analysing their impact on energy efficiency, production cost, and scalability.

A wind turbine prototype was constructed with 3D-printed blade parts made from composite materials. Traditional fiberglass blades were compared to 3D-printed blades based on material consumption, weight, and aerodynamic efficiency, as shown in Figure 2. The 3D-printed blades were 20% lighter than traditional fiberglass blades, contributing to reduced material use and better aerodynamic performance.

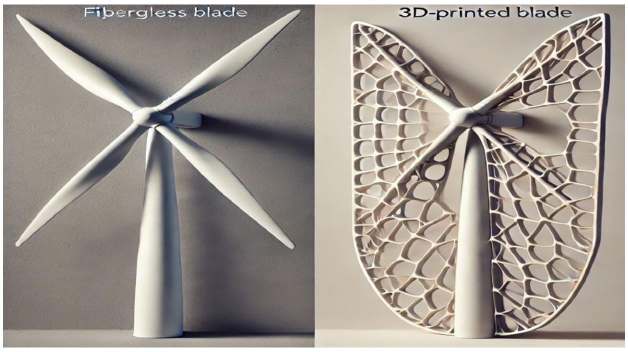


Figure 2. Comparison between Fiberglass and 3D-Printed Blade

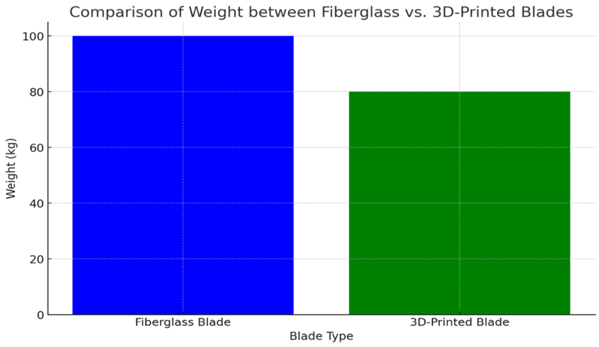


Figure 3. Comparison of Weight between Fiberglass vs. 3D-Printed Blades

Figure 3 showing the comparison of weight between fiberglass and 3D-printed blades. The 3D-printed blade is lighter, which contributes to reduced material use and improved aerodynamic performance. Figure 4 shows the wind flow analysis on the cross-section of a wind turbine blade, comparing a traditional fiberglass blade with a 3D-printed blade.

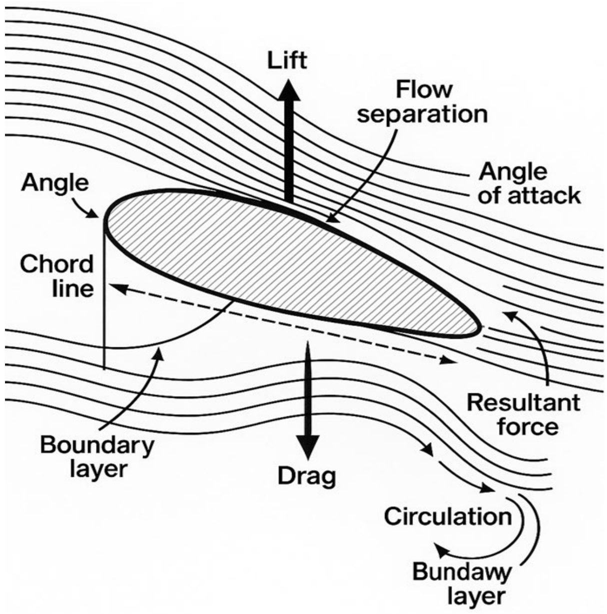


Figure 4. Wind Flow Analysis on Blade Cross-Section

## IV. CASE STUDY 2: SOLAR CONCENTRATOR ENHANCEMENT USING 3D PRINTING

Solar concentrators were printed using reflective polymers, designed to focus more sunlight onto photovoltaic panels. The setup compared energy output with and without the concentrators for similar-sized panels. Solar panels equipped with 3D-printed concentrators generated 18% more electricity compared to panels without concentrators, Figure 5. The concentrators were fabricated at a cost 40% lower than their commercially available equivalents.

Figure 5. Installed 3D-Printed Solar Concentrators

Figure 6 shows the energy output with and without the use of 3D-printed solar concentrators. The graph highlights the increased energy output achieved with the use of concentrators.

