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USADF, GE Africa Tackle Energy Poverty, Gender Inequality

Whether proscribed by law or not, unequal treatment of women continues to pose challenges in both industrially developed and lesser developed countries worldwide. With an [estimated 1.2 billion](#) worldwide people living without electricity, so does energy poverty.

The U.S. African Development Foundation (USADF) and GE Africa are working to improve both. In a public-private partnership, the two organizations [on Sept. 21 launched](#) the Women & Energy Challenge.

As part of USADF's broader-based Off-Grid Energy Challenge, the new program will provide grant funding and other resources to support development and growth of local businesses and initiatives that are owned and run by African women, or benefit them substantially in other ways.

Taking on Gender Inequality and Energy Poverty

Addressing gender inequality and [energy poverty](#) are two strategic goals for the U.N. and multilateral and national development agencies. The fifth of the U.N.'s 17 Sustainable Development Goals is to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, and the seventh is to ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all.

Women make up less than 25 percent of the global renewable energy workforce, less in Africa, USADF points out.

“The Women & Energy Challenge highlights the need to support technologies advanced by African women innovators and leaders who have lower access to finance than men in many African countries, where energy poverty disproportionately affects women,” the Washington, D.C.-based non-profit said.

Lack of access to commercial banking products and services is one major obstacle.

“Women entrepreneurs have been disadvantaged for a long time, as they do not have access to credit through the formal banking system, and lack skills to grow their businesses,” Joyce Gemma, winner of a 2014 Off-Grid Energy Challenge grant, said.

Gemma is the owner and manager of Bomafasi, a Kenyan company that distributes home solar products. Bomafasi is using the funds from its Off-Grid Energy Challenge grant to establish distribution hubs in rural areas.

African women also bear the brunt of energy poverty. That includes suffering from high rates of health problems from smoke or indoor pollution. Hence, they stand to benefit most from use of affordable, emissions-free renewable energy products and services, USADF said.

The Africa Women & Energy Challenge

USADF and GE Africa have been awarding Off-Grid Energy Challenge grants and providing technical and other support to female African clean energy entrepreneurs since the program's inception in 2013. The Women & Energy

Challenge is the first independent initiative that specifically aims to award grants that benefit African women exclusively, USADF Regional Director Tom Coogan told *Renewable Energy World*.

“We’re looking to target women in two ways: by funding and otherwise supporting African women-owned and managed businesses. Secondly, we will award grants to others, such as microfinance programs, that enable women to buy solar lighting and other products that they can use to start businesses of their own,” Coogan said.

USADF is in the midst of reviewing its budget and other resources for the coming year. The tentative project plan for the Women & Energy Challenge is to commence accepting grant proposals in January 2017, evaluate them in February and begin making grant awards in March, Coogan said. Rwanda, Uganda and Zambia are currently on the prospective list of countries USADF is considering rolling out the program, but that’s subject to change.

A GE Africa representative with relevant experience will sit on the committee that judges the merits of Women & Energy Challenge grant proposals. Local USADF partners in participating countries will implement the program on the ground.

GE Africa and USADF have joined with national government representatives and U.S. embassies in organizing and participating in local promotional events that get the word out locally, often in remote rural areas in past years. No schedule has been firmed up as yet, but USADF expects that will be the case for the Women & Energy Challenge, Coogan said.

“African women remain the cornerstone of the African family and community,” USADF’s recently appointed president and CEO C.D. Glin said in a Sept. 21 statement. “They are leading their communities yet suffer the brunt of energy poverty. Ingenuity and innovation will be unleashed with these seed capital awards — and we can’t wait to see the applications roll in.”

Cocoa and helping women

Following the publication of CARE International’s favorable assessment of Cocoa Life in Ghana and Côte d’Ivoire, Mondelez International announced that it would further strengthen the women’s empowerment initiatives of its signature cocoa sustainability program. These enhancements will build on the company’s eight years of experience mainstreaming gender equality in cocoa production through Cocoa Life, a \$400 million, 10-year effort launched in 2012, based on its successful Cadbury Cocoa Partnership.

The CARE assessment highlighted the benefits that Cocoa Life has had on increasing women’s influence in cocoa production across the program’s focus areas of farming, community, livelihoods, youth and environment, including:

- Increased cocoa yield from giving women better access to training in Good Agricultural Practices.
- Improved financial literacy and resilience as well as increased household income through access to finance. Increased household income is used to invest in agricultural inputs, to hire labor and to fund school tuition fees.
- More active participation by women in community-level decision-making bodies, such as the Community Development
- Committees and the Community Action Planning process.

- Women extension volunteers program shown to be instrumental in promoting access to finance, community mobilization and promoting Good Agricultural Practices.

“Empowering women benefits everyone and is essential if cocoa communities are to thrive, and that’s why it’s a cross-cutting theme in our Cocoa Life program,” said Christine McGrath, Vice President of Sustainability, Cocoa Life and External Affairs at Mondelēz International. “CARE’s assessment validates our strategy to empower women as a way to improve agricultural productivity, build livelihoods and help communities to thrive.”

“As an implementing partner on gender issues in Cocoa Life, I’ve witnessed how training women in Good Agricultural Practices, the business of farming and group management mobilizes them to become confident role models,” said Rose Mensah-Kutin, Ph.D., Director, West Africa Regional Office, ABANTU for Development. “The CARE report reinforces how empowering women is a catalyst for change in cocoa-growing communities, so I’m excited by Cocoa Life’s increased emphasis on its programming.”

“Cocoa farming is viewed as a male activity in most countries, but in reality, it’s the women who do a lot of the work that’s critical to the quality of the final product,” said Tom Sessions, Head of Strategic Partnerships at CARE. “The partnership between CARE and Mondelēz International has addressed key challenges facing women working on cocoa farms, arising from the community, as well as from within their families. This research highlights the importance of strengthening women’s leadership, so that they can participate equitably in the cocoa value chain and earn a sustainable income, whilst simultaneously strengthening the value chain.”

Strengthening Women’s Empowerment Initiatives

Based on CARE’s recommendations, Cocoa Life will strengthen interventions to empower women, including:

- Evolving the Women Extension Volunteer model (or similar), which will be progressively rolled out in all origin countries
- Increasing women's access to finance, farm inputs, land ownership and membership of producer groups and cooperatives
- Promoting leadership positions for women as part of the
- Community Development Committees and Community Action Plan
- processes, including a floor of 30 percent for women representatives in the process

To learn more about Cocoa Life’s approach to strengthening women’s empowerment in cocoa communities, please read the report: “Cocoa Life: a transformative approach for women’s empowerment in cocoa communities.”

About Cocoa Life

Cocoa Life aims to reach more than 200,000 farmers across six countries, benefitting more than a million people. Mondelez International's ultimate goal is to sustainably source all the company's cocoa supply, mainly via Cocoa Life. By working in partnership with farmers, NGOs, suppliers and government institutions, Cocoa Life answers Mondelez International's Call For Well-being, which urges employees, suppliers and community partners to join together to develop new approaches that can have a positive impact on the planet and its people. The Call For Well-being focuses on four key areas where the company can make the greatest impact: mindful snacking, sustainability, community and safety. Follow our progress on www.cocoalife.org/progress.

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