



# Neoliberal energy transitions in the South: Kenyan experiences



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## ABSTRACT

What is the relationship between the direction and form of an energy transition and the political economy within which it is embedded? This paper explores how the nature of (low carbon) energy transitions is strongly influenced by the process of neoliberalisation that shape energy policy in the South. We seek to understand emergent energy transitions and to advance their theorisation through an account of the political economy of energy transition in Kenya. In contrast to the often techno-managerial orientation of literatures on socio-technical transitions, we explore the political terrain upon which competing visions of energy futures and material interests collide and seek to accommodate one another. We develop a political economy account that emphasises the structural and disciplinary power of capital and global institutions to set the terms of transition. This expresses itself in both delimiting the autonomy of state actors and by reconfiguring domestic institutional and social power in ways that shape the distributional politics of transitions.

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## 1. Introduction

Like many African countries, Kenya is at critical juncture with respect to defining its energy future. The challenge it faces is to enable a 'just transition' to a lower carbon economy: one that delivers poverty reduction and climate resilience simultaneously (Swilling and Annecke, 2012; Newell and Mulvaney, 2013). Although this presents a social and technical challenge of staggering proportions, thinking about who sets the terms of transition raises key political questions about the role of actors, interests and institutions as they seek to advance competing energy pathways and associated technologies. Despite the relative paucity of academic attention, or acknowledgement by policy-makers of their importance, issues of power and political economy play a key role in determining technological and social outcomes: the winners and losers from different energy pathways, on whose terms the trade-offs between competing policy objectives are resolved, and how.

This paper addresses these theoretical and practical challenges through an account of the political economy of energy transitions and the ways in which they are constrained and enabled by processes of neoliberalisation. We refer to neoliberalisation not as an end state, but rather as a contested and spatially and socially uneven process through which ever more areas of political life are subject to market discipline which increase the dependence on

private actors for the provision of public goods. With this endeavour we are responding to calls from others who find the 'political economy of energy transitions is a vastly understudied area' (Goldthau and Sovacool, 2012: 238) amid 'the need to foreground social processes and power relations' in transitions research (Lawhon and Murphy, 2012: 355). In particular, we suggest that forms of power derived from control over production, finance and technology should assume a central place in accounts of the politics of transition. We also emphasise the specificity of these processes in the global South, where configurations of power between states, donors and transnational capital have distinct characteristics that have not been well captured by the Eurocentric origins and focus of socio-technical transitions literature to date (Baker et al., 2014; Swilling and Annecke, 2012). We develop this argument through an account of several recent policy processes in the Kenyan energy sector, and suggest that a transnational reading of political and social relations – embedding domestic energy politics within global policy networks and circuits of power – illuminates the critical and contested role of the state in neoliberal energy transitions.

Kenya presents an interesting case study to explore these politics and the potential of theoretical tools to account for them. Kenya has enacted neoliberal reforms in the energy sector, while the state continues to play important roles in energy service delivery and coordination. The government has attracted significant investment in both renewable energy generation and conventional fossil resources. It has taken a pro-active role in articulating a national climate change strategy, while seeking the development

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of new hydrocarbon reserves. A new suite of constitutional reforms and development planning processes are re-shaping the way that formal governance structures are organised, while informal ways of doing politics persist. To build this account we draw on 29 interviews conducted during August–September 2013 with government officials, donors, businesses and non-governmental organisations engaged in the policy process; reflections gleaned from a dissemination event on this research held in Nairobi in 2014; and analysis of policy documents. This enables process-tracing of key initiatives and mapping of networks and relations of power between prominent actors, undertaken with participants and users of the research in Kenya to affirm or challenge our findings.

The paper is structured as follows. First we outline our case for moving beyond a socio-technical understanding of transitions towards a political economy understanding of how power operates through neoliberal processes of transition. Second, we develop a scalar account of how donors have influenced the 'landscape' of transition through the exercise of disciplinary power to embed neoliberal reforms in Kenya's energy sector. Third, we describe the role played by the Kenyan state and donors in directing the development of new renewable energy projects within the partially liberalised energy sector. We emphasise the importance of public risk-taking in the making of markets and the distribution of value, and the political support that has been mobilised behind particular technologies. We conclude with some reflections on the empirical and theoretical findings of the paper.

