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Can the circular economy be relevant for rural development? Insights from communities without electricity in South-East Asia

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Within the rural electrification literature, only a few studies make remarks on the relation between the concept of circular economy and the effects of electricity in these marginalised communities. In contrast, most electrification studies describe the marginalised nature of the rural contexts in the Global South, leaving the dialogue about efficient technologies and economic models typical of CE literature outside their main discussion. The few articles to mention circularity seem to adopt a vision similar to the Global North, reproducing thoughts on the need to implement more efficient technologies, effective policies and financing schemes to promote the "sharing economy", yet under an overwhelming number of difficulties for its implementation [1, 2]. However, there is also a literature critical of CE primarily inside the Global North, which argues that circularity emerges as a theoretically, practically and ideologically questionable notion [3, 4]. These analyses argue that although some initiatives may lead to the decoupling of economic growth from resource extraction, it does not necessarily mean reducing the extraction rate or, for practical use, meeting environmental needs. It is also reasoned that CE can create an inevitable accumulation of individual wealth and exacerbate the informal economy and the precariousness of work [4, 5]. Nevertheless, few reflections on CE and community development emerge from the circumstances of marginalised communities in the global south [6]. Hence, there is not enough evidence to refute or support the idea that the circular economy can meet social and environmental goals compatible with the development needs in these contexts. The aim of this research is to discuss aspects of circularity in the perspective of marginalised communities without electrification in Southeast Asia. Building upon previous analyses of changes in daily activities experienced from introducing renewable solar systems in 2019-2022, we will address how compatible CE notions could be to promote sustainable development in rural communities in The Philippines and Malaysia and the relevance of the raised criticisms to CE. The investigation will be based on the analysis of interviews with members of the community.

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