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A physical baseline to model photovoltaic development and estimate its net product

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Abstract

Photovoltaic production dynamic is usually modeled using a sigmoïd or Scurve function, without any physical bases. This paper aims at developing a physical model based on energy conservation and ERoEI definition, that could reproduce a S-curve function and allow to investigate the net energy delivered by the photovoltaic industry. This approach gives some new insights on the discussion on energy delivered by renewable and low carbon energy, as it highlights the role of energy re-investment in ERoEI calculation. It also allows to investigate energy policies that could lead to a smooth energy transition and to compare the ability of different low carbon technologies to ensure energy transition.

Keywords: PV production, ERoEI, dynamic model, net energy, energy transition

Introduction

In the frame of fossil fuel depletion and climate change, development of renewable, or at least low carbon energy source is a major issue for modern societies. In particular, photovoltaic (PV) system development is often model by a logistic (sigmoïd or S-curve) function (Cherp et al. (2021)), the solution of the Verhulst equation. Despite the ability of the S-curve to fit PV

- development in most countries, as in Cherp et al. (2021), there is no physical
- bases for such model, hence the analysis of its parameters does not provide
- s bases for such model, hence the analysis of its parameters does not provide insight on the PV development capability. In this article, a physical model
- o is suggested for PV system development, based on energy conservation and

ERoEI, as previously done for fossil liquid fuel in Lamorlette (2022). This model is discussed to see how it can provide a S-curve, in accordance with Cherp et al. (2021). It is also applied to global PV system development to investigate the re-investment trend of the PV industry. This allows to estimate the net energy provided by PV systems to society, which depends indirectly on ERoEI, contrary to the common assumption that net energy on gross energy is equal to (ERoEI-1)/ERoEI (as presented in Murphy (2014) for instance). This point is discussed in details, providing insights on the controversy on PV net energy discussed in Ferroni and Hopkirk (2016) and Raugei et al. (2017). Finally, investment for energy source development in the frame of energy transition is discussed, based on recent work on fossil fuel depletion, to suggest adequate policies that could ensure a smooth energy transition.

4 1. Development of the PV industry

As proposed in Lamorlette (2022) for the development of the oil industry, based on energy conservation and ERoEI definition, a model is here developed to describe the development of the PV industry. It is firstly derived based on yearly (discrete) production, then the model is written using a continuous formalism, what leads to an ODE.

1.1. Discrete approach

The growth and decay is here considered over a one year time laps ($\Delta t = 1$ year). The growth is due to the industry expansion coming from energy re-investment. The decay is due to the closing of production sites, which are designed to last for a period τ , according to their ERoEI calculation, with $\tau \sim 20-30$ years (a PV unit lifespan). PV unit efficiency decrease is indirectly taken into account in the growing term, as explained in the next section.

1.1.1. Growing

Let us consider a yearly production of PV energy Q, available at point of use. A fraction k of this production (dimensionless, with k in [0; 1]) is re-invested to develop the PV industry on a year n. Energy conservation and ERoEI definition allow to write the increase in production ΔQ^+ on a year n, considering an equivalent homogeneous production over the whole lifespan τ of a PV unit (i.e. smoothing the efficiency decrease of a PV unit

over its whole lifespan). With an energy investment $Q_n k$, one get an energy $Q_n k E RoE I_n$ during τ years after the investment is done, based on ERoEI definition. The energy increase per unit time reads $Q_n k E RoE I_n / \tau$. It leads to:

$$\Delta Q_n^+ = Q_n k_n \frac{ERoEI_n}{\tau} \Delta t \,. \tag{1}$$

49 1.1.2. Decay

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The decay on a year n, ΔQ^- , is equal to the increase on year $n-\tau$, as it is due to the closing of sites developed τ years before. Hence one get:

$$\Delta Q_n^- = \Delta Q_{n-\tau}^+ = Q_{n-\tau} k_{n-\tau} \frac{ERoEI_{n-\tau}}{\tau} \Delta t . \tag{2}$$

