

Renewables are here to stay and grow

 By [Nicci Botha](#)

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According to the International Energy Agency, 72% of all installed power capacity globally in 2019 originated from renewable energy, and it expects it to grow in 2020, despite the pandemic. Covid-19 is by definition a shock but it's a temporary event. The long-term trends preexisting prior to the pandemic remain true today. Renewable energies are now very competitive and are able to function without subsidies.

If anything, the dramatic drop in energy consumption due to Covid-19 and the unprecedented crash of oil and gas markets has intensified the debate on the global renewable energy transition.

However, there are concerns around the pandemic encouraging countries to halt the race to renewables and focus on indigenous assets, including fossil "We have seen countries having more nationalistic agendas in order to protect their assets and revitalise their economies, thus translating to the use of more indigenous resources. Africa is well-endowed with renewable energy resources and it has become very competitive compared to other energy sources.

However, it can't meet peak demand, depending on the country. Other energy sources are needed to complement renewables, and the overall goal is to lower emissions, rather than aim right now to bring it down to zero. We need to have

a pragmatic approach to deploy an energy mix benefitting the country and the environment," Nelisiwe Magubane, chairperson of Matleng Energy Solutions, said during a African Energy Chamber and Africa Oil & Power webinar on the subject.

She also brought up the issue of intellectual property as a key component of the regulatory frameworks to be designed by governments: "Renewable energy is an opportunity for African countries to create proprietary technology, be strict about intellectual property and drive technological innovation and energy independence."

The case for nuclear

The pandemic has highlighted the roles of market volatility and reliability challenges in creating a sustainable energy sector, and Suzanne Jaworowski, senior advisor, policy and communications, Office of Nuclear Energy, US Department of Energy, pleaded the case for nuclear energy. "Nuclear is a serious option to be considered in terms of energy transition. Smaller modular reactor designs which will come online in the next few years are economically competitive with combined cycle natural gas plants. Of course, each country must decide what is best, but major nuclear technology advancements make it worthy of taking it into account. Nuclear is a lot more accessible cost wise making it a viable option."

Role of gas

Given the growing number of natural gas finds on the continent, this fuel also has a role to play as a prime fuel in energy transition. "Ninety percent of South Africa's electricity runs on coal. We have one of the highest numbers of emissions per capita across the globe. The shift from coal to renewable is particularly key in our country, economically and in regard to the energy transition. Natural gas will have a major role play in the transition, provided we are able to build the appropriate processing and transport infrastructure. The energy transition will create immense employment opportunities and is a major challenge in the years coming up," said Dr Clinton Carter-Brown, head of the Energy Centre, South African Council for Scientific and Industrial Research.

Local content

Finally, the discussion touched on localisation and local content. Although it is hot topic in the oil and gas space, local capacity development is equally, if not more, important in the renewable energy sector as it is home to major technology innovations.

"The energy sector is following the path of telecommunications. When mobile telecommunications came online, previously isolated communities suddenly could access mobile solutions. In the energy sector, mini solar kits, portable battery storage solutions, small wind power plants among others, are setting the energy on the path of revolution, in which renewables are a key component. Nuclear also has a major role to play because the main driver of the energy revolution is technological," said Massaer Cisse, general manager, Lekela Power Senegal.

He underlined that the renewable energy revolution has not been hindered by Covid-19. "We all agree that the current situation is not sustainable. Energy sources don't need to be mutually exclusive. Oil, nuclear, natural gas, coal have the biggest role to play. Renewables is here to stay and grow."

ABOUT NICCI BOTHA

Nicci Botha has been wordsmithing for more than 20 years, covering just about every subject under the sun and then some. She's strung together words on sustainable development, maritime matters, mining, marketing, medical, lifestyle... and that elixir of life - chocolate. Nicci has worked for local and international media houses including Primedia, Caxton, Lloyd's and Reuters. Her new passion is digital media.

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