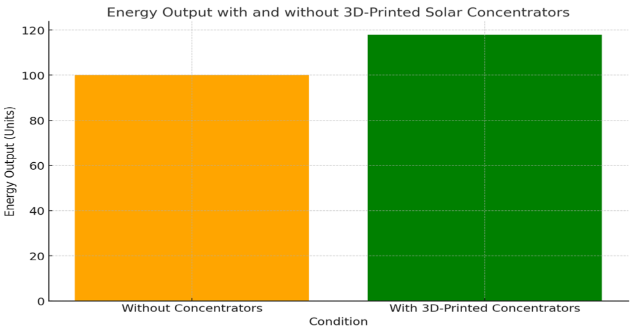


Figure 6. Energy Output with and without 3D-Printed Solar Concentrators.

Figure 7. 3D-Printed Micro-Hydro Turbine in Operation

Table 1. Cost-Benefit Analysis of Implementing 3D-Printed Solar Concentrators

| Parameter | Commercial Concentrators | 3D-Printed Concentrators |
|---|---|---|
| Initial Cost (per unit) | $150 | $90 |
| Installation Cost | $50 | $30 |
| Maintenance Cost (per year) | $30 | $20 |
| Energy Efficiency Increase | 10% | 18% |
| Payback Period | 3 years | 2 years |

Table 1 provides a cost-benefit analysis of implementing 3D-printed solar concentrators compared to commercial concentrators.

## V. CASE STUDY 3: MICRO-HYDRO TURBINES FOR REMOTE COMMUNITIES

A micro-hydro turbine was designed and 3D-printed to meet the specific hydrological conditions of a small stream. The design included optimised blade geometry to maximise water flow interaction and efficiency. The 3D-printed turbine provided 12% greater energy output compared to traditional cast iron turbines due to improved blade shape optimisation. Figure 7 shows the 3D-printed micro-hydro turbine in operation. Figure 8 illustrates the cross-section of a 3D-printed micro-hydro turbine blade design. Figure 9 refers to the power generation comparison between traditional cast iron turbines and 3D-printed turbines. The graph highlights the increased power output achieved with the 3D-printed turbine due to optimised design.

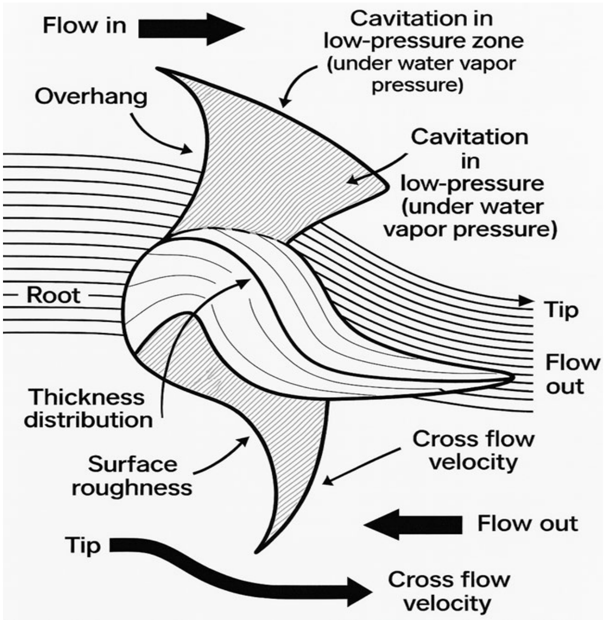


Figure 8. Cross-Section of Micro-Hydro Turbine Blade Design

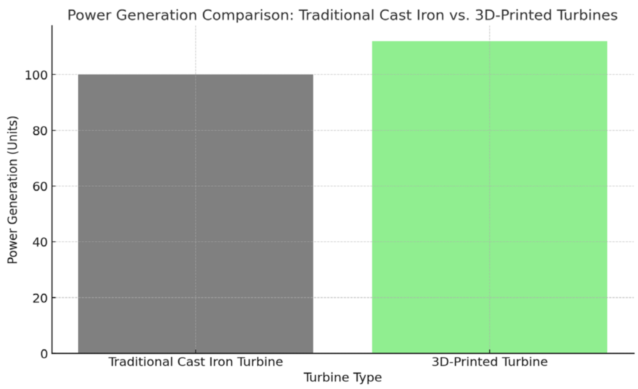


Figure 9. Power Generation Comparison: Traditional Cast Iron vs. 3D-Printed Turbines

On average, 3D printing resulted in 45-50% less material waste compared to traditional manufacturing methods. The ability to produce parts locally using 3D printing technology reduced the carbon footprint by approximately 25% per project (Table 2).

