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Climate policy robs the world's poor of their hopes

By Roger Pielke and Daniel Sarewitz

We need technologies that work in the US and in Pakistan, say Roger Pielke and Daniel Sarewitz



Having failed to stem carbon emissions in rich countries or in rapidly industrialising ones, policy makers have focused their attention on the only remaining target: poor countries that do not emit much carbon to begin with.

Legislation to cap US carbon emissions was defeated in Congress in 2009. But that did not prevent the Obama administration from imposing a cap on emissions from energy projects of the Overseas Private Investment Corporation, a US federal agency that finances international development. Other institutions of the rich world that have decided to limit support for fossil fuel energy projects

include the World Bank and the European Investment Bank.

Such decisions have painful consequences. A recent report from the non-profit Center for Global Development estimates that \$10bn invested in renewable energy projects in sub-Saharan Africa could provide electricity for 30m people. If the same amount of money went into gas-fired generation, it would supply about 90m people – three times as many.

In Nigeria, the UN Development Programme is spending \$10m to help “improve the energy efficiency of a series of end-use equipment . . . in residential and public buildings”. As a way of lifting people out of poverty, this is fanciful at best. Nigeria is the world’s sixth-largest oil exporter, with vast reserves of natural gas as well. Yet 80m of its people lack access to electricity. Nigerians do not simply need their equipment to be more efficient; they need a copious supply of energy derived from plentiful local sources.

Or consider Pakistan, where energy shortages in a rapidly growing nation of 180m have led to civil unrest – as well as rampant destruction of forests, mostly to provide firewood for cooking and heating. Western development agencies have refused to finance a project to use Pakistan’s Thar coal deposits for low-carbon natural gas production and electricity generation because of concerns over carbon emissions. Half a world away, Germany is building 10 new coal plants over the next two years.

These examples emerge from a larger, uglier background: a widely shared assumption that poor nations need not aspire to the sort of energy consumption seen in North America, western Europe and other wealthy regions. For example, the World Bank’s action plan for energy access fails to foresee that residents of a poor nation such as Chad might eventually aspire to use more than, say, a 10th of the energy consumption enjoyed by a middle-income nation such as Bulgaria.

Aspirations are critical here. If two lightbulbs, a fan and a radio are the goal – a standard measure of “energy access” used by the UN’s Sustainable Energy for All initiative – then a couple of solar panels or windmills might do the job. But if the rapidly urbanising poor are to have any chance of prosperity, they need access to energy on the same scale as all modern economies.

Climate activists warn that the inhabitants of poor countries are especially vulnerable to the future climate changes that our greenhouse gas emissions will cause. Why then, do they simultaneously promote the green imperialism that helps lock in the poverty that makes these countries so vulnerable?

If, in coming decades, Africa was to achieve rapid economic growth of the kind that China has experienced, it would lift hundreds of millions of people out of poverty. But as the rich world can attest, economic growth both requires energy consumption and leads to more of it – most of which must be provided by fossil fuels.

Last year China’s 1.4bn people were responsible for more than 10bn tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions, while the 1bn people on the entire African continent emitted just a 10th of that amount. Africa’s population could exceed China’s within a decade; it could be double China’s by the middle of the century. The prospects of these billions of people depend in large part on growth in their energy production and consumption.

Nations such as China and Brazil have big aspirations. They have not accepted a future without fossil fuels. If we are to reduce emissions without condemning vast swaths of humanity to unending poverty, we will have to develop inexpensive, low-carbon energy technologies that are as appropriate for the US and Bulgaria as they are for Nigeria and Pakistan. Even this will involve sacrifice; it will require an investment of significant resources over many decades.

Until these technologies are brought to fruition, we must work with what we have. We in the rich world have chosen economic growth over emissions reductions. It is cruelly hypocritical of us to prevent poor countries from growing, too. If we are forced to adapt to life on a planet with a less hospitable climate, the poor should at least confront the challenge with the same advantages that are enjoyed by the rich.

The writers are, respectively, professors at the University of Colorado and Arizona State University

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