

The Political Economy of Energy Access and Power Sector Reform

Energy Insight

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Introduction

This note is published as part of a series of Energy Insights, under the auspices of the Applied Research Programme on Energy and Economic Growth (EEG), a UK Department for International Development- (DFID-) financed initiative to produce cutting-edge research on the links between energy and economic growth. EEG works closely with policymakers in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia to build more sustainable, efficient, reliable, and equitable energy systems.

The purpose of this Energy Insight is to draw out the main themes from a recent review of the literature on the political economy of energy access and power sector reform (Barnett, et al, 2018) with a view to identifying lessons on how energy access goals might be achieved more effectively. Our focus is on electricity access, since that is where most of the literature has been concentrated.

The paper is split into three sections. First, we discuss why understanding political economy matters for energy access. Second, we look at how politics and the political economy of power sector reform has influenced progress on energy access in developing countries. Finally, we draw out some implications for funders and donors, and how they might change the things that they support and the way in which they provide support, in order to increase the chances of improvements in energy access.

Why political economy matters for energy access

There has been a huge resurgence of interest in and action on energy access in recent years. In part, this has been galvanised by the Sustainable Energy for All (SE4ALL) goals. In 2012, the UN General Assembly established three global goals to be achieved by 2030:

1. to ensure universal access to modern energy services (including electricity and clean, modern cooking solutions);
2. to double the global rate of improvement in energy efficiency; and
3. to double the share of renewable energy in the global energy mix.

Some 70 countries embraced this initiative and tens of billions of dollars have been pledged to achieve its objectives, from a wide variety of donors. Moreover, in 2015, Sustainable Development Goal 7 was adopted, which aims to ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all by 2030.

However, although improving energy access¹ has become a useful political rallying cry, actual progress towards SDG 7 goals has been patchy. Figure 1 shows the overall performance in achieving the sustainable energy goals, as reported in the latest Global Tracking Framework report in 2017 (International Energy Agency (IEA), 2018).

As Figure 1 shows, progress is falling significantly behind the goals: the IEA's projections suggest that, at the current rate of progress, only 91 percent of the world will have electricity access in 2030, and only 72 percent will have access to clean cooking. Improvements in energy intensity are also projected to fall short of the 2030 goal, while the share of renewables will only reach 21 percent by that time.

¹ 'Energy access' means much more than just the services enabled by electricity. It includes 'access' to transport services, cooking, space heating and cooling, telecommunications and so on. But the focus here is on electricity as this forms the bulk of the literature. Also, the issue of energy poverty is less about 'access' to modern energy sources and more about the *use* of modern

energy services by poor people. Thus 'access' depends not only on whether there is some mechanism for supplying the relevant energy to households, but also on the affordability, reliability, and availability of the appliances that convert 'energy' into services.

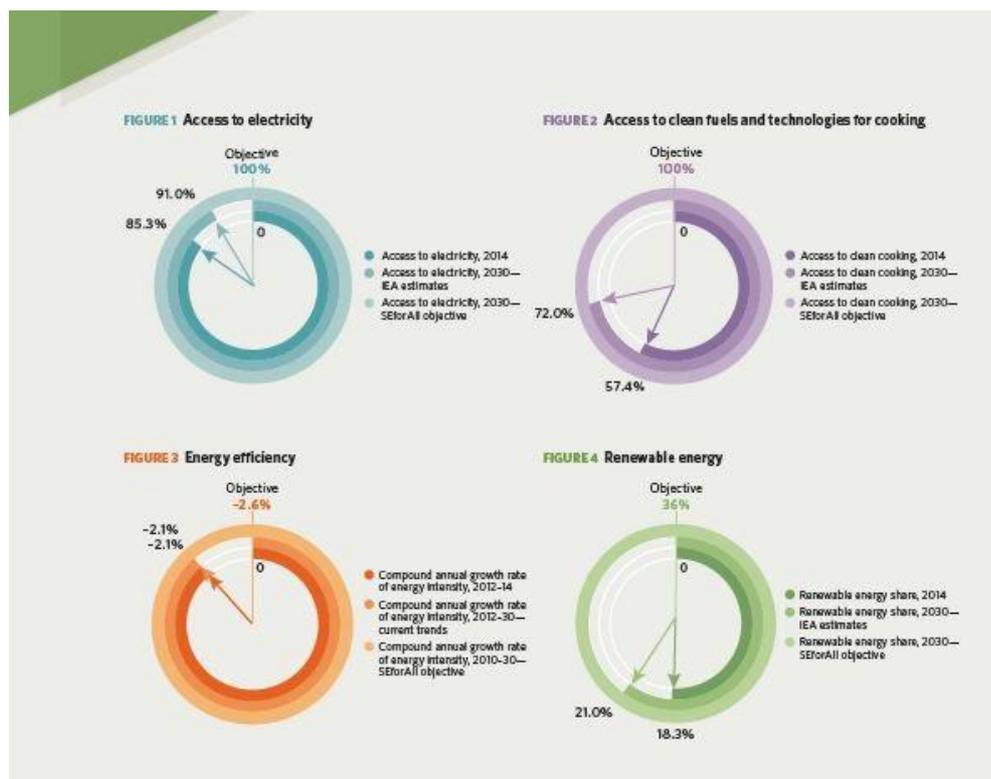
Figure 1: Progress in achieving the SE4ALL goals

