

Book Review Manuscript

Title: Energy poverty and vulnerability: A global perspective

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Sitting in front of the fireside writing on a laptop in a well-lit room, it seems easy to characterize energy as a fundamental good – one that allows us to fulfill daily tasks, receive an education, maintain our health and live in comfort, for example – but for some, it is also a fundamental *ill*. Energy access is not universal, not always affordable, and its provision is not always stable. Thus, energy production and use sits alongside questions of poverty and vulnerability caused by its maldistribution. This challenge is echoed in one of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals for 2030, recognising a need to ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all.

The next observation is, of course, that our interpretations of what constitutes “energy poverty” and “energy vulnerability” will inevitably vary across time and space. We may consider the classical “north” and “south” divide or a division along the lines of “developed” and “developing” countries, yet ever increasing evidence proves that spatial distributions are far, far more nuanced than this and that they are dependent on both social and technical criteria. Indeed, the more we learn, the more complex and interdependent these challenges become. It is for this reason that we need accounts of not only the tests we face, but also global perspectives on the historical contexts and policy environments that surround them (including, as one example from the book, post-apartheid environments). Only through this understanding can we make steps towards their amelioration. First and foremost, this book makes a very important contribution towards this goal. In this regard, it is both timely and essential.

The aims of this book are various and complementary. It aims on one hand, to provide a global perspective on energy poverty through novel theoretical approaches that challenge entrenched scientific preconceptions and policy prescriptions. Later, it introduces the aim of “providing the first global and comparative perspective on energy vulnerability in order to advance debates on the systematic processes and conditions that (re)produce domestic energy deprivation”. These sit alongside further claims around deepening conceptualizations of the systematic drivers of energy policy, by drawing attention to the manner in which the condition is embedded in deeper forms and practices of social exclusion and injustice. Despite their breadth, all seem to point towards a broader, synthesizing goal: exploring the contours and drivers of energy poverty and vulnerability in order to give policy recommendations that may reduce them.

The book (partially) fulfills this aim through 13 chapters that reflect different geographical locations, author backgrounds and most importantly, perspectives. This includes a range of focuses from rural electrification, urban energy poverty, the role of disability and multiple vulnerabilities, and even the role of youth populations in energy poverty research. All in all, 14 country cases are introduced, including China, Kenya, South Africa, and Albania, for example. This diversity is one of the primary strengths of this volume and is later reinforced by a reflection from the Editors on the commonalities and differences between the cases and the driving forces of energy poverty that are presented in each – comparisons that go some way towards delineating overarching policy principles and context-specific ones.

Moreover, within these examples the authors implicitly cover some of the core debates of our time: the drivers of energy deprivation, the role of energy efficiency, how to balance our desire for low cost energy, reliable energy and a cleaner environments, and even the nexus between water and energy services. With now widespread acknowledgement that such issues of poverty and vulnerability are here to stay, such books are welcome contributions that challenge our conceptions of both these problems and, most pressingly, their solutions.

However, in charting the global emergence of energy poverty and vulnerability the book faces no small task. The world is a very large place, after all. Because of this, the volume contains inevitable weaknesses. It therefore seems constructive to indicate some areas for future research that are inspired by the understandable gaps.

Firstly, to give a comprehensive overview of energy poverty and vulnerability from a *truly* global perspective would likely require a large series of books in need of constant revision. What is presented is, justifiably, a somewhat “privileged” overview of the task at hand, with a perspective that is inevitably biased by the location and educational facilities of authors with the means to contribute to such debates. For some parts of the world, we are still in the regretful situation where access to even a few hours of electricity a day is seen to be a marker of wealth, not poverty. Yet this situation in most parts of the Western world would seem quite unacceptable. A truly global perspective must be conscious of all of the intricacies of these social, spatial, temporal and technological differences as well as entirely different understandings of what “energy” is, including whether humans are separate from it or not. Here, I argue for the need for even more perspectives on the challenge from a broader range of authors. Yet diversity is also a limitation.

The volume provides theoretically, geographically, socially, empirically and conceptually difficult accounts of energy poverty, vulnerability, policy and the interdependencies between them. Whilst useful and necessary, this leaves an almost insurmountable challenge in the form of the questions, what next? What do we do with such complexity? In just a 7-page conclusion, the Editors provide early stepping stones towards policy-recommendations, arguing for increased attention to energy efficiency, comprehensive and holistic strategies that account for and are sensitive to a wider range of issues including household needs, practices, incomes and household materiality, as well as a focus on larger processes and histories such as uneven development and domestic markets. But who, I ask, is ultimately responsible for doing this? Moreover, how do we account for different political capabilities and priorities? These reflections are underdeveloped in the book and because of this, leave an exciting gap to be filled.

To borrow the Editors’ own words, “more remains to be done in terms of both consolidating and advancing research agendas on the issue”. To add to this, more certainly remains to be done in terms of developing the tangible, implementable policy recommendations that are needed to systematically tackle poverty and vulnerability. With this book as a guide and an exemplar, here’s to more scholarship that achieves this.

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