

Elites mustn't hide behind poor to avoid climate commitments

*Rebeca Leonard, Jacques-chai Chomthongdi, and Faikham Harnnarong**
21 Sept 2012

Thailand could substantially lower its future greenhouse gas emissions while increasing the welfare of its people - even without disturbing its current economic growth rate. So what's stopping the government from setting and working toward a national emissions reduction target?

Plenty of work has already been done to figure out how Thailand could move from its heavy reliance on fossil fuels and use energy more efficiently.

The recent Alternative Energy Development Plan 2012-2021 (AEDP)¹, approved by the Cabinet last December, for example, sets out how Thailand could produce over three times more energy from renewable sources, to provide as much as 25% of the nation's total energy needs in 2021. By switching to renewables, the plan estimates that Thailand will reduce its GHG emissions by 76 million tonnes of CO₂ equivalent - every year - in ten years time.

Of course, increasing the percentage of renewable energy in the fuel mix will be of limited effect if Thailand's overall energy consumption keeps growing as it has been. Over the last twenty years, Thailand's energy demand has grown more than doubled since 1990, and it is likely to double again by 2030 if nothing is done about it.

A second government plan tackles this problem head on. The Energy Efficiency Development Plan (EEDP)², approved at the same Cabinet meeting late last year, shows how Thailand can reduce its energy consumption in 2030 by 20%. The strategies and measures it proposes would, over 20 years, generate average energy savings of 14,500 kilo tonnes of oil equivalent (ktoe) per year. This would save the unnecessary expenditure of 272 billion baht/year, and the unnecessary emission of 49 million tons of CO₂ equivalent per year.

And, the EEDP says, it is technically feasible to exceed its targets and achieve even higher efficiencies.

Which is why it is puzzling that the latest electricity generation policy or Power Development Plan (PDP), approved by the National Energy Committee on 8 June this year, only took into account 20% of the EEDP savings target in the electricity generation sector.

¹ Available in English at :

http://www.dede.go.th/dede/images/stories/dede_aedp_2012_2021.pdf

and in Thai at: <http://www.dede.go.th/dede/images/stories/aedp25.pdf>

² Available in English at: http://www.eppo.go.th/encon/ee-20yrs/EEDP_Eng.pdf

and in Thai at: http://www.eppo.go.th/encon/ee-20yrs/EEDP_Thai.pdf

Moreover, the PDP still predicts a massive hike in electricity demand from this year's peak of 26,355 MW to a forecast of 70,847 MW in 2030, which means at least an additional 6 coal plants, 7 natural gas plants, 2 nuclear power plants and the purchase of power from several controversial dams in neighbouring countries.

There is much that can be done to improve the PDP. A recent assessment³ by energy analysts Cheunchom and Chris Greacen, published in April this year, challenges in detail the assumptions and solutions offered in the PDP. They show that multiple revisions of the PDP have had a persistent tendency to overestimate projected demand. They argue that the power planning process must be improved, and outline the structural reforms that are needed in the power sector to move closer towards the government's stated policy objectives.

“By selecting excessive amounts of controversial, expensive, risky and polluting power plants, over cheaper, cleaner, and safer alternatives”, the report states, “the PDP is at odds with both Thai energy policy as well as the interests of the vast majority of Thai people”. The analysts explore options for least-cost measures that will provide the same service, comfort and convenience, even if not as much electricity is sold.

It is not difficult to see why this recommendation is difficult to swallow for those with a financial stake in energy production in Thailand. Giant energy companies make profit from building new plants and selling more electricity. When the latest PDP was approved, the Minister of Energy confirmed a new round of bidding for 6 new power plants, which sent the stock prices of the main 3 independent power producers in Thailand shooting up. A small elite of Thai businessmen and politicians have an interest in keeping demand for new power plants up, even to excessively high levels.

But such excess creates huge environmental, social and economic costs. Many of the plans currently on the table for new power plants, particularly the most polluting, are proposed in environmentally-sensitive locations, in particular along the southern coastline and next to major rivers, threatening the livelihoods of countless communities and sparking vehement public opposition.

The Greacens' report puts forward a proposal for an entirely new PDP which has gone through a wide consultation process and gained acceptance amongst energy experts and the academic community as well as the endorsement of 147 civil society organisations. This proposal shows how Thailand can avoid burdening the poor with the heavy environmental costs of dams, coal plants, nuclear reactors, and the like. In regards to the economy as a whole, the report shows that trillions of baht in unnecessary investment could be avoided, less power would need to be sourced from outside the country, and the average consumer's electricity bill could be lower. Equally, CO₂ emissions in the power generation sector could be avoided to such an extent that in 2030 they need rise only minimally from 2010 levels.

³ Proposed Power Development Plan (PDP) 2012 and a Framework for Improving Accountability and Performance of Power Sector Planning, April 2012 Available in English at: <http://www.palangthai.org/docs/PDP2012-Eng.pdf> and in Thai at: <http://www.palangthai.org/docs/PDP2012-Thai.pdf>

Taking a more holistic approach to energy planning would help Thailand on its path to become the “low-carbon society” it aspires to.

There is no time to lose. Continued global warming is predicted to increase the frequency of tropical storms. Thailand is now much more aware of the serious and prolonged impacts of the flooding that such storms can bring.

But why should Thailand take action to reduce its climate impacts when many Northern governments are still shamelessly dragging their feet? Its true, nothing should excuse the Northern “Annex I” countries. They must make deep, quick and meaningful cuts in their emissions as a matter of the utmost urgency. This is their clear, acknowledged, legal and moral responsibility.

However, those Non-Annex I countries with high and rising emissions can move ahead with a genuine process of reducing their carbon footprints, where it is shown that this can bring economic, environmental and social benefits. While the Kyoto Protocol did not set a legally binding target for developing countries, under the Climate Change Convention, they agreed to take climate change into account, as far as feasible.

Developing countries argue, convincingly, that they have a right to carbon space, because they have as much right to develop as any of the Annex I countries who have grabbed far more than their share to reach current level of development. However the right to develop should be understood as a right to increase the quality of life of the majority of their people. It is not a right to pursue unsustainable patterns of consumption and production, nor a right for elite groups to acquire the wealth considered successful in the North, while the welfare and interests of the poor are trampled upon.

Capitalist elites in developing countries must stop blocking climate commitments on a flimsy (implausible?) pretext that it is the poor’s need for energy that they are protecting. The poor have a right not to be subjected to the heavy costs of building unnecessary and polluting energy plants in their communities.

The AEDP, the EEDP and the Greacen’s recommendations for a new PDP, show that there are already ways in which Thailand can substantially reduce its greenhouse gas emissions in the future, while improving social welfare, and that several options exist to provide energy from less environmentally destructive sources. Thailand could achieve more desirable development, more easily.

**Rebeca Leonard is a freelance writer, Jacques-chai Chomthongdi, and Faikham Harnnarong are members of the Thai Working Group for Climate Justice*