Energie powers human progress, from job generation to economic competitiveness, from strengthening security to empowering women, energy is the great integrator: it cuts across all sectors and lies at the heart of all countries’ core interests. Now more than ever, the world needs to ensure that the benefits of modern energy are available to all and that energy is provided as cleanly and efficiently as possible. This is a matter of equity, first and foremost, but it is also an issue of urgent practical importance – this is the impetus for the UN Secretary-General’s new Sustainable Energy for All Initiative.

This initiative is launched in a time of great economic uncertainty, great inequity, rapid urbanisation, and high youth unemployment. It is also a time where there is emerging consensus on the need to act cohesively towards global issues such as sustainable development. We are not, however, starting from ‘scratch’. New technologies ranging from improved photovoltaic cells, to advanced metering, to electric vehicles and smart grids give us a strong foundation from which to move forward. How we capture these opportunities for wealth and job creation, for education and local manufacturing will be the key to unlock any real revolution.

Three linked objectives underpin the goal of achieving Sustainable Energy for All by 2030:
• Ensuring universal access to modern energy services – access to electricity and to modern fuels and technologies for cooking, heating, and productive uses;
• Doubling the rate of improvement in energy efficiency;
• Doubling the share of renewable energy in the global energy mix.

These three objectives are mutually reinforcing. Increasingly affordable renewable energy technologies are bringing modern energy services to rural communities where extension of the conventional electric power grid would be prohibitively expensive and impractical. More efficient devices for lighting and other applications require less energy and thus reduce the amount of power needed to support them. Increased efficiency in the production and use of electricity relieve strained power grids, allowing them to stretch farther and reach more households and businesses. And finally, the alternative – unconstrained expansion of today’s conventional fossil fuel-based energy systems – would lock in a long-term infrastructure commitment to an unsustainable emissions path for the world’s climate.

The Secretary-General has formed a High-Level Group to design an Action Agenda and provide ongoing momentum to the goal of providing Sustainable Energy for All. This will require catalysing action from a broad array of stakeholders to help meet its stated objectives by 2030. The Secretary-General, in the run-up to the 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development Rio+20 summit later this year, described the Initiative as follows:

“At Rio+20 we will ask all stakeholders to make a global commitment to achieving Sustainable Energy for All by the year 2030. Reaching this goal will require action by all countries and all sectors to shape the policy and investment decisions needed for a brighter energy future. Industrialised countries must accelerate the transition to low-emission technologies. Developing countries, many of them growing rapidly and at large scale, have the opportunity to leapfrog conventional energy options and move directly to cleaner energy alternatives that will enhance economic and social development.”

The Action Agenda aims to establish clear actions and commitments over time to:
• establish firm political commitment
• create stable policy and regulatory frameworks
• finance the transformation
• strengthen local capacity and forge global partnerships
• ensure accountability and transparent reporting
• strengthen the analytical foundation
• disseminate information

Within the UN system we are working closely via UN-Energy (www.un-energy.org). UN-Energy is fostering new partnerships, better communication, and facilitating effective action on the ground.

A LEAPFROGGING REVOLUTION
Looking beyond the energy sector, and in the run-up to the 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20), a consensus is growing around the fact that in a resource and carbon constrained world, a transition to a “Green Economy” is required for sustainable development. However, such a shift cannot be done at the expense of the developmental priorities of developing countries, and any definition of the Green Economy will need to provide diverse opportunities for both economic development and poverty alleviation.

In response to these challenges, UNIDO launched a Green Industry Initiative, which aims at accelerating the green growth of the manufacturing and related sectors.
It provides the international community and national governments with a platform for fostering the positive role of industry in achieving sustainable development. Greening industrial development is thus an integral pillar of the Green Economy concept, as it provides a framework for developing countries to green their industrialisation process and to promote businesses that provide environmental goods and services. A holistic framing of the global energy issue is required to underpin this work.

While these issues resonate in both developed and developing economies, the impact on the Least Developed Countries is something to which we are acutely aware. Even there, good precedent for national actions exists in places such as Rwanda and Ethiopia. These countries are putting together sophisticated national plans to address sustainable energy issues for the entire economy.

For a model of transformative change that has reached every corner of the world, we can look to the mobile phone and the ICT sector. This precedent is now influencing the possibilities for smart grids, even in the most remote corners of the world. In the future, “smart and just grids” for developing countries could serve the same purpose as smart grids in industrialised countries, even though they are likely to follow a different pathway and timeframe.

Constraints such as a lack of good governance, limited investment capital, largely inadequate infrastructure and a gap in well-trained power sector personnel are likely stifling innovative practices that could already be occurring organically. The massive electricity infrastructure requirements to reach universal access offer a unique opportunity to learn from the nexus between ICT and energy systems and move forward without necessarily repeating all previous development stages.

The UN General Assembly named 2012 as the International Year of Sustainable Energy for All – thus placing energy at the heart of the multilateral process. It is an enormous opportunity to share models that work, are scalable, and can help fill gaps in existing funding or capacity. It is also a chance to ensure that the political momentum currently focused on this area is maintained. Emerging Partnerships such as the Norwegian Energy+, and the UN-Energy/Global Sustainable Electricity Partnership offer conduits for multi-stakeholder engagement and dialogue – as well as real action.

We must do considerably more than scratch the surface for an issue that deeply impacts all of our lives. This means commitments from many different stakeholders and ways to track progress. To begin, go to http://www.sustainableenergyforall.org and join us!