

# Energy access takes center stage in fighting COVID-19 (Coronavirus) and powering recovery in Africa

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COVID-19 is causing unprecedented disruptions around the world, with healthcare systems struggling and billions of people relying on electricity while confined to their homes. The pandemic is now spreading across Africa, home to the majority of those who live without electricity. To avoid the worst impacts and help contain the virus worldwide, we must act now to deploy solutions that can provide life-saving energy access to those who need it most.

Energy services are key to preventing disease and fighting pandemics - from powering healthcare facilities and supplying clean water for essential hygiene, to enabling communications and IT services that connect people while maintaining social distancing. Yet, in sub-Saharan Africa, [only 28% of healthcare facilities benefit from reliable electricity](#), and only [43% of the population is electrified at all](#). Two-thirds of schools do not have reliable electricity either and distance learning remains a distant aspiration.

At the same time, the effects of COVID-19 are anticipated to cause both supply and demand shocks across the sector and put existing energy systems under pressure. Economic conditions make it harder for low-income customers and businesses to pay their electricity bills, threatening them with disconnection. African utilities, already under financial strain, may struggle to provide basic services. Nascent companies operating mini grids in often rural locations, and providing off-grid solar services to an increasing share of the African population, could face financial hardship or even insolvency. Some of the most vulnerable people and businesses across Africa risk plunging into darkness at a moment when electricity access is vital.

All of this puts fiscal pressure on governments to fill the gaps, just as revenues are falling. Budgets are particularly at risk among oil exporters like Nigeria and Angola that also face collapsing oil prices.

The World Bank and Sustainable Energy for All (SEforALL) are working with governments, the private sector, and other partners to help. Technical advice and project funding in the context of COVID-19 include measures to respond immediately and create the conditions for an effective recovery.

- **Ensuring energy access for health and sanitation services.** The first priority is to fast-track electricity access for healthcare facilities, frontline health workers, and critical government operations. Modular solar with battery energy storage systems can be deployed quickly to underserved and rural health clinics, as well as for pumping and treating water to ensure hygiene. Off-grid solar systems are cleaner, more reliable, and often cheaper than existing diesel generators. Private sector interventions can deliver quickly deployable mini-grids and off-grid systems to hospitals, health clinics and other essential public institutions – to improve reliability or provide new access.
- **Focusing on the poorest and most vulnerable energy consumers.** Governments must work with utilities and off-grid service providers to avoid shut-offs due to non-payment, and come up with flexible payment plans. External financial support may include waivers to mitigate service disruption for households and critical institutions. Social protection schemes could be expanded to provide a safety net for poorer households.
- **Supporting utilities and essential electricity providers.** Ensuring service continuity requires helping utilities and off-grid providers to stay viable and operational. That may include providing emergency financial support for essential services, keeping work environments sanitized, stocking up on spare parts, and giving utility staff testing and protective equipment. It can also include helping utilities monitor and support cash reserves, along with helping to finance operations and maintenance. External support can also help monitor power purchase arrangements to avoid termination of contracts with independent power producers. Loans and funding could be provided to mini-grid and off-grid service providers to retain essential staff and service existing clients.
- **Promoting clean cooking solutions.** Over 70% of Africans currently lack access to clean cooking, exposing them to household air pollution that significantly increases their vulnerability to respiratory illnesses such as COVID-19 and pneumonia. Taking measures to increase the access to clean cooking fuel and technologies will now be more critical than ever.
- **Building momentum for a better recovery.** Our collective actions during the crisis can support ongoing improvements in energy access for a more sustainable economic recovery, build resilience against future pandemics, and help meet the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. Making rapid headway with modern energy solutions will not only empower clinics, utilities, companies and citizens to mitigate COVID-19 impacts in the immediate term but will also pave the way for a sustainable energy infrastructure in the future. Investing in all supply options – grid expansion, mini grids and off-grid solar – will be critical for the day after. Utilities will have to recover from a dramatic shortfall in revenues, and businesses will have to overcome financing challenges to be able to tap into significant growth opportunities. The [World Bank estimated that mini grid deployment](#) was expected to grow predominantly in Africa with more than 4,000 mini grids planned for development in the region, representing more than half of the total planned mini grids globally.

At this critical moment, energy access for African households, health facilities, and other vital public services is fundamental to mitigating the most devastating impacts of COVID-19 in the region. It is also key to ensuring a rapid economic recovery and helping put Africa on a sustainable trajectory after the immediate crisis has passed.

*First published in [All Africa](#).*

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