Figure 1 is taken from the Global Tracking Framework 2017 report that can be found at www.worldbank.org/en/topic/energy/publication/global-tracking-framework-2017

Why is progress on energy access falling behind the goals set? To answer this question, it is useful to consider the political economy of energy provision, as seen in the long history of support for the energy sector in developing countries.

In the decades following the Second World War the energy sectors of developing countries attracted considerable donor support, in recognition both of the sector's developmental role and the difficulties of attracting large volumes of private capital. However, it became clear that donor funds alone would be insufficient to meet the need. The World Bank, inspired by a renewed faith in markets and the private sector, led other donors to focus on attracting private capital through policy reform.

Unfortunately, in Africa at least, the desired reforms generally did not occur – often for reasons of political economy – resulting in severe under-investment and much slower extension of energy access to underserved communities. Although there was progress in some areas, attempts to reform electricity utilities to make them financially viable have proven difficult, particularly in Africa. A recent review by the World Bank concludes that 'Improvements in some areas have been offset by negative results elsewhere' (Lee and Usman, 2018). In many countries, governments have maintained tariffs below the

cost of supply to try and ensure that electricity remains affordable to those that have it, despite this damaging investment in reaching communities that are not yet supplied. On the other hand, where progress has been made in achieving tariffs that fully cover the costs of generation, transmission, and distribution, this has choked off demand for electricity by poor people, with the result that some countries are now reporting 'surplus' electricity generating capacity while large proportions of their populations remain without access to any modern energy services (Power Africa, 2018). Furthermore, popular resentment against high tariffs reflects the fact that the costs of supply often include considerable inefficiency and rent extraction.

The policy response has historically focused on technical, financial, and economic issues. Often these interventions have been highly ideological, swinging from strong support to, and then away from, the public sector as a driver of change, culminating in the current hybrid public-private organisational models. The last 40 years have seen the donor community change the thrust of its advice many times: from state investment in the power sector, to 'corporatisation', to the more ideological 'standard' model of power sector reform involving privatisation. But the record of relative failure has resulted

in a search for why the process should be so difficult, and what has been missing from past interventions (Lee and Usman, 2018). It is now widely accepted that power sector reform and increased energy access are fundamentally political processes, and some argue that attempts to depoliticise the process are misguided (Navros *et al.*, 2018).

Despite the continued insolvency of utilities, considerable progress has been made in increasing access to the electricity grid in a number of countries (India is a spectacular example, but progress has been massive in countries such as Ethiopia, where the percentage of the population with access to electricity increased from 25 percent to 43 percent from 2010 to 2016 (IEA, 2018)). But the central drivers of increased or restricted access, and financial insecurity in the sector, are increasingly attributed to issues of political economy. Understanding why and how this happens is key to achieving sustainable access.

The political economy of electricity access

The issue of electricity access is particularly politically salient for three reasons.

