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Investment in renewable energy is skyrocketing, in line with ambitious ...

By Molly Bilker / Cronkite Borderlands Project

Published June 17, 2015

SABANA GRANDE, Nicaragua -- As the sky fades from indigo to black, electric lights blink on in Bertha Maria L?pez's small, gray adobe house off of Highway 15 in rural northern Nicaragua.

In the kitchen under a bare bulb, she flattens masa into tortillas, sliding them into a pan on the wood-burning stove. When her granddaughter gets sick at 11:30 that night, L?pez turns on a light to find medicine and nurse the 2-year-old back to sleep.

Just eight years ago, the L?pez house was dark by sundown. Her son, now a clinical laboratory student at the University of Health Sciences and Renewable Energy in the city of Estel?, studied by the dim light of gas lamps. A middle-of-the-night crisis might have called for flashlights or gas lamps -- or nothing at all.

"Month to month, I'm not paying. With the conventional energy, I would have to be saving money to be able to pay," L?pez said. "That is a great benefit."

Nicaragua is forging a path as a leader in renewable energy; half the electricity from the country's energy grid comes from renewable resources. Still, about one-fifth of Nicaragua's 6.1 million residents don't live in homes connected to the grid. Like L?pez, they gradually are turning to solar panels to illuminate their lives.

Ortega's government has invited foreign and domestic investment to help grow and stabilize the country's power sources through multiple energy alternatives -- solar, geothermal, wind and hydroelectric. Solar's presence in the country has been growing for years as billboards along the Pan-American Highway in Estel? attest, advertising privately-owned solar companies Tecnosol, Ecamí and Nica Solar.

But in Sabana Grande, a community half an hour from the Honduras border, it has been the work of a nonprofit organization, Grupo F?nix, that has made the difference in the lives of people like L?pez.

Started in 1996 with a group of students from Alternative Energy Source Program at the National University of Engineering in Managua, Grupo Fenix has been developing solar projects in Sabana Grande since 1999, said Susan Kinne, who runs the program.



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