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Education programme: Solar businesses in Ethiopia

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Entrepreneur with solar ice wagon.

The first phase of the German-Ethiopian collaboration "Applied Education and Entrepreneurship Programme" (AEE) is completed. In this programme, universities from both countries work together to establish a new study course where students can develop solar systems and business models for the rural regions of Ethiopia supported by industry partners and small local enterprises.

Students of the University of Arba Minch, Ethiopia, first collected ideas for useful solar systems during a trip to the remote mountain village of Laka, which has no connection to the grid. Lecturers from the University of Arba Minch and the University of Applied Sciences of Neu-Ulm, Germany, then helped the students to develop the systems. Additionally they searched for local solar entrepreneurs and developed a business plan for their project. The solar projects included a mobile hair salon, a mobile phone and lamp charging station and a mobile ice cream shop.

Engidaw Abdel Haile, leader of the solar competence centre at the University of Arba Minch reports: "It is a unique cooperation between international experts, Ethiopian university students and small local enterprises who developed systems perfectly tailored for the users' requirements. So the mobile solar hair salon e.g. offers its services mainly on market days. The students therefore assembled the solar system and the hairdresser's equipment on a robust carriage, so the hairdresser is able to push his equipment on a carriage to the market in Laka and the surrounding villages without problems."

AEE as a training ground

The AEE programme is being supported by the German solar company Phaesun ([link is external](#)) with solar components and training courses about sizing and marketing of solar systems. Tobias Zwirner, Managing Director of Phaesun, called the programme a perfect training ground for all participating parties, since the solar projects are prototypes with room for improvements. He talks about some of the advantages of the project: "The local entrepreneurs remain in contact with the university for two years which corresponds with the amortisation period for the investments made for the solar systems, but also with the term they are supported in case of occurring problems." As an example he names the wheels of the carriages, which had to be changed already because they were not robust enough to carry the weight of the solar batteries. "Moreover, the operators in Laka were surprised about problems occurring with the solar system during a long period of rain. So the students realise how important it is to use high quality components and to raise awareness about the chances and limitations of solar energy", Zwirner concludes.

What's next? Scaling up.

Next, the students will try to scale up their business models together with small local businesses. This could mean planning a workshop for

the manufacture of the "solar carriages" produced earlier or planning to improve the solar power supply of private households together with local service teams. Another idea of the students was to configure complete systems, which they then offer to entrepreneurs in regions, where there is no connection to the grid. In February 2015, the students will also get the chance to present their business models at a conference at Arba Minch University to attract potential investors. The project will last until 2016 and until then the study course will take place three times. Aim is to establish the course at the University Arba Minch and carry it out independently in the future.

Start of the project in 2013

The first steps of the AEE programme were introductory workshops in Germany and a first trip of the German university team to Ethiopia in December 2013. Afterwards, eight lecturers from Ethiopia received an 8-week training course about the physical basis of solar energy, technical courses on system sizing and about the development of business plans and marketing.

After successful application, 55 Ethiopian students from the departments of engineering, agricultural economics and business economics were selected for the additional interdisciplinary study course.

(Source:Sun & Wind Energy)

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