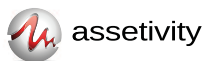


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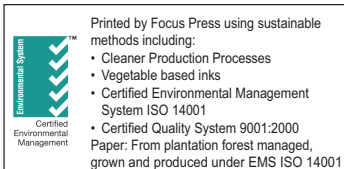
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 Engineers Australia WA Division
 712 Murray Street, West Perth WA 6005
 Phone: (08) 9321 3340
 Web: www.engineersaustralia.org.au/wa
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 Advertising & Editorial:
 nangelucci@engineersaustralia.org.au



Lighting Laos – Rural Electrification and the Development Triangle

By Anant Dev Tayal StudIEAust

Laos – the forgotten country often skipped on the South-East Asia tour, drew me in for its modesty. Finding a unique opportunity to combine a passion for travel with a learning experience, I spent three months volunteering as an engineer at Sunlabob, a Laotian renewable energy company. I went in with the sole expectation of wanting to learn the hands-on practicality of an engineering job. In the end, my time in Laos opened my eyes to the world of development work, the role that electricity plays in people's lives, and the influence that government policy has on humanitarian projects.

Sunlabob has two main solar system product offerings. Firstly, the all purpose Solar Home Systems. These consist of a solar panel, battery and charging station and provide homes with a source of light and charging points to plug mobile phones, heaters or other small electrical appliances. The second is Sunlabob's Solar Lantern Rental System. These lanterns are made up of portable, compact fluorescent lights (CFL). The lanterns can then plug into a purpose built solar charging station located centrally in the village and managed by a chosen village technician.



A field visit to Xieng Khouang Province showed me the enormous positive impact that electricity brings to people. Electrification is widely recognised as a significant driver of both social and economic progress and a key ingredient in improving the quality of life. Benefits are realised fast and can include increasing family income, improved literacy rates, improved health and immunization standards, and improved agricultural and industrial productivity.



Anant Dev Tayal StudIEAust

Despite these considerable and widely known benefits, the generation, transmission and distribution of electricity is still very capital intensive. As a result, 1.6 billion people (one quarter of the world's population) still have no access to electricity.



The Laotian Government is well informed of the situation and has made very public statements about its proposed solutions. At present, 58% of households have access to electricity; however the Government has committed to electrify 70% of households by 2010, 80% by 2015 and 90% by 2020. To achieve this goal, the Government recognises that decentralised solutions are required to reach the widely dispersed population. This is where Sunlabob has stepped in to take on the challenge. With many villages still off-grid and powerless, electrification needs to continue to build on creative and dynamic solutions so that no village, no matter how small, is left in darkness.

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