

The Perfect Gift

A Resurgence membership
6 issues a year + 5 free cards



Buy now

Quote code: T350

How Solar power is bringing food security to Africa

Joe Ware
25th November, 2016

 Tweet

 4

 Like

 65

Malawi is a country on the front line of climate change. Unlike nations ravaged by a typhoon or rich western cities swamped with floodwater, the kind of impacts Malawians face barely raise a flicker of interest in the media. Compared to a hurricane, a few degrees of temperature rise and shifting rainfall patterns sound mild, but in reality they have the potential to be far more devastating writes JOE WARE

“Sunshine can reach places that conventional grid infrastructure cannot - meaning it can be set up anywhere”

Malawi is one of the poorest countries in the world. Ninety per cent of Malawians live in rural areas; agriculture makes up 80 per cent of the labour force and 80 per cent of its exports. With so many people reliant

on growing things from the ground, disruptions to the climate threatens the wellbeing of an entire nation.

For centuries Malawian farmers have learned the patterns of the seasons - when to plant their seeds in order to capture the rains that watered the ground and brought forth food to eat and sell. But this life-saving knowledge is becoming worthless, as rainfall patterns are distorted by a changing climate and the El Nino weather event, which this year created the worst food crisis in 25 years.

This time 6.7 million people do not have adequate food.

However thanks to solar, the poorest and most remote people in Malawi are turning the power of the sun to their advantage and benefiting from irrigation systems, which are pushing back against the ravages of climate change.

Solar is most commonly known for its potential to transform the world's energy supply. Solar farms are popping up all over the place, and costs continue to plummet. Only this month the International Energy Agency released figures showing that last year, around the world, half a million solar panels were installed *every day*. But for Malawian farmers, the magic of solar technology has another and more immediate form of assistance - helping them to water their plants.

In remote Malawi, conventional grid power is unable to reach communities and so cannot be relied on to power irrigation systems when the rains don't come. And even if grid power did reach these remote regions, the costs would be prohibitive. Likewise, polluting diesel-powered generators are also far from ideal. In some places such running costs mean farmers end up paying more for the energy they use than they can earn from their crops. Thankfully, solar offers a solution. The initial investment to get such schemes up and running may not be as cheap, but it pays off in the long run. Solar-powered irrigation requires no purchase of diesel and no payment of electricity bills. And sunshine can reach places that conventional grid infrastructure cannot - meaning it can be set up anywhere.

What it does require though is some initial investment. A recent solar irrigation scheme in Chikwawa District in Southern Malawi funded by UK, Norwegian and Irish governments, and implemented by Christian Aid, has proven to be so successful it received specific attention from the Malawian state. The appropriately named, Bright Msaka, Minister for Natural Resources, Energy and Mining, praised the scheme for not being built along the country's main roads to maximise visibility to 'important people', but instead in remote places where the need was greatest.

As the saying goes, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. In this case the eating has been of corn all year round. Mother-of-three Maria Moveni, 27, has been using irrigation farming in recent months. She says: "My husband and I have experienced a tough life for some time. During the rainy season we used to cultivate cotton, sorghum and maize of which the yield was not all that good due to frequent dry spells and floods that haunt this community. This affected our livelihood so badly that my family depended on selling firewood. Now I am in a new world of possibilities. Having my own maize in October is like a dream."

But to ensure such innovative projects become the norm instead of the exception we need to shift the balance of investment away from fossil fuel development and towards clean, green, alternatives. We need more aid spending to focus on such projects to help poorer countries develop in a low carbon way.

In September a Christian Aid [report](#) showed that the World Bank, which speaks often about low carbon development, was funneling millions of pounds towards fossil fuel projects. This needs to change if the World Bank is going to be taken seriously on its claims to be a champion of sustainability.

Renewables are already starting to improve people's lives and they have the potential to impact millions more. We now need to see investment to unlock further progress and speed up this world changing transition.

This Author

Joe Ware is a journalist and writer at Christian Aid and a New Voices contributor for The Ecologist. He can be followed on twitter [@wareisjoe](#)



Ninety per cent of Malawians live in rural areas; agriculture makes up 80 per cent of the labour force and 80 per cent of its exports

Resurgence

Buy now

The Perfect Gift

A Resurgence membership
6 issues a year + 5 free cards
Quote code: T350

ART | ENVIRONMENT | ETHICAL LIVING

More articles about

Malawi | Solar energy | Renewables | Africa | Food & Farming

- Related Articles
- Czechs angry at severe water loss caused by Polish mining
 - Vital soil fungi damaged by GMO Bt cotton
 - Only 'we the people' can rise above the false promise of COP22
 - After Brexit and Trump: don't demonise; localise!
 - Scientists call for the protection of the little-known and disappearing ecosystem: seagrass 'meadows'

ECOLOGIST COOKIES

Using this website means you agree to us using simple cookies.

More information here...

A
Resurgence
& Ecologist
magazine



for every
child in
your
school

Find out more

FOLLOW THE ECOLOGIST



Previous Articles...