First, electricity availability represents a core symbol of state building in many countries. Throughout post-war history the lack of electrical energy has been recognised as a key constraint to both national development and the well-being of national elites in countries throughout the world. Bringing electricity to every village and every household has been seen in many countries as a way of uniting nations and providing legitimacy to the state. Moreover, the ‘idea’ of universal access is spreading, making it much more politically salient than before (IEA, 2018, p. 6). This is encouraging populist leaders to pick energy access as a political objective. For example, the Modi government in India has made electricity access for every household a key political objective. This has facilitated a dramatic acceleration of efforts to improve access.

Second, traditional centralised electricity power systems with transmission and distribution via the grid provide ample opportunities for rent-seeking for elites. The strategic importance of electricity, economies of scale in generation, high capital costs of energy infrastructure, and the resulting tendency towards monopoly mean that government involvement in the sector is inevitable. This has provided huge opportunities for rent-seeking for firms or individuals able to use their

position of power, whether arising from monopoly, bureaucratic advantage, or corruption. Rents can be extracted in staffing, price setting, revenue collection, determining who has energy access, and procurement. Evidence suggests that these opportunities can be very lucrative and attractive to politicians seeking to fund election campaigns or gain votes (Kofi Annan *et al.*, 2015). However, such rents also increase the costs of energy services, reduce their quality, and threaten the solvency of energy suppliers, as managerial decisions are informed by political goals rather than technical and economic priorities.

Third, electrical power is a valuable resource and so is used by politicians as a tool for distributing patronage and for winning elections. While corruption in the power sector may be motivated by personal greed it is also likely to be driven by the high cost of elections and the pressure to raise money to buy votes. An authoritative study concludes that ‘clientelism’ (vote-buying in its various forms) is far cheaper for politicians seeking power than promising to improve the delivery of public goods, not least because of the difficulty of fulfilling such promises and because of the need for quick solutions (Booth, 2012, p. 5).

There is also strong empirical evidence that politicians use electricity access to try and influence voters. Brian Min’s careful work examining the changes in satellite images of light emissions from the most populous Indian state of Uttar Pradesh provides evidence of strong correlations between receiving electricity services and political voting patterns (Min, 2015). Between 1992 and 2010, the probability of receiving electricity became ‘substantially and significantly higher in constituencies represented by the BSP [the party representing lower caste populations], especially in election years’. Min also shows that this occurs when voters switch between political parties. In cross-country studies he shows that 10 percent more of a country’s population is supplied by electricity in democratic states than in non-democratic states. He points out that it is not the provision of a stock of infrastructure that counts, but the actual service that the infrastructure delivers. It is the flow that can be controlled by political actors, and this in turn depends on their ‘ability to persuade officials to respond to their demands’, while voters weigh up the credibility of parties as regards delivering their commitments.

More generally, there is a strong motivation for politicians to control electricity prices. Ostensibly this is done to ensure affordability. However, the result has often been that prices are set well below the cost of supply,

leading to large losses for the utility providing power. Where this is the case, it is extremely difficult to change, even if a government wishes to do so, because increases of electricity prices have frequently been a trigger for protests against the governments that implement them and have resulted either in the reversal of reforms or, not uncommonly, in the downfall of the government.

This combination of political characteristics is a key reason for poor electricity access. In particular, the opportunities for rent-seeking have resulted in inefficient and high-cost supply, while the use of access to electricity as a tool of patronage has resulted in very unequal supply of services. Similarly, the use of the electricity price as a political instrument has tended to result in prices that lie below cost, leading to insolvent utilities. Kojima and Trimble (2016), show that in sub-Saharan Africa, only two countries have utilities that cover their costs (Seychelles and Uganda). This phenomenon is not unique to Africa. Pakistan has suffered for decades from ‘circular debt’ accumulated by its insolvent distribution companies; the same is true in many Indian states, notwithstanding numerous attempts at reform. In central Asia, too, cheap electricity has led to insolvent utilities that struggle to invest in improvements (McCulloch, Neil and Kee-Yung Nam, forthcoming). In South-East Asia, countries such as Indonesia continue to provide large subsidies to maintain prices for many consumers that are well below cost.

Expanded energy access requires financially viable power utilities with the potential for expanding generation and transmission capacity by attracting new finance. The precarious financial state of these utilities has severely hampered their ability to raise capital and to invest in improvements (or sometimes even basic maintenance) of the system. Utilities often have neither the resources to extend the grid to unserved communities nor the incentive to add further loss-making customers to their books.

