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Hitting reset on sustainable energy

As COVID-19 underlines, energy can be the difference between life and death. We must rapidly ramp up progress to ensure everyone has access to this fundamental resource

By **Damilola Ogunbiyi**, CEO and Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Sustainable Energy for All (SEforALL), and Co-Chair of UN-Energy

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the world as we know it. With business as usual being thrown out of the window, new opportunities are emerging that could pave the way to a more prosperous future for all.

This is particularly true for the energy transition. As countries continue to rebuild from the pandemic, clean-energy investment can support them to recover better, and use this unique moment to reset their economies and close energy access gaps.

Progress is desperately needed. Despite energy's critical role in catalysing economic development and supporting people's health and livelihoods, the world remains severely off track to achieve universal access to

affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all by 2030, as called for by Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 7.

Without electricity, people lack a basic necessity for poverty alleviation and the ability to build resilience to the global

▲ Living off-grid in a village near Mbour, Senegal. The villagers now benefit from high-quality solar homes systems

health crisis. Many are forced to cook with dirty fuels that further put them at risk of respiratory diseases like COVID-19.

According to data from the latest *Tracking SDG 7: The Energy Progress Report 2020*, 789 million people globally still lack access to electricity and 2.8 billion people – over a third of the world's population – are unable to cook cleanly and safely.

As the COVID-19 pandemic has shown, energy access saves lives. This further adds to the urgency and importance of faster progress in delivering sustainable energy for all.

But if current trends continue, we will not deliver the promise of universal energy access by 2030. We can no longer accept this incremental rate of progress. We must renew our commitment to an integrated energy transition that accelerates the pace of progress on access, prioritises energy efficiency and supports faster growth of renewables.

Meeting SDG 7 by 2030

If we look at the core targets of SDG 7 in more detail, we can see where the challenges and opportunities to accelerate progress are.

For example, on electrification, significant progress has been made since 2010, with the number of people without access to electricity reduced from 1.2 billion to 789 million in 2018. The decline was most significant in Central and Southern Asia, where the deficit shrank from 441 million in 2010 to 152 million in 2018.

The electricity access challenge remains heavily concentrated in Africa. The continent's share of world population without electricity access increased from 48 to 70 per cent between 2010 and 2018. We estimate that 565 million people still lack access to electricity across Africa. Beyond these numbers are millions more people in the region who only have minimal or unreliable access.

While electricity access can often dominate the headlines, the ongoing global challenge of access to clean cooking remains a major concern. Lack of political urgency or sustained investment, the absence of market-enabling conditions, and poor institutional frameworks have

hindered the development of the clean-cooking sector. If current trends persist, almost 30 per cent of the global population will still be without access to clean-cooking solutions by 2030.

Slow progress on energy efficiency is also undermining efforts towards all SDG 7 targets and carbon reduction. Since progress peaked in 2015, we've seen a continuing decline in the pace of progress on energy efficiency that is far from the 3 per cent rate of annual improvement required each year. This target remains within reach, but coordinated efforts are needed between governments and partners to double annual investment in energy efficiency by 2025, and double it again between 2025 and 2040,

The next few years will be critical if we're to deliver an energy transition that is truly inclusive, equitable and leaves no one behind

according to analysis by the International Energy Agency.

To encourage this investment, countries and organisations need to make public commitments – for example, through nationally determined contributions under the Paris Agreement and cross-sector energy compacts like the Three Percent Club on energy efficiency – to support the implementation of energy efficiency economy-wide.

Renewable energy has made exciting progress over recent years, but a renewable revolution is still to be fully realised. For example, decentralised renewable solutions that will be essential for providing energy access to millions are not being deployed fast enough, and renewable energy uptake is only moving at a moderate pace.

With the urgency of the climate crisis being felt globally, countries should focus on accelerating integrated and comprehensive energy policies that support greater uptake of modern renewables for electricity, heat and the transport sector.

This is our reset moment

Now, as the world continues to deal with the ongoing and growing impacts of COVID-19, countries have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to recover better and accelerate their energy transition.

This is a significant opportunity for those nations with large access gaps. According to SEforALL's Recover Better with Sustainable Energy series, countries that commit to an ambitious recover-better strategy can deliver long-term economic growth, new jobs and sustainable energy for all in the long term.

Investing in clean energy could unleash a wave of new jobs. As the global economy is increasingly being powered by clean and efficient sources of energy, research shows that dollar-for-dollar investments in clean energy create three times the number of jobs compared with fossil fuels. Every 1,000 customers connected to decentralised energy solutions – like solar home systems or solar mini grids – support approximately 25 jobs.

Countries will also see improved health, agricultural and gender outcomes, helping to ensure that women and girls benefit from a green recovery. A gender-sensitive approach is particularly key as research shows wages for women with access to energy are 59 per cent higher than those without.