Using Eq.(1) and Eq.(2), the increase in production on a year n, $Q_{n+1}-Q_n$ can be written:

$$Q_{n+1} - Q_n = \Delta Q_n^+ - \Delta Q_n^- = \frac{1}{\tau} \left(Q_n k_n E RoE I_n - Q_{n-\tau} k_{n-\tau} E RoE I_{n-\tau} \right) \Delta t .$$
(3)

54 1.2. Continuous equivalence

Eq.(3) can be written as an ODE, taking $\Delta t \to 0$. It leads to $(Q_{n+1} - Q_n)/\Delta t = \dot{Q}$ and therefore:

$$\dot{Q} = \frac{1}{\tau} \left(Q(t)k(t)ERoEI(t) - Q(t-\tau)k(t-\tau)ERoEI(t-\tau) \right) . \tag{4}$$

This equation shows a convolution term which could make it complicated or even impossible to solve analytically. Nevertheless, as discussed later, the term ΔQ^- can be neglected at short or medium time scale, which would lead to analytical solutions for Eq.(4).

2. Solution for a linear investment policy at medium time scale, recovering the S-curve

Let us first discuss the relative contribution of decay in the production dynamic, that is $\Delta Q^-/\Delta Q^+$. At a time scale smaller than τ (i.e. short time scale), this contribution is strictly zero. During the development phase of a PV industry (at local scale (a country), or at global scale), according to all the measured values presented in Cherp et al. (2021), Q evolves at a time

scale way smaller than τ . It means that practically, $\Delta Q^-(t) \ll \Delta Q^+(t)$ and then ΔQ^- can be neglected at medium time scale, the time scale at which PV is developing. It leads to:

$$\dot{Q} = \frac{1}{\tau} Q(t)k(t)ERoEI(t) . {5}$$

Let us now consider a linearly evolving investment over a period on which a PV industry plans to develop from $Q(t_0) = Q_0$ (an initial, external energy input) to $Q(t_f) = Q_{goal}$ (a goal of production), where t_0 is the time at the beginning of the investment and t_f the time at the end of the investment. Then k = 1 at the beginning of the investment $(k(t_0) = 1)$, k = 0 when the industry is fully developed (i.e. $k(t_f) = 0$) and k evolves as $1 - Q/Q_{goal}$ in between (i.e. k proportional to -Q). This leads to:

$$\dot{Q} = \frac{1}{\tau} Q(t) \left(1 - \frac{Q(t)}{Q_{goal}} \right) ERoEI(t) . \tag{6}$$

Eq.(6) is strictly a Verhulst equation, with Q_{goal} the carrying capacity. With constants τ and ERoEI, it leads to a S-curve solution, which is in line with the work of Cherp et al. (2021).

This approach does not directly take into account the potential lack of material to produce PV units or the lack of space to due to geophysical constraints, but it actually takes it into account via a future decrease of PV ERoEI. However, this aspect is not developed in this study as it considers only constant ERoEI as a baseline, in order to investigate the different analytical solution one can get from Eq.(3) or Eq.(4).

3. Short time scale analysis of global PV production

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Contrary to many countries where the saturation (or "market size") has been reached (as Portugal, Germany, Belgium or Greece, according to Cherp et al. (2021)), the global PV production seems to be in its development phase. Indeed, according to the data of BP (2021), the PV product follows an exponential growth, with a characteristic time $t_{exp} \sim 2.82$ years (this fit provides a determination coefficient higher than 0.98 on the period 2000-2021). At short or medium time scale, Eq.(3) or Eq.(4) can be solved at constants τ and ERoEI, leading to an exponential solution. This solution exhibits the following characteristic time:

$$t_{exp} = 1/\ln(1 + kERoEI/\tau). (7)$$

Identification can then leads to an estimation of k, the PV industry investment.

3.1. Estimation of PV industry investment

Eq.(7) allows to estimate the investment, as long as averaged, effective values can be evaluated for τ and ERoEI. τ is taken equal to 20 to 30 years, based on a PV unit lifespan. As remarked in section 1.1.1, the production Q that is considered is taken at point of use, which means ERoEI should be evaluated accordingly. This would refer to an ERoEI at point of use. According to Raugei et al. (2017), $ERoEI \sim 9 - 10$.

