

Eleventh session of the Assembly
Abu Dhabi, 18-21 January 2021

Background Note

Ministerial Plenary Meeting

Driving the Agenda for Energising Healthcare

1. A fast-moving global energy transformation is underway - driven by technological innovation, dramatic cost declines, positive socio-economic benefits and the imperative to decarbonise our economies. To ensure an inclusive global energy transformation, universal access to modern energy – a key component of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 7 – must be facilitated. It is a development imperative and essential for achieving several SDGs. Over time, renewables have become not only technically viable but cost effective in offering clean, reliable and affordable energy. Access to uninterrupted electricity plays a critical role in the functionality of healthcare facilities and the quality of health services delivered to communities.
2. A recent study concluded that almost 60% of 121,000 healthcare facilities analysed in 46 low- and middle-income countries were found to have unreliable, unstable or in many instances no power at all. The heavy socio-economic cost of sub-par healthcare services is also due to a lack of, or unreliable, access to electricity and it is borne by communities, especially women and children. Developing countries accounted for approximately 99% of the global maternal deaths in 2015, largely due to limited access to emergency obstetric care and insufficient maternal care during pregnancy and delivery. Electricity is essential for the proper operations of healthcare facilities, used to power several essential and life-saving medical devices such as vaccine refrigerators, oxygen suppliers and baby warmers. Energy is also required for sterilisation and sourcing of clean water. Moreover, identifying and treating haemorrhaging, one of the leading causes of pregnancy and childbirth-related deaths, becomes easier for doctors and midwives if facilities have sufficient light.
3. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has exposed weaknesses in the energy systems in many emerging economies, which has impacted the proper functioning of critical sectors such as health and water. Emergency care and the distribution of a future vaccine through cold storage appliances which are essential to stop the spread of the virus, especially in isolated areas and among the most vulnerable populations, will also require adequately energised and equipped healthcare facilities.
4. In this context, decentralised renewable energy solutions present a key opportunity to provide clean, reliable, cost-effective and tailored electricity services to rural health centres currently lacking access or faced with unreliable supply. Harnessing the opportunity offered by standalone and mini-grid systems based on renewables could rapidly accelerate the electrification of healthcare facilities and unlock substantial benefits. As an integral part of COVID-19 response, several countries, such as Nigeria and India, and development agencies have rolled out programmes to deploy mini-grids and stand-alone systems to power remote clinics, quarantine, and testing centres.

5. IRENA has acknowledged the importance of decentralised renewable energy solutions by convening the International Off-grid Renewable Energy Conference and Exhibition (IOREC) every two years since 2012. IOREC has developed into the global collaborative platform to share experiences and best practices, identify synergies and forge partnerships to collectively identify solutions towards the acceleration of rural electrification through mini-grids and standalone renewable energy systems.
6. Advancing the energy-health nexus, IRENA convened the first 'International Conference on Renewable Energy Solutions for Healthcare Facilities' in 2018 to mobilise collaborative efforts between policy makers, financing institutions and technology suppliers, across the energy and health communities. As a follow up, IRENA has joined forces with international partners, such as UNDP, World Bank and UNDESA, to establish the WHO-led multi-stakeholder platform for enhanced co-operation among health and energy actors, the the Global Health and Energy Platform of Action (HEPA), the WHO-led multi-stakeholder platform for enhanced co-operation among health and energy actors.
7. Furthermore, IRENA is working at the country-level to identify renewables-based decentralised solutions to power primary healthcare facilities in rural areas. Currently piloted in Burkina Faso, IRENA is assessing the overall energy needs of the rural healthcare facilities and identifying energy gaps to recommend robust delivery models based on renewables. One of the end products is a blueprint on renewables system design for health clinics, which will enable application of the solution to a larger rural healthcare network within the country. Once successfully tested, the Agency intends to expand this workstream to additional countries, while also capturing the water availability dimension, which is another crucial issue for the pandemic and for the effective delivery of long-term healthcare services.

Objective of the session

8. This virtual ministerial plenary session will convene governments and partners to dwell on the crucial nexus between energy and health and offer a high-level platform for an exchange on challenges and opportunities in the deployment of renewables-based solutions to power healthcare infrastructure in developing countries. The Ministerial Meeting aims to bring together a range of perspectives on this very important global development priority.
9. With a greater relevance of the topic in the wake of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, speakers from the health and energy constituencies are invited to share their experiences and best practices and explore modalities to enhance dialogue among key stakeholders at the international and local levels to rapidly scale up implementation on the ground.
10. The Ministerial will act as a 'Call to Action' for the development and public communities to prioritise electrification and greening of rural healthcare facilities building on IRENA's on-going work in this field. The session will explore the current landscape of international cooperation on this issue and identify pathways to accelerate the electrification of healthcare facilities with increased private sector involvement. The session will also gather feedback from IRENA's Membership on this aspect of the Agency's work.

Guiding questions

- What role can policymakers and development partners play to ensure that national efforts aimed at increasing the share of renewables in the energy mix and expanding access prioritise the energising of critical infrastructure delivering public services such as healthcare?

- Has an increase in energy requirement been observed (or is expected) across the health services sector in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic? How can the cooperation between health and energy communities be increased to facilitate a unified response?
- What are the immediate needs in terms of international cooperation to increase resource mobilisation for renewable energy-based electrification of healthcare facilities? How can involvement of the private sector be enhanced?
- What actions may be prioritised in terms of technical assistance, financing, capacity development and advocacy to accelerate deployment of renewable energy in the healthcare sector? In this context, what role can IRENA play to support Members and other development partners?