WHY WE SHOULD CONSIDER ENERGY PROGRESSION IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES?

NALULE ENERGY AND MINING CONSULTANCY

by

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January 2021: Policy Brief

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Summary

In the last article, we addressed some of the misconceptions surrounding the global energy transition debate. We further spotlighted some of the positive and negative impacts associated with the global initiatives to tackle climate change, as stipulated in the 2015 Paris Agreement. In this short article, I briefly explore the novel concept of 'Energy Progression'. I introduced this concept for the first time in our new edited book entitled, 'Energy Transitions and the Future of the African Energy Sector: Law, Policy and Governance'.

There have been various debates and initiatives in the developed world with respect to energy transitions. What most experts are focused on now, is energy transitions, and when asked how the poor countries should cope with all the initiatives associated with energy transitions including the decline in finances for fossil fuel projects (which is mostly due to the public pressure, shaming etc), they cite the 'Energy Justice' or 'Just Transition initiatives' as being some of the solutions for poor countries. In this respect, prior to the 'Energy Progression' discussion, I would like to briefly address this 'justice' in the energy sector.

1. How just is a just transition to a low carbon economy?

The Oxford Dictionary defines 'just' to mean behaving according to what is morally right and fair. How fair is it to have over 3 billion people lacking access to modern energy? Is it morally right to introduce strategies that will have an impact on investments in fossil fuels knowing that the number without access to modern energy is anticipated to escalate in developing countries? How can we have a just transition when over 600 million people lack access to electricity in Sub-Saharan Africa? What exactly are they transitioning from?

Taking stock of the discussion above, a question arises: as to how we can have a just transition when most scholars, international organisations and financial institutions are focused on cutting down funding and investments in fossil fuels which we know very well are crucial in developing countries (that are endowed with the resources). This is, therefore, an indication that we must revisit the term 'energy transition' to ensure that the global move to transition to a low carbon economy does not in any way escalate poverty and energy access challenges in developing countries. This is essential because misconceived problems often lead to misconceived concepts and solutions.

2. The problem of the ‘Streetlight Effect’ in the Energy Sector

In this respect, we must ask what the problem is with this 'energy transition'? The main problem with the energy transition, is the streetlight effect the concept has attracted in recent years. The streetlight effect or the drunkard's search connotes to a situation where people pay extra attention to a topic that is in the limelight. In energy terms, most research is focused on energy transition, which is understandable given the need to tackle climate change. However, this has diverted efforts to tackle poverty on the African continent. Little care is paid to the fact that fossil fuels still have a significant role on the continent. Instead, we are experiencing a ban on funding for fossil fuel projects. Although associated with various advantages, including tackling climate change, the global focus on energy transition has raised some concerns including an escalation of energy access challenges in developing countries; and disruptions in these countries’ economic development. Additionally, we have paid little attention to some of the absurd terms and conditions introduced by some foreign renewable energy companies in various African countries. For instance, during my PhD fieldwork research in Tanzania, I had a chance of visiting one of the major solar companies there, what puzzled me was the payment methods used by the company. They could allow poor households to use the solar equipment on agreement that they pay in instalments in an agreed period: however, if the household defaults, then the company would take back its solar panels and other equipment. So, how exactly are some of these companies permanently solving the problem of energy poverty? This is not to say that we shouldn’t embrace renewables, but rather, we must be vigilant not to be blinded by the ‘streetlight effect’.

Nevertheless, in recent years, several countries, including those in Africa, have successfully utilised renewables to meet their energy demand. In essence, the positive impact of the energy transition is the ability to tackle climate change. However, this also has financial consequences, as most banks and international financial institutions are now shying away from investing in fossil fuel projects. This, therefore, brings into question the need to consider energy progression.

