

Energy Harvesting from Ambient Radio Waves: A Sustainable Solution for Low-Power Devices

UBONG ASUQUO IDIONG¹, EYARE NOLA OKWA²

¹*Department of Electrical Electronics Engineering Technology, Federal Polytechnic Ugep, Cross River State, Nigeria*

²*Department of Computer Engineering Technology, Federal Polytechnic Ugep, Cross River State, Nigeria*

Abstract- *The proliferation of low-power electronic devices, particularly within the Internet of Things (IoT), necessitates sustainable alternatives to conventional batteries. Radio Frequency Energy Harvesting (RF-EH) emerges as a compelling solution by scavenging unused ambient electromagnetic energy from ubiquitous sources like cellular networks, Wireless Fidelity (Wi-Fi), and broadcast signals. This article comprehensively explored RF-EH technology, detailing its fundamental principles, system architectures (focusing on rectennas), material advancements, practical applications, and persistent challenges. Discussions on recent breakthroughs in rectifier efficiency, multi-band harvesting, metamaterials, and flexible electronics are presented. While power density and range limitations remain, RF-EH holds significant promise for enabling battery-free or extended-lifetime operation for myriad low-power devices, contributing to a more sustainable and maintenance-free technological ecosystem.*

Indexed Terms- *Energy Harvesting, RF Energy Harvesting, Ambient Energy, Rectenna, Low-Power Devices, Internet of Things (IoT)*

I. INTRODUCTION

The exponential growth of the Internet of Things (IoT), encompassing billions of sensors, wearables, embedded systems, and smart tags, presents a formidable challenge: power supply [1]. Traditional batteries suffer from limited lifespan, environmental concerns related to disposal and resource extraction, and significant maintenance costs for replacement, especially in large-scale or hard-to-reach deployments [2]. Consequently, harvesting ambient

energy from the environment offers a sustainable and often maintenance-free alternative. Among ambient energy sources (solar, thermal, vibrational, RF), Radio Frequency Energy Harvesting (RF-EH) stands out due to the omnipresence of man-made RF signals in urban and increasingly rural environments [3]. Sources include cellular base stations (GSM, 3G, 4G/LTE, 5G), Wi-Fi access points (2.4 GHz, 5 GHz), FM/AM radio broadcasts, and digital television (DTV) signals.

RF-EH involves capturing freely available electromagnetic waves propagating through the air and converting them into usable direct current (DC) electrical power. While the power densities available from ambient RF sources are typically low (ranging from nanowatts to microwatts per square centimetre under normal conditions) [4], they are often sufficient to power or trickle-charge ultra-low-power devices like sensors, microcontrollers, and simple transmitters, eliminating or drastically extending battery life [5]. This technology aligns strongly with the goals of sustainable electronics and enables novel applications where battery replacement is impractical or impossible. This article provides an in-depth examination of RF-EH technology, its components, recent advancements, applications, and the path forward.

II. FUNDAMENTALS OF RF ENERGY HARVESTING

An RF Energy Harvesting System, often termed a Rectenna (Rectifying Antenna), comprises three primary subsystems (Fig. 1):

1. Antenna: Responsible for capturing incident RF electromagnetic waves. Important parameters include:

Frequency Band: Must be resonant at the target ambient source frequencies (e.g., GSM-900, GSM-1800, Wi-Fi 2.4GHz, DTV UHF bands). Multi-band antennas are crucial for harvesting from diverse sources [6].

Gain and Radiation Pattern: Determines the efficiency of capturing power from specific directions.

Polarization: This should match the polarization of the dominant RF sources for maximum coupling.

Size and Form Factor: Critical for integration into small devices.

2. Impedance Matching Network (IMN): This critical circuit ensures maximum power transfer from the antenna (typically 50 Ω) to the non-linear input impedance of the rectifier circuit, which varies significantly with input power level and frequency [7]. Poor matching leads to substantial reflection losses. Common IMN topologies include L-networks, Pi-networks, and T-networks, often designed using microstrip lines on printed circuit boards (PCBs) or integrated circuits (ICs).