Distributed power (particularly solar home systems and mini-grids) has the potential to affect the political economy of utilities. The cost of off-grid electricity supplies has fallen dramatically in recent years and the associated technology is improving. In principle, distributed power could take political pressure off utilities to provide access to all through the grid expansion, by providing opportunities for expanding access to remote areas and sparse populations at costs that are lower than grid extension. But there is likely to be strong resistance to such innovation because the political characteristics of off-grid supplies are currently not nearly as attractive to elites as those of the grid, with the perception that there is little rent to capture and fewer opportunities for patronage compared to centralised generation and grid extension. But a counter pressure is provided by some donors who see distributed supply as attractive, not only because of its inherent characteristics, but precisely because it represents a means of increasing access without having to confront the intractable issues of power sector reform.

Even leaving the financial challenges aside, expanding modern energy services to poor people is complex. It confronts the simultaneous challenges of:

- reducing the inefficiencies and high costs caused by rent-seeking throughout the supply chain;
- overcoming the inequalities that bias energy distribution in favour of the wealthy and those politically aligned with the government; and
- coping with the financial strain of serving communities that are often relatively costly to supply, typically have very low consumption, and at the same time are too poor to afford cost-covering tariffs.

Attempts to address any one of these challenges has the potential to magnify the others, as when subsidies targeting the poor are captured by the rich or create further opportunities for rent-seeking. For this reason, attempts at reform, often have to deal with myriad conflicts between potential winners and losers (see Box 1 on conflict).

Box 1: Types of political conflict in the energy access space

The literature points to numerous kinds of conflict between various groups in the electricity access space. These include:

Conflict between	Nature of the conflict
Elites vs regulator	Donors often suggest creating an independent regulator for the sector; however, elites often undermine the independence of the regulator or ensure that its actions are consistent with their political agenda.
Unions vs management	Reforms often suggest significant reductions in the labour force of the utility due to chronic overstaffing. However, unions strongly oppose such reforms, often with high-level political backing.
Private investors vs utility	Independent power producers seek power purchase agreements with the utility that guarantee them a return on their investment, but utilities are reluctant to sign up to long-term agreements to pay higher prices for electricity particularly where technology is driving down costs (except where corruption is involved).
Rich vs poor	Rich and middle-class consumers are able to pay the costs for power and are therefore frustrated by the poor quality of provision, but poor consumers sometimes find cost-recovery prices unaffordable and oppose moves to increase prices.
Dense vs sparse	Consumers in dense conurbations are relatively easy to serve profitably; conversely, the unit costs of serving sparsely populated regions can be extremely high, while such consumers are not able to cover these costs.
Supporters vs opposition	Regions that are supportive of the government – or which the government wish to support them – often receive preferential treatment relative to areas known to oppose the government. This can lead to resentment over the spatial inequality of provision.

Political economy analysis, power sector reform, and the barriers to electricity access

Political economy analysis is the study of ideas, institutions, and incentives. It seeks to understand the power relations between, and the incentives of, different stakeholders, how they help or hinder collectively desirable reforms, and whether politically viable opportunities exist for removing such hindrances.²

The problem of electricity access can be thought of as a ‘collective action’ problem – that is, a situation in which multiple actors, if they act together, can give rise to an outcome that benefits everyone; but where action is costly for each individual actor and so they are reluctant to act unless they can be confident that everyone else will do the same. Such problems are common in the infrastructure sector where large investments need to be made based on the promise of future repayment. If the issue of electricity access is viewed as a collective action problem, then this suggests that the essential problems of power relations between different factions or interest groups ‘are not

fundamentally about one set of people getting another set of people to behave better. They are about both sets of people finding ways of being able to act collectively in their own best interests’ (Booth, 2012, p. 11). It is the obstacles to successful collective action among political elites that lead to ‘side-lining of the large and risky investments required for economic transformation’ (Booth, 2012).

