**Tracing Energy Poverty Policies in Pakistan**

[Sarah Tariq Gilani](https://dailytimes.com.pk/writer/sarah-tariq-gilani/%22%20%5Co%20%22More%20Articles%20by%20Sarah%20Tariq%20Gilani)

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For the last 150 years, civilization after civilization, humans have harnessed energy from deep underground resources, and in turn, expedited the progress of mankind. This, however, has not come without incurring costs to the environment. We all know resources are not infinite, and so by the rapid depletion of natural resources, the ability of future generations to meet their needs has been compromised. Even today, large segments of the world population do not have the means necessary to pull themselves out of poverty. Take energy, for example. Research shows that an individual’s inaccessibility to energy is a critical impediment to their growth and prosperity.

It is alarming that close to 759 million people in the world today do not have access to energy. In Pakistan specifically, almost fifty million people, accounting for 20 per cent of the population, are not connected to the grid. Even for those connected, it is common that they face power blackouts and the additional burden of rising tariffs, impeding their ability to fully utilize energy potential. The existing body of literature would refer to this as energy poverty.

Energy poverty is a concept that has remained a part of research and political discourse for close to thirty years, but an official definition that fully encompasses the concept does not exist. Most definitions agree, however, that it refers to a situation whereby the amount of energy available does not satisfy the needs of the people. Energy poverty exists in Pakistan and is one of the most pressing issues of our time. According to experts, energy poverty in Pakistan is identified as individuals that don’t have access to energy, or different energy services and sustainable modern energy products, aren’t able to afford it, and don’t consume enough energy or are energy secure. Attempts were made to address energy poverty, but its eradication has not comprehensively been addressed in public policy. For my own research, a series of expert interviews were conducted to find out more about energy poverty in Pakistan, and to explore how key policy-makers and academics would evaluate the overall efficacy of the policies governments have introduced to tackle it.

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Four policies were implemented to tackle the energy crisis in Pakistan. Flashback to 2013 when the National Power Policy was introduced at a time the energy shortfall was at its peak. The country often plunged into over ten hours of blackout. The policy attempted to increase electricity production to meet Pakistan’s growing energy demand. As a result of additional capacity, the power deficit was revived, but simultaneously, two more problems emerged. Firstly, additional power, which was generated, did not reach people due to the depleted and degraded distribution network in Pakistan. Secondly, the additional power was generated by investing in power plants that used imported fossil fuels. As a result, Pakistan’s foreign reserves continued to deplete, and energy security became a cause for concern.

In efforts to improve energy efficiency in different sectors of the economy, the National Energy Efficiency and Conservation Act 2016 was introduced, which created an authority whose role was to initiate and coordinate energy efficiency. It set up labelling standards that rated electric and thermal appliances by their efficiency. This encouraged manufacturers to produce appliances that used minimal energy to operate, and more energy-efficient appliances were made available to consumers. Even in areas where access to energy was not available, efficient cooking stoves were re-engineered to use biomass, a more available primary source of energy. This led to a decrease in indoor pollution, often attributed to energy poverty, and the awareness campaigns directed towards females empowered women to make smarter choices regarding energy use.

Another policy introduced was the Indicative Generation Capacity Expansion Plan 2040 (IGCEP), which aimed to limit the share of renewables to 16 per cent of total generation capacity. Such a plan explored alternative power generation options, like substituting imported coal with domestic coal. The idea behind the utilization of domestic coal was not revolutionary; it was initially suggested in the 1990s. However, relying on the use of fossil fuels to generate power is not sustainable, especially because renewable solutions are increasingly becoming more cost-effective and present a better feasibility case.

Lastly, Alternative and Renewable Energy Policy 2019 was introduced to increase renewables’ overall share to 30 per cent by 2030. Alternative Energy Development Board (AEDB) mapped out several strategies, like encouraging consumers to install solar to benefit from net-metering, which drastically decreases household power costs and supplies a reliable source of clean energy as well as issuing a list of certified vendors who assess energy needs and install systems accordingly. Such vendors also apply for net-metering licenses, which recently has become available to single-phase users, allowing more people to avail this facility.

Altogether, these policies have slightly contributed towards the goal of mitigating energy poverty. The lack of an integrated policy approach to the energy sector, however, is evident as there is no united approach to tackle the energy crisis. Different arms of the government work in different directions, which compromises the efforts made by them collectively. Moreover, experts are in unison when they say that governments only commit to short-term objectives and make ad hoc decisions. The recent increase of 17 per cent tax on solar systems was another example of the government making hasty decisions, hampering efforts to transition to sustainable energy. When any new political party comes to power, it looks for quick fixes while ignoring the root cause because it must show progress in a limited time frame. Policies implemented are based on data gathered on the commercial use of energy. When a large part of the population uses non-commercial primary energy to sustain itself, the policies devised do not cater to the needs of the poor, so energy poverty remains unaddressed. Much more needs to be done to combat energy poverty and achieve the sustainable development goal of providing access to all in Pakistan by 2030.What Pakistan actually needs are sound short-term, medium-term and long-term energy goals to have a sustainable energy supply–essential to end energy poverty.

*The writer is a free calmist.*