3. Rectifier Circuit: The core component that converts the captured AC RF signal into DC power. It typically employs:

Schottky Diodes: Preferred due to their low forward voltage drop (typically 0.15-0.4V), low junction capacitance, and fast switching speed, essential for GHz frequencies [8]. However, their efficiency drops significantly at very low input power levels (< -20 dBm).

Voltage Multiplier Topologies: Single diodes are insufficient for usable voltages. Multi-stage circuits like the Villard voltage doubler, Cockcroft-Walton multiplier, and Dickson charge pump are used to boost the output DC voltage [9]. The number of stages involves a trade-off between output voltage and overall efficiency. Advanced designs utilize Greinacher (full-wave) multipliers for better efficiency.

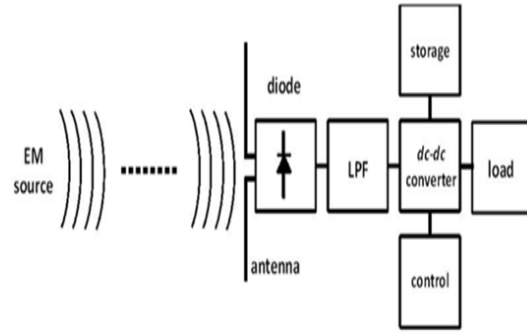


Fig. 1. Schematic block diagram of a rectenna system [10]

Voltage Doubler: A voltage doubler is a simple circuit that can double the input voltage. It uses a combination of diode and capacitor circuit elements to achieve the doubling effect. The most common configuration of the voltage doubler is the half-wave voltage doubler which uses two diodes and two capacitors [11]. The circuit works by storing charges on the capacitors during alternate half-cycles of the input AC voltage. As a result, the output voltage across the load is twice the peak value of the input voltage. This is illustrated in Fig. 2.

Voltage Tripler: A voltage tripler is a circuit that triples in the input voltage. It employs similar principle as voltage doubler but with additional diodes and capacitors. The most common configuration of voltage tripler is the Greinacher circuit [11]. It consists of three diodes and three capacitors. During each half-cycle of the input voltage, the capacitors store charges in a series configuration. As a result, the output voltage across the load is three times the peak value of the input voltage. This is illustrated in Fig. 3.

Voltage Quadrupler: A voltage quadrupler circuit is designed to generate an output voltage that is four times the input voltage. It is an extension of the voltage doubler circuit and requires additional diodes and capacitors. The Cockcroft-Walton circuit is a popular configuration for achieving voltage quadrupling [12]. It utilises a series of diodes and capacitors to store charges during each half-cycle of the input voltage. The output voltage across the load is four times the peak value of the input voltage. This is illustrated in Fig. 4 while different topologies of charge pump are depicted in Fig. 5.

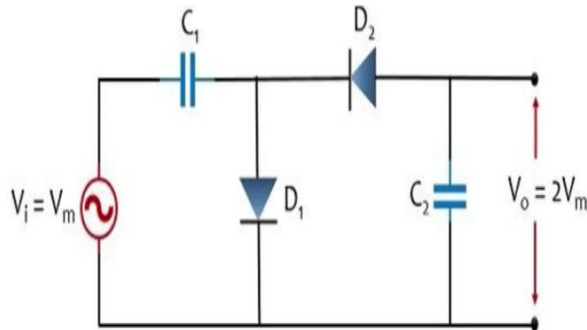


Fig. 2. Typical half-wave voltage doubler circuit [11]

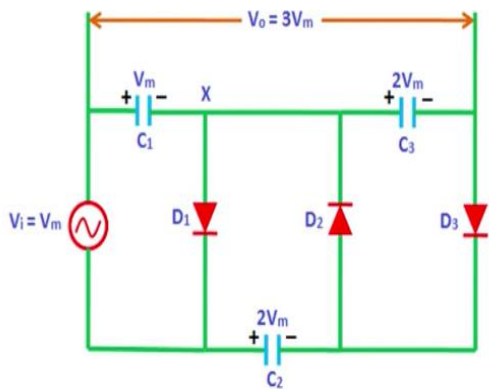


Fig. 3. Greinacher circuit [12]