## 2. From socio-technical to neoliberal transitions

Insights from theories of socio-technical transitions provide a useful but limited understanding of the ways in which shifts in energy generation and distribution in Kenya are taking place. The term 'socio-technical transition' can provide both a description of transformation from one energy system to another, and a set of tools and concepts to explain and enable such transitions. Academic work on socio-technical transitions seeks to understand how, when and where transitions to low-carbon socio-technical regimes can come about (Rip and Kemp, 1998; Meadowcroft, 2011; Scrase and Smith, 2009). Transitions in this sense refer to 'deep structural changes' in systems such as energy that involve long-term and complex reconfigurations of technology, policy, infrastructure, scientific knowledge, and social and cultural practices to sustainable ends (Geels, 2011: 24). A transition implies 'major technological transformations in the way societal functions such as transportation, communication, housing, feeding are fulfilled' (Geels, 2002: 1257).

A great deal of insight (and debate) into the nature of socio-technical transitions has been generated through a 'multilevel perspective' (MLP) on transitions (Rip and Kemp, 1998; Geels, 2002, 2011). The MLP is used to analyse system change through three heuristic levels: established socio-technical 'regimes', broad exogenous 'landscape' factors that influence regimes, and 'niche' sustainability experiments that might disrupt them. The 'landscape' of a socio-technical system is seen to comprise the structuring forces of ideologies, institutions, discourses and political and economic trends that constitute enduring forms of socio-technical organization. The socio-technical landscape provides a point of departure for analysing the ways in which neoliberal principles of energy governance have been advanced through the institutional power of international finance institutions exercised in partnership with state actors. 'Regimes' in contrast are made up of the complex of practices, regulatory requirements, institutions and infrastructures required to achieve particular societal functions, such as mobility, cooking or heating. This formulation of a dominant socio-technical system of generating, distributing and consuming energy invites a

(critical) understanding of the role of the state in transitions, which we seek to provide below. 'Niches' meanwhile provide a potential space within which social and technological learning processes, networking, and expectations develop in relation to forms of socio-technical configuration that are alternative to those of a regime. This helps us to understand patterns of low-carbon innovation developing in Kenya and how they seek to compete for the attention and resources of actors at different scales.

Despite some recent attempts to pay greater attention to the role of politics and power in transitions (Geels, 2014; Scoones et al., 2015), the transitions literature to date has had relatively little to say about the politics of which energy sources are prioritised, by whom and why, and what this means for who secures access to energy. There is a growing recognition that 'regime resistance' (Geels, 2014) matters, and that governments need to exert authority over market actors to initiate more rapid transitions without detailed attention to the political processes and terrain upon which they play out. Recognising that varied institutional contexts give rise to very different forms of decision making and power asymmetries that may influence sustainability trajectories in different ways (Hansen and Coenen, 2015; Kern, 2011; Kuzemko et al., 2016), requires us to develop specific accounts of the politics and political economy of contending energy pathways in particular contexts.

In this regard much of the material that we discuss below addresses the trade-offs between inclusive development and the promotion of renewable energies. It brings into conflict competing visions within the Kenyan state with different fractions of domestic and international capital that have a stake in distinct energy pathways; the commitments of donors to see energy transitions achieved through market-based mechanisms backed by targeted state intervention; and the uneven power relations through which these visions are contested. We are sympathetic, therefore, to the suggestion from Lawhon and Murphy (2012: 371) to consider:

who is (or is not) represented and included in transition decisions; where and at what scale decisions are made; whose knowledge counts and why; how power relations influence regime dynamics, landscape features, and the prospects for niche innovations.

In this regard emerging literature in Geography has pointed to the importance of understanding energy transitions as uneven social and spatial processes (Calvert, 2016; Huber, 2015; Rutherford and Coutard, 2014). These processes involve the 'reconfiguration of current patterns and scales of economic and social activity' (Bridge et al., 2013: 331), in which 'people and places unevenly experience the costs and benefits of energy extraction, generation, financing, distribution and consumption' (Newell and Mulvaney, 2013: 4). These contributions have helped to address the neglect of power and social relations that configure questions of energy access and energy justice, and suggest important starting points for analysis of the specific features of colonial and post-colonial socio-technical energy systems that have developed in the South. However, to complement this emphasis on the uneven social consequences of energy transitions, we still require an account of the politics, power and social relations that produce those outcomes: an account of why the organisation of energy systems privilege some actors, interests and classes over others, as part of a broader account of how political economies influence energy transitions.

## 3. Political economies of energy transition

Few studies have sought to develop a political economy analysis of the role of competing energy pathways in Kenya. Most studies to date on the transition away from fossil fuels in the country have focussed on the promotion, diffusion and performance of renew-

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