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Escaping the energy poverty trap: when and how governments power the lives of the poor

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BOOK REVIEW

Escaping the energy poverty trap: when and how governments power the lives of the poor, by M. Aklin, P. Bayer, S. P. Harish and J. Urpelainen, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, ISBN: 9780262038799

One of the seven United Nations Sustainable Development Goals that map out a route towards sustainable development by 2030 is “Affordable and clean energy”. The goal reflects the needs of the one in seven people that live without access to electricity, primarily in rural areas of the so-called Global South, and the 40% of the population that rely on polluting fuels for cooking. However, whilst energy poverty is of significant concern in this context, it has received less systematic analysis than energy poverty in the Global North, a research gap that the new book *Escaping the energy poverty trap* sets out to address. Whilst there is a growing body of evidence of the negative impacts of energy poverty upon health, gender equality, education and economic development, systematic analyses that explain the drivers and causes of energy poverty are often missing from the debate. In their analysis of energy access (specifically modern cooking fuels and electricity) Michael Aklin and colleagues set out to understand why globally, different countries have diverse experiences of energy poverty, despite on the surface seeming remarkably similar regarding wealth and infrastructural investment.

To understand inter-country differences in energy poverty, the authors argue that a long neglected political economy framework can help to unpick some of this global variation. Using this framework the authors attend to some of the structural factors that are so often missing from, yet are integral to, energy poverty. A political economy framework positions the government as central to energy poverty, understanding energy poverty as a policy problem. Thus, energy poverty is interpreted not just as a problem that can be resolved with technology, but as a problem that is inherently political. In doing so the book grapples with complex questions: why have some governments acted decisively and effectively to provide people with basic energy access and beyond? and why are other governments failing in their efforts despite often commendable goals?

Three dimensions of particular importance are identified when seeking to understand the causal mechanisms of energy poverty: government interest, institutional capacity and local accountability. Government interest refers to the range of economic and political factors that encourage a government to invest resources into improving energy access. Institutional capacity refers to government access to administrative apparatus capable of implementing policies in a competent and cost-effective manner. Local accountability emphasises the importance of local participation in the implementation of top-down government policies. Through an ambitious mixed-methods approach across twelve case studies, including an in-depth analysis of India, the book explores whether this overarching theory of energy poverty is applicable to many countries. In doing so, it illustrates the importance of government’s behaviour and policies in determining progress in the eradications of energy poverty, with implications for policy design and energy poverty alleviation.

There are however, two areas that are not fully explored by the political economy framework. Firstly, in its opening statements, the authors set out an aim to understand the “messy politics” surrounding energy poverty. To embrace this messiness, the authors suggest that political economy needs to pay greater “attention to detail”. Quoting Banerjee and Duflo, they argue that political economy can either “embrace grand theories that will offer us the satisfaction of strong and simple answers ... Or it can try to be useful” (2014, 37). For me, however, it is this inherent messiness of the politics of energy poverty that is at times underexplored in the book. Despite exploring several case studies in depth, the rigidity of the three determinants of energy poverty (government interest, institutional capacity and local accountability) at times feels like the authors are in fact searching for

that “grand theory” at the expense of the local nuances of energy poverty. This is somewhat understandable given the ambitious global scope of the book and its case studies. However, it does mean that complex and locally contingent processes of unequal capitalist relations, colonialism and patriarchy, and their role in energy poverty in different national contexts, is likely to be obscured or blurred.

Secondly, in its ambition to understand the politics of energy poverty the book focuses upon national governments, and the processes via which national governments design and implement (or not as the case may be) successful policies to alleviate energy poverty. In order to focus upon energy poverty as a “political problem” the authors choose to hold constant three other factors in their analysis: income, geography and energy resources. This is problematic, as by assuming that these factors can be held constant and thus erased from the analysis, important dimensions of energy poverty are depoliticised. The analysis assumes that income, geography and energy resources have a linear relationship with the dimensions of interest, neglecting to understand the complex linkages and feedbacks between them.

It is important to recognise that these comments are primarily a product of the different disciplinary perspective from which we each approach the topic of energy poverty. This diversity of approaches is to be celebrated when seeking to tackle a complex, multi-disciplinary issue like energy poverty. With this in mind, *Escaping the energy poverty trap* is an important and thought-provoking text, that provides a much-needed intervention to encourage researchers to explicitly analyse the structural causes of energy poverty. The book is wide-ranging and ambitious, bringing together a wealth of literature on energy poverty in the Global South into a single text whilst comparing different national contexts and their experience of energy poverty in considerable detail for a global-scale analysis. It will be of interest to any social scientist researching energy access, or broader issues of environmental or social justice.

Reference

Banerjee, A. V., and E. Duflo. 2014. “Under the Thumb of History? Political Institutions and the Scope for Action.” *Annual Review of Economics* 6 (1): 951–971.

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