

Reviewing Africa's Renewable Energy Initiatives



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REVIEWING AFRICA’S RENEWABLE ENERGY INITIATIVES

Africa and the climate emergency

As we enter into this new decade, albeit one already marked by the emergence of COVID-19, the climate emergency must remain firmly within the attention of both the public and the decision-makers. The infernos of devastating fires, cyclones, and droughts across continents point to not only a new normal but also a rapidly escalating crisis.

For Africa this reality is not new. Our continent already has been suffering disproportionately from climate change, and our large vulnerable populations have, for a long time, been victims of a problem not of their making. The 1°C world we are currently in already presents a huge challenge for Africa. A rise of 1.5°C above pre-industrial average temperatures will cause even more enormous suffering, while 2°C may tip the world into irreversible, runaway warming that threatens to bring societal collapse.

At the same time, Africans desperately need to solve the immediate challenges in ensuring energy access for all – a precondition for ensuring well-being and dignified lives for all our people.

A rapid roll-out of people-centred, environmentally and socially appropriate, renewable energy is at the core of this equation. It is the answer to both the climate crisis and the energy access and development crisis. Provision of zero-carbon energy is relevant with regard to all of the Sustainable Development Goals.

The challenge is massive, but so are the opportunities. Africa has the benefit of being a latecomer in building foundational infrastructure for development. We can leapfrog to the smart, participatory, distributed energy systems of the future and bypass locking ourselves into stranded fossil fuel assets and overly centralised energy systems. Africa can show the way to the future through both bold plans and on-the-ground implementation.

The potential and need for African leadership

The world desperately needs decisive leadership to tackle the climate crisis. Thus far, no country or block of countries has seized this role and begun implementing the types of responses and actions requisite to stay under 1.5°C, or even worse, 2°C heating.

African countries and vulnerable countries on other continents can take this lead and inject the needed vision with moral authority. It is in Africa’s interest to avoid the mistakes of the development models pursued by both the OECD and emerging economies, and instead champion development trajectories that will benefit both people and planet in the short and long term.

Africa has in fact already begun addressing elements required for such a role. The three initiatives highlighted in this paper all articulate the type of vision that is needed, and overtly highlight the importance of breaking new ground and exerting positive leadership.

From the experience thus far, however, it is also clear that substantial challenges need to be overcome to move from pleasant-sounding words and potential to real implementation wherein core, people-centred principles prevail.

New frontlines

While renewable energy still must win the battle against fossil fuels, the fault line of the future is not if renewables will be implemented but how. Experiences in Africa over the last few years illustrate this clearly.

Unless the principles outlined below are respected, renewable energy initiatives may turn into means for green-washing, consolidation of corporate power, neo-colonialism, increased inequity, support for authoritarian regimes, double-counting of aid, and ultimately harm to both local people and ecosystems.

The particular experience of the Africa Renewable Energy Initiative (AREI) illustrates many of these problems. In fact, the situation of this visionary, compelling, and innovative initiative under the current Chair, Board, and new Director is so severe that only far-reaching changes in Board composition and directorship can rescue the AREI and help it to remain relevant. Sadly, the initiative deviated from what those who originally conceived and supported it wanted to achieve, with strong, authentic African ownership as a key prerequisite.

Key features for successful renewable energy initiatives

From the perspective of African civil society, a number of features need to be championed in every initiative and in every interaction between African counterparts and their international partners concerned with renewable energy. These should:

- Respect African **ownership** and ideally be Africa-initiated and Africa-driven.
- Promote the **new energy systems of the future** – and unequivocally promote distributed, smart, flexible, diverse, and democratised energy systems, in contrast with conventional approaches favouring grid-based systems with centralised control.
- Ensure **participation and community focus** positioning energy democracy and broad, multi-stakeholder participation at the centre.
- Ensure energy access to productive sectors such as **small-scale agriculture, micro, small, and medium-sized businesses, and community services** that form the backbone of livelihoods and economies in Africa; beyond bare-minimum focus on, for instance, light provision for households.
- Ensure **social and environmental safeguards** are at the core with all activities undertaken to be implemented in line with the precautionary principle and assurance that negative side-effects are avoided.
- Focus on **transformative, programmatic, structural interventions** emphasising **policy, capacity mobilisation, long-term capacity building, and regulatory frameworks** rather than individual projects.
- Foster **new models for interaction** between developing countries and international partners, and break with neo-colonial attitudes and actions.
- Advance **new forms of collaboration between civil society and government**, wherein civil society plays sufficient roles as needed and works closely with government, in addition to its traditional advocacy and watchdog roles.
- Use examples from **pioneering** countries already taking the lead, and which can then bring other countries along.

