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Lack of Incentives Leaves Low-Carbon Energy in Question

by Laurence Stevens | April 27, 2017

Cambodia's possible pursuit of lower carbon-emitting energy sources appears to have waned after government officials this week cited a lack of incentives and higher-priority energy goals, a stance that a researcher and an activist respectively said was "short-sighted" and the "wrong decision."

In a study published earlier this month, researchers said Cambodia currently has a "unique window of opportunity" to invest in environmentally friendly energy sources due to its limited energy infrastructure.

Yet plans to build a new 150-megawatt, coal-fired electrical plant in Preah Sihanouk province, and expand an existing plant from 50 MW to 185 MW, have cast doubt on that opportunity translating into action, said Furqan Asif, the study's lead author.

Mr. Asif, a doctoral candidate at Canada's Ottawa University, wrote in an email on Wednesday that the government's shift toward coal, the fossil fuel with the highest carbon content, is "paving the way for carbon 'lock in' and, in essence, committing the country to increased carbon emissions."

Mr. Asif's comments came as Victor Jona, director of the Mines and Energy Ministry's energy department, met with representatives from U.S. company General Electric (GE) at the U.S. Embassy in Phnom Penh on Wednesday to sign a partnership deal for the new coal-fired plant, according to a media release.

The release said that GE would provide steam turbine systems and an electrostatic precipitator for the plant, which is due to go online in 2019. A memorandum of understanding to build a national carbon emissions monitoring unit was also signed.

"The Sihanoukville plant will play an important role in helping Cambodia meet its high priority energy goals," Mr. Jona said in the release.

Mr. Jona later confirmed that increasing energy capacity and improving energy security were the highest priority goals when making a decision about energy projects, not carbon emissions.

Coal overtook hydropower for the first time in 2015 as the country's leading source of electricity, according to Cambodia National Energy Statistics 2016. That year, Cambodia's two coal-fired plants produced 2,376 gigawatt hours of electricity, almost a threefold increase from the 863 megawatt hours produced the year before.

Tin Ponlok, secretary-general of the National Council for Sustainable Development, said there was a lack of incentive to cut emissions due to the low price of global carbon credits, which is the mechanism by which countries can exchange an unused allowance of carbon emissions for cash.

“There’s big uncertainty in carbon credit as there has been a big crash in the global price,” Mr. Ponlok said.

Cambodia’s Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) plan, initiated by the government’s ratification of the Paris Agreement on climate change last year, in theory commits the country to reducing emissions by 3,100 gigatons of “carbon dioxide equivalent” by 2030.

Mr. Ponlok said, however, that the NDC was voluntary and had no enforcement mechanism, making the Paris Agreement non-binding.

Alex Gonzalez-Davidson, co-founder of the NGO Mother Nature, said in an email on Tuesday that the government had an overall lack of desire to look at any renewable sources of energy other than “destructive” hydropower dams, which have previously raised alarm from environmentalist groups over their ecological impact and effect on rural communities.

“The Cambodian government has never had any desire, nor ability, to keep its word in helping reduce carbon emissions,” Mr. Gonzalez-Davidson said.

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