



NEWS RELEASE

Report: Universal Access to Sustainable Energy Will Remain Elusive Without Addressing Inequalities

Sustainable solutions must target African countries left behind in quest for global energy access

WASHINGTON, June 7, 2021 — During the last decade, a greater share of the global population gained access to electricity than ever before, but the number of people without electricity in Sub-Saharan Africa actually increased. Unless efforts are scaled up significantly in countries with the largest deficits the world will still fall short of ensuring universal access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy by 2030, according to [Tracking SDG 7: The Energy Progress Report](#) released today by the International Energy Agency (IEA) the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA), the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), the World Bank, and the World Health Organization (WHO).

According to the report, significant progress has been made since 2010 on various aspects of the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 7, but progress has been unequal across regions. While more than one billion people gained access to electricity globally over the last decade, COVID's financial impact has made basic electricity services unaffordable for 30 million more people, the majority located in Africa. Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Ethiopia had the biggest electricity access deficits, with Ethiopia replacing India in the Top 3.

Globally, the number of people without access to electricity declined from 1.2 billion in 2010 to 759 million in 2019. Electrification through decentralized renewable-based solutions in particular gained momentum. The number of people connected to mini grids has more than doubled between 2010 and 2019, growing from 5 to 11 million people. However, under current and planned policies and further affected by the COVID-19 crisis, an estimated 660 million people would still lack access in 2030, most of them in Sub-Saharan Africa.

At the same time, some 2.6 billion people remained without access to clean cooking in 2019, one third of the global population. Largely stagnant progress since 2010 leads to millions of deaths each year from breathing cooking smoke, and without rapid action to scale up clean cooking the world will fall short of its target by 30 percent come 2030. The state of access in the Sub-Saharan African region is characterized by population growth outpacing gains in the number of people with access, so that 910 million in the region lack access to clean cooking. The top 20 access-deficit countries account for 81 percent of the global population without access to clean fuels and technologies. Of these, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Madagascar, Mozambique, Niger, Uganda and Tanzania had less or equal to 5 percent of their populations with access to clean cooking. On a positive note, Indonesia, Cambodia and Myanmar have made gains each year over the report period.

The report examines various ways to bridge the gaps to reach SDG7, chief among them the goal of significantly scaling up renewables - which have proven more resilient than other parts of the energy sector during the COVID-19 crisis. While renewable energy has seen unprecedented growth over the last decade, its share of total final energy consumption remained steady as global energy consumption grew at a similar

rate. Renewables are most dynamic in the electricity sector, reaching around 25 percent in 2018, while progress in the heat and transport sectors have been much slower.

More than one third of the increase in renewable energy generation in 2018 can be attributed to East Asia – driven by large uptakes of solar and wind energy in China. The largest country-level advances in renewable energy in 2018 were observed in Spain, owing to higher hydropower generation, followed by Indonesia where a rapid uptake of bioenergy for power generation played a substantial role. To significantly increase the share of renewable energy in line with the SDG 7 target, current efforts need to accelerate in all end-use sectors to scale uptake of renewables while containing total energy demand.

Energy intensity improvements (a proxy for energy efficiency) are moving further away from the target set under SDG7 for 2030. The rate of global primary energy intensity improvement in 2018 was 1.1 percent compared to 2017, the lowest average annual rate of improvement since 2010. The annual improvement until 2030 will now need to average 3 percent if we are to meet the goal.

Accelerating the pace of progress across all regions and indicators will require stronger political commitment, long-term energy planning, and adequate policy and scale incentives to spur faster uptake of sustainable energy solutions. Although clean energy investments continue to be sourced primarily from the private sector, the public sector remains a major source of financing and is central in leveraging private capital, particularly in developing countries and in a post-COVID context. One of the newest indicators in the report, international public financial flows to developing countries, shows that international financial support continue to be concentrated in a few countries and failing to reach many of those most in need. Flows to developing countries in support of clean and renewable energy reached \$14 billion in 2018, with a mere 20 percent going to the least-developed countries, which are the furthest from achieving the various SDG7 targets. An increased emphasis on “leaving no one behind” is required in the years ahead.

