

Cities have conflicting roles and interests as energy actors: insights from Asia Pacific

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The Asia Pacific is a diverse geographical region yet one with a distinct identity

The Asia Pacific region is characterised by high rates of economic growth and rapid urbanisation. Cities are firmly situated within the wider dynamics of the region, which plays a pivotal role in global energy systems and accounts for nearly 50% of global energy demand (Lo, 2017). The specific historical, political, economic, and social dynamics of the Asia Pacific region matter in terms of shaping urban energy transitions, particularly in terms of the ongoing legacies of colonialism. For example, while Indigenous land rights debates in Australia have typically been framed in terms of regional or rural concerns, increasing work draws attention to notions of the ‘settler city’ (Porter et al, 2020). Such approaches challenge policy agendas to consider issues of reparation and learning/unlearning more sensitively, suggesting from the outset that engagement with the cultural dimensions of energy transitions needs to be a key priority in pursuing justice.

Asia Pacific and other regions prompt a reconsideration of how cities shape just transitions

The politics and practice of energy transitions in the Asia Pacific region has not received systematic academic attention to date. Where work has been conducted, this tends to focus on ‘global’ cities, such as Singapore or Hong Kong, with far less attention paid to smaller urban settlements. This necessarily means that there are significant knowledge gaps about what a just urban energy transition in the region may look like beyond the ‘global city’ model. In this context, geographies of knowledge production about energy transitions need careful consideration. Concepts and theories of urban transition have developed in particular

places, drawing on specific experiences and conditions. Work by postcolonial scholars can help expose the challenges of applying ideas developed to explain western, “developed” contexts elsewhere (Shin, 2021). For example, the body of theoretical work related to Asian urbanisms and the ‘Asian city’ (Bunnell et al, 2018; Ren and Luger, 2015) offers an opportunity to generate new conceptual insights into how urbanism is manifest which in turn may shape regionally specific forms of just energy transitions.

Diversity among cities creates challenges and opportunities for just transitions

The urgency of a regional transition to a more sustainable energy future across the Asia Pacific has been heightened by increasing concerns over climate impacts and energy security. To address this there is a tendency, at least on paper, towards integration across parts of the region (Elliott, 2012). For example, the countries of Southeast Asia that comprise ASEAN face a common challenge to meet rising energy demand in a secure, affordable, and sustainable manner. However, the great diversity across the region – particularly in terms of economic development, energy resources and consumption patterns – means that energy transitions will necessarily be different in each individual country and city, challenging a universal notion of justice. As an illustration, Singapore plays a leading role in ASEAN as a “soft power” with some capacity to influence other cities across the region through technology or skills sharing (Fuller, 2020). Nonetheless, Singapore is still heavily reliant on its petrochemical industry, suggesting that the incentives for more radical change across the region may be limited.

Agents of change may have different institutional homes

Different ambitions towards climate change at different levels of government provide a further challenge and opportunity for just urban transitions. For example, Australia lacks a credible national climate policy with a lack of support for renewable energy transitions at a federal level (MacNeil, 2021, Warren et al., 2016). At the same time, it has some of the highest rates of solar PV penetration in the world. In the absence of federal government policies, cities have stepped up to deliver energy transitions in practice, creating an impetus for change. For example, in Canberra, the Australian Capital Territory government committed to a *Next Generation Renewables Strategy* to support the implementation of distributed solar storage and to rollout battery storage to around 5,000 Canberra homes and businesses (ACT Government, 2012). This strategy has been designed to support Canberra as an innovation hub with industry actors playing a key role (Page and Fuller, 2021). While this enables faster action, questions remain over the extent to which industry actors or public-private partnerships have issues of equity embedded within their delivery models.

A further question is where the policy agenda of just transitions is situated within urban development. A recent unpublished review of policies across 14 cities in the Asia Pacific (Auckland, Sydney, Melbourne, Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, Hong Kong, Bangkok, Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh, Quezon, Seoul, Tokyo and Yokohama) highlights that energy and climate change have a range of policy 'homes'. Many cities have separate mitigation and adaptation plans, which suggests that the achievement of a form of justice that draws together issues of causality and vulnerability may be constrained. Furthermore, ideas of justice or equity were not mentioned specifically in any of the plans. In other parts of urban Asia (for example in China), transitions towards solar energy have explicitly referenced issues of poverty but the outcomes remain unclear (Lo, 2021).

Procedural justice should encompass the terms of inclusion and participation

From a procedural perspective, an important driver for just urban transitions is the engagement of activist and grassroots actors. The Asia Pacific is characterised by shifting and fragmented state-civil society relationships alongside the rise and increasing prevalence of authoritarian regimes. There are important activist and advocacy movements in cities across the Asia Pacific that are seeking to hold city governments accountable for climate change. For example, in Hong Kong, NGOs have put pressure on the city administration who were slow to produce a citywide climate action plan (Fuller, 2020). However, not only are these actors restricted to non-confrontational tactics to influence government policy and progress, but the opportunities for such action are also shrinking across many parts of the region. There is also a risk that while climate and energy policy making may be based on principles of consensus, suggesting a more equitable distribution of power, consensus may not in fact produce progressive climate outcomes. For example, in Hong Kong, collaboration has been a feature of energy governance for many years. However, collaboration is heavily shaped by regulation and powerful energy monopolies with limited opportunity for genuine participation from other actors (Cheung and Fuller, 2022).

Recommendations

- Energy transitions are not only future facing, but must directly engage with historical legacies of injustice and colonialism.
- Policy makers must embrace difficult challenges of supporting rapid change while governing for justice and equity.
- Policy makers may find innovative and effective climate solutions by looking beyond 'global' cities to consider ideas and actions from diverse actors and institutions within the city.