Solving collective action problems requires trust. In some countries, a legal and regulatory structure, and associated enforcement through the courts, provides assurance that commitments will be honoured. However, in many countries, the legal, regulatory, and judicial institutions are fragile. As a result, the necessary assurance often comes through personalised relations between elites. The overall nature and basis of the bargain between elites in a society is often described as the ‘political settlement’ (Kelsall, 2016). The central project of political settlements is ‘trying to understand the extent to which stopping violent conflict depends on powerful elites reaching deals on

² Some of this literature is provided in the bibliography below, but more can be found at <http://thepolicypractice.com/library/>

cooperation, and the ways in which such deals enable or limit projects of attempted transformation...’ (Bell, 2015).

Douglas North’s work points out that there are different types of political settlement. In particular, he distinguishes between *open access orders* – in which power can be contested and non-elites can gain influence – and *limited access orders* – in which political elites divide up control of the economy to share the rents and minimise damaging conflict between themselves (North *et al.*, 2007).

Brian Levy’s work also provides a useful framework for thinking about alternative forms of political settlement (see Box 2 below). He points out that politics can be dominant (as in countries with autocratic or strongly entrenched leaders); or highly competitive (as in countries where elections

are fiercely fought and give rise to changes in government). Similarly, the ‘rules of the game’ can be largely personalised and discretionary, or they can be strongly institutionalised.

Political economy analysis recognises that the political context is different in every country and that sectoral concerns are often secondary to those of maintaining political stability (including the prevention of violence). Thus, rents and corruption in the energy sector may well be part of the price paid for a wider ‘political settlement’. Moreover, the precise nature of the political settlement in any country affects the opportunities for, and constraints on, effective reform. For example, long-term reform in competitive systems is often hindered by the short-termism of the electoral cycle, even when reforms are in the collective interests of competing parties. Similarly, in countries where there are weak formal institutions, the literature suggests that progress often comes through ‘personalized deal making organised about the sharing of rents’ (Levy, 2015, p. 204). Tailoring the approach to reform to the nature of the political settlement appears to be the key to achieving success.

Box 2: The nature of politics and the rules of the game

Nature of politics	The rules of the game	
	Discretionary	Institutionalised
Dominant	Where strong leadership has successfully consolidated its grip on power, but formal institutions remain weak	Where political control is monopolised, but institutions are more impersonal
Competitive	Where politics is competitive, but the rules of the game remain personalised	Where politics is competitive and the rule of law has become institutionalised

Note: adapted from Levy (2015)

Note that this sensitivity to political context is the opposite to the approach adopted by donors in many countries. For example, a recent review of the political economy of the power sector in various Indian states argues that ‘a common thread running through past reform measures is the impulse to bypass or insulate the sector from politics. This impulse, we argue, is misplaced. Electricity reform will succeed only if it provides greater political pay-offs from change than from maintaining a flawed status quo, and this is how it should be in a democratic polity’ (Navros, 2018, p. 3).

If this analysis is correct then it implies that there will be a wide variety of different approaches that will be suitable for the achievement of reform of the power sector, and for electricity access more generally. In particular, in some contexts it may be more appropriate for the state to play a larger role. Work by Booth suggests that it is not the case that state failures have been more serious than market failures. He argues that there will be cases where

governments may be well advised to pursue an entrepreneurial state or party-enterprise model (Booth, 2012, p. 27). For him, ‘since “market failures” are widespread, the situation calls for sound “second-best” policy measures implemented by an economically active state’. He argues that in Africa today the state must be a major actor, and development cannot be left to competitive markets and level playing fields. This may help to explain why ‘hybrid’ business models have become the dominant form for developments in the energy sector in recent years in Africa (Eberhard and Godinho, 2017).

Finally, recent work has stressed the importance of political economy analysis at the micro level, particularly in regard to the gender relations within the household. It is the decision about which appliances to obtain, and who gets to use them, that determines the ultimate impact of electricity access. In practice this micro level is often ignored in political economy analysis (Browne, 2014), but recent attempts have been made to link gender analysis to

political economy analysis – ‘gendered political economy analysis’. Both political economy analysis and gender analysis address issues of power relations between men and women, and the insights from gender analysis at the household level strengthen micro-level political economy analysis (Energia, 2018).

