

Key Highlights

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- Day 1 of the Vienna Energy Forum 2021 featured High-Level Thematic Plenary Sessions that brought together senior government representatives and leading experts to discuss key priorities and highlight opportunities and potential solutions on global climate action.
- Topics at the Thematic Plenary Sessions included “Accelerating Action”, “Food System Transformation”, “Industry Integration” and “Energy Efficient Products”..

The opening remarks at Day 1 of the Vienna Energy Forum 2021 (VEF 2021) truly underlined the theme of the gathering: “Where Ambition meets Action.”

Alexander Schallenberg, Federal Minister of European and International Affairs, Austria, shared key policy actions and ambitions for his country, including achieving 100% renewable energy-sourced electricity by 2030 and climate neutrality by 2040, and pledged EUR 130 million to the Green Climate Fund (GCF).

Li Yong, Director General, UN Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), said we are not on track to meet climate neutrality goals by 2050 and called for increased development of clean energy technologies and increased multi-stakeholder commitment to mission-oriented innovation. He expressed his hope VEF 2021 would provide concrete recommendations for action and announced the launch of the UNIDO Green Hydrogen Partnership with Austria and Germany.

Leonore Gewessler, Federal Minister, Ministry for Climate Action, Environment, Energy, Mobility, Innovation and Technology, Austria, stressed the importance of partnerships to achieve climate and energy goals along with a higher level of commitment. Also, youth for VEF Representative, Israel Faleye, spoke on the developments at the Youth Forum and called for a greater involvement of youth in policymaking, assistance in skill acquisition & access to financing for a better energy future.

Amani Abou-Zeid, Commissioner for Infrastructure and Energy, African Union Commission, highlighted current action plans within the AU Agenda 2063 and the AU Post-COVID Green Recovery Strategy to increase regional renewable energy access while noting regional challenges. These actions include tapping the continent’s abundant renewable energy resources and building the continent’s power infrastructure.

High-Level Thematic Plenary – Accelerating Action

This high-level dialogue aimed to build momentum to support outcomes of major approaching energy events: the High-Level Dialogue on Energy (HLDE) to be held on 20 September 2021 under UN General Assembly auspices; the G20 Leaders’ Summit in October; and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change’s (UNFCCC) 26th Conference of Parties (COP 26) in November.

Panel 1 on ‘Energy Goals by 2030’ featured a Ministerial Statement from Gerd Müller, Federal Minister for Economic Cooperation and Development, Germany, on his country’s commitment to increase funding of international climate action from EUR 4 to 6 billion over time. He expressed support for Africa to fulfill its potential of becoming a green continent for renewable energy.

Panelists shared a variety of remarks on their priorities, showcasing their present and future projects. Damilola Ogunbiyi, CEO and Special Representative of the UN Secretary-

General, Sustainable Energy for All (SEforALL), and Co-Chair of UN-Energy, expressed the need for greater combined effort of countries, organizations, private sector, and other actors against energy poverty as seen in the energy compacts announced at the High-Level Dialogue on Energy Ministerial Forums.

Haoliang Xu, UN Assistant Secretary-General and UNDP Assistant Administrator, referred to a “leap forward” in terms of commitments to the energy transition in the energy compacts that were announced during the HLDE’s preparatory Ministerial Thematic Forums. He stated he remained cautiously optimistic about the achievement of the net-zero goal by 2050.

During Panel 2, ‘Towards COP 26,’ Angela Wilkinson, Secretary General for the World Energy Council, called for an improvement in global energy literacy, greater investment in the diversification of relevant skills, and bottom-up action learning for the energy transition. Francesco La Camera, Director-General, International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA), emphasized that the energy transition will bring benefits for all—with a notable a rise in job availability—but it must be supplemented with better educational support, skills training, and social protection measures.

Ovais Sarmad, Deputy Executive Secretary, UNFCCC, indicated that to ensure progress at COP 26, it is important to align all public and private finance flows with Paris Agreement climate goals, encourage inclusive multilateralism, bridge the gap between negotiations and implementation, and ensure no one gets left behind. Kavita Sinha, Deputy Director for Mitigation and Adaptation at the Green Climate Fund (GCF) said current investments toward the energy transition are a “drop in the bucket” and would require a “humongous” increase in financing to meet the energy transition goals and called for a more efficient use of capital in this regard.

High Level Thematic Plenary – Food System Transformation

To kick off the panel on “Scaling Food Productivity,” Qu Dongyu, Director-General of the Food and Agriculture Organization of

the UN (FAO), stressed that energy is a key element at every stage of the agri-food systems and essential to implementing agricultural innovations, but we must take advantage of the synergies between food and energy.

