

INTERNATIONAL ENERGY AND POVERTY: THE EMERGING CONTOURS

EDITED BY LAKSHMAN GURUSWAMY

Reviewed by Jonathan D. Schneider*

The pieces collected in this volume reflect an ambitious, wide-ranging undertaking. Editor Lakshman Guruswamy has amassed a body of literature addressed to the subject of “energy poverty,” its role in economic development, its effect on lives in less developed nations, and a survey of international efforts aimed at addressing it. Along the way, Professor Guruswamy makes the case for a moral imperative to ameliorate the condition of the world’s energy poor. Contributors to Guruswamy’s collection are academics, non-governmental organization (NGO) officials, business people, and field workers, all focused on work in developing nations. The book makes a good argument for the study of access to energy resources as a discrete discipline, focusing on the foundational nature of energy in a developing economy, and as a lynchpin for further development. It should serve as a useful primer to those new to the subject, and a teaching tool, valuable for its wide-angle focus.

Incorporating in his introduction the approach taken by the World Bank, Guruswamy defines the “Energy Poor” as those without “access to beneficial energy to meet their basic human needs, including cooking, heating, water, sanitation, illumination, transportation, and basic mechanical power.”¹ According to the International Energy Agency, this group totals 2.8 billion people (just under 40% of the world’s population) and is located principally in Sub-Saharan Africa and developing Asia, areas which Guruswamy describes as having been “caught in a time warp.”²

The desperation of poverty at this level is experienced locally, though it has obvious implications for the economies of the nations in which this population lives. The material Guruswamy has collected focuses substantially on the effect of energy poverty on household activities and on the inability of the energy poor to support fundamental activities that those in the developed world consider essential building blocks for healthy, rewarding lives. The effort to collect and manage cooking fuel, the adverse health effect of dirty fuels, and the labor-intensive nature of managing these resources, fall largely on those responsible for the household. It follows, inexorably, that an environment lacking in clean, efficient, energy resources affects women disproportionately.³

Though the development of a nearly universal electrical grid was key to the modernization of the industrial world in the 20th century, Guruswamy and his contributing authors focus a good deal of their attention, when it comes to remediation, on smaller-bore projects, such as model laws for the promotion of

* Partner, Stinson Leonard Street, Washington, D.C.

1. INTERNATIONAL ENERGY AND POVERTY: THE EMERGING CONTOURS 1 (Lakshman Guruswamy ed., 2016).

2. *Id.* at 1, 55.

3. *Id.* at 24-37, 231-44.

clean cooking stoves.⁴ Contributors Aamodt and Feamster argue that electricity is only one form of energy service, and they recommend the promotion of an array of small-scale resources, from solar light bulbs to alcohol or biogas fired engines (Appropriate and Sustainable Energy Technologies, or ASETs).⁵ Indeed, Aamodt and Feamster argue the focus of the international development community on universal electrification is a costly luxury that may postpone meaningful improvements for a generation.⁶ Guruswamy acknowledges that the leap to the developed world calls for electrification, but says that is 30-year project, estimated to cost \$17 trillion.⁷ For that reason, the focus on local projects such as cooking stoves is needed to “bridge the gap between capital-intensive electricity, and the traditional subsistence technologies of the Energy Poor.”⁸

Addressing the macroeconomic effect of energy resource development, contributor David Stern concludes that energy use and economic growth are tightly coupled, though he says “there is still ambiguity on the nature of the causal relationship.”⁹ Stern’s data shows a strong correlation between economic growth and the availability of relatively inexpensive energy resources. Though he notes the correlation has become somewhat muddled in developed nations, exhibiting dramatically improved labor and communications productivity into the 21st century, throughout much of the 20th century, access to and exploitation of inexpensive energy resources has been a key component of economic development. Indeed, as an implicit recognition of this nexus throughout industrialization of the developed world, and the resulting climatological implications, many in the global discussion of carbon control measures refer to the “climate debt” owned by the global North to the global South.¹⁰

Reporting on United Nations-sponsored remediation efforts, contributor and Professor Ved Nanda catalogues the extensive history of multilateral initiatives, reports, and resolutions leading to the current Secretary General’s Sustainable Energy for All (SE4All) initiative. The aim of this latest initiative is simultaneously to promote universal access to modern energy services, improved energy efficiency, and reliance on renewable energy. Nanda reports about \$50 billion has been pledged by the private sector and similar investors in support of the initiative, and tens of billions have been committed by regional development banks in Asia, Europe and Latin America.¹¹

Of course, these amounts fall far short of what is needed in the developing world. Potentially addressing some of that gap, Professor Marc Safty promotes an approach to encouraging private investment, knowing non-recourse project finance is not feasible in parts of the world characterized by unpredictable legal outcomes and governmental instability. Instead, Safty advocates the exploration of infrastructure finance which draws on partial governmental recourse,

4. *Id.* at 287-314.

