

Investments for Africa's Nuclear Future Are Lacking from the West

by Princy Mthombeni

This presentation was made to the Sare for Senate Presidents' Day Conference, Feb. 18, by Princy Mthombeni, a nuclear communications specialist and founder of Africa4Nuclear, in South Africa. Diane Sare is an independent candidate for U.S. Senate from New York.



Courtesy photo

Princy Mthombeni

Hello everyone. I'm coming to you live from South Africa, and I'm genuinely happy to be part of today's program. Thank you, Diane, for inviting me. I want to start by giving a clear picture of electricity access on the African continent. Africa is home to 17% of the world's population, but it accounts for just 4% of the global power, the lowest in the world. An estimated 600 million people in Africa do not have access to electricity. This is a continent of about 1.5 billion, and the United Nations predicts that Africa's population would have doubled by 2050, amounting to approximately 2.5 billion people, with electricity demand expected to triple by 2040.

In terms of [annual] *per capita* consumption of energy in sub-Saharan Africa, with the exclusion of South Africa of course, it is 180 kilowatt-hours (kwh), compared to about 13,000 kwh in the United States, and 6,500 kwh in Europe. As the U.S. and South Africa are heading to national or Presidential elections, in any industrialized or developing economy, there are always subjects of differing opinion. Different administrations, major political parties, and Presidential candidates contest for election by adopting a certain view on economic trajectories. One of those economic trajectories is a highly contested sector, which is energy.

Today it's important to talk about what other countries are offering African countries as a solution to the energy poverty. Countries like Russia have been very clear; they are offering affordable and sustainable energy solutions to the African countries. Those are nuclear energy, plus oil and gas.

International cooperation of countries on economy is very important. A lot of people confuse things. Those of us in the nuclear advocacy, when we promote Russia-

Africa and China-Africa cooperation, some people misconstrue it as though we are saying African countries should not cooperate with Western countries. That is not what we are saying. The Western countries offered many economic solutions in Africa which include coal power, oil and gas, transportation, banking and financial services, geothermal, etc. And lately, they are offering renewable energy solutions. That is what Western countries are offering in terms of economy to Africa and it is most welcome. This proves that the West is well represented in the African economic sectors.

The question is, why is it that when African countries want to partner with other countries such as China or Russia in relation to nuclear technology development and gas for solutions, they are facing resistance? Why are people outraged about China or Russia offering Africa things that clearly and obviously are the best solution to their challenges? For example, those in the oil and gas sector in South Africa. They reckon that if South Africa takes the Russian oil and gas offer, the price of fuel would drop by half. Now, this is where communication and advocacy groups like us and Stand Up For Nuclear and many others like the one that Michael Shellenberger in the U.S. is running, need to sensitize and educate members of the public to fundamentally understand these things, so that when governments finally enter into partnerships with these countries, particularly for nuclear technology solutions, they find that the ground is already conducive for the smooth implementation of nuclear build programs, especially in many African countries, [where] the mainstream media is biased against China and Russia. They have adopted a stance of being the gatekeepers of Western countries, who are monopolizing the economic cooperation with African countries.

Education vs. the Anti-Nuclear 'Narrative'

On a positive note though, slowly but surely the mainstream media is losing credibility, and is being

replaced by social media influencers, podcasters, and independent journalists, among others. For instance, in South Africa there was a strong mobilization to reject Russia's offer of an around 9,600 MW nuclear energy deal, which would have been signed around 2016-17. However today, many organizations and individuals that opposed that nuclear deal, are leading conversations that South Africa must procure nuclear power. Some are even saying, had South Africa signed a nuclear deal with Russia in 2016, there would not be these constant power cuts that we are facing now. Even highly organized economics forum groups sprang up one day, and one said it wants to offer small modular reactors as a solution to rolling black-outs in South Africa.

Therefore, as a global nuclear community, we must continue playing a pivotal role in sensitizing and educating not only members of the public, but also policy-makers, government officials, and political and community leaders, among others. Because once again, the mainstream media is fighting for the preservation of the monopoly of the Western economy offers. But we are glad that examples like Russia-Egypt, Russia-India, South Korea-United Arab Emirates, and France-United Kingdom nuclear deals, and Western countries with massive small modular reactor programs, are rather pointing to the propaganda of mainstream media in Africa, which finds pleasure in writing everything that has to do with opposing nuclear energy. They never talk about how the nuclear renaissance is evolving in many Western countries, including those that I have mentioned. This just goes to show that the hope for nuclear technology development and expansion lies with nuclear communicators and nuclear advocacy groups, which—for example—have been pumping up a lot of information on some of the decisions that have been in favor of nuclear power technology in Western countries. For example, Jennifer Granholm, who is the U.S. Secretary of Energy; the former Secretary of State for Business Energy and Industrial Strategy in the United Kingdom, Kwasi Kwarteng; and the private players that are embracing small modular reactors such as TerraPower, NuScale in the U.S., StarCore in Canada, etc. It is quite clear that the media in Africa is sabotaging a good potential partnership between African nations and other countries for nuclear power technologies.

A Legacy for Coming Generations

Now let's talk about the youth. What about the youth? Because the decisions that we take today will be inherited by them as we hand over the baton. It's quite clear that

we must be unequivocal about this. The only youth who would be disadvantaged, and that is currently being disadvantaged, is the African countries' youth, and no one else. Because in Western countries, plus Asia and the Middle East, etc., their leaders are implementing nuclear technology solutions. Their youth will inherit thriving economies.

Once again, as a nuclear community, we continue to do our part to prevent the African youth from being disadvantaged. As the current generation of professionals, we are on the right side of history. For example, to name a few organizations that are playing their part in educating people, including youth, about the benefits of nuclear technology in Africa: the African Young Generation in Nuclear (AYGN); Women in Nuclear Africa; Eastern Africa Association of Radiation Protection; and many others. Over and above these interventions, nuclear advocates have taken to social media, pumping up the facts in such a way that even the youthful political parties in African state parliaments are now advocating for nuclear power.

As you may know, last year at COP28, which is the climate-change conference, about 25 nations signed the pledge to triple nuclear energy capacity in the world. The pledge was led by the United States, so there is absolutely no reason for Africa to be refused collaboration with any nations for nuclear technology solutions.

As I am about to close, having highlighted that the mainstream media is hostile towards nuclear energy, as advocacy groups we are operating in a very difficult environment. We are working against a well-organized media and anti-nuclear lobby groups who are well-funded by renewable energy agents and non-governmental organizations, some of which publicly announced that they oppose nuclear because it stands in the way of renewable energy. Therefore, as nuclear advocacy groups, we require all the support we can get in order to push and promote the benefits of nuclear technology, including power, medicine, seawater desalination, industrial and agricultural applications. So, when we come knock on your doors as leaders, please attend to us with humility and understanding that we are passionate people who are just trying to help our countries address socio-economic challenges such as lack of industrialization, poverty, inequality, and unemployment, among others. But most importantly, as nuclear advocates in Africa, we want to contribute to building a prosperous Africa based on inclusive growth and sustainable development—the Africa that we want, and that we want the next generations to inherit.

Thank you so much again for inviting me, Diane. I want to join everyone in that room in saying, "Diane Sare for U.S. Senate!"