

Can Coal Contribute to Sustainable Development?

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Presentation for UNFCCC Mitigation Workshop
Dec 9, 2004

Abstract

Meeting growing global energy demand is one of the greatest sustainable development challenges facing the world today. The task for the energy sector, including coal, is to meet this growing energy demand in an environmentally sustainable, affordable and secure way.

Many developed countries have relied heavily on coal to underpin their high living standards and industrial development – and continue to do so. However, the importance of coal to sustainable development is brought into particularly high relief by the situation of developing countries looking to grow, reduce poverty and achieve the living standards that developed countries take for granted. Adequate and affordable energy supplies are essential to achieve these objectives.

1.6 billion people currently lack electricity and the enormous benefits it brings in terms of poverty reduction and improved quality of life. Coal has been the route to electrification for millions in the developing world – China alone secured electricity access for over 700 million people between 1980 and 2000 in a system based 84% on coal.

Coal contributes in a wider sense to all individual pillars of sustainable development. Coal plays a significant economic role in coal producing and consuming countries alike. Coal remains the main fuel of choice for electricity generation worldwide and is an essential input to two-thirds of the world's steel production.

The challenge for coal, as for other energy sources, is to ensure that it meets all the objectives of sustainable development and, in particular, ensuring that it improves its environmental performance.

The continuing road to environmental improvement involves various stages:

- enhanced take-up of existing commercial technologies for lower emissions;
- deployment of new, state-of-the-art, technologies;
- development and commercialisation of the next generation of technologies holding out the prospect of ultra low emissions; and
- exploiting the synergies between coal and renewables to enable faster penetration of renewable technologies.

Coal use need not be incompatible with sustainable development. Coal already contributes in a major way to social and economic development. It can also be used in a way that is compatible with environmental protection. With a favourable policy environment to facilitate the continued deployment of existing clean coal technologies and the development of the next generation of technologies, the vision of an ultra low emissions energy production system for the 21st century can be realised, and the coal industry is committed to working with others to achieving this goal.