Over-riding these principles is the importance of **equity** and the recognition that transitioning to 100% renewable energy needs to be enabled within a framework of **Faire Shares**¹ and internal cooperation. African countries and developing countries in other continents need to prepare ambitious plans, but also need, and are entitled to, financial, technological, and other relevant support to enable these.

This substantial transfer of resources is not aid; rather, it is a way for richer countries to make good on their fair share of climate action (in addition to rapidly moving to zero emissions within their own borders). It is also in their direct self-interest to ensure developing countries are equipped to avoid becoming major emitters, given the virtually non-existent remaining carbon budget to achieve the Paris Agreement goals.

¹ See the www.civilsocietyreview.org for reports on Fair Shares based on each country’s capacity and responsibility.

Renewable energy in Africa and the world

Any conversation on renewable energy must be placed in both global and local contexts. Things are indeed trending in the right direction as renewable energy becomes cheaper and more widespread. Nevertheless, it is important to realise the scale of the challenge and how extrapolation of current trends will fall far short of what is needed from the standpoints of both climate and energy access.

From a global standpoint:

- While solar and wind are expected to be the most substantial renewable energy sources, the exponential growth in solar, constituting 505 GW capacity in 2018, is confined to five major countries—India, Germany, Japan, the United States and China—with minimal growth seen in the rest of the world.²
- While investments in renewables have increased sharply, the world is far from the renewable energy revolution that is needed. Despite expansion of renewables, there is simultaneous, continuous investment in fossil fuels, which adds to the existing stock of fossil fuel-based energy. The world needs, conversely, a rapid, managed, and equitable phase-out of fossil fuel production.
- Fossil fuels and nuclear power still heavily dominate (currently 74%) electricity production, which comprises a quarter of all primary energy consumption. Hydropower dominates the renewable energy share, contributing 16%, while wind contributes as little as 6%, solar PV 2%, biopower 2%, and geothermal 0.4%.³

In an African context:

- A major challenge concerning polluting and hazardous fuels in Africa is traditional biomass, which must be replaced with appropriate renewable energy sources. Renewable energy and energy efficiency funding, however, account for less than half of all current energy investments, with sub-Saharan Africa receiving the least of these investments.⁴
- While access to electricity in Africa has improved, access to safe and sustainable cooking still falls far below world averages.⁵
- Investment in renewable energy is heavily concentrated in only a few African countries, with African LDCs lagging especially far behind.⁶
- A major departure is needed from the business-as-usual path. African countries must make bold, ground-breaking new policies and plans to truly embark on a renewable energy revolution.
- There is an urgent need for African countries to simultaneously tackle further expansion and proliferation of fossil fuels, while massively promoting renewable energy. Countries already dependent on fossil fuels, or those considering exploration of new reserves, need credible economic diversification and just transition plans, which should be developed through broad, participatory processes within these countries.

Three current African initiatives

While numerous initiatives, programmes, and projects related to renewable energy exist, this briefing paper highlights three recent initiatives. Each of these has continental or near-continental reach and uniquely African origins. They all share similar forward-looking, progressive principles, which are in considerable alignment with the civil society principles noted above.

Successful implementation of each or several of the initiatives would signify major progress and would help to significantly ramp up NDCs, in addition to energy access, for African countries and communities.

² Source: IEA PVPS

³ Source: REN 21, Renewables 2019 Global Status Report

⁴ Source: World Energy Investment Outlook, IEA 2019

⁵ World Bank, Sustainable Energy for All (SE4ALL) database from WHO Global Household Energy database (<https://data.worldbank.org>)

⁶ Source: World Energy Investment Outlook, IEA 2019



Africa Renewable Energy Initiative



The Africa Renewable Energy Initiative (AREI) was launched at COP21 in Paris in December 2015. At the time it was hailed by many as the most inspiring and ambitious initiative emerging from the climate negotiations context.

