

Africa's energy future

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The African Union Commission will be electing its next Chairperson at the end of January. This is an influential position, and whoever assumes it will play a major role in the direction the continent takes in the coming years – and in selecting which issues to prioritize.

Amina Mohamed, currently Kenya's Foreign Affairs and International Trade Cabinet Secretary, is one of the candidates running for the position. One need only take a cursory look at Dr. Mohamed's long list of accomplishments as a lifelong public and foreign servant to understand that she is exceedingly qualified for the role, but one highly appealing qualification that should be carefully considered is her deep commitment to and understanding of environmental issues.

Prior to becoming a Cabinet Minister, she served as Assistant Secretary General of the United Nations Environment Programme – leading reforms and positioning the organization as a key global player. Through this and other roles, she has spent years working to combat climate change and improve Africans' access to clean energy. A candidate who is already wired to understand how critical these issues are to the well being and economic development of the continent is uniquely positioned to succeed in making significant progress.

Two-thirds of the population in sub-Saharan Africa live their lives without electricity. Roughly 10 million small and medium-sized businesses are similarly without electricity. Even for those who do have power, the costs average three times higher than in Europe or the United States, and the poorest populations in Africa, those that live off the electric grid, pay 60 to 80 times what Londoners or New Yorkers pay per energy unit. The status quo is both incomprehensible and unacceptable. A change-maker is needed.

Africa's population is projected to double over the next 30 years. With an already enormous demand for energy, one can imagine what the level of demand will be in the coming years and decades. But along with great challenge comes great opportunity. There is no reason that Africa cannot become a renewable energy superpower. The continent is home to some of the world's most significant hydropower and geothermal resources, plentiful solar and wind resources, and natural gas reserves. Yet, at the moment, Africa is not taking advantage of these resources – oil richness has traditionally overshadowed the wealth of renewable energy options. There have been various, smart initiatives on the continent pushing toward renewables, but a strong leader seated at the top of the principal organization of the region could do much more.

As Dr. Mohamed well knows, being smart and forward-thinking on energy is not only good for the environment and for health, it is also good for economies. Energy is a building block for everything Africa can accomplish.

Access to electricity is the cornerstone of opportunity and possibility. It is how students can study for exams and then get accepted to university, how entrepreneurs can take their ideas and ambitions and grow them into reality, how shops can continue into the evening hours – no longer limited to daylight hours, how people and enterprises become connected to the world.

There could not possibly be a greater need, or more attractive investor market, for renewable energy than in Africa.

The only missing element is an overarching consensus – across the board, across the continent. It is time for all of Africa's leaders to buy into the implementation and practice of clean energy in a major way.

Dr. Mohamed is considered to be a consensus builder. Hence, there is cause for optimism, should she be elected, that she would succeed in encouraging the establishment and utilization of clean energy sources across the region – in turn, building sustainable economies and fighting climate change for future generations.

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