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## Global Expert Group Meeting in Support of the Mid-Point Review of SDG 7 at the HLPF 2023: Ensuring Universal Energy Access and Advancing Just, Inclusive and Equitable Energy Transitions: 11-12 May 2023

Energy is defined as the ability to do work and it has become increasingly clear that energy is indispensable in achieving sustainable development. In particular, access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy is essential for communities and individuals all over the world to achieve their developmental goals. As emphasized by Lotta Tähtinen, Chief, Outreach and Partnerships Branch, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 7, on access to clean and affordable energy, is connected to the entire 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the success of all other SDGs depends on advances on SDG 7.

The Global Expert Group Meeting in Support of the Mid-Point Review of SDG 7 at the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) 2023 was convened by UN DESA, in collaboration with UN-Energy. The Meeting brought together experts from the UN System, governments, the private sector, academia, and civil society to discuss progress made and challenges regarding SDG 7. Experts participated in three interactive discussions that focused on:

- where the world stands on SDG 7, including opportunities and challenges;
- how we can achieve SDG 7, such as through mobilizing partnerships and taking action; and
- ways to strengthen global cooperation on SDG 7.

To help them in their discussions, participants listened to reports on progress, or lack thereof, on the various targets under SDG 7. They heard an update from Heather Adair-Rohani, Acting Head, Air Quality, Energy, and Health, World Health Organization (WHO), as Chair of the most recent edition of [Tracking SDG 7: The Energy Progress Report](#), who, noting some progress, said the electricity access rate increased from 84% of the world's population in 2000 to 91% in 2021. However, she said, if the current trend continues, about 1.9 billion people will still lack access to clean cooking by 2030.

As this meeting comes as the UN is gearing up for the mid-point review of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, experts considered this poor progress lamentable and provided suggestions and proposals for moving forward, such as through: a specific focus on Africa and clean cooking, as the geographic



region and target most off track; an inclusive and cross-sectoral stakeholder platform that is both accountable and transparent, to help break down silos; and using the finance available for increasing electricity access to improve access to clean electric cooking in recognition of the crossovers between the two targets.

The Meeting took place at UN Headquarters in New York, US, from 11-12 May 2023.

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Lotta Tähtinen, Chief, Outreach and Partnerships Branch, UN DESA



Astra Bonini, Senior Sustainable Development Officer, UN DESA

## Report of the Meeting

### Opening Remarks

The Global Expert Group Meeting in preparation of the SDG 7 review at HLPF 2023 opened on Thursday morning, 11 May, with remarks by Lotta Tähtinen, Chief, Outreach and Partnerships Branch, UN DESA. She noted that this Meeting comes at a particularly important point, as the UN is gearing up for the mid-point review of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, to be conducted during the [2023 SDG Summit](#) in September. She noted that the July session of the HLPF is a stepping stone towards this Summit and will conduct an in-depth review of five SDGs, namely: SDG 7, SDG 6 on clean water and sanitation, SDG 9 on industry, innovation and infrastructure, SDG 11 on sustainable cities and communities, and SDG 17 on partnerships for the Goals.

Tähtinen underlined that achieving SDG 7 depends on achievement of the other SDGs being reviewed at HLPF 2023. She invited the meeting to consider synergies between the SDGs to minimize trade-offs, as well as to: share knowledge about success stories, good practices, and challenges; highlight areas of concern; and suggest ways forward through, among other things, partnerships.

### Special Remarks

Mark Radka, Chief, Energy and Climate Branch, UN Environment Programme (UNEP), addressed the Meeting virtually, lauding the fact that there is now greater appreciation of the role energy plays within sustainable development, as well as recognition of the need for an energy transition that deals with the climate crisis and addresses the energy access gap. He underlined the importance of the advice and counsel of experts such as those participating in the meeting, noting that experts provide the content to “keep us on a good and true path.”

Minoru Takada, Team Leader for Energy and Climate, UN DESA, in honor of Mark Radka to mark his retirement from UNEP, expressed appreciation for his hard work in bringing energy action to the fore in the UN system.

### Setting the Scene

Astra Bonini, Senior Sustainable Development Officer, UN DESA, provided some conceptual information to inform the upcoming interactive discussions. She noted that the annual HLPF reviews four to five SDGs every year and said SDG 7 was last reviewed in 2018. She outlined the features of these thematic reviews as follows:

- evidence-based, with experts reviewing progress and challenges, sharing lessons learned, and identifying promising partnerships and opportunities for action;
- wide engagement, noting the HLPF preparations depend on engagement with experts and stakeholders from within and outside the UN system, across regions and sectors;
- holistic, with reviews covering individual SDGs the HLPF is focusing on, but also identifying synergies and trade-offs with other goals;
- coordinated, with reviews leveraging other high-level events, such as the UN Water Conference, the biodiversity and climate change conferences of the parties, and the Multi-Stakeholder Forum on Science, Technology and Innovation for the SDGs (STI Forum), among others; and
- time-sensitive, noting the 2030 Agenda is a time-bound commitment and reviews consider the timeline and trajectories of achievement relative to past reviews and acceleration needs.

