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Energy project transforms the lives of the rural poor

Written by Solomon Mburu



Powerlines

"We have two turbines at our power station and each produces one kilowatt of electricity. We then transmit the electricity with wires to the energy kiosk," said Mr Patrick Gichovi, the project's co-ordinator.

Solar panels located at the centre, commonly known as energy kiosk, account for an additional 0.5 kilowatts of electricity. The power is collected at the energy centre, which is strategically placed in an area that is easily accessible to all villagers.

At the kiosk, the power is distributed through wire connections to be used for different purposes.

"We want to help the community see what electricity can do to impact on their lives in terms of income generation, employment and wealth creation," said Mr Alexander Varghese, the UNIDO representative for Kenya and Eritrea.

According to Mr Varghese, the electricity will help villagers start cottage industries, which do not require a lot of energy. "These are cottage industries that do not require a lot of power and at most require five to 10 kilowatts of energy. If they need more then we will be able to provide for them," said Mr Varghese.

Among the business ventures that have been started at the energy centre are juice and soap making, dressmaking, a barber shop and video showroom.

The kiosk also houses a cyber café which doubles up as a computer college for the locals. Lawrence Kariuki, the college tutor is very optimistic of the venture's prospects.

"I have had two students for the past one month and hope to get more in time," said Mr Kariuki. He intends to increase the number of computers, have a photocopier and a scanner. With accessibility to the Internet, UNIDO intends to turn the kiosk into an international call centre in future.

Priscilla Wangechi, who runs the soap-making business located at the kiosk, said that the electricity has improved her business. "When mixing the chemicals, I just put them in the container and the machine does the mixing. It is much faster and more thorough than using hands," she said.

The community is also planning to start a fish farm at a dam located at the power generation site. They also plan to start an egg incubation venture. The project's socio-economic co-ordinator, Cecilia Wangechi, said the villagers are concentrating on making productive use of the electricity rather than consumptive use. This, she said, will assist them to own the project and make it sustainable.

"The community has to own the project and the more business ideas they have, the better," said Ms Wangechi.

The community had lived without electricity for many years and has been looking for a way to solve their problems.

A glimmer of hope came when one of the villagers suggested generating their own electricity at the fall located on Mukengeria River.

The villagers came together and each family contributed Sh100 towards the project.

In time, the contributions increased and now each family is supposed to pay a minimum of Sh6,000 to be part of the project. With the initial capital, the community built a power station, but the money could not sustain completion of the project. This is when UNIDO stepped in and pumped \$50,000 into the

March 27, 2008: The normally dark sidewalks and homes at Kabai Village in Kirinyaga District are slowly lighting up following the creation of a 24-hour energy centre. Villagers who have never had electricity are now enjoying the benefits that come with the project.

Having been used to expensive paraffin and firewood, the villagers are now utilizing their new found power to charge lamps, batteries and support cottage industries.

The energy small centre, which utilizes 2.5 kilowatts of electricity, is the product of a sustainable hybrid renewable energy system created by villagers and funded by the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO).

It draws its power from two small turbines located at the bottom of a 450 feet waterfall at Mukengeria River.

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Top 5 Gainers

	Average Price	Change (%)
TPSE	70.00	+4.48
FIRE	11.00	+2.33
CFC	115.00	+1.77
NIC	53.00	+0.95
KQ	54.00	+0.93

Top 5 Losers

	Average Price	Change (%)
BERG	36.00	-10.00
MSC	11.20	-1.32
KNRE	14.00	-0.36
BBK	67.30	-0.30



project.

The community was able to acquire the turbines and built the energy centre together with its power distribution facility. Using money earned from the various projects, the community intends to expand the power generation capability.

“We want to boost the production of energy to 20 kilowatts in future,” said James Chomba, the project's treasurer.

This, he said, will help them to start distributing power using wire connections to more members living as far as two kilometres from the energy centre.

The centre has for long represented a small structure which provides an outlet for small fast moving consumer goods.

The new concept is now set to change the lives of rural Kenyans and boost development in rural areas. Phillip Okundi, who commissioned the project, said that the new concept should be transferred to other regions in the country to help spur development.

“This will bring an enormous change in the minds of people and this is how a country industrializes,” he said.

According to the engineer, only 20 per cent of the energy used by Kenyans comes from the conventional sources—hydroelectricity from Kenya Power and Lighting and fuel from petroleum companies.

The remaining 80 per cent comes from firewood and charcoal, which is essentially used in many rural areas and among the urban poor and which is expensive.

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