After its promising beginning, the initiative has unfortunately been ridden with obstacles. While the AREI is still a landmark achievement in terms of its visionary core documents⁷ and intentions, its implementation and governance have grown disappointing. The question is now whether there are ways of reclaiming the AREI to make it the ground-breaking initiative it was meant to be, and if so, how this can be done.

Key features

- The AREI is African-initiated, and it should also be African-owned and African-driven. All African Heads of State have endorsed and approved it through the African Union.
- Its overriding goals in accordance with the AREI framework are to:
 - Help achieve sustainable development, enhanced well-being, and sound economic development by ensuring universal access to sufficient amounts of clean, appropriate, and affordable energy.
 - Help African countries leapfrog to renewable energy systems that support their low-carbon development strategies while enhancing their economic and energy security.
- The AREI framework highlights the importance of broad multi-stakeholder engagement, social and environmental safeguards, and leapfrogging to the best available, smart, modern, distributed renewable energy systems that will enable a transition through low- to zero-carbon futures.
- The initiative has nine work areas that include mapping, promotion of transformative policies, capacity building, funding, and financing, in addition to safeguards and multi-stakeholder participation.
- The AREI outlines two phases: Phase 1 (2015–2019) with a target of enabling provision of 10 GW of new and additional renewable energy generation capacity, and Phase 2 (2020–2030) targeting 300 GW.

Rather than focusing on individual projects, the AREI was supposed to set visions and direction for the entire continent. It should do so by working closely with African governments and stakeholders, including civil society, to enable the best possible policies and to enable environments that make possible a broad, bottom-up surge of socially and environmentally friendly renewable energy throughout Africa.

Current situation – major problems

Since its launch at the Paris summit in 2015, the AREI has faced several waves of challenges around its governance, management, donor influence, and transparency. After the current Director took over in 2018, the initiative deviated from its objectives and civil society was entirely shut out of the processes. Key problem areas that must be overcome include the following.

Inappropriate governance

Continuous conflicts of interest within the African Development Bank, which currently hosts the AREI Delivery Unit (secretariat), and numerous examples of breach of the AREI’s own governance rules by the AREI Board, and particularly its Chair, the President of Guinea, have severely hampered the initiative and its credibility.

Inappropriate donor influence

A major crisis erupted at the second AREI Board meeting in March 2017, when inappropriate influence by France and the EU, in alliance with Guinea and Chad, led to undue approval of projects that the AREI

⁷ See the AREI Framework (<https://tinyurl.com/areiframework>), Action Plan (<https://tinyurl.com/areiactionplan>), and Governance documents (<https://tinyurl.com/areigovernance>).



had not assessed⁸. As a consequence, the Director of the Delivery Unit resigned. These donor influences seem to have been reinforced.

Inappropriate project approvals

The new AREI website currently claims to have adopted 206 projects, without detailed information on the different projects, how they were assessed, or the results of the assessments. Undue approval of projects, while ignoring the AREI-approved criteria to ensure social and environmental standards, additionality and no counting of loans as contributions to donor pledges, has severely undermined the AREI’s reputation⁹.

Lack of transparency and participation

Board and other meetings take place with no notifications and no provision of documentation or accounts of outcomes posted on the AREI website¹⁰. Scarcely any African countries are actively engaged. African civil society is excluded from such meetings, which directly contradicts the AREI’s own governance rules that underscore the importance of civil society participation and multi-stakeholder engagement^{11,12}.

Mission creep

The AREI has diverted from a policy focus on transformative, programmatic efforts, as outlined in its framework, to a project labelling focus with increased risks of double-counting and rubber stamping of projects that would be implemented anyway.

→ Way forward

Reclaiming the AREI’s original vision of a new distributed and people-focused energy model is more important than ever. Doing so will require concerted and strong collaborative measures by mutually supportive forces across African countries, civil society, and international partners. The challenges in this should not be underestimated.