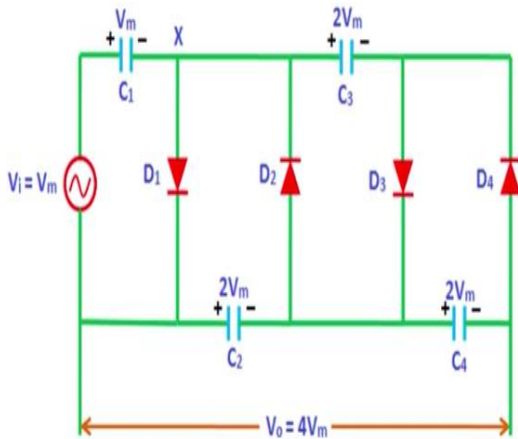


Fig. 4. Cockcroft-Walton circuit [12]

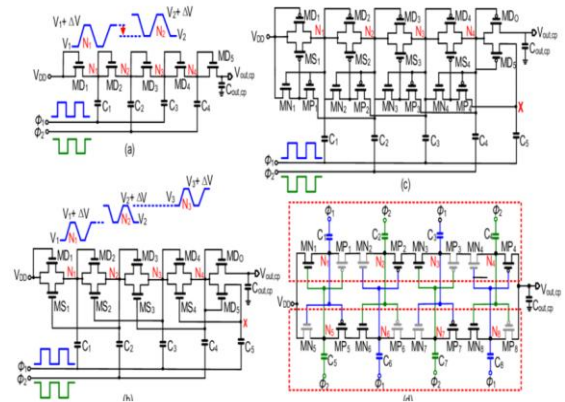


Fig. 5. Topologies of charge-pump (a) Conventional (b) Charge transfer switch: Type-I (c) Charge transfer switch: Type-II (d) Two-branch latch charge-pump [13]

Efficiency (η): This is a paramount metric for rectifiers, defined as $\eta = \frac{P_{DC_out}}{P_{RF_in}} \times 100\%$. Achieving high efficiency ($> 50\%$) at low ambient power levels (ranging from -30 dBm to -10 dBm) remains a major research focus [14].

4. Power Management Unit (PMU) / Energy Storage: The raw DC output from the rectifier is usually unregulated and intermittent. A PMU performs several vital functions:

Voltage Regulation: Provides a stable DC output voltage suitable for the load device.

Maximum Power Point Tracking (MPPT): Dynamically adjusts the load seen by the rectifier to operate it at its peak efficiency point as input power fluctuates [15].

Energy Storage Interface: Manages charging of a small energy buffer (such as supercapacitor and thin-film battery) to accumulate harvested energy and provide bursts of power when needed by the load [16].

Cold Start: Enables the system to bootstrap operation from very low or zero stored energy [17].

III. RECENT ADVANCEMENTS AND SYSTEM ARCHITECTURES

Research in RF-EH is rapidly progressing, focusing on enhancing efficiency, sensitivity, bandwidth, and integration:

A. Multi-Band and Wideband Harvesting

To maximize harvested power from diverse ambient sources, antennas and rectifiers capable of operating efficiently across multiple frequency bands (such as 900 MHz, 1.8 GHz, 2.1 GHz and 2.4 GHz) are essential. Techniques include: Log-periodic antennas, fractal antennas, or multi-resonant structures [18]. Frequency-independent rectifier designs using broadband matching networks or multiple rectifier paths tuned to different bands [19].

B. High-Efficiency Low-Power Rectifiers

Overcoming the diode's sensitivity barrier at microwatt levels is critical:

Advanced Diode Technologies: Zero-bias Schottky diodes, tunnel diodes, and CMOS-based rectifiers optimized for ultra-low voltage operation [20].

Synchronous Rectification: Using actively switched transistors (MOSFETs) instead of diodes controlled by the RF signal to reduce conduction losses [21]. Requires careful design to avoid control circuit power consumption negating gains.

Harmonic Recycling: Capturing and reusing harmonics generated by the non-linear rectifier to improve overall efficiency [22].

C. Metamaterials and Electromagnetic Structures

Engineered materials offer novel ways to enhance power capture:

Metasurfaces: Thin, planar structures that can focus, steer, or amplify incident RF waves towards the harvesting antenna, effectively increasing the power density locally [23].

