62. Ethics and energy consumption

by
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Climate change casts the issue of equitable access to energy in a new light, because fossil fuel use damages poor communities that use little oil, coal or gas themselves. A range of approaches exist to thinking about these issues and developing more ethical and just patterns of energy use.

Energy security as a human right

This *World Social Science Report 2013* could not have been produced without energy; academic reflection and dialogue require energy to allow communication. However, one-sixth of the world's population lacks access to electricity and struggles to meet basic and essential needs fundamental to health and well-being, such as heating, lighting, cooking and hygiene, let alone to reflect on social science policy. Electricity has enhanced global reflection on social science.

How can we respond to global ethical dilemmas?

Some people find it difficult to identify with the problem of climate change. In response, Markowitz and Shariff (2012) have proposed strategies for communicators to use to appeal to our moral reasoning and persuade people to take action to address climate change. The recognition that we are one cause of climate change is the first step towards modification of our ethical choices.

Rai et al. (2010) found that although international normative texts (such as those from the United Nations) agree on a number of ethical principles, most communities find it difficult to adopt them, because ordinary citizens have a different perspective on life from that expressed in UN rhetoric. However, every society has some ethical concept of justice and of responsibility to future generations. A growing number of publications reflect on these issues for our future and help policymakers combat global environmental change.

The problem of access to essential energy services for all can be viewed through a human rights perspective. Access to energy is important for a reasonable quality of life. Many poor people are dependent on traditional biomass fuels (wood, dung and so on) for their heating and cooking needs. Indoor air pollution from the burning of solid fuels is

responsible for more than 1.6 million premature deaths each year (Wilkinson et al., 2007). Access to reliable and affordable supplies of modern energy – liquid fuels such as kerosene, liquid gas or electricity – enhances public health.

The concept of human security relates to multiple dimensions of human freedom. Human security encompasses more than the possibility of military threat: it includes food, health, personal, political, community, economic and environmental security (UNESCO, 2008). The Asian Development Bank (2009) lists important energy security concerns as:

- a lack of energy access
- a lack of diversification of energy resources
- high dependence on traditional fuel
- an increasing gap between energy supply and demand
- an overdependence on imported energy
- a lack of adequate infrastructure.

The risks to human security posed by dangerous climate change are not only the result of ecological risk. Existing global inequalities in the distribution of power, opportunities and resources mean that climate change will have a greater impact in some countries than in others (Moss et al., 2011). Social scientists have also questioned the necessity of people's overdependence on consumerism, high levels of energy use, and widespread use of industrial products (Illich, 1973).

Social justice and energy policy

Inequality raises important questions of social justice. Those who will be most adversely affected by climate change are also the least responsible for creating the threat to human security from greenhouse gas emissions. The poorest 1 billion people are responsible for only 3% of emissions (World Bank, 2010). All cultures also attach a high value to biodiversity (Bosworth et al., 2011). However, the survival of many plant and animal species and the integrity of entire ecosystems are also at risk from pollution and the burning of fossil fuels. Environmental security encompasses far more than just human security.

It is essential to ensure that everyone's basic and essential energy needs are met, whilst also reducing our carbon footprint and energy consumption levels and changing behaviour (Schroeder and Pisupati, 2010). We have to consider the rights of others in the pursuit of our choices, arguing for a more frugal lifestyle than most of us adopt.

Energy poverty therefore should be a matter of social justice. Egalitarianism implies the need for redistributive justice, given that it is not right for some people to have poorer life chances than others through no fault or choice of their own. Welfare egalitarians argue that being disadvantaged means reduced opportunities for well-being. Resource egalitarians argue that being disadvantaged means having fewer resources than others. The capability approach views disadvantage as having fewer opportunities to achieve various "functionings"[1] which are seen as critical for people to flourish and be free (Moss et al., 2011).

A "sufficientarian" approach permits a limited level of inequality in people's access to energy resources. This ensures that everyone has the opportunity to lead a minimally decent life. Once this is achieved, it is of no moral consequence if some are better off than others. "Ability security" points out that people with disabilities are especially vulnerable to energy price increases and to supply shortages. For example, a household in Australia

where one member suffers from multiple sclerosis will spend almost ten times as much on air-conditioning as the average (Moss et al., 2011).

The challenge of adopting an equity-based approach to energy policy is to agree on a workable understanding of what constitutes a decent minimum of well-being (Moss et al., 2011). An egalitarian or sufficientarian approach to energy equity will favour some level of government intervention in the energy sector to protect essential energy usage, for example by providing concessions on electricity tariffs for low-income households or through rural electrification programmes. An egalitarian energy policy would impose obligations on governments to reduce energy poverty and to promote universal access to an affordable and reliable supply of electricity. These goals could come into conflict with the targeted approach that many governments currently adopt for rural electrification and grid extension projects. If we apply the ethical principle of autonomy, local alternatives – such as solar or wind energy operated at the local community level – could empower communities and free them from future increases in the price of grid electricity.

Energy policy initiatives must target the reduction of energy poverty in existing generations while taking the interests of future generations and of other species into consideration. Carbon-intensive energy use involves risks to human and environmental security (World Bank, 2010). This means that not all ways of reducing energy poverty are sustainable, or consistent with the moral obligations we have towards future generations and the environment. Moss et al. (2011) review several ethical approaches that help explain the responsibility and moral obligation we have towards future generations.

Who should pay?

For example, if person A has taken unfair advantage of person B by imposing costs on them, person A should take responsibility for those costs – this is the polluter-pays principle. Applying this principle in distributing the costs of climate change mitigation is problematic. One issue is that many people now living in affluent, developed countries are migrants with little in common with the earlier citizens of these countries (Caney, 2006).

People who benefit the most from polluting activities should be obliged to pay for climate change. But this approach faces a number of difficulties. One is the issue of how to divide the costs of pollution among beneficiaries if many of them are no longer alive.

A further motivation for requiring affluent countries to contribute to the costs of sustainable development in developing countries is their greater ability to pay for it. Rich countries can help developing countries in various ways, ranging from technology transfer, to knowledge transfer, to capacity building and resource transfers.

Ecocentric approaches to environmental security

The interests of future generations and other living organisms, as well as the integrity of ecosystems, suggest that global and local energy needs should be met when possible through sustainable technologies.[2] Environmental security takes an ecocentric ethical approach towards the value of the living and non-living environment. This suggests that the damage done to nature by energy production and use should be minimised. By contrast, the anthropocentric approach to human security underestimates human integration into ecosystems. It is important to appreciate that ecosystems are also crucial for human survival.

Individual lifestyles and attitudes have to become more austere and frugal. The consumerist myths of market economies have to be questioned. Social scientists have played

important roles in exploring the linkages between happiness, quality of life and greater consumption, although there is solid evidence that greater socio-economic empowerment generally enhances the well-being of vulnerable groups, such as women (Blumberg, 1995). If we want everyone to have equal access to energy, we have to understand that there are limits to sustainable energy provision. Intergenerational equity requires us to secure the energy needs of future generations and consider the injustices done to those alive in our own generation. In every culture and tradition, the social sciences and humanities have a strong role to play in challenging assumptions of what a good life consists of and our reliance on energy to achieve it.

Notes

1. "Functionings" include various things that people can be or do, like being nourished or being part of a community. It includes things that people are actively able to do, such as reading and writing, and things that are passive states such as being free of disease.

2. *www.eubios.info/repository_of_ethical_world_views_of_nature*.

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