Collective Energy Action: A New Vision for UN-Energy

Background: Inception and Re-Emergence

Following its inception as a subsidiary of the Chief Executive Board (CEB) in 2003, UN-Energy was an active and instrumental network, taking critical actions that included those that eventually built support for the inclusion of energy in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). As the UN’s mechanism for inter-agency collaboration in the field of energy, UN-Energy helped to ensure coherence in the multilateral system’s multidisciplinary response to the World Summit on Sustainable Development, and to support countries in their transition to sustainable energy. It also helped ensure that across the UN System there was a functional line of sight on other work, therefore establishing the basis for greater and more effective coordination and earlier programme design. Since the departure of the previous Chair of UN-Energy in 2015, however, the role of UN-Energy has lapsed, and it has been largely inactive.

Driven by the need for greater action by the multilateral system on SDG7 as an enabler and prerequisite for achieving many other SDGs, in 2018 the Secretary-General appointed Mr Achim Steiner, Administrator of UNDP, and Ms Rachel Kyte, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Sustainable Energy for All, as Co-Chairs as UN-Energy and the Department of Economic and Social Affairs as its Secretariat.

An initial principals-level meeting of the reformed UN-Energy took place in June 2018, chaired by Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammad. The meeting reiterated the importance of UN-Energy as the main principal coordination mechanism on energy issues within the multilateral system and members committed to undertake a stock-taking exercise, examine lessons of the past and identify areas of focus for UN-Energy going forward. These inputs and two subsequent technical-level discussions have informed the creation of a new proposed Vision for UN-Energy contained within this document and a draft Plan of Action for UN-Energy for work beginning in 2019 that is attached.

Increasing urgency to achieve SDG7 and accelerate the Energy Transition

There is growing evidence that achieving SDG7 – affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all – is not on track and it is increasingly clear that more needs to be done if this goal, and the accompanying energy transition, is to be achieved by 2030.

Domestic and international investment in those countries that most need resourcing to finance their transition to sustainable energy continues to be dramatically short of the levels required. Recent reports have also found that investments in fossil-fuel energy continue to rise in many countries. At a time when the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is issuing stark warnings about the consequences of climate change, urgent action is required to meet the agreed climate and development goals.

While much of the needed funding for achieving SDG7 will come from private capital, most global energy investments will be government-driven, so critical roles exist for the multilateral system to help support and shape government decisions and implementation. Despite this, the Dalberg report of 2017 identified UN-system support for SDG7 as one of the those most lagging behind and (along with SDG6 on water) and requiring significantly more attention.¹

¹ System-Wide Outline of the Functions and Capacities of the UN Development System, June 2017.
As the report noted:

“Affordable and clean energy receives little attention. SDG 7 receives less than 1% of overall expenditure on SDGs, the second lowest amount of any SDG in 2016. This expenditure, amounting to USD 226 million in total, was fragmented across 18 UNDS entities; UNDP accounts for USD 106 million, with work focusing primarily on access to energy and renewables. Multilateral development banks are the principal sources of finance for energy infrastructure, and often for technical advice as well, so the UNDS does not need to replicate their work. However, the UNDS could dedicate more effort and resources to normative support, policy advice and data collection and analysis (which accounted for 14% of UNDS expenditures in 2016) and also to capacity development (which accounted for 26% of UNDS expenditure in 2016).”

Energy as the golden thread

The nature of energy also means it cuts across the work of many multilateral bodies but also development itself. Echoing the words of former Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, the Deputy Secretary-General, Amina Mohammed, has said access to modern, clean energy is the common denominator underpinning most SDGs. Achieving affordable, clean energy for all is the “golden thread” that ties together global efforts to end poverty, reduce inequalities and cut pollution. Energy is widely perceived as the key enabler and prerequisite to many of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, particularly those focused on health, education, environment and gender equality.

A call for collective action on energy

As the vision of Secretary-General’s reforms of the UN have made clear, to achieve the order of magnitude changes envisioned by SDGs the multilateral family needs to do much more to ensure coordinated and focused approaches that avoid duplication. This is particularly critical for SDG7 given its inter-linkages and co-benefits to the other SDGs and the Paris Agreement.

But to do so will require bold, new, and ambitious approaches that do not simply call on increasing the individual resources of multilateral bodies but also coordinating these efforts to ensure the collective resources of the multilateral system can be shaped, sharpened and directed to greater effect. Without such cooperation the UN system’s ability to move the needle on energy will be significantly hampered.

Vision for UN-Energy

Based on the preceding we propose the following vision statement for UN Energy:

To accelerate the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement, countries increasingly adopt sustainable energy solutions, embarking on an energy transition by creating the enabling conditions that catalyse public and private investment to scale-up action on energy access, renewable energy and energy efficiency. By making their energy sectors more sustainable, their economies can follow a more equitable growth path, contributing to poverty eradication while combating climate change and increasing their resilience.

