



GOVERNMENTS AND INDUSTRY MUST JOIN FORCES TO EXPAND ENERGY ACCESS

By Rachel Kyte, CEO and Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Sustainable Energy for All (SEforALL)

The economic and development case for expanding access to reliable and affordable clean energy has never been stronger. Access to energy allows people to contribute to the local economy, delivers adequate healthcare, enables education, and opens up business opportunities. We are now closing in on the final decade to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and despite clear evidence that access to energy underpins the achievement of all SDGs, the world is falling short on achieving SDG7 to ensure affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all by 2030. Achieving this goal is still within reach but we need political leadership, a consistent policy reform agenda and partnerships that will enable innovative and successful approaches that can be replicated and scaled.

Access to electricity is growing, but not fast enough

Notable progress has been made on electricity access in recent years, with the number of people living without electricity dropping to roughly 840 million from one billion in 2016. India, Bangladesh, and Kenya are among the countries that have made significant progress by making access a political priority and putting a greater focus on integrated electrification planning, embracing both on-grid and off-grid solutions and cooperating with the private sector.

However, beneath this global progress, the gap is widening between a few countries where progress is being made and other countries where significant populations do not have access to electricity. Of the 20 countries¹ that represent nearly 80 per cent of the remaining deficit in access to electricity, five are located in Asia and the rest in Africa. If the current trajectory continues, an estimated 650 million people worldwide will still be without access to electricity in 2030.

The urgent challenge, which will be critical for universal electrification, is to create the conditions necessary for financing and business models to take root in the 20 countries that we know are at risk of being left behind.

We need a reset moment on clean cooking

The situation for access to clean cooking is even more urgent with roughly two out of five people on the planet without access to clean cooking. This figure has barely changed in the past 20 years and urgent and decisive leadership is required to achieve progress.

This inaction condemns a new generation of women and children to indoor air pollution, threatens significant deforestation, and stalls the growth of economies because

of public health and environmental impacts. According to WHO, household air pollution from the use of inefficient stoves paired with biomass, coal and kerosene for cooking is responsible for some four million premature deaths a year, with women and children most at risk, and is the fourth leading risk factor for disease in developing countries.

New risks: access to cooling in a warming world

With continuously rising temperatures and heatwaves becoming more frequent, the challenge of achieving energy access is further compounded by the need to ensure everyone has access to cooling. Cooling underpins the ability of millions to escape poverty, to keep children healthy, vaccines stable, food nutritious, and economies productive. An estimated 1.1 billion people in hot climates face serious risks to their health and productivity from a lack of access to cooling.

Better data for planning and decision-making

Governments need to set aggressive domestic targets for electrification, energy access and clean cooking access. These targets provide a point of reference for the government and the private sector, while it instills confidence for long term investors. Integrated planning should not be limited to just electrification but should address cooling needs in a warming world to guarantee the supply of safe medicine and food and protect populations from extreme heatwaves.

We require a more detailed understanding of end-user electrification needs and disaggregated data on gender and nexus issues such as water, climate and food to better inform electrification plans and investment decisions. The current approach to data parameters needs refining to address the challenges of affordability, reliability, level and quality of access.

Mindset matters

The energy sector is driven by political short-termism. Politicians make promises about affordable clean energy but then fail to act because they are locked into outdated models and thinking. The revolution in renewable energy and digitalization is enabling a fundamental shift in the way we can provide energy services. If we focus on those traditionally unserved and design energy services for them, we will catch those in between. Focusing on the last mile first is good for everyone, whether it be for electricity services, clean fuels for cooking or solutions for cold chains and cooling. ■

1. 20 electrification 'high impact' countries: Angola, Burkina Faso, Chad, Congo DR, Ethiopia, Kenya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Korea DPR, Myanmar.