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Explained: Taking stock of the International Solar Alliance

The International Solar Alliance, launched by PM Narendra Modi in 2015 and led by India ever since, has delivered less than its formidable promise. The offtake of solar in the Global South has remained poor

Written by **Amitabh Sinha** Follow

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An employee walks past solar panels at the photovoltaic park installed by Engie in Marcoussis near Paris, France, February 12, 2024. (REUTERS/Gonzalo Fuentes/File Photo)

At the 2015 climate conference in Paris, India in collaboration with a few other countries including conference host France, set up the International Solar Alliance (ISA) to accelerate the deployment and absorption of solar energy across the world, and mainly in the developing countries.

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The ISA was a unique initiative in which India took the lead in establishing a global organisation. Over the years, the ISA has evolved into an intergovernmental organisation with more than 110 countries as members. However, its impact on expediting the deployment of solar energy in the developing world has been extremely modest until now.

ISA slow on delivery

The ISA was never meant to be a project developer. It did not have to install solar projects itself. It was envisaged as a facilitator, or a force multiplier, which would help countries overcome financial, technological, regulatory, or other barriers in harnessing solar energy.

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The end result was supposed to be large-scale deployment of solar energy, especially in countries where energy access was very low. But nine years down the line, the ISA doesn't have much progress to show. An ISA-facilitated solar power project is yet to start operations.

The first such project is expected to be in Cuba where auctions have taken place and a developer has been selected to set up a 60 MW plant, which is supposed to be followed by several other similar-sized or bigger projects totalling about 1,250 MW.

Several other countries in Africa and Latin America are said to have [completed the preparatory work](#), and are ready to follow Cuba's example.



Total installed capacity and country-wise solar footprint.

China ahead of pack

The inability of ISA to facilitate many more projects is striking, considering the rapid growth in solar energy deployment. The global installed capacity of solar power has been increasing at over 20 per cent annually over the last five years. Last year, it grew by more than 30 per cent, according to World Solar Market Report 2024, a publication of the ISA.

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But as Ajay Mathur, director general of ISA, pointed out, most of these installations are happening in a handful of countries, with China accounting for a lion's share. Of the 345 GW of solar capacity addition in 2023, more than 216 GW, or about 62 per cent, happened in China alone.

“More than 80 per cent of investments into solar energy are flowing in to developed countries, China, and large developing countries like India,” Mathur said.

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Barriers and solutions

“There are large entry barriers in smaller developing countries, particularly in Africa. This is what ISA has been engaged in ironing out,” Mathur said.

Many of these countries do not have prior experience of executing large power projects, and certainly not solar projects, which is newer technology, he said.

“There are no local developers, so the investment has to come from foreign companies. But foreign investors look for policy stability and sound regulatory environment.”

The ISA has been working with governments and local institutions to create regulatory structures, draft power purchase agreements, and train human resources. “One of our important interventions has been the setting up of STAR (Solar Technology and Applications Resource) centres in partnership with local institutions. This has resulted in local expertise and capacity building,” Mathur said.

Mathur said the results of these efforts would become visible soon.

“I think the heavy lifting has been done in the last few years. At least half a dozen countries are on the verge of floating tenders for power projects. We expect this to escalate quickly,” he said.

ISA has been targeting deployment of 1,000 GW of solar energy, and unlocking a trillion dollars in solar investment by 2030.

Why solar matters

Solar is the most crucial element of the global energy transition that is critical to tackle the challenge of climate change. It is the fastest-growing renewable energy source, despite its inherent limitation of being intermittent. In most regions of the world, solar is now also the cheapest source of energy when sunshine is available. Solar energy installed capacity is projected to grow between 3 and 15 times in different scenarios for achieving global net zero by 2050.

But as Mathur pointed out, only a handful of countries have been deploying it on a large scale (see box). About 43 per cent of global solar PV capacity is installed in China alone. The top 10 markets account for more than 95 per cent of installed capacity. Less than 2 per cent of new additions are happening in Africa, a region that houses about 80 per cent of the nearly 745 million people who still do not have access to electricity.

The solar manufacturing industry is even more imbalanced. Over 80 per cent of the manufacturing process is concentrated in China, which is seen as another barrier to quick spread of solar energy in smaller markets.

In fact, it is this lopsided nature of solar development that the ISA was meant to address and balance.

India's leadership role

Deployment of solar energy is only a vehicle. The ISA was created to serve a much larger strategic purpose for India. It is an important part of India's outreach to the

Global South, particularly to countries in Africa.

Despite being an inter-governmental multilateral organisation, ISA is still largely viewed as an Indian initiative. This is not without reason — it is headquartered in New Delhi, it is almost entirely funded by India, and India has presided over its general assembly since its inception. It will continue to do so, at least until 2026.

ISA is thus intricately linked to India's diplomatic objectives. For this reason, the ISA's performance would reflect on India's capabilities to claim leadership of the Global South and speak on its behalf. Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) himself has been championing its cause, and has spoken about its crucial role at every relevant forum.

Unfortunately, the ISA's good offices have remained largely underutilised till now. It has been under-staffed and under-funded, and has had a troubled relationship with the Ministry of New and Renewable Energy, which is its liaison ministry with the Indian government.

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But more importantly, it has failed to create excitement about solar energy in countries that are in desperate need of access to cheap and reliable energy source.

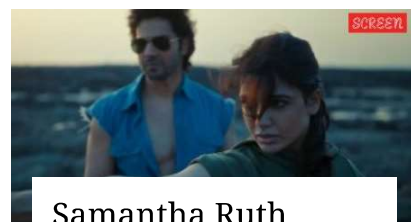
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