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OPINIONCOMMENTARY

The Rich World's Climate Hypocrisy

They beg for more oil and coal for themselves while telling developing lands to rely on solar and wind.

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The developed world's response to the global energy crisis has put its hypocritical attitude toward fossil fuels on display. Wealthy countries admonish developing ones to use renewable energy. Last month the Group of Seven went so far as to announce they would no longer fund fossil-fuel development abroad. Meanwhile, Europe and the U.S. are begging Arab nations to expand oil production. Germany is reopening coal power plants, and Spain and Italy are spending big on African gas production. So many European countries have asked Botswana to mine more coal that the nation will more than double its exports.

The developed world became wealthy through the pervasive use of fossil fuels, which still overwhelmingly power most of its economies. Solar and wind power aren't reliable, simply because there are nights, clouds and still days. Improving battery storage won't help much: There are enough batteries in the world today only to power global average electricity consumption for 75 seconds. Even though the supply is being scaled up rapidly, by 2030 the world's batteries would still cover less than 11 minutes. Every German winter, when solar

output is at its minimum, there is near-zero wind energy available for at least five days—or more than 7,000 minutes.

This is why solar panels and wind turbines can't deliver most of the energy for industrializing poor countries. Factories can't stop and start with the wind; steel and fertilizer production are dependent on coal and gas; and most solar and wind power simply can't deliver the power necessary to run the water pumps, tractors, and machines that lift people out of poverty.

That's why fossil fuels still provide more than three-fourths of wealthy countries' energy, while solar and wind deliver less than 3%. An average person in the developed world uses more fossil-fuel-generated energy every day than all the energy used by 23 poor Africans.

Yet the world's rich are trying to choke off funding for new fossil fuels in developing countries. An estimated 3.5 billion of the world's poorest people have no reliable access to electricity. Rather than give them access to the tools that have helped rich nations develop, wealthy countries blithely instruct developing nations to skip coal, gas and oil, and go straight to a green nirvana of solar panels and wind turbines.

This promised paradise is a sham built on wishful thinking and green marketing. Consider the experience of Dharnai, an Indian village that Greenpeace in 2014 tried to turn into the country's first solar-powered community.

Greenpeace received glowing global media attention when it declared that Dharnai would refuse "to give into the trap of the fossil fuel industry." But the day the village's solar electricity was turned on, the batteries were drained within hours. One boy remembers being unable to do his homework early in the morning because there wasn't enough power for his family's one lamp.

Villagers were told not to use refrigerators or televisions because they would exhaust the system. They couldn't use cookstoves and had to continue burning wood and dung, which creates air pollution as dangerous for a person's health as smoking two packs of cigarettes a day, according to the World Health Organization. Across the developing world, millions die prematurely every year because of this indoor pollution.

In August 2014, Greenpeace invited one of the Indian's state's top politicians, who soon after become its chief minister, to admire the organization's handiwork. He was met by a crowd waving signs and chanting that they wanted "real electricity" to replace this "fake electricity."

When Dharnai was finally connected to the main power grid, which is overwhelmingly coal-powered, villagers quickly dropped their solar connections. An academic study found a big reason was that the grid's electricity cost one-third of what the solar energy did. What's more, it was plentiful enough to actually power such appliances as TV sets and stoves. Today, Dharnai's disused solar-energy system is covered in thick dust, and the project site is a cattle shelter.

To be sure, solar energy has some uses, such as charging a cellphone or powering a light, but it is often expensive and has distinct limits. A new study in India's most populous state, Uttar Pradesh, found that even hefty subsidies couldn't make solar lamps worth their cost to most people. Even in wealthy nations such as Germany and Spain, most new wind and solar power wouldn't have been installed if not for subsidies.

This is why, for all the rich world's talk of climate activism, developed nations are still on track to continue to rely mostly on fossil fuels for decades. The International Energy Agency estimates that even if all current climate policies are delivered in full, renewables will only deliver one-third of U.S. and EU energy in 2050. The developing world isn't blind to this hypocrisy. Nigeria's vice president, Yemi Osinbajo, articulated the situation elegantly: "No country in the world has been able to industrialize using renewable energy," yet Africa is expected to do so "when everybody else in the world knows that we need gas-powered industries for business."

Rather than selfishly block other countries' path to development, wealthy nations should do the sensible thing and invest meaningfully in the innovation needed to make green energy more efficient and cheaper than fossil fuels. That's how you can actually get everyone to switch to renewable alternatives. Insisting that the world's poor live without plentiful, reliable and affordable energy prioritizes virtue signaling over people's lives.

Mr. Lomborg is president of the Copenhagen Consensus and a visiting fellow at Stanford's Hoover Institution. His latest book is "False Alarm: How Climate Change Panic Costs Us Trillions, Hurts the Poor, and Fails to Fix the Planet."

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