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COVER STORY: Lights On!

Nasir Ali Panhwar writes about how solar panels have brightened up a few villages in the remote coastal belt of Sindh

In August this year, five solar panels in the creek villages of Keti Bunder, District Thatta, were installed. This was made possible through the joint efforts of WWF Pakistan's Indus for All Programme and Pakistan Council for Renewable Energy Technology (PECRET). The initiative is the first of its kind in the deprived coastal belt of Sindh.

The panels are of two types. Panel A produces 200 watt output with two batteries installed at mosques and Panel B is of 500 watt, with four batteries installed in a school. Panel A has two wall hanging fans and two energy saver bulbs, while panel B has two fans and four energy savers. Three panels were installed in mosques in Bhoori village, Khobar Creek, and two in Tippun village, Hajamro Creek, one is in a mosque and other one in the community school. After the training of two people from each village, the operation and maintenance of the panels are done by the villagers.

"Solar cells are long lasting sources of energy, which can be used almost anywhere," says Aman Mahar, working for the Indus for All Programme at Keti Bunder. He elaborates that solar cells provide cost-effective solutions to energy problems in places where there is no source of electricity. Solar cells are also totally soundless and pollution free. As there are no moving parts, these require little maintenance and have a long lifetime. Compared to other renewable sources, solar panels also have many advantages.

"Rooftop power is a good way of supplying energy to a community and more cells can be added to homes and businesses as the population grows, enabling energy generation in line with demand," Mahar adds.

When the villagers were asked about the changes brought about by the installation of solar panels, they said that previously few people

come to the mosque after sunset and early morning. Now they are quite happy to see many people coming to the mosques regularly, especially children and elderly people.

"Now we can hear the Azaan after sunset and even early in the morning that wakes us up," says a villager. He adds that the mosque's loud speaker can also be used now for emergency announcement in case of a cyclone as previously this kind of facility did not exist in the village.

There is a community school in the village of Tippun and it is the only school in the creeks of Keti Bunder. The thatch-made structure of school had no proper lighting earlier.

"After the installation of the solar panel, the children are very happy and are concentrating more on their studies," says a school teacher. He adds that the children will also benefit from the solar panel during the hot and humid summer months. "We are feeling privilege to have electricity in this remote area," he adds with pride.