

## PhD research project

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### Understanding the gendered consequences of low carbon innovation discourse

Various sustainability-related narratives have emerged and evolved in recent decades, each articulating a particular strategy with claims to achieving sustainable development benefits. Examples include 'green growth', 'green economy', 'low-carbon development', 'climate-compatible development', and so on. Whilst there are commonalities amongst them, each privileges certain normative goals over others. Green growth and economy narratives, for instance, are accused of prioritising narrow economic goals even if they are to be achieved using 'green' technologies. Low-carbon development is critiqued for focussing attention only on achieving aggregate global greenhouse gas emissions reductions. In particular, these narratives ignore social justice in sustainability (e.g. equity across 'axes of difference': race, class, ethnicity, gender, etc.). Meanwhile, the more general development discourse has increasingly adopted a 'market solutions' narrative in which it is claimed that private sector actors will deliver more sustainable outcomes than public sector actors, in part because of assumed private sector efficiency, entrepreneurialism and innovativeness. As such, sustainability narratives tend to assume the pre-eminence of private sector led development pathways. This is evident in bottom-of-the-pyramid rhetoric that posits win-win development scenarios in which the poor get increased access to services whilst private sector actors generate profits. Often deploying examples such as the rapid adoption of mobile phones in Africa, and subsequent innovations such as mobile banking, these narratives also suggest that development problems will be solved through the discovery and diffusion of radically-new innovative technological artefacts invented and marketed by the entrepreneurial private sector.

Critiques of these narratives point to problematic assumptions about both markets and private sector actors, as well as questionable assumptions about innovation processes and outcomes. In poorer developing countries, market structures tend to be weak, the private sector is mainly populated by small firms with no ability to take risks, customer demand is often poorly articulated, and not all 'markets' offer profitable opportunities. Innovation processes and outcomes tend to be *ad hoc* and informal, with a heavy reliance on external donor funding to support innovation (even as donors champion the innovativeness of the private sector). Moreover, donor agendas powerfully influence the 'problems' that are prioritised and the nature of 'solutions' pursued, thereby affecting the directions of innovation. As donors increasingly focus on value-for-money and impact policy goals, the attractiveness of quick and neat technical fixes to readily-defined problems grows, especially if such technical fixes can become marketable products and services that can be exploited by entrepreneurs. However, this implies that complex challenges will remain unaddressed, those at the margins will be neglected, and those without voice will remain invisible. This raises questions about whether the social justice dimension of the sustainable development is being (once again) demoted. Given that narratives promote particular intervention strategies that have material consequences – for defining problems and goals, legitimating certain kinds of knowledge, resourcing some actors rather than others, etc. – what are the consequences of the low-carbon innovation discourse (in general, and in particular narratives) for realising social justice under climate change mitigation policies? This PhD project will focus on low-carbon innovation discourse and explore its gendered consequences in a developing-country context. It will investigate gendered access to resources for pursuing particular innovation pathways, and in what ways these pathways may or may not be reinforcing social injustice in development trajectories for climate change mitigation.

### Notes

There is little or no academic work that has been done on the gender aspects of low-carbon innovation in the context of market solutions in developing countries, especially in regard to climate change mitigation. Where work on gender has been done in relation to climate change it is concerned only with adaptation. This therefore represents an opportunity to make a new and important

academic (and policy) contribution whilst building capabilities in SPRU around gender and innovation. It is also an opportunity to reach out to other departments at Sussex where expertise on gender and development (more generally) already resides, such as IDS and Global Studies. For example, in Global Studies, academics with such expertise include Andrea Cornwall, Lyndsay McLean Hilker and Buzz Harrison. And, in IDS, I have already had discussions with Lyla Mehta on possible co-supervision of this kind of PhD work, which she is keen in principle to do.

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