By acting on the enabling measures put forward in our Recover Better series – including investing in energy efficiency, setting roust policies, eliminating fossil-fuel subsidies and declaring a moratorium on coal-fired power plants – countries will benefit from increased GDP, affordable energy provision and improved agriculture, gender and health outcomes.

Crucially, this reset can also spark progress at the speed and scale needed to meet SDG 7 and help put the global economy on a trajectory in line with the Paris Agreement and the entire SDGs.

In this moment we must also redefine what we consider energy access to be. For too long, people have seen it simply as the ability to turn on a light. Yet energy access cannot just be considered in terms of a minimum level of access. We must also ensure it provides energy for development, for productive use and economic

opportunity – helping millions of people live dignified, healthy and prosperous lives.

We need a Decade of Action

2020 marks the beginning of the final Decade of Action to achieve the SDGs. With ambitious action we can still achieve SDG 7 by 2030. But the next few years will be critical if we're to deliver an energy transition that is truly inclusive, equitable and leaves no one behind. That is why SEforALL, through our new business plan, is focused on moving beyond advocacy to action by prioritising data-driven decision-making, partnerships with high-impact countries and implementation on the ground.

To help galvanise action, the UN General Assembly has called for a High-level Dialogue on Energy to be held in 2021. This will be the first high-level meeting on energy mandated by the General Assembly in over four decades and will provide the global community with a pivotal moment for increasing action and ambition towards SDG 7 goals.

SEforALL, along with the UN Development Programme and the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, will lead this work, including the development of new energy compacts and multi-stakeholder partnerships that aim to accelerate a universal energy transition and access. Ahead of crucial global climate talks in Glasgow, this will be a critical moment on the international calendar for countries, businesses and key stakeholders to raise ambition.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, progress to meet universal energy access was too slow. Now COVID-19 risks derailing even the progress we have seen unless we act immediately. If we go back to business as usual, and if current trends continue, we will not deliver the promise of universal energy access.

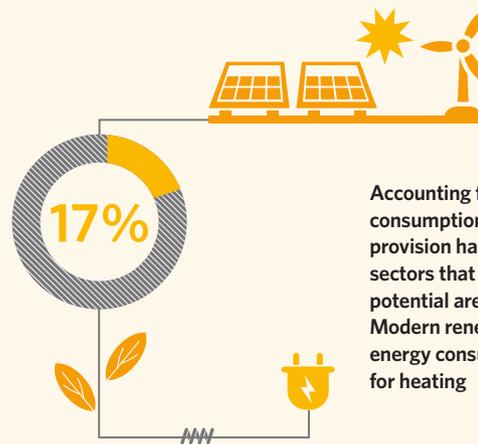
The benefits of investing in sustainable energy are clear: a demonstrable return on investment, a more resilient economy, healthier people and a cleaner environment. Today's decisions will impact tomorrow's ability to recover better over the long term. We must hit 'reset' and seize this moment to realise our promise of sustainable energy for all. ●

7 AFFORDABLE AND CLEAN ENERGY



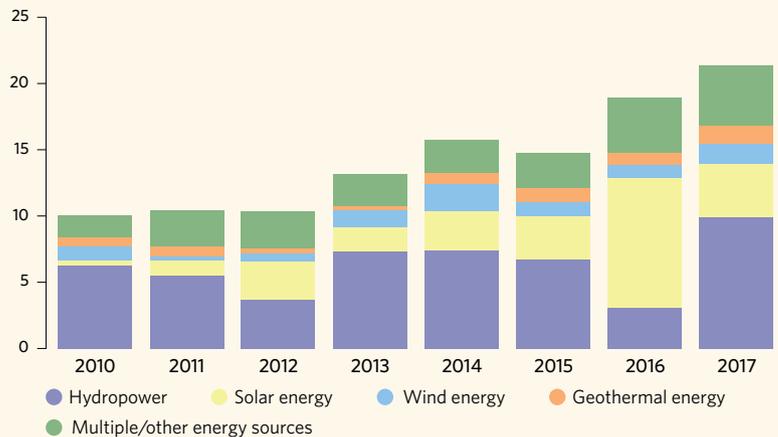
Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all

Energy access needs to be improved: in 2018, 789 million still had no electricity



Accounting for only 17% of total energy consumption in 2017, renewable energy provision has to be accelerated. Two end-use sectors that currently lag far behind their potential are transportation and heating. Modern renewables made up just 3.3% of energy consumed for transport and 9.2% for heating

International financial flows to developing countries in support of clean and renewable energy by type of technology, 2010 - 2017 (billions of dollars at 2017 prices and exchange rates)



Source: Sustainable Development Goals Report 2020