An identification of k is performed based on t_{exp} global value and theoretical expression (Eq.(7)). The following behaviour is observed: For $\tau = 20$ years, an ERoEI of 7 or lower would lead to $k \geq 1$. For $\tau = 30$ years, an ERoEI of 11 or lower would lead to $k \geq 1$ which would mean that PV industry is an energy sink. This emphases the result of Raugei et al. (2017) on the minimum possible value of PV ERoEI, as values lower than 9 (for $\tau = 30$ years, the most realistic value) would lead to an irrational energy sink. However it suggests that global PV development is close to its maximum self-growing capability, with k(t) = 1 from 2000 to 2021.

3.2. Estimation of the net production

As a fraction k of the production is taken for re-investment, the net product Q_N reads:

$$Q_N(t) = (1 - k(t))Q(t). (8)$$

According to the previous remark on the averaged, effective, value of k, it suggests that net energy from PV was and is still close to zero. This is in line with the study of Ferroni and Hopkirk (2016) which claims that PV is not producing any net energy and could even be an energy sink. Therefore, considering k = 1, the answer of Raugei et al. (2017) to the study of Ferroni and Hopkirk (2016) is right in term of ERoEI values, however the study of Ferroni and Hopkirk (2016) is right in term of net energy delivery.

This whole result on net energy from PV systems is nevertheless very far from the classical relationship presented in Murphy (2014) for oil (for instance), where net energy is supposed to depend directly on gross energy and ERoEI through the relation:

$$Q_N = Q \frac{ERoEI - 1}{ERoEI} \,. \tag{9}$$

It seems that the confusion might come from the original derivation of this relationship, which was done for oil. Indeed, for oil, this relationship almost applies according to energy conservation, with two corrections. Firstly, as highlighted in Lamorlette (2022), it should read:

$$Q_N = Q \frac{ERoEI - 1}{ERoEI_w} \,, \tag{10}$$

where $ERoEI_w$ is the ERoEI at the wellhead. The paper of Hall et al. (2009) contains everything in the text to develop Eq.(10), even a numerical application in Table 3. The paper of Lamorlette (2022) merely presents a more complete mathematical formulation of the concepts presented in Hall et al. (2009). Secondly, as discussed in Lamorlette (2022), Q_N in Eq.(10) still misses the role of energy re-investment. Hence a (1-k) (with k being the investment of the oil industry) correction was added. As k for oil is historically lower than 1% (see Lamorlette (2022)), Eq.(10) is practically applicable to oil with accurate results.

This whole rational however breaks down for the PV industry during its development phase, as PV industry development depends straightforwardly on ERoEI but its net energy does not, mainly because re-investment is close to unity. As the same energy development modeling can be applied to wind, nuclear or other low carbon energy, net energy from these sources should be carefully evaluated during the industry development.

4. Toward a smooth energy transition

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4.1. Sustaining a steady-state dynamic at long time scale

Solutions presented in this article in section 2 and 3 are valid at short and medium time scale, neglecting ΔQ^- . However, a steady-state at long time scale requires to take it into account, changing the required value of k to sustain this dynamic. This steady-state investment can be evaluated thanks to Eq.(4): Let us consider a constant \dot{Q} , at constant ERoEI. Eq.(4) leads to k=1/ERoEI and $\dot{Q}\to 0$ when $t\gg \tau$. It means that when k decreases according to a given energy policy, in order to compensate the lack of energy due to fossil fuel depletion, it should be kept above 1/ERoEI or equal to 1/ERoEI once this value is reached, to ensure the investment needed at long time scale. When this long time scale steady-state is reached, it is worthy to notice that $Q_N=(1-k)Q=Q(ERoEI-1)/ERoEI$. Hence this relation actually applies to any energy source that follows equations similar to Eq.(4)

and Eq.(8) (i.e. PV, nuclear and wind), but only once a steady-state is reached. This result can explain the controversy about PV ERoEI: if one considers ERoEI at the most extreme boundary of the PV industry, that is $ERoEI_{EXT}$, it should take into account the whole re-investment and its value seems to be close to 1, since k seems to be close to 1, what is in line with Ferroni and Hopkirk (2016) and de Castro and Capellán-Pérez (2020). This extended ERoEI is somehow "dynamic", as it takes into account the industry dynamic. On the other hand, an ERoEI at point of use could be considered as "static" as it does not depends on the industry dynamic. At the industry steady-state, dynamic and static ERoEI values converge, according to the result above, however the dynamic value does not provide any insight on the ability of a technology to develop, which suggests it is not a proper index to compare technologies.

