

“Energy is indispensable for development.” Then what about for sustainable development?

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When we talk about sustainable development today, do we really attribute the same meaning? In 1987, the Brundtland report provided a broad way to conceptualize sustainable development, but since then, many actors have cherry-picked and adapted the concept to their own reality and interests. Consequently, Canada, Greenpeace and the oil company Shell do not share the same definition of sustainable development. How can we achieve this goal if we do not speak the same language?

It goes without saying that energy, mainly fossil, is closely related to development; the importance of this relationship goes back to the 19th century. Energy is undeniably integral to our everyday life, our capacity to exploit it for our production is fundamental to our society. As the general director of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Yukiya Amano, said during the Summit on Sustainable development in September 2015: “Energy is indispensable for development”. Then what about for sustainable development?

In light of this close relationship between energy and development, this paper will analyze the role of energy in the framing of the political discourses on sustainable development heard at the UN Summit in September 2015. My hypothesis is that the ambiguity of the meaning of sustainable development is strongly related to the role played by the energy-development nexus.

Our study, based on a form of discourse analysis derived from Laclau and Mouffe, clearly demonstrates the marginality of energy in sustainability discourse but also the antagonisms concerning the way energy is articulated with sustainable development discourse. Only 20% of the 245 speeches discussed energy. A closer look reveals that the most developed countries and the oil producer nations mentioned energy in a similar proportion, but when you look at the BRIC's countries and the less developed ones, it goes up, respectively, to 50% and 40%. Demonstrating the existence of diverging discourses in the international community about the role of energy within sustainable development can give a hint as to the complications we could encounter in the implementation of sustainable development. This antagonism could lead to a dislocation, an impossibility to accurately frame the signification of sustainable development and a failure to act. The fact that the meaning of sustainable development varies within the different political discourses may become an obstacle to a real shift in our way for prosperity.

If we really want to transform our world and not only add an adjective to development, we should start paying attention to the role the energy plays in our understanding of sustainable development.