Africa: Coping with the challenge of climate change on the path to sustainable development

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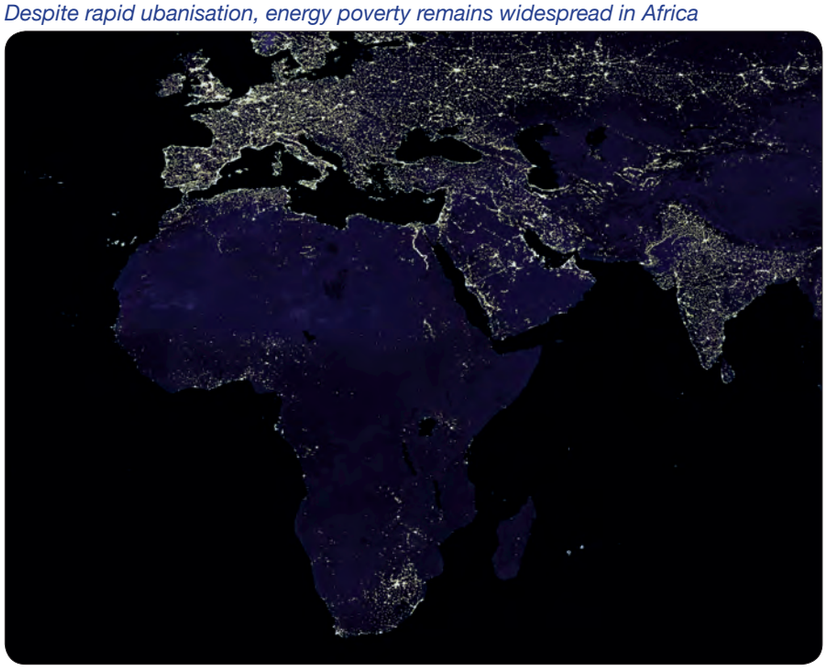
The UN has declared 2012 the International Year of Sustainable Energy for All. The issue of sustainable energy development is a key consideration for climate change mitigation and adaptation initiatives, and is an integral component of Africa's ability to achieve the inter-related economic, social and environmental aims of sustainable development. Nearly one third of the global population lacks access to sustainable, efficient energy services that are environmentally friendly. Climate is likely to affect everyone in one way or the other: from temperature rise, increased floods and change in rainfall patterns to the spread of diseases like cholera and malaria. The challenges that need to be overcome in sustainable development are enormous. As a continent, Africa is experiencing one of the fastest rates of urbanisation in the world, with Sub-Saharan Africa leading the way. By 2030 Africa will have about 760 million urban residents, more than the entire western hemisphere of today. And by 2050 the figure is expected to grow to about 1.2 billion. With more people moving to cities, the demand is increasing for sustainable development projects in energy and water, as well as healthcare. African countries are likely to be severely affected because of the already high levels of poverty and vulnerability. The impacts of environmental change on men and women are likely to be different due to their different roles and responsibilities.

Much of the focus of development interventions in Africa have been on energy use at community level. For example, many interventions have promoted the use of improved stoves, which end the drudgery of wood-fuel collection by women and children. The different impacts of climate change, international energy policies, and climate change mitigation activities on men and women have not been articulated or researched into properly at the national and regional levels. These impacts can play significant roles in mitigating climate change activities at the local level. Energy policies therefore need to be explored and addressed.

In the developing world, 1.3 billion people now live below the poverty threshold, 70 per cent of whom are women. Energy use is a yardstick for socio-economic development, and it is clear that energy poverty and inefficiency are widespread in Africa. Energy use is closely linked to a range of social issues: poverty alleviation, population growth, urbanisation, and lack of opportunities.

Despite rapid ubanisation, energy poverty remains widespread in Africa



Promoting sustainable energy in Africa

Major initiatives must be taken and scaled-up at all levels to make progress. The measures that should be embarked upon in Africa include:

Prioritising efficient institutional, regulatory and policy frameworks: African policy-makers should pay special consideration to policy measures which clarify the role of various stakeholders (public and private); improve the investment climate in general through more favourable legal and regulatory reforms; strengthen the role of independent energy regulatory bodies and lift barriers to the realisation of regional integration projects in energy. Co-opting women in making energy policies will enhance the promotion of sustainable energy and alleviate energy poverty in Africa.

Increasing financial flows towards the African energy sector: International development partners, including the UN, should enhance their role to support African Nations to undertake the necessary reforms conducive to a coherent, transparent and attractive investment framework and increase their advocacy and funding function to mobilise and significantly increase financial flow towards Africa for investment in energy projects. Commitments made to set the NEPAD energy initiatives as a priority for the continent, should be reinforced.

Improving the share of RE in the African energy mix: African governments should put in place coherent regulatory and policy frameworks that support the development of thriving markets for renewable energy technologies and recognise the important role of the private sector. This includes removing barriers; allowing fair competition in energy markets; and taking into account the concept of internalising external costs for all energy sources.

Promoting regional energy integration as a catalyst for development: The Regional Energy Commissions (RECs), with the support of international partners, should promote regional energy trade as an efficient means to reduce the uneven distribution of energy resources in Africa; reduce energy import cost burdens on most national economies; and increase the supply of secure and environmentally sustainable energy.

Linking rural energy development programmes to poverty reduction strategies and the achievement of the MDGs: International development partners, regional, sub-regional and national energy stakeholders should view the energy access problem as inseparable from poverty reduction efforts and economic growth strategies. They should, therefore, be willing to drastically increase their financial participation in the sector and assist in the development of key infrastructure that can sustain the minimum economic growth required to break the cycle of poverty and achieve the MDGs.

Promoting coordination and coherence among all international partners: More efforts must be made by all energy stakeholders, especially UN organisations, to create coherence, complementarities and effectiveness in energy policy initiatives in Africa. This can be achieved in the framework of a collaborative mechanism such as UN-Energy/Africa.

Conclusion

In conclusion, energy production and utilisation is the main source of greenhouse gases emissions and global warming and the solution lies in adopting clean, sustainable, alternative energy systems and strategies, which include behavioural changes, promoting of energy efficiency and conservation, expanded development of renewable energy resources, adaptation of clean and efficient fossil conversion technologies and nuclear fission and fusion.

Africa's GHG emissions are negligible when compared with global emissions, yet Africans are most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, so we must start in our own ways to reduce emissions and clean our environment. ❑

Sub-Saharan Africa has the potential to be a leader in renewable energy