3. Why Energy Progression?

I introduce the 'Energy Progression' dialogue because I believe that mis-conceived problems and concepts often lead to mis-conceived solutions. This explains why we have for long tried to tackle the challenge of energy poverty on the African continent without any success. We must agree that sometimes, African problems do require local and tailored African solutions. We must be genuine and accept the various energy challenges we face on the continent. There are many people who die in hospitals due to lack of electricity; the increased number of people dying due to indoor air pollution caused by overreliance on biomass; the many schools which are not equipped with modern energy; our mothers and sisters in rural areas who spend a lot of time fetching firewood etc. I am from Uganda, and while I work in the UK, I often ask myself, how do I explain to a Ugandan in the village that it is 'just' for Uganda not to utilize its 6.5 billion barrels of Oil to tackle energy poverty and ensure economic development? It is for these reasons, that I introduced the 'energy progression' concept because I believe the current energy transition debates are characterised by 'public shaming' of the poor countries that still want to utilise their fossil fuels. With energy progression, there is no shame. We rather recognise that energy poverty should not be tolerated in the 21st century; and clean technologies such as carbon capture are key in tackling climate change.

4. Energy Progression Explained

To be able to understand and appreciate this new term 'Energy Progression', we must have a clear understanding of the relevant words, including progress, progression and progressive. The Cambridge English dictionary defines the term 'progress' to mean a 'movement to an improved or more developed state or a forward position". In this respect, the word 'progression' refers to "the process of developing or moving gradually towards a more advanced state".

Energy progression therefore recognises the differences in societies and the need to consider these differences when shifting from one energy source to another. Understanding and responding to the progressive nature of energy use is crucial in solving the energy access challenges experienced in developing countries.

Europe is an excellent example of the progressive character of energy use. One of the recognised and celebrated energy progressions in Europe was a historical shift from biomass to fossil fuels. The nineteenth century was characterised by industrialisation necessitating the transition from wood and waterpower to coal in the nineteenth century, or from coal to oil in the twentieth (we note that some EU countries such as Poland have been highly dependent on coal in the 21st century-so no total progression). On the contrary, in developing countries such as those in SSA, many homes in rural communities are still relying on traditional biomass. With the anticipated industrialisation and urbanisation, these countries will need massive energy, including fossil fuels, to tackle their energy needs. The importance of fossil fuels in industrialisation is evidenced in developed countries and their reaction to disruption in energy supply. For instance, historically, developed countries such as the UK were heavily reliant on coal to the extent that when faced with a 'coal panic' in the late nineteenth century, robust solutions were suggested including the urging of military strategists to seize control of coal reserves in foreign lands; and the urging of companies to drive their workers harder to increase the domestic production of coal. These suggested solutions were however rejected not only by unions inside Britain but also other colonial powers.

With energy progression, we note that developing and developed countries face different energy challenges. For instance, whereas in developed countries the use of biomass such as charcoal and firewood is predominantly historical and a topic of the nineteenth century, developing countries such as those in SSA, in contrast, on the other hand, are still struggling with a reliance on traditional energy. The focus of SSA countries is access to electricity. We note that electricity in its natural form tends to appear as lighting and static, the technological advances have enabled primary sources of energy such as coal, nuclear power, running water and of late renewable energy sources to provide this electricity

The main aim of energy progression, therefore, is recognising the progressive character of energy use, implying that it has to happen gradually and in different stages. This, in essence, implies that, in all these stages, there should be adequate support at the national, regional and international level through among others the availability of finances and technology to ensure that countries progress from one form of energy to another. With energy progression, we pay extra attention to the energy access challenges on the African continent; the role of fossil fuels in industrialisation; the role of fossil fuels in urbanisation; the role of fossil fuels in meeting the domestic energy demand from the anticipated population growth. In this respect, while advocating for clean technology to utilise fossil fuels, we advocate for more funding to support African countries develop and capitalise their fossil fuels. With energy progression, we also call upon climate change activists to be considerate and think of the many people who are relying on less than one dollar a day due to lack of access to modern energy. Most importantly, with energy progression, we ask international financial institutions to reconsider their policies banning funding for fossil fuel projects because at the end of the day, different countries face different energy challenges and they should all be given a chance to progress from one energy use to another. This does not in any way mean that African countries should not embrace renewables, there are already efforts to deploy renewable energy and energy efficiency technologies on the African continent.

5. Further Reading:

1. Nalule VR. How to Respond to Energy Transitions in Africa: Introducing the Energy Progression Dialogue. In Energy Transitions and the Future of the African Energy Sector 2019 (pp. 3-35). Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.

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