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Energy poverty and climate change mitigation: finding synergies

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Dr Stefan Bouzarovski

“World political leaders and environmental advocates have gathered in Durban to assess global progress in dealing with climate change. Most of their discussions will centre on the need to curb hydrocarbon energy consumption in developing and developed countries alike, in order to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

A frequently overlooked issue in debates surrounding global climate change mitigation pertains to the inadequate availability of energy at the household scale in many developing countries. An estimated 1.6 billion people across the world have no access to electricity. Large parts of Africa and South Asia remain enveloped in darkness every night; only 15 and 40 per cent of their populations, respectively, are connected to an electric power source. At the same time, more than 3 billion people globally depend on polluting solid fuels for cooking. Indeed, much of the reluctance of developing countries to support international climate change agreements can be attributed to their desire to bring their per capita energy consumption up to developed world levels.

However, the lack of adequate energy services in the home is hardly an exotic issue. One in five British households is estimated to live in fuel poverty – a condition produced by a combination of low incomes, inefficient housing and specific household energy needs, among other factors. Fuel poverty has been on the rise across the developed world in recent years; 160 million people across the EU are likely to be suffering from disproportionately high housing costs because of it, while 50 million are deemed to be unable to keep their homes adequately warm. There is widespread concern that the movement towards a greener economy will require energy price increases that will exacerbate the living conditions of these households, while pushing many more into fuel poverty.

Research at the University of Birmingham is demonstrating that social justice and greenhouse gas emission reductions need not be opposing policy priorities. Academics from the newly-formed Energy, Society and Place Research Unit (ESPRU) have highlighted the various ways in which improving the energy efficiency of residential dwellings can also help lift households out of fuel poverty. Some of the findings of this research have been incorporated in the design of relevant UK and EU policies. ESPRU researchers have also been working across Africa and Asia to identify the policy strategies that can be used to provide environmentally sustainable and socially just energy services to deprived populations. This work is making it increasingly obvious that carbon reductions and poverty alleviation can be delivered alongside each other, provided that the policies behind them are informed by thorough research."

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