Key highlights on SDG7 targets

Access to electricity. Since 2010, more than a billion people have gained access to electricity. As a result, 90 percent of the planet’s population was connected in 2019. Yet 759 million people still live without electricity, with about half of them living in fragile and conflict-affected settings. Despite accelerated progress in recent years, the SDG target of universal access by 2030 appears unlikely to be met, leaving an estimated 660 million without electricity, especially if the COVID-19 pandemic seriously disrupts electrification efforts. Regional disparities continue to persist, and the access deficit is particularly concentrated in Sub-Saharan Africa, which accounts for three-quarters of the global deficit. Latin America and the Caribbean, Eastern Asia and Southeastern Asia are approaching universal access, with more than 98 percent of their population having electricity access, whereas in Sub-Saharan Africa less than half of the population has access. Among the 20 countries with the largest access deficits, Bangladesh, Kenya, and Uganda showed the greatest improvement since 2010, thanks to annual electrification growth rates in excess of 3 percentage points, driven largely by an integrated approach that combined grid, mini grid and on-grid solar electrification.

Clean cooking. The share of the global population without access to clean cooking fuels and technologies was 66 percent in 2019, leaving almost three billion people or one-third of the global population without access. Since 2010, the global access rate to clean cooking solutions grew annually by 1 percent, with gains mostly attributed to progress in the regions of Central and Southern Asia and Eastern and Southeastern Asia. In stark contrast, progress in clean cooking access in Sub-Saharan Africa was slower than population growth, with some countries showing little or no improvements in the clean cooking access rate. For the first time, in 2019, more people without access to clean fuels and technologies reside in Sub-Saharan Africa than in any other region. Close to 900 million people or around 85 percent of the population in the region lack clean cooking access, accounting for 35 percent of the global access deficit. Current trends suggest that unless rapid action is taken to scale up clean cooking, the world will fall short of the universal access target for clean cooking by almost 30 percent, achieving only 72 percent of the population

in 2030. Of the top 20 countries with greatest number of people lacking access to clean fuel and technologies for cooking, 10 are located in Sub-Saharan Africa (Nigeria, Ethiopia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, United Republic of Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya, Mozambique, Madagascar, Ghana, Niger), 6 are in Eastern Asia and South-eastern Asia (China, Indonesia, Philippines, Myanmar, Viet Nam, Democratic Republic of Korea) and 4 are in Central Asia and Southern Asia (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan). During the period 2010-2019, the top 5 most populous low- and middle-income countries (China, India, Indonesia, Brazil, and Pakistan) increased their combined access rate by 2 percent where progress in all other LMIC, remained unchanged or stagnant over the same period. To ensure no one is left behind, the political commitment, and financial incentives must be prioritized in all access-deficit countries to achieve the universal target of SDG 7.

Renewables. The COVID-19 crisis resulted in an estimated 7 percent year-on-year expansion of renewable electricity generation, supported by long-term contracts, low marginal costs, priority access to grids, and installation of new renewable capacity. In contrast, renewable energy share for transport and heat declined in 2020. Renewable electricity accounts for almost half of global modern renewable energy consumption and three-quarters of its year-on-year increase, with hydropower being the largest renewable source of electricity globally and for each region. Heat, which is the largest energy end use worldwide, had only a 1.2 percent absolute increase when it came to renewable sources. Coal, gas and oil still meet three-quarters of global heat demand, making it heavily fossil-fuel dependent. The sector needs greater ambition and stronger policy support. Transport has the lowest renewable energy penetration of all sectors, with only 3.4 percent in 2018 being supplied by renewables. While Sub-Saharan Africa has the largest share of renewable sources in its energy supply, it is not modern - 85 percent is traditional uses of biomass. Latin America and the Caribbean have the largest share of modern renewable energy uses, thanks to hydropower for electricity, bioenergy for industrial processes and biofuels for transport.

Energy efficiency. Global primary energy intensity - an important indicator of how heavily the world's economic activity uses energy - improved by 1.1 percent in 2018. This was the lowest average annual rate of improvement since 2010. The annual improvement until 2030 will now need to average 3 percent if we are to meet the SDG 7 goal. Emerging economies in Central, Southern, Eastern and South-eastern Asia saw a rapid increase in economic activity, but the rise in energy supply was mitigated by significant improvements in energy efficiency, resulting in robust, continuous improvements in energy intensity. Between 2010 and 2018, energy intensity in South-eastern Asia grew 3.1 percent. The lowest rates of energy intensity improvement occurred in Western Asia, Northern Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean (0.8 percent) and Sub-Saharan Africa (1.4 percent). Using different metrics to measure intensity in individual sectors, the rate of improvement in energy intensity slowed compared with the period 1990-2010 in all sectors except for transportation, where fuel efficiency standards drove energy intensity improvements.

