

Rural microgrids panama

Over the course of the two-day workshop, participants reviewed a series of case studies of potential renewable energy microgrid projects in remote regions of the participating countries. Each case study illustrated that solar powered microgrids offered a cost-effective alternative to diesel generation. Specifically, modelling indicated that installing a hybrid system in which photovoltaics provided a minimum of 66% of electricity consumed would lower the levelized cost of electricity in each community examined.

Growing fast in Sub-Saharan Africa, South and Southeast Asia, off-grid solar is beginning to take root in Central and South America. A self-described last-mile wholesale solar energy distributor, Solubrite is one of a small, but growing, number of solar-social enterprise startups providing clean, affordable solar energy products and services to rural families and businesses in Central America.

Founded in 2013 by Marc Henrich in the wake of his travels across Nicaragua and Panama, Solubrite has installed more than 10,000 small home PV solar systems in rural homes to date. The solar-social enterprise start-up's now looking to parlay its success by expanding technologically and geographically.

Solubrite launched a pilot solar home product and service line in its home territory in Panama's predominantly rural Chiriqui province in 2015. Besides expanding in both Nicaragua and Panama last year, Henrich and company are planning to install another 25,000 systems come 2018, which would convey the benefits of affordable, safe, reliable emissions-free electricity to more than 125,000 families, Henrich explained in an email response to questions.

Chiriqui province is Panama's agricultural heartland. Members of the typical indigenous Ngable Bugle household (nine members) in Chiriqui's Cerro Iglesias district earn an average \$9 per day as subsistence farmers or construction workers, the two main sources of livelihood. Most families lack access to grid power and spend a significant portion of their incomes on DC batteries, which they use to power lights and charge cell phones, Solubrite explains as part of a recently completed Kiva social enterprise loan crowdfunding campaign.

Henrich experienced similar employment and living conditions while traveling through rural Nicaragua. A chance meeting with an American engineer who had built and was distributing a small PV solar lamp powered by a Nokia cell phone battery inspired him to expand on the theme. The experience led to Solubrite's launch.

"Patrick (the engineer) was convinced of the power of solar products to produce tremendous social and environmental impact. Women particularly were affected - they mentioned feeling more safe and secure at night, they no longer had to travel to charge their cell phone batteries saving them time and money, they

enjoyed longer hours of family time in the evenings and the children could continue working on their homework into the night," Henrich recounted.

As of 2013 Nicaragua was the poorest country in Latin America by GDP and per capita income. More than one-third of the primarily rural population and (35%) was living without electricity, he continued. During his subsequent travels across Panama, Henrich had a realization.

"Panama City was going through a construction boom, but throughout the rest of the country, and particularly in indigenous areas, many communities were still living in deep poverty with no access to electricity or clean water," he told Microgrid Media.

Worldwide, it's estimated that one-third of our population are subsistence/smallholder farmers. If not persecuted outright, they are largely neglected, paid lip service and overrun by economic development plans. That said, they produce about 70 percent of the food we consume globally.

Other pioneering social enterprises, such as Haiti's Smallholder Farmer's Alliance (SFA), are successfully employing new, for-profit social enterprise business models to help empower smallholder/subsistence farmers and families economically and socially while at the same time fostering adoption of sustainable agricultural tools and methods that produce local, national and global social and environmental benefits.

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