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International Experience Reflection

The Heart of Darkness

I still get a certain sense of enjoyment that this Conradian reference evokes from friends and family as I detail my first foray into Sub-Saharan Africa; but for the millions in rural Africa that still live off the electrical grid, this is still very much the reality of life. To bring light into these electricity deserts, EIC has partnered with CRAN Microfinance and renewable energy suppliers with the goal of ending energy poverty and bringing light to these darkened homes and communities.

In one such electricity desert that I had the fortune to visit was the village of Koni in the rural Volta Region of eastern Ghana. Koni is a small settlement of roughly 800 people predominantly employed in agriculture. The village has no access road, let alone electricity, internet or even mobile service. To access the village, one must travel on a water-infested overgrown path dodging the dangers posed by boulders, snakes and the tropical sun. Arriving, one feels almost transported back in time as one gazes upon the labyrinth of mud-brick and straw roof houses of the village whose architecture has probably changed little since its inception hundreds of years ago.

Life in communities like Koni is still very much reminiscent of these olden times in that activity centers on the position of the sun in the sky; the workday starts at 6am with sunrise and concludes around 6pm with sunset. Within these 12 hours, villagers scramble to complete all their chores – cooking, eating, farming, selling their product, and for the children especially, reading and studying – before darkness envelops their environment and activity ceases to be possible.

The potential for even a simple solar-device that can charge one .5W light is incredible for the people of Koni. Families that have received the product have already seen a substantial improvement in their life. After dark hours can now be used more productively. Children too have reaped the benefits of the device as they can read and do homework at night. Studies show that the probability of children staying enrolled in school increases with the introduction of even one light. Other workers shift cooking and eating into the night and use the last two hours of daylight to pursue other income-generating measures instead. One cassava farmer for example now grinds his cassava into a local favorite called *gari* himself and earns a higher margin on his produce. The small local health clinic can diagnose and care for patients properly for health care emergencies that occur at night. Midwives, too, can better serve mothers in delivery with the benefit of a proper light.

It's difficult to conceptualize a life without electricity when laptops, mobile phones, overhead lights, cars and the like always populate our nearby surroundings. There are millions of people in rural villages throughout Africa that live without all the above, however. One simple intervention such as providing a solar-powered light can bring the largest sense of modernity and hope to people in villages like Koni.

Boarding my flight in Accra bound back to the US, I was struck by the simple universality of the importance of energy in all of our lives. We share, in common, a need to harness energy to make our lives easier, more productive and better. It is this energy in common amongst us that drives EIC and her partner, CRAN Microfinance, to help others realize their full potential by leveraging the revolutionary power of energy.