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RESEARCH INTERVIEW: “Energy and climate change are priority sectors for us, though we were struck by how weak the power sector research pipeline is in Kenya”

Exclusive interview with Dr Rose Mutiso, co-founder and CEO of the Mawazo Institute and member of the Advisory Board for African Utility Week taking place in Cape Town in May.



1) Let’s start with some background on the Mawazo Institute and your role there.

Mawazo is a not for profit research institute based in Nairobi. Our mission is to support next generation scholars and thought leaders in Africa. We accomplish this by providing research funding, training, and other resources to women pursuing PhD and post-PhD research locally, and get policymakers and the public engaged with their work. You can learn more about Mawazo here: <http://mawazoinstitute.org/>

2) What projects in the energy sector in Africa that Mawazo is involved in currently are you most excited about?

Mawazo’s core programmes are thematically agnostic, as we support women doing research in any academic discipline as long as their work has development relevance. Energy and climate change are priority sectors for us, though we were struck by how weak the power sector research pipeline is in Kenya. For example, of the nearly 200 applications we received for Mawazo’s PhD Scholars Programme this year, only a couple were from women researching energy issues. We do see a large number of proposals from agriculture, health, and environmental studies, so these could be a bridge to energy research as there is strong energy nexus potential in these fields.

In addition to running Mawazo, I am also a Senior Fellow of the Energy For Growth Hub initiative, where I conduct independent research on power sector issues. Right now I’m working on a project focused on energy data management in developing countries, as well as other aspects of our utility sector in Kenya such as pricing.

3) What in your view are the main challenges that the energy sector faces on the continent?

This is a tough question as there are very many diverse challenges, which are also geography-specific. One thing I have been thinking about a lot lately is the difficulty that governments and utilities face in balancing social imperative of increasing electricity access, while balancing costs and profitability. It’s something that many countries are grappling with across the continent.

4) How important is renewable energy for Africa’s energy future?

It is critical. We are endowed with many renewable energy resources, and should leverage them to power the continent particularly in the face of the imperative to mitigate climate change and pollution. Many African countries are already heavily powered through renewables, though overreliance on hydro adds a lot of vulnerabilities. Much needs to be done to be able to integrate intermittent renewables, but this is a question that even mature countries are grappling with and so we need to share lessons across the globe.

5) What is your vision for the sector?

I have very many aspirations for the African power sector, so I’ll just pick one for now. I would love to see more women in the power sector at every level, including in leadership and in technical roles where the representation gap is particularly stark.

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The programme for this year's AUW is really strong and reflects many current priorities and trends in the African power sector. I'm particularly interested in the conference tracks on expanding T&D infrastructure in the face of major capacity additions, as well as strengthening telecommunications infrastructure in the utility sector. These discussions are critical for the growth and survival of our vulnerable utilities.

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