It also means that ERoEI is not a sufficient index to evaluate the worthiness of a given technology development, it can only evaluate its sustainability once the industry is developed. The present results suggests a value of 7 would be enough to sustain a production, with roughly 15% of the production dedicated to sustain the production. In our case, with PV, according to the results of section 3.1 and Eq.(8), the net production at steady-state will be more than 90% of the global PV production. It seems that the problem of energy transition actually requires to answer the following question for a given technology: "How long will it take to reach this steady-state? Is it possible to reach it before facing fossil fuel depletion?", what is not depending only on ERoEI, as explained in the next section for PV, nuclear and wind.

4.2. Estimating the ability of an energy industry to grow

In order to evaluate the growing capacity of a given technology over a period t_{trans} , Eq.(3) could be used, with adaptation specific to each considered technology. For PV, it can be used straightforwardly. Considering an energy increase I_{PV} , starting with a yearly amount Q_0 , according to Eq.(3), the PV absolute maximum growth rate g_{PV} is $g_{PV} = 1 + ERoEI/\tau$, then, with G_{PV} the relative maximum growth rate (G = g for PV):

$$I_{PV} = Q_0 g_{PV}^{t_{trans}} = Q_0 G_{PV}^{t_{trans}}. (11)$$

For nuclear and wind, Eq.(3) should take into account the time t_{invest} needed to develop a production site (a nuclear power plant or a wind farm). This requires to apply Eq.(3) on a time laps $\Delta t = t_{invest}$, using the same rational

as previously. It leads to:

$$Q_{n+t_{invest}} - Q_n = \frac{t_{invest}}{\tau} \left(Q_n k_n E RoE I_n - Q_{n-\tau} k_{n-\tau} E RoE I_{n-\tau} \right) . \tag{12}$$

Based on Eq.(12), the absolute maximum growth rate g for nuclear and wind is $g = 1 + t_{invest} ERoEI/\tau$. This growth rate is applied over $t_{trans}/t_{invest} \sim 2$ investment time steps. It means that the increase in energy I, starting with a yearly amount Q_0 can be estimated the following way, with $G = g^{1/t_{invest}}$:

$$I = Q_0 g^{t_{trans}/t_{invest}} = Q_0 G^{t_{trans}}.$$
 (13)

The quantity I/Q_0 (or G) represents the ability of a given technology to grow in t_{trans} years (or per annum for G). For PV, $G_{PV}=1.38$ based on the previous analysis. Taking $\tau_{Nu}=40$ years and considering $t_{invest}=8$ years for nuclear, according to EDF (2021), $G_{Nu}=1.31-1.38$ (depending on the value used for $ERoEI_{Nu}$, 40 to 60 according to World Nuclear Association (2018), subscript Nu relates to nuclear). This result suggests that nuclear is actually not a safer investment to cope with the end of fossil fuels, contrary to what the ERoEI values suggest. It also highlights that the ability of a technology to replace an energy source does not depend only on its ERoEI but also on t_{invest}/τ and t_{trans}/t_{invest} , due to the general expression of I/Q_0 .

4.3. An energy policy based on fossil fuel depletion and growth capacity of PV and nuclear

On the one hand, according to the study of Lamorlette (2022), it is suggested that the net peak oil might arrive as soon as 2028 (based on the results obtained with the ERoEI data for oil of Delannoy et al. (2021a)), with a 40% production decrease in 2035 and a 85% production decrease in 2050. The study of Lamorlette (2022), in accordance with the results of Delannoy et al. (2021b), can also be extrapolated to estimate the net peak gas around 2036 (based on the results obtained with the ERoEI data for oil and gas of Court and Fizaine (2017)) with a decrease rate similar to oil (40% production decrease in 2043 and a 85% production decrease in 2058). According to the study of Delannoy et al. (2021a), net peak oil might arrive as soon as 2024, with a production decrease of approximately 25% in 2030. On the other hand, according to the Paris agreement, use of fossil fuel should stop in 2050. Based on these considerations, suggesting a linear decrease for oil after 2024, for gas after 2036 (following the trends presented above) and