● New leadership

New leadership in terms of both the Director and the Board is needed. As the first 3-year term for the AREI Board has already expired, proper regional nomination procedures under the African Union are needed for the election of a new Board in accordance with the AREI’s own governance rules, which also stipulate annual elections of its Chair.

● Audits and evaluations

Concrete first steps will involve execution of independent, third-party auditing and evaluations of conduct thus far, and ensuring full transparency and availability of all AREI Board documents, project assessments, and other key documentation.

● Maintain vision

Civil society, international partners, and other actors need to recognise that the key AREI objectives transcend the AREI as an institution. Whether or not the secretariat or Board is currently functioning, African countries need to adhere to, and be inspired by, the AREI’s goals, principles, and criteria for a swift energy transition to the new, smart, people-centred, 100% renewable energy systems the AREI originally envisioned.

⁸ Protest letters from African (<https://tinyurl.com/africansoletterarei>), German (<https://tinyurl.com/germansoletterarei>), and international (<https://tinyurl.com/internationalsoletterarei>) civil society, with hundreds of signatories, garnered major media attention. See also <https://www.climatechangenews.com/2017/04/27/eu-france-accused-hijacking-africa-led-clean-energy-scheme/> for one of the many articles published at the time.

⁹ See <http://www.arei.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Approved-AREI-Criteria.pdf> for the AREI Criteria

¹⁰ A new AREI logo and website (www.arei.info) were launched in 2019. Contrary to the previous website (<http://www.arei.org/start>), this one contains no information from Board and other meetings.

¹¹ See <https://tinyurl.com/csoletterofconcernareiidu> for CSO letter outlining concerns with the AREI IDU and its director.

¹² See <https://tinyurl.com/areisurvey> for a civil society report and survey on the AREI.



Least Developed Countries Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency Initiative for Sustainable Development



The Least Developed Countries Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency Initiative for Sustainable Development (LDC REEEI) is an LDC-initiated, LDC-owned, and LDC-driven overarching framework to accelerate the harnessing of the renewable energy potential across LDCs, and to promote energy efficiency¹³. It was originally conceived by African LDC experts, and intended to function as a well-synchronised sister initiative to the AREI (wherein the LDC initiative would, as one of its functions, strengthen capacity of the 34 African LDCs to benefit them at a level equal to wealthier African countries).

The effort to develop the LDC REEEI was launched at COP22 in Marrakech. Its Framework and Action plan was subsequently developed in 2018, and is now in a concrete operationalisation phase¹⁴.

The LDC REEEI is one of the most progressive, far-reaching, and far-sighted efforts on renewable energy by any country grouping. It outlines the ambition to illustrate what international leadership, co-operative efforts, and transformative measures to simultaneously tackle climate and development can look like¹⁵.

The LDC REEEI’s Vision highlights long-term plans for people-centred, sustainable well-being for all LDC citizens; focus on productive sectors; a new efficient and distributed energy model for the future; and people-centred energy including that through communities and co-operatives.

The LDC REEEI is primarily a framework and platform to enable LDCs to work in co-operative ways and accelerate the sharing and implementation of best practices, particularly regarding programmatic, bold policies. The Initiative is not a fund or implementer as such; rather, it intends to work closely with LDCs to ensure international climate finance supports these actions.

Key features

- The LDC REEEI has three overarching goals:
 - 100% access for all LDC citizens to sufficient, affordable, renewable energy by 2030;
 - 100% utilisation of energy efficiency potential along the value chain through full implementation of best practice measures and planning by 2040; and
 - 100% electricity from renewable energy sources in all LDCs by 2050, catering to all needs of their citizens, social services, and industries.
- The LDC REEEI has a bottom-up approach that highlights the importance of pioneering countries taking a leading role and setting examples (e.g., through improved NDCs), and inspiring other LDCs (and other North and South countries) to follow suit in accordance with their individual circumstances.
- The Initiative has eight focus areas to guide and frame the activities that need to be undertaken in each LDC. These comprise: (1) LDC-led mapping and monitoring; (2) knowledge, capacity mobilisation, and learning; (3) planning and policy for approaches such as long-term scenario-building, payment guarantees, incentives for off-grid solutions, efficiency standards, grid standards, community energy, local/national manufacturing, and energy efficiency; (4) funding and financing; (5) multi-stakeholder engagement; (6) equity, women, and social/environmental safeguards; (7) NDCs and national development plans; and (8) public awareness and communications.

