

First village hybrid grid launched

□ KHONESAVANH LATSAPHAO

ALAO private energy supplier for off-the-grid areas, Sunlabob Rural Energy Ltd, launched Asia's first village hybrid grid in Nam Kha village, Phaxay district, Xieng Khuang province on Friday.

After one year of planning, engineering and a test-run, Sunlabob has now inaugurated the grid for all 96 families in the village.

The new system combines energy from solar panels, a hydro-turbine and a diesel generator, soon to run on bio-fuel, and the company considers the combined use of different energy sources the most appropriate solution for rural electrification off the grid.

Sunlabob is a Lao company that has been active in the renewable energy sector in Laos for the last seven years, with innovations including the development and operation of a rental scheme for solar home systems, and community-owned systems.

Sunlabob implemented this project together with its Swiss partner company Entec, the world market leader for small hydropower solutions, as well as the Swiss non-government organisation Helvetas, local authorities and residents of Nam Kha village.

The villagers are very pleased with the results.

"Our living conditions have already improved a lot during the test-run," head of the village, Mr Wang Lor Yang, said.



Senior national and international officials attend the opening ceremony.

Besides improving individual living standards in each household, the 24-hour electricity system will open the door for productive use to generate additional income.

Director of Sunlabob, Mr Vongsakhamphui, said Nam Kha village was chosen as an appropriate location for setting up a pilot project to serve as an example for other areas.

"The village had a broken water turbine, so elements of the old water system, like the dam, could be incorporated into the new system, allowing us to save some money," he said.

To use only renewable energy sources, Sunlabob is promoting the use of bio-fuel made from Jatropha trees.

"As soon as the farmers deliver enough Jatropha seeds, we will be able to replace the

diesel in the generator with bio-fuel," Mr Saleumphone said.

As well as reducing the costs of running the generator, the growing and processing of Jatropha is yet another source of income for the villagers.

Managing Director of Sunlabob, Mr Andy Schroeder, highlighted the technical innovation of the hybrid system.

"Not only is the combination of different energy sources new in the field of energy development, but also the installation of a control unit, which automatically synchronises the different sources," he said.

"It is the first time that such a system has been built anywhere in the world. This is a big chance for Laos to establish a technical and

operational model for rural electrification and become a leading example for other countries."

Based on this successful example Sunlabob intends to rehabilitate 40 broken hydropower plants into functioning village hybrid grids. Differing from the small hydropower plants, which depend on reverse water availability, the hybrid grids can provide electricity 24 hours a day on a permanent basis, in a system that is able to respond to the increased needs of villagers and contribute to the development of remote areas.

Lao officials, ambassadors and representatives of international banks, bilateral government organisations and NGOs took part in the opening ceremony on Friday.