

SDG 7: Affordable and Clean Energy

Leaders Announce Voluntary Commitments for Rapid Decarbonization

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High-level leaders have announced over 130 commitments to help ensure clean and affordable energy for all by 2030 and reach net-zero emissions by 2050. The Secretary-General is expected to present a global roadmap for this journey to the UN General Assembly.

Aiming to advance progress towards SDG 7 (clean and affordable energy) and the Paris Agreement's goal of net zero emissions, the High-level Dialogue on Energy was convened by UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres as a virtual event on 24 September 2021. It closed out the High-level Week to kick off the UN General Assembly's 76th session, and was the first UNGA summit-level event on energy in 40 years.

The Dialogue was long overdue, said Guterres in his opening remarks, with three-quarters of a billion people still lacking access to electricity, energy production still responsible for 75% of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, air pollution from cooking fuels still killing millions annually, mainly women and children, and one-quarter of health clinics in Africa "grind to a halt" during a global pandemic because they have no power. Guterres called on everyone at the HLDE to "begin today" to decarbonize rapidly and radically and avoid dealing a fatal blow to the SDGs, ourselves, and the planet.

The Earth Negotiations Bulletin reports that throughout the Dialogue, speakers cited projections about the number of new jobs and improved livelihoods to be brought by a clean energy transition, as well as the "health and survival" benefits for humans and nature. This indicates much better recognition than even a few years ago of the global benefits of the "energy revolution" in transitioning to decarbonization and renewable and sustainable energy. The ENB also observes that "the costs of inaction are now being felt in the climate change-linked flooding, droughts, and wildfire events across the world in 2021," which can help make the case for covering the short-term costs of addressing the crises by ending dependence on GHG-producing energies.

A highlight of the High-level Dialogue on Energy was the presentation of voluntary commitments to action, known as Energy Compacts. Many of the 137 Compacts submitted prior to the Dialogue were highlighted in speakers' remarks, with more being announced in real time. Other speakers indicated that they have Compacts forthcoming.

The financial commitments made in the Compacts total around USD 400 billion. HLDE Co-Chair Achim Steiner, Administrator of the UN Development Programme (UNDP), said this amount "is just the beginning." Just 1% of the 400 trillion held by private capital today would be enough to realize the energy transition, he explained.

Another result of the HLDE and its preparatory process is a Global Roadmap based on discussions since early 2021 on ways to reach to SDG 7 and net-zero emissions. The Roadmap is expected to be included in the UN Secretary-General's summary of the Dialogue, which will be presented to the UNGA.

Liu Zhenmin, UN Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs and HLDE Secretary-General, said key elements of a global roadmap are clear, including:

- Close the energy access gap for the 760 million who lack access;
- Ensure clean cooking solutions;
- Scale up financing for clean energy solutions;
- Leverage synergies with other SDGs to pursue a just and inclusive energy transition; and
- Dramatically scale up action.

According to the summary of the preparatory process, the priority recommended actions are:

- Close the energy access gap;
- Rapidly transition to clean energy pathways;
- Leave no one behind, strengthen inclusion, interlinkages and synergies;
- Mobilize adequate and well-directed finance; and
- Harness innovation, technology and data.

In a table of ‘Key milestones towards the achievement of SDG 7 and net zero emissions,’ the summary indicates the state of each area currently, followed by quantitative milestones for 2025, 2030, and 2050.

During the HLDE, Liu said UN-Energy will continue to support mobilization of more Energy Compacts in the years to come. The summary of the preparatory process called for strengthening UN-Energy to enhance coordination and coherence among UN entities and other partners in efforts to reach SDG 7 by 2030 and net-zero emissions by 2050. It calls on UN-Energy to ensure that the global roadmap’s recommendations are “translated into specific, strategic, bold and time-bound plans of action towards a clear set of milestones to be achieved by 2025, 2030 and 2050.”

The ENB analysis suggests that events like the HLDE recognize that governments alone cannot achieve the global goals, and partnerships are needed with civil society, the private sector, and all levels of governance. “Like the 2017 UN Ocean Conference,” the HLDE has expanded the number of actors and entities that are not depending on governments to make decisions and take action, but “are thinking realistically about what they themselves can and will do.” In this way, events that catalyze voluntary commitments and provide for them to be tracked over time may represent an “improvement on the traditional template” for managing global environmental issues.

The Secretary-General recently suggested holding a global stocktaking by the end of 2023 to review the global plan of action for the UN Decade of Sustainable Energy for All (2014-2024), in light of the outcomes of the September 2021 energy summit.

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<http://sdg.iisd.org/news/leaders-announce-voluntary-commitments-for-rapid-decarbonization/> (accessed on November 11, 2021).