



Energy justice for all? Rethinking Sustainable Development Goal 7 through struggles over traditional energy practices in Sierra Leone



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ABSTRACT

With Sustainable Development Goal 7, the United Nations has declared its ambition to ensure access to modern energy for all by 2030. Aside from broad appeals to differentiated responsibilities and 'greener' technologies, however, the goal leaves significant procedural questions unaddressed. This paper argues that the basic orientation of this approach is problematic, undermining possibilities for progress toward energy justice and equitable development. First, in framing the issue of global energy distribution in broad techno-managerial terms it obscures how particular geographies of energy poverty have been shaped by critical political economic influences. Second, in privileging modern forms of energy and focusing on an end state of universal adoption, over a broader goal of eliminating energy poverty, the approach of SDG7 presents tangible hazards to many of those it seeks to benefit. Using a case study of Sierra Leonean rural cooking energy policy, we demonstrate how the underlying mentality of SDG7 feeds into existing discourses that marginalise producers and users of 'traditional' energy sources, threatening important livelihoods. With such evidence, we argue that for justice in energy policy to be realised holistically, there is a need to question *how* our knowledge of energy 'problems' have emerged to avoid epistemologically autarchic policy positions.

1. Introduction

As part of its 2030 development agenda, on September 23, 2015 the United Nations passed Sustainable Development Goal 7 (SDG7) "[to] ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all" (UNDP, 2015a, b). In many ways, the presence of this "energy goal" within the SDGs marked the emergence of a new *cause celebre* within global energy debates, as neither the 1992 Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (United Nations, 2014) nor the Millennium Development Goals 2000–2015 mentioned energy poverty or access as major issues. While in many ways SDG7 presents an admirable vision for future global energy access and use, what is conspicuously absent from the Goal is any explicit mention of justice issues. In this paper, we examine the implications of this omission and scrutinise the relationship of SDG7 to questions of energy justice. We further ponder what true energy justice for all might look like.

Drawing on a case study of cooking energy in Sierra Leone, we present two key critiques of the Goal's formulation. First, while SDG7 embodies a clear distributive ethic (i.e. "modern energy for all") its effective silence on issues of procedural justice frames energy poverty in primarily technical-managerial terms, obscuring the political-eco-

nomics dynamics of which it is a product. Second, we argue that its casting of the fact that "3 billion people rely on wood, coal, charcoal or animal waste for cooking and heating" (UNDP, 2015a, b p. 16) as a key problem and its corresponding identification of "modern" energy distribution as the solution is overly simplistic. While there is little question that access to industrially-produced forms of energy such as electricity is critical for certain forms of development (Bhattacharyya, 2012; Sovacool and Drupady, 2012), we find the assumption that "traditional" energy sources are inferior is problematic. We contend that there is a need to move beyond this simple binary of "modern"=good/"traditional"=bad if procedural issues of energy justice are to be addressed. More broadly speaking we argue that global energy debates must balance consequentialist ethics focused on homogeneity in energy outcomes with policy approaches that emphasise procedural justice in transition, including a voice for the supposed beneficiaries of energy transitions (i.e. recognition justice). Such a conceptual shift would open discussions allowing more respectful consideration of a wider range of energy sources, producers and users, as well as the roles they might play in addressing substantive issues of energy poverty.

The use of simple fuels such as firewood or charcoal and transitions to more "modern" forms of energy has been a key focus of national

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policies and global energy debates for several decades, not least because an estimated 38% of people world-wide rely on biomass for their day-to-day cooking needs (IEA, 2016). Indeed, while the notion of “energy access for all” appeared only recently in global discourses, international concern over fuelwood use has a much longer history, as exemplified by the prominent 1987 publication of *Our Common Future* by the Brundtland Commission (1987). Labelling them “the Vanishing Resource,” the report considered fuelwood supplies to be in rapid decline “in many developing countries, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa” (Brundtland Commission, 1987, p. 159). As such, while the case study presented here focuses on Sierra Leone, it has broad salience with respect to ongoing regional and international policy discussions. In engaging the latter, in this article we employ an “energy justice” lens to interrogate mainstream discourses that have tended to frame biomass energy as an environmental or modernist development problem. Based on our findings, we move beyond the more prosaic recommendation for greater attention to procedural justice in fuelwood energy policy formulation, asserting the need to critically examine *where* and *how* conventional views of fuelwood energy issues have been (and are being) produced. Specifically, we contend that current environmentalist and modernisationist policy discourses surrounding fuelwood are disconnected from the perspectives and experiences of people who actually produce, trade and use fuelwood energy sources. In order to develop these analyses, the following section provides an overview of energy justice debates and their relevance to SDG7. Building on this foundation, the third section describes our research methodology, while the fourth presents an empirically-based investigation of cooking energy production, use and policy dynamics in Sierra Leone. The fifth section analyses the dynamics of the case study from the perspective of recent theorisations of “energy justice”. Finally, the sixth section concludes the discussion, summarising our main arguments and detailing the implications of our findings for current and future evolutions in national and global energy policies.

