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Achieving universal energy access is about much more than bringing light to far-flung communities. It involves delivering power around the clock to homes and businesses in areas with weak grid connections, as well as off-grid communities where energy infrastructure is nonexistent. Zola Electric, formerly Off Grid Electric, wants to serve those markets—and to do it with affordable, reliable and clean electricity.

On Tuesday, Zola unveiled its Infinity power system, which combines solar technology with energy storage to serve as a modular alternative to diesel generators. The system is billed as the first “smart” storage product to autonomously manage multiple power sources and deliver 24/7 AC power to “anyone, anywhere.”

Infinity operates as a standalone mini-grid. It can work with both solar and the existing grid, switching between them when one power source falters, and has built-in electrical safety mechanisms to safeguard against outages. Zola says it also automatically optimizes solar efficiency to minimize energy costs and carbon dioxide emissions.

“Our goal here, by the end of the year, is to have a product family that covers 100 percent of the energy access market,” said Lenihan. “That means rural and urban, on-grid and off-grid, commercial and residential—to be able to serve anybody at any part of the energy ladder, and then scale with them as their energy needs go up or go down.”

Zola recently pulled in two high-profile solar industry figures to help it scale. Last month, Lyndon and Peter Rive, the co-founders behind SolarCity’s rise to become the top distributed solar developer in the U.S., signed on as company advisers.

Roughly a billion people around the world still do not have access to electricity. Roughly a billion more, plus millions of businesses, do not have access to reliable electricity. Zola wants to serve all of those potential customers, but its primary focus with Infinity is on people and businesses in cities.

The Infinity system is specifically designed to work where there is a power grid, but it only operates for a few hours a day. In most of these places diesel generators have become the default power source. Places like Nigeria.

In Nigeria, an estimated 100 million people currently rely on diesel generators each day. According to the Rural Electrification Agency, this costs the country nearly \$14 billion each year, while also creating severe health and environmental problems. Diesel generators in Nigeria produce about 29 million metric tons of carbon dioxide each year, which is equivalent to the emissions from roughly 6.3 million passenger vehicles.



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Zola started out in Tanzania seven years ago with a mission to replace candles and kerosene with a cleaner fuel alternative. Through successive funding rounds, the company expanded into Rwanda, Ghana and the Ivory Coast. At the same time, the company evolved from leasing and selling home solar kits to individual households, to offering solar coupled with energy storage, to bundling solar and storage with other energy-efficient devices for a more comprehensive energy solution.

"The launch of this modular smart storage product is timed well with Zola's evolution beyond the solar home system space, and the broader sector's growing focus on more urban and peri-urban customers," said Ben Attia, a senior solar analyst with Wood Mackenzie Power & Renewables. These customers "have more willingness and ability to pay, more power demand, more sensitization to energy options, lower customer acquisition and retail distribution and servicing costs, and, in most cases, a very compelling value proposition in terms of partial or total diesel displacement."

Energy access companies "are all presenting themselves as prepaid [electricity] service providers, rather than pure product suppliers," he said. "They understand that fundamentally, just like in advanced economies, customers don't demand kilowatt-hours. They demand what they power: light, access to information and entertainment, a charged mobile phone, refrigeration, etc."

The Rive brothers left SolarCity in mid-2017, after the company sold to Tesla (and subsequently faded from the solar landscape). After taking some time off, Lyndon has assumed the role of Zola's board chairman, while Peter Rive is serving as Zola's operational and technology adviser.

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