Bonini presented two reports of particular importance to the HLPF and SDG Summit: the [Global Sustainable Development Report](#), which is prepared every four years with the next edition due later in 2023; and the [UN Secretary-General’s Report on Progress towards the SDGs](#), which is built on the statistical data coming in through the custodian agencies that monitor progress. She provided some updates on progress based on the reports, underlining:

- slow implementation of the SDGs before the COVID-19 pandemic and regression in areas such as climate action, biodiversity loss, and inequality;
- significant setbacks caused by the COVID-19 crisis, including in poverty eradication, gender equality, education, and eliminating hunger;

- a growing gap between high- and low-income countries; and
- the expectation of future crises unless urgent action is taken.

Bonini remarked that the advance unedited version of the [Special Edition of the Secretary-General's Report on Progress towards the SDGs](#) was launched in April 2023 and contains sobering findings, such as:

- only 12% of the SDGs are on track;
- almost half of the SDGs are moderately or severely off track;
- about 30% have seen no movement or have regressed below the 2015 baseline;
- under current trends, 575 million people will still be living in extreme poverty in 2030;
- the world is back at hunger levels not seen since 2005; and
- carbon dioxide levels continue to rise and to a level not seen in two million years.

Bonini highlighted areas with progress, such as increased access to electricity, even with the COVID-19 pandemic, and to the Internet, although not yet universal. She reported that a key message for action from the reports is that the SDGs are interlinked and must be approached holistically. Bonini concluded by stating that the expectation from the SDG Summit is that it will rekindle the hope of the SDGs and “sound the alarm” for urgent action. She said the Secretary-General, in his special edition, called for using available resources to

deliver a “rescue plan for people and planet” to achieve the SDGs, enabled by Member States delivering an “SDG stimulus package” of USD 500 billion per year between now and 2030.

### ***Interactive Discussion 1: Where Do We Stand on SDG 7? Opportunities and Challenges***

This session, which was moderated by Takada, focused opportunities for, as well as challenges to, achieving SDG 7. Adair-Rohani, WHO, presented an overview of progress on SDG 7 as Chair of this year’s edition of [Tracking SDG 7: The Energy Progress Report](#). She noted some progress, although slow, in areas such as electrification and clean cooking, underlining, for instance, that globally, the electricity access rate has risen from 84% of the world’s population in 2000 to 91% in 2021, with more than a billion people gaining access. With respect to clean cooking, she said, about 1.9 billion will still lack access to clean cooking by 2030, mostly in low- and middle-income countries, if current trends continue.

Adair-Rohani, however, lamented regression in other areas, particularly in improving energy efficiency, with progress on energy intensity slowing to 0.6% in 2020, down from an average of 1.8% over the last decade. She further highlighted that although renewables saw sustained development, their share in total final energy consumption did not progress significantly.

Adair-Rohani noted that even for targets that saw an increase, this increase was not uniform with some geographic regions and sub-regions seeing limited improvement or even a regression,



Participants during the interactive discussions (photo by UN DESA)



Martin Niemetz and Interactive Discussion 1 Moderator Minoru Takada, UN DESA

highlighting Africa, the least developed countries (LDCs), and small island developing States (SIDS), as well as some other regions for specific targets. She noted that all these statistics predate the war in Ukraine but reflect that, while the energy crisis began before the war, it was exacerbated by it.

In the interactive discussion, experts called for a focus on areas where the economics are failing, such as clean cooking and demand-side electricity. They discussed the possibility of using the finance available for electricity access to improve access to clean electric cooking as a way to exploit the crossover between the two targets. One expert noted that technological opportunities are available in all areas, but that energy efficiency remains low, and underlined that there is no excuse for this.

Several experts highlighted synergies between climate and energy action, and between the housing and energy sectors, calling for “breaking silos” including in relation to finance.

On finance, experts called for increased financial flows to the LDCs and SIDS. One urged empowering Africa’s private sector and leveraging local capital to increase investment in the region. One expert urged considering synergies and private-public collaborations, such as partnerships with organizations working in the areas of women’s empowerment, agriculture, and health.

Several experts stressed continued consideration of progress beyond 2030, urging efforts to support transition up to and beyond 2050.

Discussing increased electricity access, one expert questioned the almost sole focus on household or domestic electricity and called for increased consideration of productive uses of electricity. One expert stressed that all low-carbon energy sources, including nuclear, should be on the table, while another highlighted fossil fuel subsidies as a barrier to increasing investment in renewable energy.