¹³ See www.ldcreeei.org for more information

¹⁴ The LDC REEEI Framework can be downloaded at http://ldcreeei.org/wp-content/uploads/Core_publications/LDC_REEEI_Framework_Executive-summary_English.pdf

¹⁵ See <https://www.climatechangenews.com/2020/05/28/clean-energy-vital-covid-19-response-worlds-poorest-countries/> on LDC REEEI as lever for simultaneously addressing multiple crises.

Current situation – promising

The LDC REEEI has the potential to become a landmark initiative that sets examples not only for LDCs but also for other country groupings. Its comprehensive framework has generated considerable enthusiasm, and the initiative has been highlighted at various international forums, including the 2019 Climate Action Summit in New York. It is now facing an important moment in ensuring its formative establishment and operationalisation phase can evolve as intended, with a number of pioneering LDCs setting examples.

The LDC REEEI shares origins with the AREI. A substantial part of the drafting team that developed the LDC REEEI and leads its implementation also led the development of the visionary AREI framework and constituted the initial AREI secretariat during its first, promising phase. The LDC REEEI provides an opportunity to develop and implement renewable energy frameworks in accordance with the people-centred and participatory principles true to both initiatives’ original visions. A political champion has been appointed by the LDC group of negotiators at the UNFCCC to champion and mobilise support for the LDC REEEI.



Way forward

● Principles

The people-centred principles of the LDC REEEI must be emphasised and internalised in participatory processes in all LDCs, involving government officials, scholars, civil society, and other stakeholder groups.

● Funding and alignment

The initiative and pioneering LDCs must be provided with the necessary support to enable operationalisation of the initiative and lay the foundation for more substantial climate finance of ambitious country programmes stemming from the process. International donors need to align activities connected with LDCs and renewable energy with the LDC REEEI’s principles, criteria, work plans, and overall framework.

● Partnerships

Existing, best-case examples of partnerships and participatory processes between governments, civil society, and other stakeholders should link directly with the LDC REEEI to highlight and inspire similar approaches in other countries.



African Energy Transition Programme



The African Energy Transition Programme (AFRETRAP) was published in October 2019 and constitutes one of the five pillars of the African Energy Commission (AFREC). This effort is, thus, the most recent initiative on the African continent highlighted in this report, and therefore less widely known.

The AFRETRAP aims to provide an understanding of the energy systems needed in the short, medium, and long terms to achieve the transition to low-carbon energy¹⁶. It hopes to identify and support the development of “detailed, policy-relevant and country-driven strategies consistent with the national development agenda and the Paris Agreement goal.”

The programme transcends the renewable energy agenda and aims, in the words of the African Union Commissioner of Infrastructure and Energy, “to fully mobilise Africa’s own energy resources and potential” and “put Africa directly on low carbon energy development pathways, avoiding the fossil fuel lock-in now facing most industrialized and emerging economies.”

Key features

The AFRETRAP is designed to enable country-based, bottom-up efforts to develop pathways for the energy transition over the coming decades. The concept is to initiate scenario-building teams during the initial phase in a number of pilot countries. The teams are to be composed of experts from these countries in collaboration with experts mainly from elsewhere on the African continent.

- The guiding principles align with many of African civil society’s “Key features for successful renewable energy initiatives” outlined above. These include the importance of leapfrogging to the best available smart, modern, distributed renewable energy systems; transformative and programmatic approaches; and multi-stakeholder engagement and environmental safeguards.
- The programme outlines a staggered approach that will first take stock of current Africa-relevant initiatives, goals, and approaches at national, regional, continental, and global levels.
- A core component of the programme is mobilisation and strengthening of African capacity and expertise. African-based scenario-building teams will undertake research and exploration of low- to zero-carbon pathways in alignment with the seven strategic objectives the programme outlines.