How donors might think and work politically on energy access

Power sector reforms proposed by the World Bank and other donors focused on the ‘standard model’ of tariff reforms, transparent competitive tendering, unbundling of generation, transmission, distribution (often as a prelude to privatisation), and establishment of an independent regulator. The failure of many of these reforms – primarily because of opposition by powerful interests within the countries who benefited from the status quo – led to a rethink of the approach (World Bank, 2004). By 2013 the World Bank noted that its ‘approach to energy sector reforms has evolved over the past two decades, and there is now greater recognition of the complexity and time required for lasting reforms as well as the highly contextual nature of appropriate institutional and business models’ (World Bank, 2013). The World Bank and other donors are now much more sensitive to the political complexity of energy sector reform, the specific country context in which it is being promoted, as well as the dangers of sticking too rigidly to preconceived ideas about the ‘standard model’ of reform and the respective roles of governments, markets, and the private sector.

This experience suggests that, if ‘context is everything’, then different countries need different types of intervention. Political economy analysis suggests that successfully identifying and designing appropriate interventions depends upon local capacity to analyse problems, experiment with solutions, and learn from mistakes. Donors can play an important role in helping to build this capacity (as well as providing finance and technical assistance) but evidence suggests that they need to be more politically savvy than they have been in the past. This requires exploring new ways of working and new partners with whom to work so as to have more influence on the key political variables in each context.

This is likely to require depending more heavily on local knowledge (Lovei, 2000). Recent evidence suggests that successful projects usually involved some form of continuing political economy analysis, which was ‘embedded in project thinking and contributed to politically smart ways of working’, rather than one-off political economy analyses. Such approaches have been described as ‘politically smart and locally led’ development (Booth and Unsworth, 2014).

Achieving these changes is sometimes hampered by the political economy of donors themselves. A recent review by McCulloch *et al.* (2017) concluded that, while PEA has been mainstreamed in many areas, there has been relatively little change in the types of projects that are actually implemented (see also Piron *et al.* (2016)). McCulloch and colleagues pose two questions: To what extent have donors analysed the underlying political constraints that they face? And are they taking on board the lessons from recent research on ‘thinking and working politically’ – and, if so, how? Interestingly they find that ‘almost all of the donor officials interviewed displayed a detailed understanding of the political context in which they operated’, and ‘most donor officials accepted that political interference in the power sector was a near certainty and that many previous projects had cost two or three times as much as originally anticipated and taken two or three times longer than originally planned’. Notwithstanding this, they found that development partners put relatively little effort into building a wider domestic constituency for reform in the countries in which they operate.

A key lesson from these studies is the importance of political mobilisation and building coalitions of support. Some donors find it difficult to support such activities, arguing that ‘this is important, but we can’t do that, what we can do is the technical bit’³. In fact, there are many examples of development partners supporting political mobilisation around issues. This appears to be most effective when it is done by supporting the agendas of legitimate local organisations that have interests that are closely aligned with the developmental objectives of the donor. Typically, such activities have little or no donor branding. Moreover, they require a flexible and adaptive approach, with close real-time monitoring of what is working (and what is not) and shifting resources

³ For instance, at least in theory, the World Bank’s Charter specifically excludes political considerations: ‘It must lend only for productive purposes and must stimulate economic growth in the developing countries in which it lends. It must pay due regard to the prospects of repayment. Each loan is made to a

government or must be guaranteed by the government concerned. The use of loans cannot be restricted to the purchases in any particular member country. And the IBRD’s decision to lend must be based on economic considerations alone.’ (World Bank Annual Report, 1990, p. 3). Also Andrew Barnett, 1991.

accordingly (see also Andrews *et al.* (2012) on problem-driven iterative adaptation – PDIA).

Although the activities that will be appropriate will vary by context, political economy analysis does provide suggestions for how donors and national governments could operate more effectively to achieve financially viable utilities and greater use of (and access to) modern energy services. Potential types of activity include the following:

- Changing incentive structures in the sector by:
 - prosecuting corruption;
 - increasing transparency; and
 - improving and implementing procurement rules.
- Changing the culture through:
 - improved media reporting; and
 - a better-informed public and civil society.
- Building countervailing power and creating competition within the ruling elite (for instance, by promoting international trade in green electricity).
- Working to change the ‘social contract’ such that the state becomes more responsive to the interests of wider society.

