

An open letter to stakeholders

Off-Grid Solar: An Essential Service in the Fight against COVID-19

The off-grid solar sector has a vital role to play in the COVID-19 response. Just 41% of low- and middle-income country health care facilities currently have reliable electricityⁱ, whilst [789 million people lack access to electricity](#) in their homesⁱⁱ. As communities respond to the pandemic, they can use off-grid solar products and services to:

- **Provide rural health facilities with electricity access:** Larger off-grid solar systems can be used to power medical equipment in hospitals, primary health clinics, temporary emergency facilities, and laboratories. In addition, solar home systems can provide lighting, and power information technologies for central health agencies and smaller, rural health facilities, which will soon be on the frontline of the pandemic. A key benefit of these systems is how quickly they can be installed and be operational.
- **Provide household electricity access, helping to ensure people have the information they need to stay safe:** Continuing to provide access to electricity throughout periods of lockdown will improve access to health information from governments via phones, radios, and TVs for millions of people, enhancing awareness of vital preventative measures such as hand-washing and social distancing.
- **Promote good hygiene through access to clean water:** Solar water pumping can provide access to clean water for basic hygiene, helping to stop the spread of the virus.
- **Facilitate the distribution of health and sanitation products:** The use of solar refrigeration products will be crucial in establishing [a cold chain for distribution](#) once vaccines become available. Furthermore, through its existing logistics and distribution networks, the off-grid sector has the capability to facilitate the distribution of millions of health and sanitation products such as food, soap, or face masks to households and health facilities. Off-grid companies can partner with governments looking to distribute goods quickly and efficiently to rural and remote locations.
- **Communicate directly with off-grid households via phone and SMS:** The sector's extensive customer databases and call centres could be utilised to support government and health agencies to communicate vital health information messages about how customers can protect themselves and their communities via calls and SMS. Company call centres are increasingly able to operate remotely via cloud-based software platforms.

The off-grid solar sector also positively impacts people's lives, already providing 171 millionⁱⁱⁱ people with improved access to energy across the globe. The off-grid solar sector can:

- **Enable households to maintain a minimum quality of life:** Energy access, powered by the off-grid sector, is vital for survival. Energy access is essential for maintaining a continuous supply of essential services and, ultimately, a minimum quality of life.
- **Enable people to work remotely:** Many businesses cannot continue to operate if employees cannot work remotely. Larger off-grid systems can help to power the computers and internet connections needed to continue working from home, helping to protect jobs and incomes, whilst limiting macro-economic impacts.
- **Enable children to continue their educations:** The use of radios, televisions and tablets have enabled children who are unable to attend school continued access to education, while lighting allows students to study safely during the evenings. In Kenya, for example, off-grid solar powered satellite televisions are enabling access to lessons from the Ministry of Education^{iv}.
- **Help people stay in touch:** Providing electricity to households, along with mobile phones, radios, and TVs enables people to stay in touch with loved ones while practicing physical distancing.

Governments are encouraged to classify the off-grid solar sector as an essential service.

The off-grid solar sector's customers have lower incomes, live in more remote, rural off-grid areas, and often have limited access to health services, compared to those with access to grid electricity, and are therefore particularly vulnerable to COVID-19. As lockdown measures continue, the sector is working hard to ensure ongoing technical and customer support to off-grid customers, while adhering to national guidance in order to assist in halting the spread of the virus. Designating the off-grid sector as an essential service will facilitate the continued electricity access to millions of off-grid customers.

To continue to play a role in delivering access to energy to 171 million people, [the off-grid solar sector needs funding](#). Companies are doing everything they can to ensure continued electricity access for customers and to support the health sector, but with revenues declining, the sector needs a range of financial support, including grants and low interest loans that meet the full spectrum of needs from a diverse range of companies in the sector, particularly those of smaller businesses. With the right support the sector can keep customers connected and informed, and help to electrify health facilities, making an important contribution to the COVID-19 response.



About the Authors: The note has been developed by Lighting Global, Power Africa, ESMAP, GOGLA, Africa Clean Energy, AMDA and Sustainable Energy for All (SEforALL). These organisations are seeking to partner with governments to electrify health facilities and deliver medical appliances, as well as to provide relief funding to the off-grid solar sector.

ⁱ *Environmental conditions in health care facilities in low- and middle-income countries: coverage and inequalities*, Cronk & Bartram, 2018. Cited in [Lasting Impact: Sustainable Off-Grid Solar Delivery Models to Power Health and Education](#).

ⁱⁱ [Tracking SDG 7: Energy Progress Report 2020](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ The Tracking SDG 7: Energy Progress Report 2020 estimates that 171 million people have access to electricity thanks to off-grid solutions, including mini-grids, see [Tracking SDG 7: Energy Progress Report 2020](#)

^{iv} [Azuri helping off-grid children across Kenya to continue education while schools closed](#).