Current situation – bold vision, but some contradictions

It is still in the early days, but the AFRETRAP’s vision is, “by 2063, Africa’s energy systems will largely be based on renewable energy resources coupled with a strong and to a considerable extent localized manufacturing sector, highly qualified human resources and an integrated energy infrastructure for both centralized and decentralized energy systems.”

It recognises that “overconsumption and non-efficient energy lifestyles by the high emitting, wealthy part of African populations must be curbed while the overwhelming majority of Africans gain sufficient access to more, but efficiently produced and used, energy,” and that Africa itself must define how to tackle its energy challenges, rather than uncritically absorbing ideas and models from Europe and North America.

The programme recognises the gravity of the climate crisis, and that Africa will suffer the most the soonest, and that the world must move swiftly to low- to zero-carbon societies. It also recognises the substantial risks posed by stranded assets from continued investment in fossil fuels. The outlined vision’s thrust is on development of a new, renewable energy model that is smart, distributed, and can cater to all needs.

Despite the above, one strategic priority area emphasises natural gas and expansion of regional pipelines. This likely reflects the current mandates of the AFREC (which has African domestic markets for oil products and natural gas as one of its five priority areas). It also shows the contradictions inherent in

¹⁶ See <https://afrec-energy.org/publications/afrec-energy-transition-en.pdf> for the report outlining the programme.

current energy politics. It is worth noting that the AFRETRAP mainly argues for natural gas as a means to address peak demand, and acknowledges this may actually not be needed, as concentrated solar power and batteries may already be viable alternatives for balancing supply.

The way forward

Given its formal basis in the African Union system, the AFRETRAP has potential to open space for transformative trajectories. The AFREC’s broad mandate to cover the entire energy sector can both be a means and a hindrance in this regard.

● Engagement

Progressive countries and stakeholders, including civil society, should engage directly with the AFREC and the team involved in development of the AFRETRAP.

● Funding

Donor countries are encouraged to provide initial support for the AFRETRAP’s development and operationalisation.

● Iron out policy kinks

Engagement by civil society and other stakeholders should help overcome some contradictions and ensure the programme adheres to its promising principles.

Conclusion

Africa and the world are facing an unprecedented set of intertwined environmental, developmental, and social justice crises, with climate and energy at the centre. Nothing short of bold, transformative solutions that break with business-as-usual development models and that confront elite, vested interests will suffice. In a situation in which the world is in desperate need of real leadership, Africa has a special role to play. If the continent that has done the least to cause climate change takes leadership in planning for a climate-friendly, renewable energy-powered future centred on equity and well-being, other regions will feel both moral pressure and inspiration.

The three Africa-originating initiatives highlighted in this briefing note embody this boldness and aspiration. Their goals, principles, and ambitions must be lauded and supported, just as any diversion or inappropriate implementation is called out and effectively addressed.

One of the most important conclusions from this overview is the critical importance of strong and well-functioning civil society engagement. Forces for the common good and not ridden by vested interests and commercial gains—i.e., civil society, social movements, and independent scholars—must lead the work in close interaction with governments. They must claim and be recognised for their roles as generators of ideas and visions, while simultaneously exerting pressure as watchdogs.

Africa is at a crossroads. With the right funding, support, and governance, efforts and initiatives that adhere to the principles outlined in this report have considerable potential not only to foster the right environment for clean energy in Africa, but also to demonstrate approaches replicable in other countries, for the benefit of all.

Powershift Africa

Power Shift Africa (PSA) is a climate and energy think tank and NGO established to provide policy, advocacy, and communications from an African perspective, to educate and inform within Africa, and amplify the African moral voice in the international climate arena.

PSA's mission is to mobilise climate action in Africa, intensify African voices by presenting a united, well-evidenced message to governments, other stakeholders, and the media, and to support a shift in climate and energy policies towards zero-carbon and resilient alternatives.

PSA, headquartered in Nairobi, Kenya, was founded in 2018 to drive public debate on climate and energy. It does so through networking with African CSOs, experts, and the media to increase Africa's engagement in climate and energy issues locally, regionally, and internationally.

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