Box 3 provides some concrete examples from the literature of interventions and approaches that have been implemented.

Box 3: Examples of interventions and approaches to power sector reform

- **Isolating schemes from politics.** Notwithstanding arguments that reject this approach, in some projects (Navros *et al.* 2018) various approaches to creating islands or pockets of effectiveness have been successful. These can involve providing much better service delivery to customers that can afford the higher supply price. This separation of supplies, for instance between farmers’ pump-sets and domestic consumers, appears to have avoided political resistance in Gujarat –though not elsewhere (Isoaho *et al.* (2016) and Katakey *et al.* (2014)).
- **Providing benefits to match additional costs.** This entails sequencing interventions such that policies that some factions believe will be harmful to them are balanced by improvement in the quality of customer service to these factions.
- **Providing clear, authoritative empirical evidence** of the distribution of the cost and benefits of current and possible future interventions.
- **Facilitating alliances.** Setting up entities specifically designed for the facilitation of alliances and the building of trust (Wood, 2016). These include ‘non-traditional regulators’, such as civil society groups and community groups, monitoring and evaluating the performance of utilities and energy service providers (Odarno, 2017). The experience of farmers’ lobbies in India suggests that coalitions of actors can be effective in demanding better energy access, and this route may be open in some countries for similar coalitions, such as women’s self-help groups, cooperatives, or even political parties.
- **Tackling non-payment.** Name and shame elite consumers who do not pay (Antmann, 2009).
- **Training and familiarisation** can also reduce the fear associated with power sector reform, both at the technical and political levels.

New drivers of change for electricity access

Despite past failures in electricity access, there are drivers of change that offer hope for improvement, through their potential to disrupt traditional political power relations.

Foremost among these is technical change and the falling cost – and decentralised nature – of some renewable energy sources. New renewable energy technologies may disrupt power relations in two ways. First, the dramatic falls in the costs, particularly for solar PV and wind power, make investment in these technologies commercially viable in many countries. Existing elites that have invested heavily in other energy sources may attempt to block the shift to renewables and lock in dependence on more traditional fossil fuels. However, as renewables become cheaper, countries may reach a political ‘tipping point’ where existing elites attempt to capture the new industries to avoid losing access to the rents associated with control over the supply of energy.

Second, several new renewable technologies have much fewer economies of scale, meaning that they can be deployed effectively in decentralised settings. This has potentially important implications since it could allow local elites – at the village or city level – to provide electricity to their populations, thereby capturing rents typically appropriated by central elites. To date, very little analysis has been done on this potentially important shift in the political landscape of energy access.

New technologies are also changing the politics of subsidy. In the past, it has been extremely difficult politically to remove electricity subsidies. However, new mechanisms of biometric identification and mobile phone-based cash transfers are creating ways in which subsidies can still be provided but in a more targeted, efficient, and market-making fashion.

Another key change is the growing political influence of unserved and underserved populations. These have traditionally been seen as too weak or unorganised to demand greater access. However, it is clear that underserved populations have been active in the ‘deal space’, demanding greater energy access and improved energy services.⁴ Key among these groups are women’s collectives. These appear to give a voice to poor women – evidence of the power of such collectives is widely available in relation to cooperatives, credit circles, and even trade unions.

Finally, whether it is technology or the greater activism of unserved populations, the political economy literature suggests that ‘contingent’ events – circumstances which are possible but cannot be predicted with certainty – have in the past been key in disrupting the grip that current elites have over the economy. As Hudson and Leftwich put it, ‘Emphasising the contingent nature of “political realities” helps us to rethink the nature of political feasibility – which is of course central to political economy..... Whatever the “level of development” or the sector or the issue, there is always room for manoeuvre’ (Hudson and Leftwich, 2014). This gives hope that politically aware approaches may be able to support interventions that will yield long-term improvements in electricity access going forward.

⁴ Clearly, populist leaders (in India at least) see electricity and LPG access as vote winners. Behind the rise of women as a distinct voting bloc, with their own interests, has been the drive

of mezzo-level women’s collectives. These women’s collectives do appear to give a voice to poor women in India. See Energia (2018).

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