

EnergyNet, Africa Energy Forum

Interviewee: João Marques, EDP Executive Director

The rise of renewables: synergies between Portugal and Africa

There is far more that links Portugal and Africa beyond history and geography. From an industrial standpoint the two entities may be at different stages but when it comes to energy, the rise of renewables has brought about an interesting synergy – one that makes the upcoming Africa Energy Forum in Lisbon one of the most intriguing yet.

To the north, despite Portugal's traditional success throughout the advent of renewable energy, the country has fallen behind as new methods surrounding offshore and wind overtake the importance that was initially placed on onshore generation.

At the heart of this momentum shift is the country's leading energy player, EDP, who has long urged Portugal to react more speedily to this change of direction.

"The focus on the accommodation of cleaner energy - namely offshore wind and especially solar - presents a challenge of developing decentralised generation while surrounded by a grid that was built based on traditional big powerplants," introduces the company's Executive Director, João Marques da Cruz. "This will require huge investments now, not just in hardware and equipment, but also in intelligence in order to manage this decentralised generation.

"This transition is the biggest challenge that everybody is facing right now in Portugal."

This is where the alignment with Africa's own nascent venture into clean energy and decentralised solutions comes into play.

However, Portugal has the benefit of being a previous leader in the onshore space to leverage investment and progression, and Mr Cruz is hopeful that this will help his own domestic market react sufficiently, while also applying lessons learned to neighbours across the continental border.

"In Portugal, in decentralised solar particularly, we already have a lot of players wanting to make investments in Portugal. This is why the challenge now is to prepare the grid for this new wave of renewables based on solar," he says. "It's also where we at EDP are most active at present, offering solar solutions to the market; and it's also where we're continuing to have an influence in Africa, especially in Portuguese-speaking countries."

A new wave of decentralised clean energy

Across Angola, Mozambique and Cape Verde in particular, EDP is joining numerous international players in mirroring domestic development with international opportunity.

In Africa, Mr Cruz believes the first step is to veer away from traditional generation by promoting localised, off-grid solutions.

"Sustainable, local grid solutions," he corrects. "When we think about off-grid solutions (and local grids are disconnected from the rest of the grid so are classed as off-grid), it's important to accommodate local generation with improved grid management and supply skills.

"This kind of 'island' in terms of energy management is something we believe is one of the main drivers for Africa and other places lacking a more robust central grid."

The belief extends to an expectation that local off-grid options will generate a better quality of clean energy than the main grid can provide, and it's something that both Africa and Portugal need to diversify into in order to fully capitalise on the opportunities that offshore generation and solar present.

More important still is the idea of implementing the two strands of energy generation in tandem.

Mr Cruz explains: "In Portugal we have a two-step approach to first address large windfarms and then look into decentralised generation. One thing we've learned from projects in Africa though is that we can do these two things together without phases. My suggestion for both is - without forgetting the big windfarm projects that countries are already deadlocked into - to also look towards decentralised solar solutions simultaneously.

"You can do them together and there's no reason why this new wave of decentralised clean energy should be looked at as opposite to the big wind farms or centralised renewable projects already ongoing."

'Now' is the moment for Africa

'Doing things together' ties in nicely with the forthcoming Africa Energy Forum in Lisbon this June; affirming that Portugal's historical ties with Africa can be brought into modern times via networking, knowledge sharing and - hopefully, as far as Mr Cruz is concerned - tangible investments and project building.

"This event needs to be seen as a starting point," he says. "If the event doesn't initiate any real process of investment or collaboration then it's not a success, but I hope in this case with the participants in attendance, that we can create a momentum of more investment in energy in African countries."

This wish comes from a realisation that situations need to improve on both sides. Whereas Africa is trying to offset central challenges, Portugal is trying to reinvent its renewables landscape; but the common thread across both is the kinds of projects that can be implemented. And they need to be implemented soon.

"'Delay' is a common word associated with energy projects, especially in Africa, but I hope when we speak of this event in years to come we'll look back at a positive turning point whereby leaders and companies began to push through projects rather than just talk about them," Mr Cruz concludes. "There are much better conditions for implementation now because local authorities understand the need to invest in clean energy, and hopefully the consensus now is to invest in renewable energy - both across centralised and traditional windfarm projects, and these aforementioned decentralised options too.

"I hope that major players can understand that 'now' is the moment for Africa. EDP certainly understands and is ready."