



The old and the new...traditional housing and a solar panel in Sukiki village.

FROM THE SWISS ALPS TO THE SOLOMONS

How remote Sukiki village got its power

By Gary Gray and Francis Pituvaka

AT FIRST GLANCE THERE WOULD SEEM TO BE LITTLE to connect a mountain climbing accident in the Swiss Alps and the introduction of solar-powered lighting to a village in the Solomon Islands. Yet if it wasn't for a very tenuous thread of coincidences that began in Switzerland, the village of Sukiki on the weather coast of Guadalcanal would still be relying on kerosene for its lighting.

The trail begins some years ago when American Neville Williams breaks his wrist while mountain climbing in Switzerland. His injury is attended to by surgeon Dr Herman Oberli. When he leaves Oberli's surgery Williams hands across a card that identifies him as the president and founder of the Washington DC-based Solar Electric Light Fund (SELF), a non-government organisation set up to promote rural electrification in developing countries. SELF is already involved in rural

electrification programmes in 12 countries, including China, Sri Lanka and Zimbabwe.

The scene then moves to Honiara, capital of the Solomon Islands, where Oberli takes up a position as consultant surgeon in the Central Hospital. From there it is a short step to a conversation between Oberli and surgical registrar Dr Silent Tovosia about the ways of helping Tovosia's village to enjoy the benefits of electricity.

On Oberli's suggestion, Tovosia contacts SELF, which undertakes a feasibility study in the Solomons, approves the project and work gets underway to bring light to Sukiki.

That was 1997. The solar lighting systems have now been installed and are working well. Sukiki village elder, Mage Onorio, is full of praise for the changes the electrification programme have brought to his people. To him, the new technology is like a miracle—for years



Welcome: Solar equipment comes ashore.



Proud and satisfied: *The project brought a new new mood to the village.*

they have been dependent on buying kerosene to fuel their lamps. "Gone are the days when we have to spend up to \$50 each month for our lamps. We do not have the trouble of having to look for kerosene and matches any more and our children can read and do their homework at night," he said.

"Our lights bring us a lot of pride and satisfaction in knowing we have moved one step forward".

The programme has also brought a new mood to the village. "Surely the project has a great impact on the lives of the people in the village as now they're not interested to go to Honiara," Onorio said. The morale in the village has not been so good since his childhood, he believes, and Onorio is now in his early 60s. The changes have stirred the entrepreneurial spirit of the villagers, and prompted them to want to build better homes.

Benefits: Onorio admits that when the scheme was first mooted there were a number of people who were reluctant to take part as they thought it would be expensive. However, before the programme got underway, the villagers were shown how solar power could benefit them. A small demonstration using solar energy to pump water was staged and most doubters were convinced.

Light to see at night is but one of the benefits of the system, according to Onorio. Another is safety. Still fresh in the villagers' minds is an accident in 1996 when a pressure lamp exploded, badly burning a woman's face and upper body. The 12-volt current produced by the solar panels poses no threats to the users, can be used to power other appliances (and especially save money spent on batteries for radios) and it has the added advantage of being environmentally friendly.

The programme will not stop at Sukiki. Another village, Makaruka, also on Guadalcanal, is expected to be turned on to the sun. There, more than 1000 people will benefit from a system covering at least 50 homes and a community high school. SELF is involved once again, assisted this time by a grant from the United Nations under the auspices of the Italian Trust Fund. The programme is coordinated in the Solomon Islands by a Honiara-based, non-profit, non-government body known as the Guadalcanal Rural Electrification Agency (GREA). Support has come from the Guadalcanal Provincial Government and the Central Government.

GREA, under the chairmanship of Tovosia, is hopeful the programme will carry forward and lead to the electrification of many more rural villages. At present the electricity grid in the country is limited to the larger urban centres, but GREA hopes to introduce an arrangement whereby villages will be able to purchase equipment at a cost similar to what they are currently paying for kerosene. The Sukiki villagers now contribute money they would have spent on kerosene to GREA which has set up a revolving fund so that the contributions can be used to finance the next stages of the programme.

Tovosia is confident the process will continue and accelerate, to bring power to many more remote rural villages in the Solomon Islands. ☐



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