for coal after 2044 to end the use of fossil fuels by 2050 (following the Paris agreement), a worst case scenario can be build for energy substitution, taking also into account the need for an increasing energy input for our societies. This need is here evaluated using a business as usual (BAU) assumption for energy consumption similar to the one suggested in Lamorlette (2022), that is a linear increase of the global energy consumption, which fits the data of BP (2021) on the period 1950-2021 with a determination coefficient higher than 0.99. A second worst case scenario is also studied, where oil production begin to decrease after 2028, according to Lamorlette (2022). These scenarios are presented on Fig.1 and Fig.2.

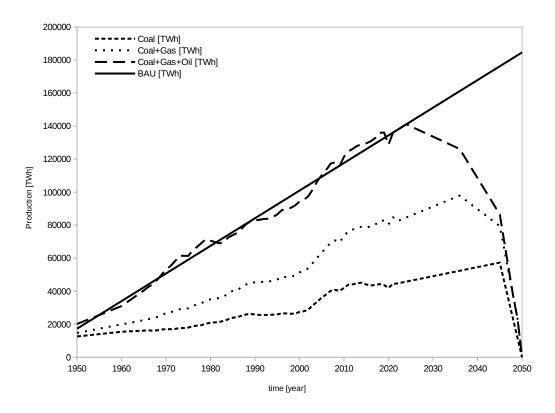


Figure 1: Worst case scenario energy ressources. The gap between the solid line (the business as usual of coal, gas and oil) and the long dashed line represents the energy deficit that PV needs to cover.

In order to study if a smooth energy transition is physically possible, numerical simulations are performed for PV development, beginning in 2021

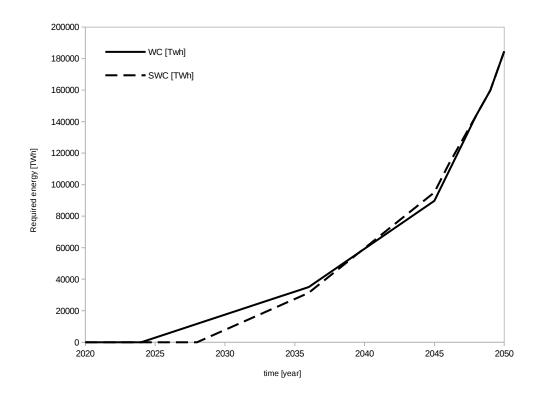


Figure 2: Worst case (WC) and Second Worst Case (SWC) scenario energy ressources.

with a production equal to 2701 TWh (according to BP (2021)) and an investment k equal to 1, solving Eq.(4) and Eq.(8). τ_{PV} is set to 30 years and $ERoEI_{PV}$ is taken in the range [8; 12]. It is noted here that the ERoEI value fitted on the period 2000-2021 yields $ERoEI_{PV} = 11.4 \pm 1.2$ assuming a 95% confidence interval can legitimately be evaluated based on PV production data. k is then optimised using an inverse method to fit the net production on the required production predicted by the scenarios described above, ensuring a long time scale linearly increasing production by setting k to a value slightly higher than 1/ERoEI once transition is over (an example of k time evolution for the worst case scenario and $ERoEI_{PV} = 11.4$ is presented on Fig.3).

These simulations shows that for the second worst case scenario, a smooth energy transition is physically achievable if $ERoEI_{PV} = 8.6$, a value lower than the practical value and lower than most references on its theoretical value, as Raugei et al. (2017) for instance. For the worst case scenario, an

