



COMMENT



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# Power to the remotest regions

## Africa needs decentralized energy

If one were to imagine a place where decentralized energy could flourish, it would have a number of defining characteristics: diverse natural resources; an imposing land mass making construction of a well-developed, integrated grid a major challenge; lack of the financial resources to develop an integrated grid; poor energy reliability; reliance on highly polluting energy technologies; and the need to address rampant energy poverty. The African continent fits this description to a tee.

Just as mobile phone technology has allowed Africa to leapfrog the need for wired communications and become the fastest growing market for mobiles in the world, decentralized energy technology can bring power to even the most remote reaches of Africa. It can also bring clean, efficient and economic power to areas that are electrified, but lack reliability and rely on inefficient and highly polluting technologies.

The International Energy Agency (IEA) estimates that 1.6 billion people – predominantly in sub-Saharan Africa – currently have no access to electricity. In addition, millions die premature deaths as a result of inhalation of indoor smoke from the burning of fossil fuels for cooking and heat. The global financial crisis is exacerbating an already bad situation. Even as technology and progress march on elsewhere around the globe, the IEA estimates that by 2030 there will still be 1.4 billion people without access to electricity. Remarkably, two-thirds of this population will be in sub-Saharan Africa.

Therefore, there is probably no greater potential to do good for mankind, and earn a profit while doing so, than on the African continent.

In view of the potential for decentralized energy throughout Africa, WADE recently launched a chapter for southern Africa in conjunction with Wits University. The kick-off meeting in Johannesburg attracted a broad cross-section of industry, government and academic institutions and leaders focused on how to advance decentralized energy in the region. The keynote address of Dr Ruth Rabinowitz, MP, sent a powerful signal for the future of decentralized energy policy – she was recently successful in securing passage of the first feed-in tariff for South Africa. WADE has also worked lately with the World Energy Council in Nigeria on a series of policy meetings and is in the process performing a study focused on the opportunity for decentralized energy in Nigeria. This study will include a quantitative analysis using the WADE Economic Model.

While the challenge is as immense as the continent, the prospect for true change and a better future lie squarely ahead.

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