
Sustainable Energy for All – or another scheme to increase energy corporation profits?

Sustainable Energy for All (SEFA) is an initiative launched by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon in October 2011 and which has been gaining political momentum in the run-up to Rio+20. Ban Ki-moon has made it clear that he sees SEFA as centre-stage to the Rio+20 process and that it will proceed regardless of the outcome of UN negotiations.

SEFA's official goals for 2030 are to a) double the rate of improvement in energy efficiency, b) double the share of renewable energy and c) ensure universal access to modern energy services.

The goals themselves are highly problematic: 'Renewable energy' is not defined and SEFA documents show that mega hydro dams, agrofuel and biomass plantations fall under it. Increasing the share of renewable energy itself will not necessarily reduce fossil fuel burning since global energy use is to be greatly expanded: while SEFA aims to increase energy 'access' in the South, they say nothing about the need to reduce energy overconsumption in the North. And finally, the three goals are entirely independent from each other. 'Energy access' in the South does not have to be renewable, efficient or in any way 'sustainable' – it may just mean more coal power stations or tar sands exploitation.

Perhaps most worrying, however, is the nature of the SEFA initiative itself: It is run by a High-Level Group whose members were hand-picked by Ban Ki-moon and who include representatives of Siemens, Statoil, Eskom, Riverstone Holdings, Bloomberg New Energy Finance and other corporations. The only governments represented are the US, EU, Russia, India and Brazil. Charles Holliday, Chair of the Bank of America is one of two Chairs of the SEFA's High-Level Group. This group produced SEFA's Action Agenda, i.e. work programme, in secret, without any semblance of consultation.

The key message that runs through the Action Agenda and other SEFA document is the 'need' to 'catalyse investment' by removing any 'barriers' to it. Far from regulating corporate investment, SEFA seeks to facilitate more of it – regardless of its social, environmental and climate impacts. Companies are to help governments with devising and implementing business-friendly energy policies. Governments, in turn, are to commit public funding to help business start-up costs and to underwrite financial risks. This includes funding Research + Development, pilot projects, technical assistance, subsidies, loan-guarantees and other types of 'risk mitigation' for private sector investments. The role of civil society is relegated to that of supporters and facilitators : the Action Agenda suggests that civil society groups might work in partnership with companies, 'educate' communities in the South, implement projects, etc.

SEFA is not a new funding body but a 'clearing house' for voluntary commitments and partnerships. Governments and companies in particular are encouraged to submit their policy commitments. Ghana has been the first country to make a formal commitment. Its centrepiece is an expansion in the use of natural gas, together with support for new pipelines and processing plants. Ghana's already approved Renewable Action Plan is also included – it backs the expansion of monoculture plantations for agrofuels. So far, any energy investments, at least in the South, can be put forward as

commitments, based on the claim that more energy generation will translate into greater 'energy access'. SEFA's Secretariat has confirmed that governments will have free choice as to which types of energy they wish to include in country commitments – without any pretence of looking at 'sustainability', despite the initiative's title.

In many respects, SEFA can thus be seen as a continuation and possibly expansion of long-standing polluting and destructive energy finance, e.g. by the World Bank (who are members of the High-Level Group). Yet at the same time, SEFA is part of a much newer dangerous trend: As a UN-led initiative, it represents an attempt to effectively replace the multilateral negotiations and conventions process with multi-stakeholder private-public partnerships. It is thus a particularly powerful example of what many civil society groups have described as the 'corporate capture of the UN'.

You are invited to sign the Open Letter calling on Governments to reject the Sustainable Energy for All Initiative (SEFA), available at http://www.wrm.org.uy/actors/CCC/reject_SEFA.html which is to be presented to governments at Rio later this month.

To sign the Open Letter, please send an email with your organisation's name and country to biofuelwatch@gmail.com

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For more background information, see <http://www.biofuelwatch.org.uk/2012/sefa/>