2. Energy Justice and SDG7

Although the notion of “energy justice” is relatively new both as an analytic frame and a normative ideal (Sovacool and Dworkin, 2014) it is rooted in longstanding philosophical debates on ethics as well as more recent work on “environmental justice” (Jenkins et al., 2014; McCauley et al., 2013). While the former encompasses 2–3 millennia of thought from around the globe, scholarship in the latter area has emerged over the past 2–3 decades, particularly in political ecology – a relatively young transdisciplinary subfield with an emphasis on revealing “winners and losers, hidden costs, and the differential power that produces social and environmental outcomes” (Robbins, 2012, p. 11). Broadly speaking, this work has been grounded in two key propositions. The first is that although they are commonly portrayed as discrete, social and environmental dynamics are fundamentally inter-related, a key consequence of which is that distributions of environmental goods and ills are profoundly linked to (frequently inequitable) political-economic processes. The second is that attempts to “solve” environmental issues are themselves shaped by these same structural political economic forces and frequently reproduce such patterns of disempowerment and injustice (Schlosberg, 2004). The core elements of these themes have been emphasized in recent scholarship on energy justice as exemplified by McCauley et al. (2013) and Jenkins et al. (2016). Developing a triumvirate framework they emphasise: *distributive justice* – a socio-spatial concept directing attention to patterns in the location and dissemination of energy goods and ills; *procedural justice* – a political concern highlighting the allocation of access to and participation in decision-making processes and; *recognition justice* – an epistemological focus on the ways and extents to which disparate forms of knowledges are valued and incorporated (McCauley et al., 2013).

As illustrated by SDG7, however, evolutions in international policy

discourses on energy ethics have been considerably more limited in scope. To be sure, in seeking to “ensure universal access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all” (UNDP, 2015a, b: Target 7a), even in general terms the Goal implicitly embodies the distributive justice approach. Moreover, it is also exemplary in its more specific provisions, perhaps most notably those emphasizing the need to increase renewable energy dissemination (Target 7b) and improve energy efficiency (Target 7c). Since the costs of climate change will be felt most severely by the least developed countries (Thomas and Twyman, 2005) the structure of the global energy system and its climatic effects have been identified as “central justice issues of our time” (Sovacool et al., 2016, p. 18). In explicitly recognising that “energy is the dominant contributor to climate change”, that “reducing the carbon intensity of energy is a key objective in long-term climate goals” (UNDP, 2015a, b) and mandating action for their resolution, therefore, the Goal also implicitly addresses the issue of intergenerational equity in the distribution of the global energy system’s socio-ecological costs. In essence, although it does not directly refer to “justice” or “ethics”, the text of SDG7 expresses principles consistent with a strong theory of distributive justice and closely aligned with the political ecological focus on environmental equity.

As Jones et al. have noted, however, “distributive justice is only one piece of the justice puzzle” (Jones et al., 2015, p. 149), and SDG7’s weaknesses in other areas reveal its limitations as a universal agenda. First, in terms of *procedural justice* it provides very limited guidance. Admittedly it does emphasise the need to “enhance international cooperation” (7.a), particularly in order to upgrade energy supply technology in “least developed countries, small island developing States, and land-locked developing countries” (7.b). Aside from the implied invocation of “common but differentiated responsibilities” for ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ countries established under the Kyoto Protocol (Barrett, 1998), however, questions relating to the forms, principles and processes of such cooperation are left unaddressed. On one hand, since (as the name implies) the Sustainable Development Goals are ends rather than means-oriented, this characteristic is neither surprising nor problematic in itself. On the other hand, this lacuna is nonetheless considerably problematic if energy justice outcomes are contingent on political-economic processes. In essence, without a clear procedural justice agenda SDG7 would seem to be in considerable risk of becoming at best a Sisyphean Quest or, worse, a toothless expression of aspiration.

Second, and perhaps more concerning still, is the complete lack of attention to *recognition justice*. As is often the case with expressions of international policy, the Sustainable Development Goals (including Goal 7) were developed by groups of experts and formally endorsed by governments at the national-state level. While the assumption of a leadership role by the United Nations in this area may be taken as an encouraging development, a consequence of the approach taken is that the energy poor – the intended beneficiaries of the initiative – were marginalised in the process of its creation. The exclusion of their voices limits the range of knowledges and perspectives on which the Goal is based, with important implications for its final formulation and implications. The results are clearly evident in the text of the SDG7, particularly in terms of its dismissive approach to so-called “traditional” energy sources, an expression of modernist development ideology which has been widely critiqued for marginalising alternative approaches (Leach et al., 2008; Powell, 2006; Weber, 2004).

2.1. Methodology

To illustrate our arguments, we draw on a case study of energy policy in the West African nation of Sierra Leone where, as in most of sub-Saharan Africa, the main source of cooking fuel is biomass in the form of firewood or charcoal. Produced on farm and forest lands across the country for subsistence use as well as urban commercial sale (Munro and van der Horst, 2012a; Munro et al., 2016), the importance

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