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Article 3

SOME FUNDAMENTAL PROBLEMS OF ENERGY DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTH ASIA

After the largest blackout in history swept across northern India in 2012, the world turned its attention to energy issues in South Asia. The region affected by the blackout is home to more than 600 million people, twice the population of the United States.

While the region's energy sectors face Himalayan-sized challenges, they are simultaneously on the cutting edge. India can boast of some impressive achievements, including some of the largest solar power plants in the world. Energy in South Asia is also a site of political conflict and physical violence over issues such as access to electricity and ownership of energy resources. These struggles

expose deeply rooted contradictions in the value of development.

Demand for energy is growing rapidly in South Asia. Together, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh have more than 300 million people without access to electricity. To meet such huge power demands, the prime minister of India is pushing the state-run mining company, Coal India, to double output from 2016 levels by 2020. The government also has ambitious plans to grow solar capacity by over 8 times the current capacity within five years and to increase nuclear power to 25 percent of total power generation by 2050.

This expansion is a matter of meeting demand but also holds more significance. Individual human development and national economic development depend on energy. Levels of education, life expectancy and income are higher where more people have access to electricity. Additionally, national economies cannot improve during electricity shortages, and South Asian countries face chronic shortages.

Despite the region's great need for electricity, new power plants often face local opposition. People in affected regions fear displacement, damage to the environment and loss of livelihood and religious sites. They often question whether they will gain anything positive from a power plant or dam in their village.

Research on displacement in India tends to support such fears: in general, the wealthy make successful

transitions, while the poor do not. Those displaced by dams and other power-generating stations are often among the rural poor or from indigenous groups. They are historically disadvantaged and may not be able to afford electricity, but they are forcibly uprooted to meet the incessant demand for power. Taking this violence and displacement into consideration reveals development as bloody and subversive.

Widespread use of coal and oil for electricity, plus poor-quality gasoline and diesel for transportation, has made air pollution a serious problem in South Asia, particularly in major urban areas. Several cities in India, as well as Karachi, Pakistan, and Dhaka, Bangladesh, are now among the world's worst for air quality due to high levels of particulate matter.

Each government is working to address this problem by seeking to increase low- and non-carbon sources and raise quality standards. However, such efforts face limitations due to conflicting goals. India's rising use of coal, for example, is based on the idea that maximizing its domestic resources will reduce imports and strengthen national security. As China has discovered, however, such policy can backfire if public health seriously deteriorates.

Throughout the electricity supply chain, companies and governments jockey for political power and citizens struggle to keep it themselves. Control over the spread of electricity in the countryside can translate into control over rural votes. Political parties rise to power on platforms offering cheap electricity, then try to stay in power by overlooking electricity theft. Individuals without electricity and those who cannot afford it argue that they need power, even if that means stealing it. Some feel that access to electricity should be considered a human right. All of this begs these questions: Who is development for? And at what cost?