For the Ministerial Statement, Kenyan Senator Halake Abshiro said national commitments toward sustainable energy goals are a step in the right direction but they must be supported with resource allocation for implementation. She also acknowledged the importance of access to information and public participation for climate and energy justice, calling for optimum public participation that reflects climate and energy justice.

Samir Ibrahim, CEO of SunCulture, highlighted the plight of small holder farmers and warned against the consequences of not paying close attention to the most vulnerable populations. He called for lowering the price of food systems and sharing data to create simplified solutions. Magdalena Kouneva, Director General, Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency Partnership (REEEP), added there needs to be a fundamental shift in the amount of financing and policy engagement to sustainably transform food systems.

Audrey Deisderato, Co-founder and Chief Operations Officer for SunFunder, stressed progress is lagging in the informal sector with small holder farmers because the sector is very complicated, fragmented, and does not have the privilege of long-term planning as the formal sector does. She pushed for more investments in specialized and local intermediaries that can offer tailored solutions.

At Panel 2 on “Smart Food Systems,” Omar Paganini, Minister of Industry, Energy and Mining, Uruguay, delivered their Ministerial Statement, noting 97% of the country’s electricity comes from renewable sources and Uruguay is presently working on fostering electric transportation and green hydrogen, and transforming their industry with a circular economy approach. In addition, Malik Amin Aslam, Minister for Climate Change, Pakistan, shared their clean energy steps towards clean transportation and nature-based solutions that encourage sustainable forestry.

Jeffrey Pins, Head of Portfolio at the IKEA Foundation, underscored how energy access lies at the nexus of poverty and climate, highlighting the need for inclusively regenerative farming practices that keep the end user in mind when transforming food systems. Kristina Skierka, CEO, Power For All, stressed the high cost of technology for farmers and implored donors and governments to commit to making it more affordable. Leonard Mizzi, Deputy Director at the European Commission's Directorate-Generale of International Partnerships, said it was important to establish the interconnection between climate, food system and biodiversity, and to dismantle silos.

High Level Thematic Plenary – Industry Integration

The “Winning the Race to Zero” panel discussed the paths for renewable energy investments, green finance instruments, and direct recovery efforts to build capacity across industries and promote efficient industrialization.

Anthony Hopley, Co-Executive Director, Mission Possible Platform and Executive Fellow, World Economic Forum, expressed that to accelerate the energy transition in industry there is a need to speed up innovation and increase collaborations between governments and companies. He noted the energy transition may disrupt many industries and collaboration is necessary.

Dinah McLeod, Chief Executive, Global Cement and Concrete Association (GCCA), announced their ambition to achieve carbon-neutral concrete by 2050, noting the cement and concrete industry has reduced its carbon emissions by 20% over the past few years but there remains a need for greater action. In addition, Christiane Bruner, Cooperate Affairs, VERBUND, said although long term goals should be kept in mind, we should not waste time and rather, create short term milestones.

At Panel 2, ‘The Digital Revolution,’ Gökçe Mete, Head of the Secretariat, Leadership Group for the Industry Transition (LeadIT), Stockholm Environment Institute, shared the benefits of artificial intelligence and machine learning in predicting emissions, fostering transparent

certification mechanisms, maximizing efficiency, managing production assets, and minimizing resource use.

Cate Hight, Principal Climate Aligned Industries, Rocky Mountain Institute, shared that digitalization provides opportunities in market creation as well as supporting accountability. Also, she added that digital tech, corporate will, activist pressure, and consumer demand make it possible to establish a thriving market for climate-differentiated products.

High Level Thematic Plenary – Energy Efficient Products

Matthew Opoku Prempeh, Minister for Energy, Ghana, delivered the Ministerial Statement, sharing Ghana's plan to lower greenhouse gas emissions by 15% in 2030 and further—by 30% with external support. He announced that through its national electrification scheme, Ghana has been able to achieve an energy access rate of 85.5%.

At Panel 1 on “Sustainability vs. Profitability”, Alfonso Blanco-Bonilla, Executive Secretary of the Latin American Energy Organization (OLADE), stressed the need to reduce energy efficiency gaps between countries as well as the importance of designing strategies according to the barriers and facilitators of individual countries. Sumedha Malaviya, Manager, World Resources Institute Energy Program, highlighted the energy subsidies as a barrier to energy efficiency. She added that many emerging economies have energy reliability concerns but through energy efficiency, individuals could enhance their livelihoods.

At Panel 2 on “Affordability Matters,” Rose Mwebaza, Director of the UN Council Technology Centre and Network (CTC), spoke on the inaccessibility of energy efficient products due to a similar inaccessibility to technology and high costs, which inevitably push people toward least efficient options. Shilpa Patel, Director, Mission Investing, Climate Works Foundation, Kigali Cooling Efficiency Program (K-CEP), shared that innovative service provision—such as cooling as a service—will eliminate the need for capital expenditure.