

Sustainable Energy Access during COVID-19: Time for Collaboration not Heroes



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Our lives have been altered by the COVID-19 pandemic. As, George W. Bush, former president of the US, put it, *“A pandemic is a lot like a forest fire. If caught early it might be extinguished with limited damage. If allowed to smolder, undetected, it can grow to an inferno that can spread quickly beyond our ability to control it”*. It is certain that COVID-19 has grown to be a global inferno beyond our imagination.

In the wake of this pandemic, the role of sustainable energy solutions has come to the forefront with many governments declaring energy an essential service. Prior to the pandemic, the sustainable energy industry with all of the goodwill struggled to convince decision-makers that energy should be considered an essential service. Now more than ever, it is clear that access to sustainable energy is essential, especially, in regards to building a robust response and recovery to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The general consensus is that life will never be the same after this global health crisis. However, how the sustainable energy industry responds and rises to the challenge will make all the difference. For hundreds of millions of people in sub-Saharan Africa, things might remain exactly the same or even get worse unless the sustainable energy industry comes together to address one of their very basic needs: access to sustainable energy.

The following recommendations are made as a crying call for the sustainable energy market ecosystem to efficiently support the global response to and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic in efficient and sound manner.

Business-as-usual will not do

The sustainable energy sector has been prone to lack of coordination and collaboration, over the years. For instance, as a result of the pandemic, there is a rush from sustainable energy stakeholders to put out calls to actions. These calls to actions, however laudable, are mostly done in an uncoordinated fashion, with one exception being [ARE's Call to Action](#), which garnered more than 130 supporters. Clear, every organization wants to be seen as the great savior with the magical solutions to single-handedly electrify health facilities and to provide power to households and businesses.

Currently, huge funds are being announced, almost on a weekly basis, since the pandemic hit us like a hurricane. Powerful organizations are all vying for position to be first to tap into these funds. Unfortunately, these funds will most likely be available to the usual suspects on the same or better terms. This does not augur well on the industry and confirms a normal pattern, where smaller local companies are left behind or left with very little when it comes to access to financing.

These two examples above, represent the business-as-usual scenario even in the midst of the global pandemic. This means that the renewable energy industry has, unfortunately, not yet seized this opportunity to bring about a paradigm shift.

Back to basics with a human-centered approach

Access to sustainable energy is a question of life or death. However, this seems to have been lost in the discourse over the years. But, thanks to COVID-19, we are now forced to grapple with this reality, every day. We must now, remember that the sustainable energy sector is all about human lives, not impressive products, trendy tech crazes or jargon. Forever, we, in the sustainable energy industry, have clung to the idea of innovation in terms of extolled business models and chic technologies, when the focus should have been on how to meaningfully impact the lives of those who are most vulnerable to energy poverty. Going-forward, our interventions and decisions should be people-centered.

Put substance ahead of image

Big announcements of funding are being made with much fanfare. However, the announced funds have not yet started flowing and will most likely take many months to be deployed. To the smallholder farmer in rural Senegal relying on the rain; the woman in Ghana walking 10 miles a day to collect fuelwood for cooking and all the disenfranchised people living off the grid or at the mercy of an unreliable grid, what matters most is accessing the energy solutions which will improved their lives.

Truly Bridge the Gap between Financing Supply and Demand

These are extraordinary times which require extraordinary measures to get energy to those who need it the most. Therefore, we must fix the mismatch between financing and projects and cut down lead-time for financing decisions. With so many funds operating and so many entrepreneurs seeking financing, it is just unfathomable that the two sides are both still not satisfied. Funders can never seem to find the right project and entrepreneurs never seem to find the financing they need.

Financing must be adapted to market realities

A popular Malian saying goes, “the ant can never drink the water prepared for elephant”. The great majority of the micro, small and medium enterprises (MSME) working to increase access to sustainable energy services at the last-mile are not able to access adequate financing due to the fact that eligibility criteria either eliminate them *de facto* or put them at clear disadvantage compared to their larger counterparts. The reality is that the playing field is not levelled for local MSMEs operating at the last-mile. There is no better time than now to review strategy by reducing decision-time and adapting ticket sizes so these companies serving hard-to-reach customers can compete equally for financing.

Take governments and other funders to task

As chef Roy Choi, so poignantly put it, “money is just one ingredient in the recipe of life”. Money is certainly not the only missing link to solving the access to sustainable energy gap. However, COVID-19 has obviously demonstrated, that there is enough money to address the global energy poverty crisis. Countries are committing unprecedented sums of money to address the COVID-19 pandemic. The amounts are astronomical, to say the least. So, clearly, the issue to solving the lack of access to reliable and affordable energy, which is affecting at least 3.6 billion people worldwide, has never been lack of money, but rather lack of political will and misguided priorities. The idea that governments do not have the financial resources to work with the private sector to address the energy crisis has now been proven false.

Sensitize and advocate like never before on the issue of access to sustainable energy

Knowing that lack of access to clean cookstoves kills more than 4 million people worldwide, each year, should be enough to declare lack of sustainable energy access a global public health threat.

Going forward, we must no longer accept this notion that there is not enough money to ensure every citizen has access to safe, reliable and affordable energy. COVID-19 has dispelled that myth. We pray that the pandemic never reaches the same number of deaths caused by lack of sustainable energy. However, we shall also hope that the issue of energy access gets the same attention, urgency, engagement and financing as COVID-19. Providing access to sustainable energy to all, must be at the forefront of the development agenda globally, regionally and nationally, not in rhetoric only but in reality. How else would we truly build the resilience of our health infrastructure, farmers and economies? Energy is a must and it is painful to hear governments always argue that there are other priorities. If energy cannot be the only priority, it should, at least be the top priority due to its transversal nature.

Bold collaboration and partnerships should be the new normal

If the saying, “we are in this together” is to ever ring true, this is the time. We must band together, in order to make our interventions more impactful. The resolve of the sustainable energy sector to address COVID-19 and its aftermath must not be scattered operationally and financially. As a community, we owe it to ourselves to ensure that we “recover better” in the words of UN Secretary General, Mr. Antonio Guterres. We cannot maintain the *status-quo* and expect different results. We must take cues from other industries, where historical competitors have come together to collaborate on production of solutions such as ventilators, disinfection gel, testing kits, etc. More importantly, collaboration ensures that the financial resources available are not dispersed in a way that make them barely impactful.

In conclusion, we must embrace the unique role of the clean energy industry in the quest for sustainable development. The sustainable energy sector must ensure its response to the COVID-19 pandemic is swift, bold, unambiguous, well-organized and forward-thinking.

Indeed, now is the best time to unapologetically and rightfully boast about all the game-changing sustainable energy solutions. However, while doing so, we must rethink our strategy to shift course and render our industry more holistic, more inclusive and more united.

The world will, without a doubt change, post-COVID-19. It is our duty as an industry to make sure it does for the better. The sad truth is that for millions of people, their lives post-COVID-19 will be far worse than prior to the pandemic because COVID-19 has and will continue to compound inequalities, unless the sustainable energy industry rises to the challenge with bold partnerships capable of making economies more resilient.

As the great Indian thinker, Rumi, once said, “speed is irrelevant when you’re going in the wrong direction”. We might have been going in the wrong direction rather fast, these past years. We, now have the momentous opportunity to redirect course and initiate bolder initiatives and collaborations in order to make our impact greater and more far-reaching. Otherwise, we will fall short of meeting Sustainable Development Goals, (SDGs), especially SDG 7, which aims to provide universal access to affordable, reliable modern energy by 2030.

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