

ECONOMIC INSIGHT

Concerns over Kurdula solar power, 5 months after installation

From Rakiya A. Muhammad, Sokoto

It has been over five months since the inauguration of the 80kwp off-grid mini solar power plant at Kurdula in Tangaza local government area of Sokoto state.

While the initiative is noted to be transforming the lives of the people, there are concerns over unsteady supply.

Alhaji Kabiru Kurdula Sarkin Arewa's glee was obvious as he spoke on the solar project, the first electricity initiative in the sleepy village.

After sunset, Kurdula was perpetually plunged into darkness. The inhabitants depended on torchlight candle, kerosene and lantern to lit up their homes at night.

For the villagers, the solar project has brought more than electricity. "Kurdula is now radiant at night, it has enhanced security with electricity in all houses. Our economic and social lives have also witnessed marked improvement," Alhaji Kabiru, a shop owner in the village said with excitement.

Kurdula a rural community, over two and half hour drive from Sokoto, was one of rural communities not covered by the national grid and had no access to electricity like many remote settlements.

According to the World Bank: "Globally, more than one billion people still lack access to electricity; sub-Saharan is home to about 600 million of these. In Nigeria 80 million people are without access and millions more suffer from poor service."

For their part, the people of Kurdula had to go to Dogon Dutse in Niger Republic for most things that had to do with electricity. It was not until January this year when the project was inaugurated by Sokoto state Governor Aminu Tambuwal at the village that it eventually had access to electricity.

The Kurdula project was supported by Nigerian Energy Support Programme (NESP), and jointly implemented by the Federal Ministry of Power, Works and Housing and the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ).

"Mini grid powered by renewable sources is the best option for us to expand electricity access in the rural areas where the national grid is not available," Sokoto State Governor, Aminu Waziri Tambuwal avered.

The solar initiative was to enable access to cheap, affordable and steady electricity for the over 4,000 inhabitants of the village. "Before the solar,



■ Sirajo, a tailor at Kurdula community in Sokoto State

we didn't have electricity in the village entirely. It was stark dark at night. You can't see anything from anywhere. We had frequent cases of thieves who to coma and vandalize shops and break into people's houses because, it was really dark all over the village, it was only moonlight," Kabiru recalled.

But now, he said, "we no longer experience such situation. We can observe people's movement."

The solar project has spurred productivity and enhancement in local businesses such as welding, cold drink shops, and tailoring, among others.

"Kabiru shared his excitement about his own accomplishments. "I started cold drink trade since the commissioning of the solar project. We were using only generator which we fuelled at N850 to N900. The cost of doing business has now reduced and profit increased."

He added: "A unit of the solar energy cost N200. I used to fuel my small generator at N850

-N900 a gallon daily and in two hours, it is finished but if I have a N1,000 units, it lasts for many days. I get more power supply and more cash flowing. I save a lot."

Faces of other residents bore the same expression of excitement and enthusiasm.

One of them, Sirajo Abubakar, a welder said: "I used generator before and some works that I could not do is possible now such as iron door, bed, welding of vehicle. We had to go to Dogon Dutse in Niger Republic before but with this electricity, I do everything here."

On the cost, he noted that, "I spent N500 for two litres of fuel which can last for only three hours but N2,000 worth of unit specifically 10 units, can last two weeks. More profit less cost."

The welder who is married with three children, has trained two apprentices on the business, he revealed.

A tailor Sani Kurdula also revealed the impact of the

power project. "I do more work with electricity. The cost of service is more with generator; we buy fuel at N200 to N300 a litre which lasts just a day. With the solar electricity, I can double my work now. We charge N1,200 for female when we were using generator but now we charge only N1,000," Kurdula noted.

Some women and girls express delight over the electricity in the village. They are pleased that they can preserve a number of things in the freezer and that they can watch more of television and unwind better.

One of the girls, Aisha said, "We want to have uninterrupted supply of electricity to relax much more." The girls also hope to own electrical devices when they are married to ease domestic activities and for comfortability.

Solar: Reservations over brief supply

In spite of the excitement, some of the residents had some reservations on the inconsistent nature of supply in recent time. After the initial excitements, Kabiru, Sani and Sirajo voiced out a common concern.

Kabiru whose mood transmuted from high spirit to gloom, lamented that the power is not steady now unlike when it was launched.

He said, "Before, it was steady. I don't know the cause of the problem; it could be due to the meter at the solar power house. When the unit finishes in the bulk meter even when your prepaid meter has some unit, you don't have power since the source has no unit to provide electricity to consumer." He appealed to the handlers to intervene on this challenge saying, "We want constant supply of electricity, we don't mind the cost of buying the unit for the power distribution, the solar project is an advantage to us."

"Our people are quite appreciative because even when a household has only a single bulb, they rush to purchase unit from the

authority but the problem is shortage of unit at the distributing meter."

For Sani the welder, he advocated for a direct supply to the homes of the customers rather than through the distribution meters.

He said, "There should be direct supply to our homes not using the bulk meter, if it is money they need from us or more units to buy, we want ownership of our card for stability."

At the distribution office, Usman Mohammed, the Controller explained how the solar power plant operates. He said the project was meant to power 500 houses, and for 24 hours but it has exceeded the plan and now the load is too much for the meter. "It cannot operate with over 700 houses on it, it overshoots the target, when in full operation, it can hardly last two to three hours," he revealed.

To tackle the challenge, he said they need adequate chargers, more solar panels, inverters and other accessories for the solar grid to function better.

"We need to resort to using direct supply instead of this unit metering. The system should be changed to its initial direct supply system or provision made for adequate units for the main distribution meter," Mohammed explained.

The Commissioner at the Ministry of Energy Development in Sokoto state, Bello Mohammad Goronyo said the project has created a huge impact on the lives of the people. "The village did not have electricity before but you can see how it has turned around the fortunes of the community particularly in the area of enhancement of business, poverty reduction and adding a lot of value to their social lives," he noted.

On the challenges, he said they are resolvable. "Sometimes you put unit in the bulk meter, when it finishes, there may likely be some challenges before it is reloaded, challenges of reloading the unit is an issue because of the network in some, the problem may arise from the additional connections by some members of the community to their households which make the line to trip because of overloading," he Goronyo said.

The commissioner assured that his ministry would convene a meeting of stakeholders including representatives of the community and the service provider to ensure the challenges are redressed.

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■ The solar power plant at Kurdula community in Sokoto State