Energy poverty in Zimbabwe takes many forms but policy only looks at one

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Around the world, many countries measure energy poverty by looking at income. They define energy poverty in terms of how much of a household's budget is used up by energy consumption. For example, if a household spends more than 10% of its income on domestic energy needs, it's considered energy poor.

This way of seeing energy poverty encourages a focus on increasing the supply of kilowatts of electricity.

What's more, the emphasis tends to be on the total amount of energy delivered to a group of people, without regard for how it is distributed or the distinctions between people.

For the energy poor to be told that energy supply has increased by kilowatts or megawatts may be of little relevance. Rather, they would want to know if they could access that energy and use it for purposes like cooking and heating. They need to have the capabilities to use the energy in a way that improves their lives.

As the economist Amartya Sen has observed, it's more important to know what a person can do (capability) than how much pleasure or desire fulfillment (utility) they get from an activity.

I conducted research in the Zingondi Resettlement Area, in Manicaland province of Zimbabwe, to establish how a lack of capabilities contributes to energy poverty. My conclusion was that the local people are more capability poor than energy poor. They don't have the capacity to convert energy into services they value—cooking and heating. People don't need energy as such but the real opportunity to use it for meeting their needs.

My study shows that the use of objective data alone in measuring energy poverty is too narrow. Policies are usually based on objective data like kilowatts available. But the capability of an individual to use the available energy resources should be the starting point of energy development and policy.

Capability constraints

The Zingondi Area was initially established as a farming co-operative. Later, the government dissolved it and allocated each household three hectares of land. The locals depend on subsistence farming and most of them live in thatched mud houses.

Data from the UN Development Programme's 2019 report on multi-dimensional poverty show that individual and group capabilities are constrained in various ways. First, the experience of energy poverty can differ within the same household. And it affects women in a number of ways. A female respondent put it like this: "When I am cooking using semi-dry wood, no one can even enter the kitchen because of the smoke. It is like a prison cell! So, I will have to serve my sentence because I am the mother who is expected to provide. I have no choice."

Comparing the rural kitchen with a prison cell shows the distress women suffer when preparing food using unclean and inefficient energy sources. Women are paying a high price for energy because fuelwood and charcoal are a major source of household air pollution.

There's also a social dimension to energy poverty. I found that people in my study felt humiliated by it. They felt they were not capable of improving their lives. Lack of electricity wasn't just a problem of cooking, lighting and other practical purposes. It's also a form of social suffering.

The feeling of humiliation puts the poor in a worse bargaining position. They put up with less (relying on inefficient and unclean energy sources such as fuelwood). It becomes more difficult for them to challenge the status quo (affordability, connection or insufficient electricity provision in the country).

Peri-urban dwellers' dilemma

Capability deprivation can be experienced by a community as a collective. People see power lines passing over their houses. The infrastructure—power lines and electric poles—is there. But they can't afford it and therefore they have no connection. It's of no use to them.

The guiding principle of the national energy policy is that energy services should be applicable, acceptable, affordable and available. The policy appears to be responsive to the needs of the people but it falls short of considering their reality. The Zingondi people don't have the capability to use the electricity. Nor do they have the political power to compel the government and the service providers to provide them with clean energy.

Here capability is determined by social belonging. As peri-urban dwellers they have difficulty negotiating with the government or the service providers. Interviews with the locals revealed that they don't feel they have secure land tenure. This means there's no motivation for them to build permanent structures.

Policy as a capability constraint

The neoliberal bias of energy policy makes it a capability constraint. Zimbabwe uses a stepped block tariff, which is supposed to benefit the poor by charging them less than the cost of production for lower consumption. But in reality, the poor are the hardest hit.

Here's why. First, most poor households have no connection to the grid. Second, for those who are connected, multiple households often share a single connection. This increases consumption and costs, resulting in poor households paying more than better-off users. Likewise, prepaid metering constrains capability. The system assumes consumers can purchase electricity in advance and disconnect when they don't have money. It makes disconnection the "rational choice" of the poor. In fact,

it's an act of exclusion by the government.

Going forward

Energy availability doesn't always translate into well-being. Universal energy access can only be achieved if people have the capabilities to use the energy to transform their lives.

Energy poverty should be understood not only in terms of objective data, but also associated perceptions. Policy should improve individuals' capabilities to use energy for their well-being. To do this, policy must be based on a clear picture of who is being left behind and how.

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