

# THE REAL ISSUE AT COP27 IS ENERGY EQUITY

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Environmental Conservation, Sustainable Development, and EIA

A coal-fired plant in the United States | Photo Credit: AP

In a starkly unequal world, what does the urgency of climate action imply? This has been a central question in the climate change negotiations since the Rio Earth Summit (1992) and will also be at the root of contestations at the upcoming [27th Conference of Parties \(COP27, beginning November 6, in Egypt\)](#) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

In the run-up to COP26, last year in Glasgow, several developed countries had declared their intention to reach net-zero emissions by 2050. These declarations did not square with the requirements of “keeping 1.5 deg. C alive”. Four-fifths of the global carbon budget to limit warming to 1.5°C (with 50% probability) has already been exhausted. Developed countries are responsible for more than half of these historical CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Nevertheless, there was much celebration of these targets. There was also high drama at COP26, with moral grandstanding by many developed country negotiators who invoked the future of their children, because India and other countries understandably balked at the singling out of any one fossil fuel for immediate action.

It is important to recall some of these shenanigans at COP26, as in the last year, it has become clear that developed countries may be unlikely to meet even the inadequate targets they have set, keeping to the trend of the last three decades. The rhetoric of COP26 appears unconscionably hypocritical if we consider the reality of global energy inequalities.

Global energy poverty is concentrated in the developing countries. In 2021, 733 million people had no access to electricity and almost 2.6 billion people lacked access to clean fuels and technologies. The average per capita energy use of the richest 20 countries is 85 times higher than that of the 20 poorest countries.

Addressing this stark energy poverty in developing countries is important because there is a strong correlation between energy supply and human development. The average annual per capita electricity consumption of sub-Saharan Africa is 487 kilowatt-hours (kWh), alongside an infant mortality rate of 73 per 1,000 live births; maternal mortality ratio of 534 per 1,00,000 live births, and per capita GDP of \$1,645. On the other hand, the OECD group of countries have a per capita electricity consumption of 7,750 kWh, corresponding to an infant mortality rate of seven, maternal mortality ratio of 18, and per capita GDP of \$42,098.

The reality of global inequality was acutely evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. Several countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America are facing severe agricultural and industrial slowdowns in the post-pandemic period. The lack of reliable energy infrastructure has compounded the difficulties and has multi-dimensional impacts across developmental indicators.

In 2022, these inequalities have been aggravated by soaring energy and food prices. Several countries face a severe rise in the cost of living and nearly 70 million additional people are estimated to fall below the poverty line of \$3.20 per person per day. Poor and vulnerable communities in the energy-importing countries of the global South suffer the most. Almost 90 million people in Asia and Africa, who gained access to electricity recently, cannot afford to pay their energy bills. In this background, COP27 affords a critical moment to acknowledge and address the concerns surrounding energy access and security in developing countries.

Unfortunately, these long-standing problems of the global South have been ignored by developed country governments, academia, and civil society. At a time when the language of energy poverty and security is re-entering the northern vocabulary, it is time to call out the hypocrisy of the advice on fossil fuel use given by the north to some of the world's poorest regions since the Paris Agreement was signed.

In the United States, 81% of primary energy is from fossil fuels. In Europe, fossil fuels constitute 76% of the energy consumption (coal, oil, and natural gas contribute 11%, 31%, and 34% respectively). Thirty years after acknowledging the problem of anthropogenic global warming and committing in the UNFCCC, to take the lead in climate change mitigation, the level of decarbonisation in the global North has been minuscule. In July 2022, the European Union (EU) voted to classify the use of natural gas for some uses as "green and sustainable". Natural gas was responsible for 7.5 billion tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> (i.e., 23% of the total CO<sub>2</sub> by the major fossil fuels), in 2020. Additionally, in 2022, even coal consumption in the U.S. and the EU is estimated to increase by 3% and 7%, respectively.

These same developed countries argue that green energy constitutes a great business opportunity for developing countries as it has become cheaper. They have used this dubious argument to dismiss differentiation between developed and developing countries and are lobbying for banning the financing of any fossil fuel projects in some of the poorest countries.

Bridging the energy deficits in the global South using renewable energy alone is a much bigger challenge compared to what developed countries will face this winter. Spokespersons for urgent climate action across the world must acknowledge this stark reality that the global South has to deal with, whether in times of war or peace.

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At COP27, the global South must put the question of its energy poverty and the severe global inequalities in energy access squarely at the centre of all discussions. We need to achieve zero hunger, zero malnutrition, zero poverty, and universal well-being even as we collectively contribute to ensuring effective climate action. As the strapline for COP27 ("Together for Implementation") suggests, we must work together to ensure that these developmental goals are not side-lined, as they were at COP26, in the pursuit of hollow declarations of net-zero targets three decades into the future. A developing country leadership at COP27 can ensure effective discussions, based on equity and common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities, on the relative responsibilities and sharing of mitigation and adaptation burdens while coping with loss and damage.

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