

**AgriNet Information Board Managers run Solar Charging Stations in Uganda**

*By Ronald Ssesanga <sup>1</sup>*

Two Information Board Managers (IBMs) in Uganda are running solar charging stations for lanterns and mobile phones. AgriNet is working together with Technical Specialist Services for rural Development (TSSD) a franchisee of Sunlabob, a solar company based in (Laos). Ramzy Magamba and Ronald Ssesanga are setting up this new enterprise in collaboration with AgriNet. 10% of the income from the charging stations comes to the station managers and 90% goes towards the operation costs and to the TSSD to pay for the loan of the equipment. Ronald Ssesanga explains the business.



*(From left) Ronny Ssesanga, Bussi IBM John Sserufusa, Paul Nyende and Ueli Scheuermeier*

**Solar Lanterns**



We have set up charging centres in two areas where power is needed. In both areas there are no plans for installing electricity within the next ten years. We have trained two AgriNet IBMs to run charging stations. We have installed solar panels, which feed into a charger for lanterns and mobile phones. Ush 20,000/ is the down payment for the hire of the lanterns, which the customers will get back if they return it. The stations can charge about 25

lanterns per day. The lanterns can be charged for ten hours at a time, which means that the lantern lasts for about three days if they are used for three hours per night. Each station can charge eight lanterns at once. Both in Bussi and Saazi we have had to add another charging station due to demand.

**Teething Problems and Future Plans**

We have had some teething problems with



chips and batteries and we are waiting for a new consignment of 600 lanterns, which are arriving in January from Laos with batteries to

replace faulty ones. Our plan is to deploy the new lanterns in areas in the west and north of Uganda. TSSD have already been contacting new areas to search for possible entrepreneurs. There has been an overwhelming demand for phone charging, so we also need to find the connectors, which will allow our customers to power up mobile batteries directly from their lanterns.

**Rosemary Kiberu IBM in Saazi**

Rosemary is based in Saazi village where she has been running the solar charging station for one year; she has two chargers. 70 people are using the lanterns, which she charges for Ush 600/ each. It depends on the weather how many lanterns can be charged in a day, 15 if the weather is bad or 40 in good weather. Rose also charges mobile phones for Ush 1,000/. It takes three hours to charge a lantern and about two hours for a mobile phone. Rose receives 10% of the income from each lantern and 40% of each mobile charge. This is just extra money that she can get while she is at home, on top of her income from farming. Rose has an Information Board (IB), which she has put near the market in Saazi; she would also like another board at her house. She posts the market prices from AgriNet and has been able to link tomato farmers to the Kampala markets through AgriNet.

Kerosene for lamps costs about Ush 1,000/ per week; solar charging is a similar price. What the customers like about the lanterns is the brightness; there is no smoke and they are not dangerous. Mothers with babies prefer to use

<sup>1</sup> Interviewed by Anne Dennig in November 2009

solar lanterns; shops like them and so do the bars and the hotels. They are also used by customers for mining sand at night and for fishing. Rose uses the light to make mats in the evening and also to light her broiler chicks so that they grow faster.



Rose has had the lanterns for over a year; these are her comments on the business. “This work is not a big burden. I can put the lanterns on in the morning and

then I do not need to stay in the house. I can maintain the IB and do my other work in the house and with the chickens; I also have a son who can help me if I need. This is a very, very good job for a woman to do. Technical problems are rare and when I have a problem I call for support or if there is an error on the system I turn it off and then on again and then it works. It was easy to learn how to work the system and if I have problems I contact Ronald and he can advise me on the phone or if not he can come out to me.”

### John Sserufusa, IBM on Bussi Island



John runs a solar charging station and is the IBM for AgriNet on Bussi, an island of around 10 square miles, which has no electricity. When the islanders heard about the charging centre in Saazi they became interested in

having their own station so that they could have solar lamps to use in their homes and for night fishing.



There are two solar panels on the roof of John’s house. The maintenance of the panels is important; they must be kept clean and clear of shadow. If the circuit is broken at any point then the whole panel will not work. Sometimes loose connections need to be fixed. We have trained John to maintain the panel and to do some minor repairs. A cable leads to two charging

stations and a computer which recognises the lanterns before charging and after they are full.

The computer is a security mechanism, enabling lantern use after charging. There is also a battery that is charged by the solar panels and is used to charge mobile phones.



There are 95 lanterns on Bussi, which are being used by 60 households. Each day about ten people come to charge the lanterns. John keeps records for each lantern and contacts us for support. John has been working with us for four months. The customers pay Ush 1,000/ for 10 hours of light. John takes 10% commission for himself. John is also charging mobiles for Ush 500/; there is a lot of demand for this.

John has an AgriNet IB. The market information from AgriNet enables the farmers to price their products correctly. John wants to use the board to give the islanders better links to the Kampala markets. This is an area where pineapples are produced. We plan to use this charging station as a bulking point for pineapples. The islanders can pay for charging their lanterns with pineapples. The going rate is between two or three pineapples for ten hours of light. AgriNet will then organise to collect the load of pineapples, which they will transport to the markets and sell. We have



already had one deal, organised by AgriNet, for two tons of pineapples from Bussi to the Nakasero market in Kampala. The idea of payment through farmers produce is a good one for those people who cannot afford to pay cash. We have a similar plan for payment in Saazi, which is a chicken producing area. This payment plan works well together with AgriNet marketing service.

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