Noting the poor progress in clean cooking, several experts called for increased focus on this target. Several underlined the need to “put people at the center” of energy action, noting



Interactive Discussion 2 Moderator Sheila Oparaocha, Executive Director, ENERGIA

that if SDG 7 is not achieved, people will suffer. They said the energy transition must focus on lifting people out of poverty by, for instance, considering productivity loss encountered due to limited access to electricity.

### ***Interactive Discussion 2: How Can We Achieve SDG 7? Mobilizing Partnerships and Taking Action***

This session, moderated by Sheila Oparaocha, Executive Director, ENERGIA, focused on partnership opportunities for achieving SDG 7. Experts focused on practical ways forward, with one underlining the importance of concessional resources for the energy transition. They suggested that a portion of available climate finance should focus on achieving SDG 7, given its impact on climate action.

Experts also called for:

- mobilizing domestic resources, engaging local financing institutions, and deploying diverse instruments;
- considering not only domestic uses of electricity, but also “productive” uses such as agriculture and commerce;
- engaging diverse actors, such as academics and scientists, who have valuable data that can support energy transition efforts; and
- increasing education and public awareness, noting early education is vital to promoting a sustainable future.

Participants called for synergies between energy action and other sectors, such as climate and housing. Noting that “the future is electric,” one expert called for merging the electrification and clean cooking agendas, and another proposed leveraging finance for electricity access to improve access to clean electric cooking. One expert highlighted the need for concessional resources for the energy transition, and suggested that, for instance, part of climate finance should focus on SDG 7. Another urged changing the narrative about Africa’s “difficult” investment climate, noting that the perception of risk is probably higher than the reality. They urged working with finance regulators and credit agencies to change this perception of risk.

### ***Interactive Discussion 3: How Can We Strengthen Global Cooperation on SDG 7?***

This session took place on Friday morning and was moderated by Hans Olav Ibrekk, Special Envoy for Climate and Security, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Norway. It focused on strengthening global cooperation on SDG 7, which experts underlined is vital for accelerating implementation of SDG 7, and that “delivering action requires solutions without borders.” They also called for focusing cooperation on actual action, not just on intention or ideas.

Experts suggested ways for improving cooperation, such as an inclusive and cross-sectoral stakeholder platform that is both accountable and transparent, to help break down silos. They also discussed [energy compacts](#), highlighting their importance for tracking government commitments on energy and for assessing progress. They compared these compacts to nationally determined contributions (NDCs) under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and said they can serve to connect SDG 7 and the global roadmap to a solid action plan on the ground. Suggestions on cooperation included creating opportunities for partner organizations working on SDG 7 to collaborate and maximize their synergies.

Discussing possible solutions and ways forward, several experts noted that, although globally, there is progress on electricity access, Africa still lags behind. They called for focusing on Africa and on clean cooking, as the geographical region and target, respectively, most off track. One urged a just and equitable transition of industrial policies to create decent and climate-friendly jobs. Other suggestions included active engagement of Indigenous Peoples and youth in the planning, implementation, and monitoring of SDG 7 actions.

Lack of sufficient data was highlighted as a challenge, with some noting that although agencies, such as the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA), produce many reports, such reports do not cover all countries. Experts pointed out that donors and investors require data to make their investment decisions, suggesting sustained investment in country data systems as a way of addressing this gap.

On finance, one expert called for increased funding directed to the local level, underlining that most funding goes to national governments rather than cities and municipalities, and often spending decisions are political and do not take local realities into account. They said energy action must be data and fact driven. Another expert proposed that stakeholders should work with financial service providers and governments to support the development of appropriate financial services that are suitable to meet both consumptive and productive needs. One expert, noting that many developing countries will not have an optimal credit rating due to the ongoing debt crisis, suggested mobilizing financing for SDG 7 in national budgets, as well as regional cooperation for financing.



Interactive Discussion 3 Moderator **Hans Olav Ibrekk**, Special Envoy for Climate and Security, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Norway

Another solution focused on “scale and impact,” with experts lamenting a proliferation of small projects and calling for selecting those that can be scaled up using scarce public resources. They urged a bottom-up approach, ensuring that priority areas and actions identified by countries themselves receive the greatest attention and financing.

### ***Way Forward to the HLPF and Beyond***

Bahareh Seyedi, Senior Sustainable Development Officer, UN DESA, highlighted upcoming events, including the HLPF 2023, the SDG Summit, and the Secretary-General’s Climate Ambition Summit in 2023, and the General Assembly’s Summit of the Future in 2024. She noted discussions during this Expert Meeting will contribute to these upcoming meetings. She said a summary report will be made available to participants to comment on before the final report is produced.

### ***Closing***

Thanking all participants for their frank and valuable contributions to the meeting, Minoru Takada, UN DESA closed the meeting at 12.03pm.



**Bahareh Seyedi**, Senior Sustainable Development Officer, UN DESA