RF Concentrators: Passive structures designed to collect RF energy over a larger area and funnel it towards a smaller rectenna element [24].

D. Flexible and Wearable RF-EH

Integration into clothing, skin patches, and smart packaging. Conductive textiles, screen-printed antennas, and rectifiers on flexible polymer substrates

(examples are PET and PI) [25]. Challenges reported include maintaining performance under bending/stretching and biocompatibility for implantable applications [26].

E. Hybrid Energy Harvesting

Combining RF-EH with other ambient sources like solar, thermal and piezoelectric, provides a more consistent and higher total power output, overcoming the intermittency of single sources [27]. PMUs for hybrid systems require sophisticated multi-input management.

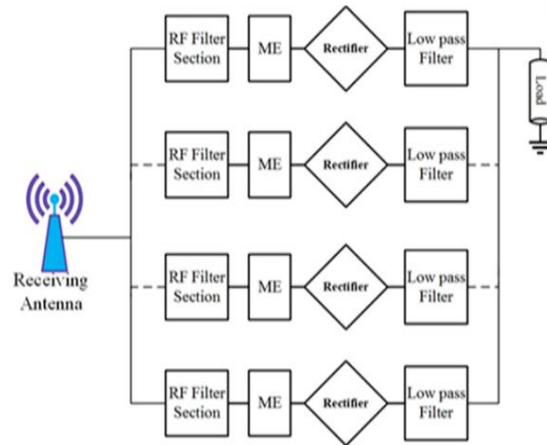


Fig. 6. Multiband RF harvester topology (ME = matching element) [28]

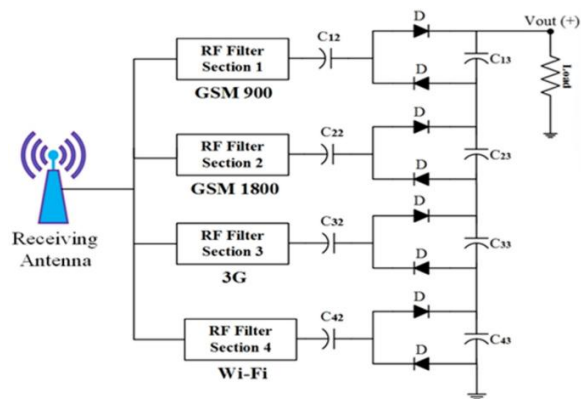


Fig. 7. Multiband RF harvester with complete rectifiers [28]

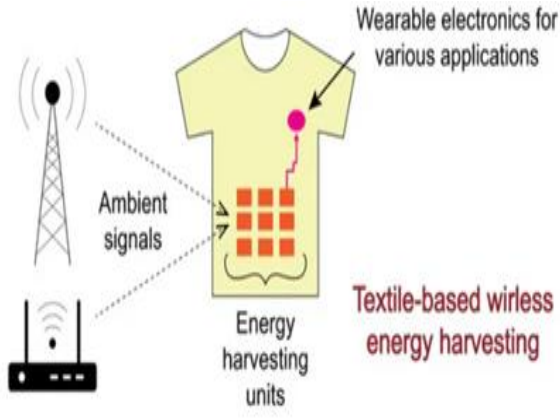


Fig. 9. Textile-based energy harvesting [29]

IV. APPLICATIONS AND DEPLOYMENT SCENARIOS

RF-EH enables diverse applications, particularly where battery access or replacement is challenging:

A. Battery-Free/Battery-Assisted IoT Sensors

Environmental monitoring (temperature, humidity, air quality), industrial equipment monitoring (vibration, strain), smart agriculture (soil moisture), smart building (occupancy, light) sensors [30]. RF-EH powers the sensor and potentially enables intermittent data transmission.

B. Wireless Sensor Networks (WSNs)

Creating maintenance-free mesh networks for large-scale monitoring in infrastructure, agriculture, or environmental protection areas [31].

C. RFID Enhancement

Powering or supplementing the power for active RFID tags and sensors, extending read range and functionality beyond traditional passive RFID [32].

D. Wearable and Implantable Medical Devices

Powering or trickle-charging devices like glucose monitors, neural recorders, or drug delivery systems, reducing the need for invasive battery replacement surgeries [33].