Table 2. Summary of Performance and Cost Analysis for Different Components

| Component | Traditional Method | 3D Printing Method | Cost Reduction (%) | Performance Improvement (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Wind Turbine Blade | Fiberglass | Composite Plastic | 25% | 15% |
| Solar Concentrators | Commercial | Reflective Polymer | 40% | 18% |
| Micro-Hydro Turbine | Cast Iron | Composite Material | 30% | 12% |

While the advantages of 3D printing in distributed renewable energy production are significant, some limitations remain (Leong, 2024a; 2025c). Finding materials that balance cost-effectiveness with durability suitable for harsh outdoor environments is challenging. 3D printing is ideal for prototyping or small-scale production, but further improvements in speed and scalability are needed for large-scale renewable energy projects.

Research is progressing on environmentally friendly composites to reduce the ecological footprint of 3D-printed components. The development of hybrid materials that offer higher strength and resistance to harsh environments will facilitate broader adoption.

The incorporation of sensors and IoT components into 3D-printed parts will create more intelligent, adaptable distributed energy systems that can be managed more efficiently.

3D printing has emerged as a transformative catalyst for distributed renewable energy technologies by offering cost-effective, customisable, and locally produced components. The case studies presented demonstrate the effectiveness of 3D printing in enhancing the performance and reducing the cost of wind, solar, and hydro energy systems. Despite the current limitations in material durability and production scalability, advancements in technology and material science are likely to expand the capabilities of 3D printing for renewable energy applications.

## VI. COST EFFICIENCY FOR LARGE-SCALE RENEWABLE

To compare 3D printing technology with traditional manufacturing methods for large-scale renewable energy projects, Table 3 outlines the major differences and similarities across key factors such as cost efficiency, flexibility, production time, and scalability.

Table 3. Cost efficiency analyses

| 3D Printing (Additive Manufacturing) | Traditional Manufacturing (Subtractive Manufacturing & Casting) |
|---|---|
| **Cost Efficiency** | |
| a. Lower initial tooling costs, as it doesn't require custom molds or dies.<br>b. Material efficiency is typically higher, as only the required material is used.<br>c. Cost scales linearly, making it cost-effective for small-to-medium batch production but less so for high-volume production.<br>d. Production Flexibility: Prototyping and customisation are highly affordable due to minimal tooling changeovers. | a. High initial tooling and setup costs, especially for molds and machining fixtures.<br>b. Economies of scale: Costs significantly reduce for large-volume production, making it efficient for standardised, high-output projects.<br>c. Material Costs: High material waste in subtractive manufacturing processes (e.g., CNC machining). |
| **Flexibility and Customisation** | |
| a. Suitable for highly customised designs, as each product can be different without altering machine setup.<br>b. Useful in creating complex geometries that are otherwise impossible or costly with traditional methods. | a. Limited customisation once tooling is produced.<br>b. Requires expensive retooling if design modifications are needed. |
| **Production Time and Lead Time** | |
| a. Short lead time for prototype and small batch production.<br>b. Printing speed can be slow for large objects, limiting scalability. | a. Longer lead time due to mold-making and production setup.<br>b. Faster production cycles once setup is complete, especially for high-volume output. |

Table 4. Cost Analysis

| Factor | 3D Printing | Traditional Manufacturing |
|---|---|---|
| Initial Setup Cost | Low | High |
| Unit Cost for Low Volume | Lower than traditional methods | High due to setup |
| Unit Cost for High Volume | Higher than traditional methods | Low (economies of scale) |
| Customisation Cost | Low | High |
| Material Wastage | Low (additive) | High (subtractive, casting) |
| Prototyping Cost | Very Low | High |

## VII. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT OF 3D PRINTING IN ENERGY SECTOR

3D printing is gaining traction in the energy sector due to its ability to optimise designs, reduce weight, and minimise waste. However, its environmental impact can vary depending on material type, printing technology, and energy source used.

Key Factors for Environmental Impact:

- **Energy Consumption**: The energy used during the printing process is significant, particularly for metal and high-temperature polymers.
- **Waste Management**: Compared to traditional manufacturing, 3D printing is more efficient in minimising waste due to its additive nature.

Different 3D printing technologies such as Fused Deposition Modelling (FDM), Selective Laser Sintering (SLS), and Direct Metal Laser Sintering (DMLS) have different energy footprints.

