

Public Sector Involvement in Sustainable Energy Access in the Global South

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Brief Bio

Session Leader(s)

Bipasha Baruah holds the Canada Research Chair in Global Women’s Issues at Western University, Canada. Mini Govindan is a Fellow in the Social Transformation Division of The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI), New Delhi, India. Dr. Baruah and Dr. Govindan specialize in gender, development and technology; women and work; and social, political and economic inequality. Their current research explores the opportunities and constraints that women face in securing employment and entrepreneurial opportunities in renewable energy and resource efficiency in different world regional contexts.

Abstract

Short description, including alignment with conference themes and objectives

Priorities for technology and infrastructure development and dissemination should ideally be determined by the greatest benefit for the common good. Much recent research indicates that this can only be achieved through strong public-sector intervention. Private sector organizations have long indicated that they require additional forms of support, including assistance with business plans, reducing commercial risks, supporting joint ventures, and piloting and testing innovative business models. Therefore, in order to ensure that the technologies and infrastructures that can make the biggest differences in the lives of the underprivileged are developed and disseminated, there is a clear need for governments to either be involved directly, or at the very least, to put incentives in place that direct private investment to areas that would otherwise not be prioritized.

We are interested in examples and case studies of sustainable on- or off-grid energy technologies that are developed and/or disseminated solely by the public sector, or through collaborations between public, quasi-public and non-state actors. This may include public-public, public-private and/or multiple-stakeholder partnerships between government ministries or agencies, utilities, technology providers, financial institutions, NGOs and other civil society organizations, faith-based organizations, citizen’s groups, labor unions and professional associations that perform roles in line with their comparative advantages. We are particularly interested in partnerships or collaborations for sustainable energy with explicit goals for reducing gender and other social inequalities.

Description

Proposed discussion focus

There is much evidence to suggest that market-based strategies cannot by themselves deliver effective and affordable energy services, particularly in the Global South. Researchers working in many emerging economies and developing countries - India, Colombia, Bolivia, Tanzania, South Africa, Kenya and Uganda, for example - have written specifically and explicitly about the need for NGOs, universities and other civil society engagement in the energy sector by providing adequate means of participation and oversight to create checks and balances between financial and development goals.

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Description (Cont.)

Instead of simply focusing on the shortcomings of privatization and commercialization, as many researchers have done in the past, our focus in this breakout session is to showcase existing public service and hybrid public-private alternatives for on and off-grid sustainable energy provision. We are particularly interested in models with explicit goals to address social inequalities based on gender, class, race, ethnicity and disability. The case studies and examples presented in this breakout session will help in identifying both best practices and missed opportunities. Hence, it will enable researchers, practitioners, policymakers and advocates to better understand contemporary and future alternatives to commercialized/ privatized energy service delivery, investigating models such as public-public and public-private partnerships, cooperatives, community-owned systems, progressive financing schemes and rights-based approaches as well as conditions required for their sustainability and reproducibility.

Objectives

Justification and expected impact during and after the conference

The commercialization or outright privatization of basic services like water, electricity, health and sanitation was justified in many developing countries and emerging economies by the unsatisfactory performance of state-regulated and controlled power regimes. The rationale behind such reforms was that efficiency, pricing, and greater involvement by the private sector will reduce pressure on national and local government budgets and create a profitable sector, which in turn will finance necessary investments for improvements in service and access. In many countries, India and South Africa, for example, this market vision of basic service provision represents a dramatic shift in policies that had guided the sector previously, serving to unravel post-independence and post-apartheid public-service models of state-led development, in which electricity and water, among other services, were part of broader goals of nation building and explicit policy mechanisms for redistribution. There is growing evidence around the world that such neoliberal reform has been designed more to address macroeconomic concerns and to satisfy donor conditionalities, and with less consideration for social justice and equity issues. We are consequently witnessing a trend towards re-municipalization of basic services in some countries. Hybrid public-private and multiple-stakeholder models in basic service provision are also emerging in many parts of the world. By focusing on public sector engagement in both on- and off-grid sustainable access to energy services, this session will document grounded alternatives to market-based solutions and analyze feasibility for replication elsewhere in the world.

Target Audience

This session should be of use to anyone interested in energy development and dissemination strategies that generate more equitable and sustainable outcomes, including, academic and non-academic researchers, public and private enterprises in on and off-grid energy technology development and dissemination, donor agencies, development banks, labor unions, NGOs and other civil society organizations.