5. *Id.* at 204-05.

6. ENERGY AND POVERTY, *supra* note 1, at 204-05.

7. *Id.* at 65.

8. *Id.* at 318.

9. *Id.* at 12-23.

10. *Id.* at 116-19.

11. ENERGY AND POVERTY, *supra* note 1, at 84-96.

subsidized insurance (along the lines of the United States Overseas Private Investment Corporation), and other risk mitigation strategies designed to induce investment in economies generally inhospitable to investors. But even on a small scales—as developing world entrepreneur Doug Vilsak’s piece on small scale solar lighting illustrates—finding a consumer base for the most economical purchases (small scale solar lighting) is an enormous challenge.¹²

In the short to medium term, the potential for self-supporting energy resource development in the regions of the world on which Guruswamy is focused is quite limited and will depend on international assistance. Guruswamy has professor of theology E. Christian Brugger build a moral case for commitment to such work, drawing heavily on the work of St. Thomas Aquinas’ (*Summa Theologie*), positing that poor peoples have a human right to energy resources (material with which to lead a “dignified life”) and the people of wealthier nations an obligation to share their surplus.¹³ Guruswamy takes a more secular approach, though he comes to the same conclusion, relying on the work of John Rawls to support an obligation of richer peoples to come to the aid of “burdened societies.” Guruswamy concedes that Rawls did not advocate a theory of distributive justice among nations, but nonetheless appeals to a Rawlsian sense of what “decent people” should do.¹⁴

Whether based on religious conviction (Aquinas) or some form of social contract theory (Rawls), the view that the right to energy resources is a necessary component of essential human rights has the quality of an assumption or a belief. And whatever one’s sympathies for this conviction, as a practical matter, there is no political consensus (certainly not in the United States) for the view that richer nations have a moral obligation to advance the plight of poorer nations. In fact, the reference made by a number of Guruswamy’s contributors to the body of literature supporting action in furtherance of “environmental justice” highlights, by contrast, the challenge faced by those advocating a theory of energy justice. While proponents of environmental justice maintain that polluters have no right to *harm* others in the pursuit of commercial activity, the moral case for energy justice calls for an affirmative redistribution of wealth. For that reason, those advocating environmental justice position themselves squarely within the tradition of classical liberal thinking (think “conservative” in the current political context), while energy justice calls for affirmative assistance in a manner often thought to be the province of private charity.

Because this reviewer *does* have some sympathy for Guruswamy’s perspective, it is suggested that proponents of a global theory of energy justice may make more headway arguing that *all* nations benefit by alleviating economic deprivation. Among other things, economically desperate environments are increasingly a breeding ground for anti-Western terrorism. However poor these regions are, the world is a far smaller place than once it was, and the frustration that accompanies desperate poverty finds its way abroad with a facility that should no longer surprise us. It stands to reason that helping to remedy the conditions that give rise to economic deprivation has ancillary security benefits.

12. *Id.* at 245-57.

13. *Id.* at 68-83.

14. *Id.* at 62-65.

On a slightly more mercenary level, the assistance which wealthy nations may provide poorer nations holds the strong potential for mutual economic gain. The better off the peoples in Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia, the likelier they are to buy Nike tee shirts and athletic shoes. This is the basis on which a good deal of U.S. foreign aid has historically been justified. Moreover, the friendlier we find the environments in which useful fundamental resources are located, the better our prospects for sharing the associated benefits are. Certainly, the Chinese have moved wholesale into Africa with this in mind.

Kudos to Professor Guruswamy and his colleagues for this highly informed and thought-provoking collection. It should prove to be a valuable addition to the academic literature in this developing area, and a good read for interested minds elsewhere.