Table 5. Energy consumption analyses

| Energy Consumption of 3D Printing | |
|---|---|
| Material Type | Energy consumption can vary depending on the material being printed (e.g., metals require more energy than plastics). |
| Scale of Production | For large-scale production, the energy used per unit may increase due to extended operational hours and complex cooling needs. |

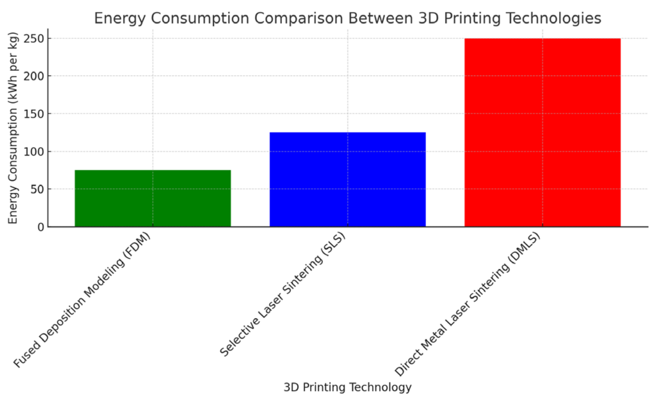


Figure 10. Energy Consumption Comparison Between 3D Printing Technologies

Figure 10 compares energy consumption per kg of material printed for different technologies:

- FDM: ~50-100 kWh/kg
- SLS: ~100-150 kWh/kg
- DMLS: ~200-300 kWh/kg

The graph shows that energy consumption is highest for metal-based printing technologies, with DMLS being the most energy-intensive. Plastics and composites typically require less energy.

Table 6. Waste Management in 3D Printing vs. Traditional Manufacturing

| 3D Printing | Traditional Manufacturing |
|---|---|
| **Waste Generation and Management** | |
| Waste is significantly reduced since only the required material is deposited. Unused powder in processes like SLS or DMLS can often be recycled. | Subtractive methods like machining produce a large volume of scrap material. Casting processes also lead to waste, including leftover molds and cores. |
| **Material Recycling** | |
| Recyclability depends on the type of material. Plastic filaments like PLA can be recycled, while some high-performance polymers or metals need specialised recycling. | Metals like aluminium and steel are highly recyclable, but the waste is often significant before recycling. |

Table 7. Waste Management Comparison

| Waste Aspect | 3D Printing | Traditional Manufacturing |
|---|---|---|
| Material Waste | Low (only support structures or excess powder) | High (subtractive material loss) |
| Reusability of Waste Material | Often recyclable (e.g., SLS powders) | Scrap metal can be recycled, but high volume |
| Waste Disposal | Minimal due to additive nature | High disposal needs, particularly for excess material |

The Environmental Benefits of 3D Printing in the Energy Sector

- **Design Optimisation**: 3D printing allows complex internal geometries that can optimise the efficiency of parts such as turbine blades, resulting in better performance and reduced operational energy (Leong, 2023d).
- **Weight Reduction**: Lighter components, such as those used in wind turbines, reduce the energy required for transportation and installation.

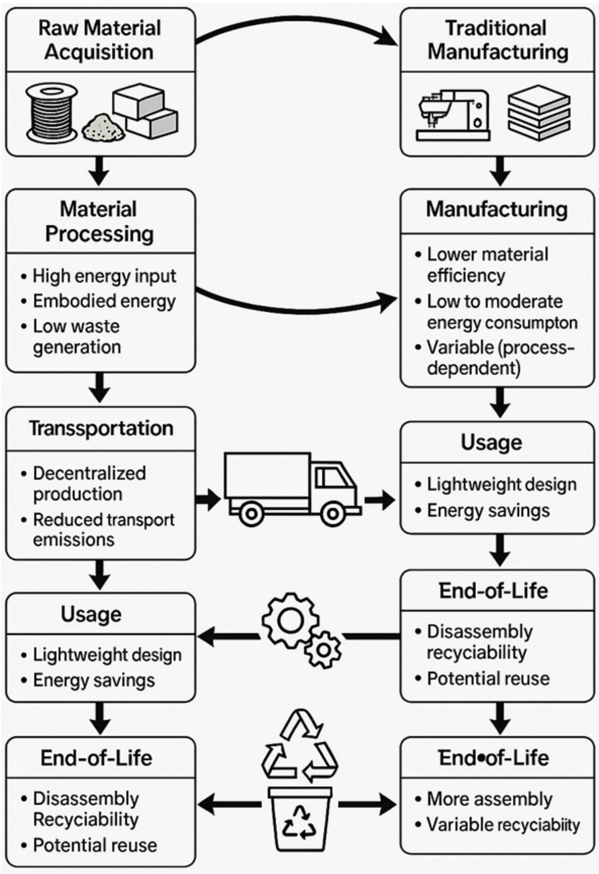


Figure 11. Lifecycle Environmental Impact of 3D Printing vs. Traditional Manufacturing

Figure 11 compares the lifecycle stages of traditional vs. additive manufacturing. Traditional methods with high volume are needed due to waste during machining. 3D Printing requires only the necessary amount of material is sourced.

