

Women as solar power entrepreneurs: pilot project in the Sunderbans

The Sunderbans is a part of the world's largest delta formed by the rivers Ganga, Brahmaputra, and Meghna. It is situated on the lower end of Gangetic West Bengal. The area is interwoven by a network of small rivers, creeks, and waterways, and 70% of the area is under saline/brackish water. To protect the natural habitat, environment, and the biodiversity of the region, the Sunderbans Biosphere Reserve was established in 1989. It covers 9630 km² including about 4444.33 km² of human habitat along with the entire forest area. There are only 42 km rail and 280 km metalled road in the entire inhabited area. Waterways are the major means of communication in this region. The entire Indian Sunderbans consists of 19 blocks. Out of all these blocks, the southern blocks are relatively remote and inaccessible.



As most of the places of southern part of Sunderbans are separated from main land, and from each other, by wide rivers and creeks, these places are not connected by road with nearby towns. Further, as it is extremely difficult to extend high-tension transmission line to these areas due to its difficult terrain, the remote mouzas/villages of southern part of Sunderbans suffer from chronic shortage of energy. Due to lack of such basic infrastructure, socio-economic development of the region is also affected.

Against this background, energy interventions based on alternate technologies such as solar are found to be relevant and viable. About 20% population in the unelectrified islands (216,000) is currently using SPV (solar photovoltaic) electricity. TERI has been working in this region for the past eight years in partnership with the state government as well as with the NGO sector to promote the use of SPV. One of the most recent projects, 'Women as solar power entrepreneurs: pilot project in the Sunderbans' has endeavored to create viable enterprises on the supply side targeting women entrepreneurs. These enterprises have been created not only to provide SPV-based services in remote and interior villages, but also to provide repair and maintenance services to already existing products and systems.

This pilot project, implemented by TERI in partnership with the RKM (Ramakrishna Mission) has also created an organizational set up viz. MFEDO (Market Facilitating and Enterprise Development Organization) within the cluster organization Kalpataru of the RKM to incubate these enterprises. Kalpataru is now equipped to act like an anchor to these enterprises by helping them in procuring raw material, facilitating market linkages, and formulation of self-help-groups.



By providing initial training and capacity-building on several techno-commercial aspects; identifying the market for product and services; setting up a workshop for the product testing and assembly; and procuring material and goods to start business, the project has helped six women to become solar entrepreneurs who are now engaged in a variety of businesses such as charging and renting of solar lanterns on daily basis, designing and assembling small electronic items, and repairing of solar home systems.



Apart from the financial independence, a sense of pride arising from the newly acquired skill and confidence is the biggest contribution of the project to the women of Sunderbans.

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