Theory of Change

The theory of change underpinning UN Energy’s work stems from two sets of issues: 1) The change that is required of the UN System in line with the recent developments around the “long-term positioning of the UN Development System”, 2) the structural change that is needed in the energy sector to accelerate achievement of the SDGs and the Paris Agreement.
The central hypothesis on the first point is that in order to effectively support implementation of the energy-related goals in support of the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement, in a manner that responds to the transformative, universal, and integrated nature of these agendas, and to meet the expectations of Member States, the UN development system must more effectively “function as a system” in an integrated and coherent manner, at the global, regional and country level. Improved “functioning as a system” is a pre-requisite for continued relevance, better strategic positioning, and strengthened delivery of results and impact.

On the second point, it has now become clear that current energy systems do not adequately address our most pressing challenges; they are failing to reach billions of people, still rely overwhelmingly on fossil fuels, and are unaffordable for many. In short, energy systems are not sustainable in the long term. Growing populations and growing prosperity will lead to increases in the demand for energy services. To meet the SDG7 targets by 2030, there needs to be a global transition of energy systems towards those that are zero-carbon and sustainable.

UN Energy can act as the main mechanism that brings the UN System together for more integrated and coherent delivery of policy and normative support with the aim of: a) improving the overall delivery of UN support and services on energy-related issues; b) improving the evidence base for system-wide results and impacts; c) improving UN-wide “branding” and image.

The UN system can play a unique role in advancing the energy-related goals. The UN could bring new authority to the process, providing independent, high quality advice, as a credible, neutral convener and coordinator of multi-stakeholder processes. This should go beyond the global and regional level, where UN-Energy has been most active in the past. Building on its comparative advantage, coordinated support of UN-Energy member interventions at country and sub-national level can achieve significant impact towards achieving SDG7 goals and help close the energy gap.

Mission of UN-Energy

As there is no single entity in the United Nations system that has sole responsibility for energy, UN-Energy’s principal mission must continue to be the primary agent within the UN for promoting system-wide collaboration on energy related issues.

In line with the reforms of the Secretary-General, members and partners of UN-Energy must use this forum for coordination and knowledge exchange, make use of their comparative advantages, ensure synergies, seek greater harmonisation and reduce duplication, all to meet growing demands from Member States in accelerating the energy transition. this critical area.

Building on its previous vision, it is proposed that UN-Energy act to support UN Member States in achieving SDG7 and the interrelated goals of the Paris Climate Agenda and the broader SDG agenda:

1. **Promote coherence in the multilateral system’s multi-disciplinary response to achieve SDG7 by:**

   - Acting as a gateway for sharing (both between members/partners and more broadly) information, knowledge, experiences and good practices on SDG7 and the NDCs implementation through dynamic and action-oriented approaches with extensive use of information and communication technologies;
   - Maintaining an overview of ongoing and planned work within the system and promoting joint programming, harmonisation and cooperation among agencies and their initiatives at the national, sub regional, regional and global levels while addressing gaps and overlaps and avoiding duplication;
• Promoting the energy-related activities of the organisations of the system.

2. **Focus on substance and collaborative actions**, with regards to policy development and implementation in the area of energy, as well as in maintaining an overview of major ongoing initiatives based on the UN-Energy work programme. In addition, UN Energy should be a system-wide network open to all concerned organisations and entities that can provide a mechanism for the system’s interaction with non-UN stakeholders by:

• Organising a regular exchange of views on policy in the field of energy and related activities, as well as developing partnerships;
• Adopting a clear country-level focus, coordinating action of the UN-system on energy;
• Developing and maintaining dynamic and interactive mechanisms for information exchange and dissemination among all partners.

**What UN-Energy Members will agree to collaborate on**

20 To achieve its vision the members of UN-Energy agree to:

• **reassessing and examining opportunities for coordination and cooperation across the multilateral system**, including on high impact countries, where the need is greatest, and areas such as ‘energy-health’, ‘energy for displaced people’, and ‘energy-climate’;
• **sharing knowledge and harmonising positions**, e.g. through expert group meetings with delegates and experts on SDG7 targets and means of implementation, and considering the ongoing membership of UN-Energy and its relationship with other processes;
• **agreeing every two years on a UN-Energy Plan of Action as a living document, and meeting at least two times at Principal Level and bi-monthly (on average) at a Sherpa Level**, to coordinate activities, exchange knowledge and discuss progress;
• **coordinating on global advocacy and outreach** e.g. where possible to work to hold joint high-level events on energy and its nexus with other SDGs during UN Summits, UNGA, UNFCCC, HLPF;
• **emphasising accountability and monitoring**, e.g. through UN-Energy reports on UN system’s activities on energy and periodic reporting to CEB/UNSDG;
• **sharing data, and** supporting dissemination and coherence in data relating to tracking progress on SDG7;
• **offering coherent advice** on behalf of the UN system to support inter-governmental deliberations, e.g. SDG open working group, HLPF, and SDG monitoring and indicators.