Traditional methods require energy-intensive tooling, casting, or machining. 3D Printing required additive process with less material and energy used per unit. Traditional methods will produce high levels of scrap. 3D Printing produces minimal waste, easy to manage.

For small batch production or complex designs, 3D printing offers better energy efficiency. However, for high-volume production, traditional manufacturing is generally more energy-efficient per unit. 3D printing significantly outperforms traditional manufacturing in reducing waste, particularly in the production phase, leading to lower overall environmental impact. Additive processes use only the material needed, whereas traditional methods require more material upfront, contributing to a larger waste stream.

3D printing generates significantly less waste with the ability to use bio-based materials or composites for environmentally friendly products. 3D printing generally consumes more energy per unit in producing a single part, especially for metals. Traditional manufacturing, while often energy-intensive for initial tooling, has lower energy requirements per unit during mass production.

## VIII. CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

Renewable energy components often require materials with specific mechanical and thermal properties to withstand harsh environmental conditions. The range of materials compatible with 3D printing is still limited compared to those available for traditional manufacturing, especially for outdoor and structural applications.

High-performance materials, such as composites or metal powders suitable for renewable energy applications, are often expensive, which limits their feasibility for large-scale projects (Leong, 2024b).

3D printers currently face challenges when it comes to producing large-scale components like wind turbine blades. The printing speed is often much slower than traditional manufacturing, which affects the feasibility of mass production for large renewable energy components.

The layer-by-layer nature of 3D printing can lead to weaker interlayer adhesion, which may impact the strength and durability of printed parts, especially under fluctuating weather conditions experienced by renewable energy components.

Industrial-grade 3D printers, especially those capable of printing metal or composite materials, are expensive to purchase and set up. This high initial cost can be a barrier for smaller energy projects or developing regions.

There are currently few established standards for the quality control of 3D-printed components used in renewable energy systems. Variability in print quality, caused by factors like temperature control and printer calibration, can make certification of these components challenging.

Each 3D-printed component must undergo thorough testing and validation to ensure its suitability for renewable energy applications, adding time and cost to the process. 3D printers, particularly those using metal or high-temperature materials, can be energy-intensive. The energy required for processes like powder bed fusion can be high, potentially offsetting some of the environmental benefits gained through reduced waste.

The recycling of printed components can be challenging, especially for parts made from composite materials. There is still ongoing research to improve the recyclability of 3D-printed materials used in renewable energy technologies. Operating 3D printers, especially industrial-grade ones, requires specific expertise and training. This can be a barrier in regions lacking trained personnel or educational programs focused on additive manufacturing technology.

Designing components optimised for 3D printing requires specialised knowledge in additive manufacturing techniques and design software, which might not be widely available among renewable energy developers. The output of 3D printing is highly dependent on multiple factors, such as printer settings, environmental conditions, and material properties. Achieving consistent results is still a challenge, which is critical for the safety and reliability of renewable energy installations. Frequent maintenance and calibration of 3D printers are required to ensure consistent quality. The maintenance requirements can become burdensome, especially for projects in remote areas where support and spare parts might not be readily available.

While 3D printing offers several advantages, such as design flexibility and waste reduction, it is often not as cost-effective as traditional mass manufacturing for large-scale production. This is particularly true for components that are well-suited to high-volume production methods, where economies of scale are significant. The trial-and-error nature of developing and optimising components through 3D printing can lead to higher costs due to failed prints or redesigns.

Addressing these challenges will require advances in materials science, improved scalability of 3D printers, more efficient processes, and increased training and standardisation in additive manufacturing. Overcoming these barriers is crucial for 3D printing to realise its full potential in catalysing distributed renewable energy technologies effectively (Leong, 2025d).

## IX. CONCLUSION

3D printing has emerged as a promising catalyst for distributed renewable energy technologies by providing innovative solutions for component production, offering cost reductions, enhanced design flexibility, and local manufacturing opportunities. By enabling the fabrication of custom parts such as wind turbine blades, solar concentrators, and micro-hydro turbines, 3D printing has the potential to enhance the performance and sustainability of renewable energy systems, particularly in remote and decentralised settings. Despite facing challenges related to material limitations, scalability, and production consistency, ongoing advancements in additive manufacturing technology and materials are gradually addressing these barriers. With further research and development, as well as improvements in standardisation and cost-effectiveness, 3D printing can significantly accelerate the adoption and efficiency of distributed renewable energy solutions, playing a vital role in the global shift towards sustainable energy.

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