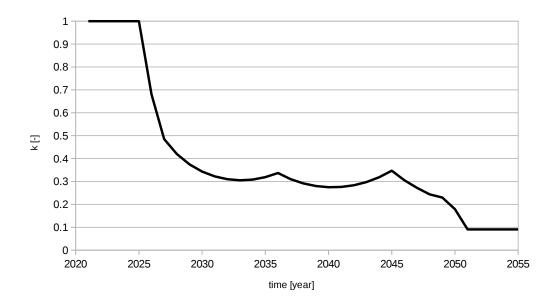


Figure 3: k time evolution for the worst case scenario and $ERoEI_{PV} = 11.4$

 $ERoEI_{PV}$ of 12 is required to do so, a value that might be slightly above the practical value. For $ERoEI_{PV}=11.4$, the worst case scenario leads to a 3-4 year energy decline that begins in 2025, which is similar in relative energy deficit to what follows the 1979 oil shock. For $ERoEI_{PV}=10$ (what could be considered as a lower bound limit of the practical value), the worst case scenario leads to a 4 year energy decline that begins in 2025, which is similar to the energy deficit observed after the 1929 crisis. These results (compiled in Table 1) suggest a smooth energy transition is physically possible if the second worst case scenario was to happen. If the worst case scenario was to happen, the $ERoEI_{PV}$ fitted value suggests that an energy crisis similar to the 1979 oil shock will happen. For the lowest probable $ERoEI_{PV}$ ($ERoEI_{PV}=10$), an energy crisis with a magnitude as important as the 1929 crisis will happen. In any case, a full disruption of energy supply seems avoided.

Table 1 also presents the absolute maximum growth rate corresponding to the required $ERoEI_{PV}$ for the different cases. It allows to estimate the required ERoEI of nuclear (Nu) and wind (Wd) that could allow an equivalent energy transition. τ_{Wd} is here taken equal to 25 years and t_{invest} is

taken equal to 4 years (the value observed in Germany) or 8 years (the value observed in France).

These results suggest fossil fuel depletion can be handled more or less smoothly, nevertheless, it is important to notice that in case of an energy crisis, it can only be handled if investment is kept close to its maximum during the whole crisis (as observed on Fig.3), without using the production to partially cover the depletion of fossil fuels, as such policy would lead to a total disruption of energy supply. Finally, it is worth noting here that this rational has been conducted at global scale, but it could also be applied at local scale (i.e. a country) to determine a specific, efficient investment policy, based on the resources and energy mix of a given country.

Table 1: Required ERoEI and relative maximum growth rate for the different scenarios, considering a smooth transition (first two lines), a crisis similar to the 1979 oils shock (lines 3 and 4) and an energy decrease similar to the consequences of the 1929 crisis (last line). For wind, case (a) corresponds to $t_{invest} = 8$ years and case (b) corresponds to $t_{invest} = 4$ years. Bold values are lower or equal to theoretical or practical values, meaning the considered technology can physically handle a given scenario, for a given energy crisis level.

Scenario	$ERoEI_{PV}$	$ERoEI_{Nu}$	$ERoEI_{Wd(a)}$	$ERoEI_{Wd(b)}$	G
Worst	12.0	69	43	18	1.40
Second worst	8.6	34	21	11	1.29
Worst	11.4	60	38	16.5	1.38
Second worst	8.2	29	18	10	1.27
Worst	10.0	45	28	14.0	1.33

Conclusion and opening

In this article, a model is presented to study PV production dynamic. This model is able to reproduce the behavior of the previous S-curve function model. It also shows the following features:

- The model development, based on energy conservation and ERoEI definition, is applied to PV but can be applied also to wind and nuclear.
- It allows to explain why the usual relationship between gross, net energy and ERoEI ($Q_N/Q = 1-1/ERoEI$) does not apply to any low carbon

- technology during its development, before a steady-state production is reached.
 - It provides new insights on the PV net energy discussion, explaining how the investment dynamic can modify artificially the ERoEI measurement. This point highlights why ERoEI should be calculated at point of use to compare technologies.
- It shows that a technology development ability depends on ERoEI, but also on two dimensionless times: t_{invest}/τ and t_{trans}/t_{invest} , what allows to compare objectively PV, nuclear and wind.
 - It suggests a proper energy policy could ensure a smooth energy transition, if $ERoEI_{PV}$ practical value is greater than 12.
 - It suggests no full disruption of energy supply will happen during energy transition if $ERoEI_{PV}$ practical value is greater than 10, what seems realistic according to this study and $ERoEI_{PV}$ theoretical value. However, it suggests an energy crisis similar to the 1979 oil shock might happen around 2025.

6 References

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