E. Smart Packaging and Logistics

Powering temperature, humidity, or shock sensors on perishable goods or high-value shipments during transit [34].

F. Backscatter Communication

RF-EH can directly power ultra-low-power communication techniques like ambient backscatter, where devices modulate and reflect existing RF signals (e.g., Wi-Fi, TV) to transmit data without generating their own carrier wave [35].

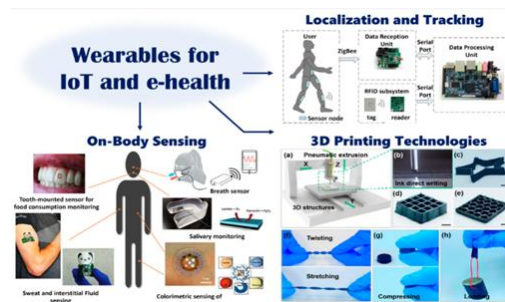


Fig. 10. Illustrated concept of a unified e-Health system integrating wearable sensors, indoor positioning technologies, and 3D printing techniques across components (a–h) [36]

V. CHALLENGES AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Despite significant progress, RF-EH faces hurdles for widespread adoption:

A. Low and Variable Power Density

Ambient RF power levels are inherently low and fluctuate dramatically based on location, time, and source activity. This limits the operational range and complexity of supported devices [4]. It is imperative that future works focus on harvesting from higher-power density environments (e.g., near-dedicated transmitters) and improving sensitivity.

Rectifier Efficiency at Low Power

As discussed, diode non-linearity severely limits efficiency below -20 dBm. Continued innovation in device physics (e.g., novel semiconductor materials like GaAs and GaN on flexible substrates), circuit topologies (e.g., self-synchronous designs), and MPPT algorithms is crucial [14], [20], [21].

B. Frequency Selectivity and Bandwidth

Efficiently harvesting across the fragmented and crowded RF spectrum requires sophisticated multi-band/wider-band rectenna designs and adaptive systems [6], [19].

C. Integration and Miniaturization

Embedding efficient antennas and rectifiers into tiny form factors required by many IoT devices remains challenging, often compromising performance [37]. System-on-chip (SoC) and advanced packaging techniques offer pathways.

D. Regulatory and Safety Constraints

Transmitter power levels and frequency allocations are strictly regulated. Harvesters must comply with these regulations, and potential unintended interactions (e.g., interference) need careful assessment. Safety limits for human exposure to RF fields (SAR, PD) must be respected, especially for wearables/implantables [38].

E. Energy Storage Limitations

Small supercapacitors or thin-film batteries have limited energy density and cycle life. Advances in micro-energy storage are complementary to RF-EH progress [16].

F. System-Level Optimization

Co-designing the harvester, PMU, storage, and ultra-low-power load device is essential for maximizing overall system efficiency and functionality [15], [17].

Recommended Related Study Areas

The following study areas recommended to be explored:

- i. Materials science for high-frequency, low-loss flexible electronics.
- ii. AI/ML for predictive MPPT and adaptive harvesting strategies.
- iii. Integration with 5G/6G infrastructure enabling dedicated wireless power transfer alongside communication.
- iv. Standardization of interfaces and performance metrics.
- v. Large-scale real-world deployment trials and economic viability studies.

CONCLUSION

Energy harvesting from ambient radio waves presents a sustainable and increasingly viable solution for powering the burgeoning ecosystem of low-power electronic devices, particularly within the IoT. By scavenging unused RF energy from pervasive sources like cellular networks and Wi-Fi, RF-EH technology offers the potential for battery-free operation or significantly extended battery lifetimes, reducing maintenance costs and environmental impact. While challenges related to low power density, rectifier efficiency at microwatt levels, and system integration persist, recent advancements in multi-band rectennas, novel materials, metamaterials, flexible electronics, and power management steadily improve performance and applicability. As research continues to address the existing limitations and explore opportunities presented by denser wireless infrastructure like 5G/6G, RF energy harvesting is poised to play a pivotal role in enabling truly autonomous, sustainable, and ubiquitous computing.

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