

Africa on brink of energy coup

Electricity is the first step into the digital age, improving learning, enterprise, healthcare and communications

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AFRICA is on the brink of an energy revolution which will transform lives across the continent, if decision makers can fully grasp and advance the technological and other innovations on our doorstep, global consulting engineers and scientists SRK Consulting (Africa) said.

“Rolling back poverty and boosting growth by getting affordable electricity to all households is now a more realistic possibility than ever before,” SRK corporate consultant Roger Dixon says, “especially with fast-developing renewable energy technologies to build upon.”

Dixon highlighted the developmental impact of access to electricity at household and community level, especially in the era of mobile and digital communication.

“Electricity is the first step into the digital age, facilitating improved levels of learning, enterprise, healthcare and communication,” he said.

“In many remote areas, electricity in the household also heralds a new culture of efficiency in which people



ENERGY REVOLUTION: Africa is going through an aggressive energy revolution to change the lives of the people of the continent. PICTURE: AFP/GETTY IMAGES

can spend time on more productive activities instead of fetching firewood or water.”

He also highlighted electricity’s vital contribution to improving educational access and quality, which were in

turn linked to economic performance, employment and more sustainable levels of population growth.

According to the African Development Bank (ADB), the continent loses 4% of its gross domestic product due to lack of electricity – with more than 645 million Africans living without it.

Electricity use per capita averages 181kWh in Africa, compared to about 13 000kWh in the US and at least 6 500kWh in Europe.

It is also often unaffordable to Africans, the ADB says, which estimates that a person living in northern Nigeria pays up to 80 times more per unit of energy than a resident of London or New York.

“The urgency of this challenge is clear from the ADB’s plan to spend \$12bn (R178bn) in the energy sector over the next five years and leverage a further \$40bn-\$50bn,” Dixon said.

“In South Africa, the government expenditure on energy projects – mainly from Eskom – is expected to exceed R180bn over the next three years, making up more than 20% of public sector infrastructure spending.

“In addition, the government is also considering potential investment in nuclear power.”

He said renewable energy sources would be a cornerstone of this economic revolution, as Africa’s potential in wind, solar and hydropower is released by the quick pace of technology.

“But we also need to innovate our models of energy generation and distribution, providing legal, policy and technical support for private sector investment and exploiting opportunities in locally-focused energy schemes alongside a national grid,” he said.

Renewable energy’s share of South Africa’s installed electricity capacity has leapt from zero to 4.5% since 2010, on the strength of the government’s Renewable Energy Independent Power Producer Procurement Programme.

South Africa has recently become one of the world’s top 10 countries generating power from solar photovoltaic sources and is now the largest wind-energy producer in Africa, with capacity exceeding 1000MW.

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