International Financial Flows. International public financial flows to developing countries in support of clean energy amounted to \$14 billion in 2018, a 35 percent decrease from an all-time high of \$21.9 billion the year before. Nevertheless, the overall trend in public financial flows has been positive over the past decade, increasing threefold during the period 2010-18 when viewed as a five-year moving average. This trend, however, masks some important distributional discrepancies, with financial commitments concentrated in a few countries and thus failing to reach many of those most in need of international support. The 46 least developed countries (LDCs) received a mere 20 percent of public financial flows over the period 2010-18 and a total of \$2.8 billion in 2018—the same level as in 2017 but lower than in 2016 and 2015. International financial flows need to be further scaled up and increasingly target those countries

falling furthest behind in reaching SDG 7. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has dramatically increased investors' risk perception and shifted public funding priorities in developing countries, international public financial flows are more critical than ever to leverage the investment levels needed to reach SDG 7.

“On a global path to achieving net-zero emissions by 2050, we can reach key sustainable energy targets by 2030 as we expand renewables in all sectors and increase energy efficiency,” **said Fatih Birol, Executive Director of the International Energy Agency.** *“Greater efforts to mobilise and scale up investment are essential to ensure that energy access progress continues in developing economies. Providing electricity access and clean cooking solutions to those people who are deprived of them today costs around \$40 billion a year, equal to around 1% of average annual energy sector investment on a path to net zero by 2050. This fairer and cleaner energy future is achievable if governments work together to step up actions.”*

“Renewable energy has proven itself to be reliable, cost-effective, and resilient during the pandemic, revealing its significant value at the forefront of the energy transition. But progress towards the achievement of climate objectives and SDG7 needs to move at an accelerated pace and equitable manner,” **said Francesco La Camera, Director-General of the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA).** *“Efforts, including international public financial flows to renewables, must be scaled up to support countries that need the most improvement in clean, affordable, and sustainable energy access, healthcare, and welfare. IRENA will continue to leverage its expertise and partnerships to ensure that the manifold benefits of renewables lead to an inclusive and sustainable economies.”*

“The 2021 Report will inform the High-level Dialogue on Energy 2021 on the current progress towards SDG 7, four decades after the last high-level event dedicated to energy under the auspices of UN General Assembly. It finds that the COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly impacted progress towards ensuring access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all, having even reversed some progress made so far. At the same time, the situation presents opportunities to integrate SDG 7-related policies in recovery packages and thus to scale up sustainable development,” **said Stefan Schweinfest, Director of the Statistics Division, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs.**

“The Tracking SDG7 report shows that 90 percent of the global population now has access to electricity, but disparities exacerbated by the pandemic, if left unaddressed, may keep the sustainable energy goal out of reach, jeopardizing other SDGs and the Paris Agreement’s objectives,” **said Mari Pangestu, Managing Director of Development Policy and Partnerships at the World Bank.** *“Addressing energy access and climate change requires an inclusive energy transition. We must work together to achieve SDG7 so that everyone can access clean, affordable, and sustainable electricity.”*

“Moving towards scaling up clean and sustainable energy is key to protect human health and to promote healthier populations, particularly in remote and rural areas. Far too many people, often the most vulnerable ones such as women and children, still lack access to clean cooking fuels and technologies, exposing them to dangerous levels of household air pollution. A healthy and green recovery from COVID-19 includes the importance of ensuring a quick transition to clean and sustainable energy,” **said Dr. Maria Neira, Director of the Department of Environment, Climate Change and Health at the World Health Organization (WHO).**

This is the seventh edition of this report, formerly known as the Global Tracking Framework (GTF). This year's edition was chaired by the United Nations Statistics Division.

The report this year comes at a crucial time as Governments and stakeholders are gearing up for the UN High-level Dialogue on Energy, a summit-level meeting in September 2021 that will examine steps needed to achieve SDG7 by 2030 and mobilize voluntary commitments and actions in the form of Energy Compacts.

The report can be downloaded at <http://trackingSDG7.esmap.org/>.

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LAUNCH EVENT: 7 JUNE 2021, 8:00 - 10:00 AM EDT

Link [here](#) to join Webex event
Meeting ID: 172 425 4878
Meeting password: Meet1234

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