

Affordable solar power: A pathway to sustainable energy for all Ugandans

Today, I had the chance to visit a local salon in Kampala, and I was surprised to see people bringing their phones for charging. Curious, I asked why they didn't charge their phones at home. They told me that electricity is too expensive for them to afford.

As we approach 2030, our government has set targets under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to ensure that every Ugandan has access to reliable, affordable, and clean electricity. However, this goal seems unachievable because of the high cost of electricity.

Reflecting on my own experience, I only use electricity between 7:00 PM and 10:00 PM and from 5:00 AM to 7:00 AM, mainly on weekends. Despite this limited use, Umeme sends me a bill of UGX 200,000 or more, as if I were using electricity around the clock. I can't help but wonder how my usage could result in such high charges.

Solar energy is a relatively inexpensive alternative, especially where hydroelectric power is inconvenient and unreasonably expensive. The burden of high monthly electricity bills has made me consider switching to solar power. Unlike hydroelectric power, solar power involves a one-time installation cost and no bureaucracy. There's no need for poles or lines; you simply purchase solar panels that fit your budget and install them on your roof.

The benefits of solar energy are clear. It's clean, renewable, and significantly cheaper in the long run. The government should consider subsidizing the cost of solar panels to make this alternative more accessible to the average Ugandan. By doing so, clean power would become affordable for many Ugandans, especially those in rural areas, who currently have limited access to electricity. The low cost of solar electricity would also help low-income earners light their homes without suffering the adverse health effects of smoke produced by kerosene lamps and candles.

Access to affordable energy is crucial for eradicating poverty through advancements in health, education, water supply, and industrialization, and combating climate change. Although the Government of Uganda is heavily investing in the construction of hydroelectric dams, fossil fuels, extending the grid across the country, there is a need to broaden this scope and focus more on investing in other renewable sources, particularly off-grid solar energy.

Increased investment in solar energy would not only provide affordable and clean energy for rural households but also help reduce carbon emissions from fossil fuels, particularly in urban centers. This would address one of the significant drivers of global warming and climate change. Moreover, investing in solar-powered water irrigation systems could improve agricultural production in rural areas, thereby tackling poverty and food insecurity, and contributing to the SDG on zero hunger.

Furthermore, solar-powered water pumps would enable rural households to access clean water, improving the quality of education and life for girls and women. With fewer household chores such as fetching water from distant wells, girls would be able to stay in school. Good health and

wellbeing would be ensured through increased access to safe water and sanitation, as poor sanitation contributes to diseases like diarrhea, the second leading cause of death in children under five worldwide, with Uganda being no exception.

However, the solar energy sector in Uganda faces several challenges due to the lack of specific laws and policies to address issues such as the Solar Energy Policy and consumer protection. This absence leads to a market flooded with low-quality solar products, which negatively affects consumers who deserve access to modern, reliable energy services. The government needs to create a market environment where Ugandans are aware of good quality products and are guaranteed such when they invest in accessing modern energy services. This is crucial because solar energy providers must ensure customers enjoy their experience with solar products and understand the importance of high-quality hardware and service.

As a result, solar and other renewable energy electrification efforts in the country remain uncoordinated. This disorganization explains why the government's attempts to expand electricity access and affordability, especially for the poor and vulnerable, continue to fall short. Achieving SDG 7 will also help accomplish several other SDGs, including Goal 1 (No Poverty), Goal 2 (Zero Hunger), Goal 3 (Good Health and Well-being), Goal 4 (Quality Education), Goal 5 (Gender Equality), Goal 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and Goal 13 (Climate Action).

Therefore, the government should focus on making solar power a more viable and widespread solution for Uganda's electricity challenges. By investing in and promoting solar energy, Uganda can move closer to achieving its SDG targets and ensure a brighter, more sustainable future for all its citizens. Access to affordable, clean energy is not just a necessity but a right that can transform lives and protect our environment for future generations.

For God and My Country

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