Key Takeaways: Africa's Energy Future

Event details

Panel Title: Sovereignty, Stability & Power: Hard Choices in African Energy Security
Event: Harvard Africa Development Conference (ADC)
Location & Date: Harvard Law School; April 18th, 2026.

Panelists:
Dr Stanley Opara - Executive Director, *African Methane Mitigation and Intelligence Network*
Dr. Ijeoma Malo - Co-Founder *Clean Tech Hub Nigeria*
Mayor John-Charuk Siafa - Mayor of *Monrovia, Liberia*.

Moderator:
Natalie Colbert — Executive Director, *The Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School*.

Overview

Around **600 million** Africans still lack access to electricity, making energy access an immediate development imperative—not a distant goal. At the same time, the continent must build an energy system that can support **long-term industrial growth**, not just basic household consumption.

Key Takeaway #1 — The Impossible Balance

Dr Stanley Opara framed a central paradox: Africa must secure **new energy supply** while simultaneously confronting today's poverty and infrastructure deficits that limit who can actually use that energy.

He pressed the uncomfortable question of whether the continent will keep prioritizing **exports** or build enough **domestic capacity** to power households, services, and industry—highlighting the tension between urgent needs now and planning for the future.

Key Takeaway #2 — Pragmatism Over Ideology

Ijeoma Malo emphasized a ground-level reality: many renewable advocates are not "anti–oil and gas"—they are focused on getting reliable energy to the hardest-to-reach communities using **whatever works**.

That means a **middle-of-the-road approach** that blends solutions like **solar**, **gas**, and **minigrids**, especially where the grid is absent or unreliable; she underscored the human cost with a simple example—children failing exams because they have **no light** to study at night.

Key Takeaway #3 — The Import Dependency Problem

Malo also warned that Africa's renewable buildout is constrained by an uncomfortable dependency: solar panels, batteries, and controllers are largely **imported** from **Europe** and **China**.

Without a push for **local manufacturing**, the energy transition risks exporting value and jobs—rather than creating **dignified work** and resilient supply chains on the continent.

Key Takeaway #4 — The Access-Accountability Gap

From a mayoral perspective in Liberia, **John-Charuk Siafa** described a governance mismatch: cities are held accountable for energy access outcomes, but the infrastructure decisions and delivery mechanisms often sit with the **national government**.

He cited stark access levels—roughly **30–35%** in urban areas versus about **1%** in rural communities—and pointed to the irony of power lines and cables passing directly over places that remain unelectrified, underscoring the disconnect between policy intent and lived reality.

The discussion converged on a pragmatic conclusion: this is not a debate about choosing **oil** versus **renewables**, but about delivering measurable results for **600 million** people while building the energy foundation for **industrial capacity**.

Key Takeaway #5 — Access First, Debate Second

With **600 million** Africans still without electricity, panelists argued the real question is not "**oil vs. renewables**," but "**how do we get energy to everyone** first?" The access gap is the starting point; the technology mix should follow what delivers reliable power fastest. The debate matters, but it cannot come before basic access.

Key Takeaway #6 — The Resource Export Dilemma

The panel returned to a hard tradeoff: exporting resources can generate revenue, but it can also delay **domestic capacity** and industrial growth. Leaders must negotiate contracts that

lock in **local processing**, **local hiring**, and enabling **infrastructure** — not just royalties. The **Dangote refinery** was cited as a proof point of what's possible when long-term vision meets execution.

Key Takeaway #7 — The Leapfrogging Myth

"Leapfrogging" is appealing, but incomplete: **solar alone** cannot reliably provide the **baseload power** needed for industrialization. A mixed approach — **gas where needed**, **renewables where possible** — is the more realistic path to scale.

Key Takeaway #8 — The Implementation Gap

The panel stressed that policy without implementation is just talk. Nigeria's **minigrid regulation** took nearly a decade to pass, and while many countries have **local content laws**, enforcement remains the real challenge.

Key Takeaway #9 — The Financing Problem

Financing is still stacked against Africa: **technical assistance** is plentiful, but actual **capital** to build generation and distribution is scarce. International financing often comes with **conditions** that don't match on-the-ground realities, slowing projects that communities need now.

Key Takeaway #10 — Community Ownership Works

When communities **own** and **maintain** minigrids, they are more likely to protect them from vandalism and create **local jobs** — a model worth scaling. It turns energy access into shared responsibility, not a distant service delivery promise.

Key Takeaway #11 — Energy Sovereignty Requires Expertise

At global conferences and negotiation tables, African delegations need to know exactly what to ask for — which requires building **internal expertise** and sending people who understand their country's needs. Energy sovereignty depends on capacity to negotiate, implement, and measure outcomes over time.

The most credible path forward is one that prioritizes outcomes—scaling access quickly, strengthening accountability, and investing in local capability so the transition is both **effective** and **durable**.