

Nations are thus required to create an unbiased *modus—operandi* which ensures universal access to energy. It should not just be a moral responsibility, but a constitutional obligation upon the state with no room for evasion or fraud. Given that the national constitution is the custodian of all citizens, it is natural that governments dole out mechanisms which gradually enhance the standard of living and ensure inclusive sustainable development for the people. - Apurva Pandey\*

Energy is the key element which connects our societies, politics, and economies to the environment. In present times, it is an inalienable resource required to run our day—to—day lives seamlessly, particularly in the form of electricity. It serves as a catalyst for the growth of developing societies and economies. This, accompanied with the rise in advanced technological innovation, further adds value to an otherwise constantly evolving standard of living. It helps alleviate society from the clutches of poverty, hunger, water crisis, diseases etc. And yet nearly one-sixth of the global population lives without access to clean and smart energy.



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As per the Least Developed Country (LDC) Report 2017: “62 percent of people in least-developed countries (LDCs) have no access to electricity, compared with 10 percent across other developing countries. Today, the majority of people worldwide who lack access to electricity live in LDCs — a proportion that has grown steadily from less than one third in 1990.” These statistics emphasize that access to regular, adequate, safe, affordable, reliable, and diverse energy resources is fundamental to the eradication of poverty, and to promote social equity and economic development.

Universal access to energy is not just a mere “means to an end” but rather is a human right in itself, especially in light of other basic rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) of 1948 recognizes these rights as that of life, food, shelter, health, education etc. which are deeply entwined with access to sufficient energy services. Today, even though

reasonable and effective access to energy services is regarded as a human right worldwide, there are communities which still use toxic fuels such as wood, kerosene, dung, and crop waste to cook and heat their homes, never mind the lack of electricity grids. Without proper electricity infrastructure, the poor and isolated cannot be provided with modern services in medical, education and hospitality industries. They have fewer opportunities to transform or even sustain a decent livelihood. For instance, with regular access to electricity, local hospitals can provide facilities such as cold storage of vaccines and medicines, in addition to being able to conduct ultrasounds, x-rays, and other clinical services.

It is these communities, mostly in LDCs and other developing countries, which are vulnerable to catastrophes, both natural and manmade. Conspicuously, though the 2013 World Future Energy Summit established “sustainable energy for all” as a major policy priority for governments, this goal is yet to see the light of day, as many African and Asian nations have majority population suffering from lack of sustainable energy and are exposed to dangerous emissions.



Least Developed Countries (LDCs) | Image: UN-OHRLLS

In 2015, the United Nations adopted a standalone goal on energy, Goal 7, which aims to ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy to all by 2030. Notably, it will increase the share of renewable energy, amplify the global rate of improvement in energy efficiency by 2030, and develop new energy infrastructure, especially in LDCs. Interestingly, all 17 of the sustainable development goals— tightly interconnected with social, economic, and environmental goals embedded in human rights—are dependent on the standalone Goal 7, which ensures access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy. This is because all forms of development are subject to the availability of energy resources and services, while sustainable development is reliant on renewable energy resources and services.

Intricately linked to the SDGs is the Paris Climate Accord. Climate change mitigation is enmeshed with sustainable development, which holds the promise of ushering in an era of renewables— i.e. a complete energy transition from fossils to clean energy. Of course, in the words of 2017 UN Emissions Gap Report: “the successful implementation of the Paris Agreement and the sustainable development goals agenda will depend on the ability of governments to develop national targets that serve both and take advantage of common

opportunities.”

Nations are thus required to create an unbiased *modus—operandi* which ensures universal access to energy. It should not just be a moral responsibility, but a constitutional obligation upon the state with no room for evasion or fraud. Given that the national constitution is the custodian of all citizens, it is natural that governments dole out mechanisms which gradually enhance the standard of living and ensure inclusive sustainable development for the people. Universal access to modern, clean, and smart energy mechanisms in this respect should be first and foremost, given the staggering 1.1 billion people lacking access to electricity and an estimated 2.8 billion without access to clean cooking facilities.

New innovations and mediums to increase renewable energy outreach are then fundamental, which also affords an opportunity to leapfrog the conventional energy stage in favour of a renewable energy era, vital for human rights justice and climate justice. If not achieved, as per the International Energy Agency, more than half a billion people in Sub—Saharan Africa will be without access to electricity in 2040. Though not explicitly specified within international human rights regimes, universal access to sustainable energy has been adopted by several leading international organizations; thereby setting a new precedent.

It is important for the world to understand that more carbon means more poverty, and the greater the level of sustainability, the greater the equality. Thus, access to renewable energy presents a real opportunity to the underprivileged. Given new technological innovations, distributed renewable energy systems— such as wind turbines, geothermal systems, and/or solar panels— can be made available in previously inaccessible lands. The dawn of the “enernet,” or energy internet, can further streamline the process, provided quality infrastructure development takes place.

What is required then is to establish access to clean energy as a human right, and not a mere goal of some agenda or for that matter as some foregone derivative conclusion. Though, international treaties other than the Paris Climate Accord, such as the New Urban Agenda (Habitat III), International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the UN Declaration on the Right to Development, Earth Summit-Johannesburg, Stockholm Declaration on the Human Environment etc. do accentuate the importance of reliable access to energy as a precursor to protecting other human rights, this access only exists as a criterion. Access to energy has now become a cornerstone of modern civilization and fundamental for the survival of human race itself. Thus, reliable access to clean energy should be made a stipulated human right at all levels of governance, whether national or

international.

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