Solar energy for homes haiti

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Marisa Plumb: Fifty kilometers outside Grand-Go?ve, Haiti, we"ve run into a problem. A river runs across the road we"re on, and it"s the only route to a town called Anse-?-Veau. I"m with a seven-person team trying to deliver a solar energy unit to the town, which isn"t connected to the grid. Finding a way to drive through the wide body of water without ruining our cargo has been the challenge of the day.

Michelle and Paul Lacourciere, the founders of Sirona Cares, the foundation running this solar project, are used to these kinds of challenges by now. Earlier in Grand-Go?ve, they swapped a pickup track for a flat-bed truck with higher clearance, and a dozen people constructed a makeshift ramp from plywood. It took everyone"s help to push the 3000-pound machine into place.

Known as a SunBlazer, the unit we"re hauling is basically a solar charging station on wheels. It consists of six solar panels that charge 40 battery kits. With funding from the IEEE, a company called Nextek, in Long Island, New York, built six SunBlazers. This summer, all of them were distributed to rural communities in Haiti.

While you may see power lines in many parts of Haiti, a lot of them haven"t been operational since the late eighties. EDH, Haiti"s public utility, currently serves less than 15 percent of the population. Michelle explains that the project is a way to serve customers that EDH can"t currently reach.

Michelle Lacourciere: We are not competing with the utility, we"re complementing them, so we"re trying to service people who are not currently reached by EDH--they love the fact that we"re going into dark areas and getting people used to paying for electricity.

Marisa Plumb: When we finally reach Anse-?-Veau, everyone is relieved to find that the SunBlazer made it in one piece, without water damage.

The team sets to work getting the unit set up. Project leader Ray Larsen and engineer John Lorts don"t like the way the SunBlazer is precariously perched on the side of a hill. However, the steep, rocky terrain leaves few other options. They agree that the best they can do is level the unit with cement blocks and large rocks.

Now that the unit is secure, the next step is to teach local operators how to use it-- how to extend the solar panels, crank them to an angle that will absorb the most sun, and switch on the flow of energy to the batteries in the bed of the trailer. Each battery kit comes with two 4-watt LED lights and is designed for a typical Haitian home. In addition to providing light, the batteries can charge radios and cellphones.

Paul also reminds the operators that this is a business opportunity: Customers will pay a monthly fee to use the kits.

Michelle Lacourciere: The goal is to create a sustainable project which is economically sustainable, and we needed to be sure that people would be willing to pay for electric light in their home, and if they would, then we could lease operators equipment so that they could recharge customers" homes and then repay for the lease, and the lease payments would allow us to repay investors. So we needed to create a cycle of sustainability. These are extremely poor people, but they are paying a significant amount of their income towards energy in the form of kerosene. So we checked to see what they were paying for kerosene for cellphone charging, for candles, those kinds of things, and we set the price at 50 Haitian dollars to start.

Marisa Plumb: That"s about 10 percent of an average monthly wage in Haiti. Sirona Cares will cover the maintenance and any repairs that the units need through field technicians that will visit each location once a month.

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