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PERCEPTIONS OF SOLAR ENERGY IN BAYOMEN-CAMEROON

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ABSTRACT: According to the Cameroon Energy Situation (SEC) in 2011, the energy consumption mix was 73% biomass, 20% oil and gas products, and 7% electricity totaling around 6000 ktoe (Kilotons of oil equivalent) for the whole country and converted to about 0.3toe (tons of oil equivalent) per capita. World Energy Outlook (2016), holds that only 54% of the Cameroonian population has access to electricity, with an average of 88% in urban areas versus only 17% in rural areas. There is still a lot to be done to connect all Cameroonians to excellent and affordable electricity sources. The inhabitants of Bayomen village have been living without electricity for years until recently that renewable energy a concentrated solar system was installed. The interest behind this work is to find out the perceptions that the inhabitants of Bayomen do have about solar energy. Data was collected with the help of techniques like in-depth individual interviews, focus group discussions, and direct observations to understand what they think about this new energy source in their village. One significant finding shows that majority of the inhabitants are getting in contact with solar energy for the first time. Solar energy is considered a blessing to the village for bringing development and has also removed them from the darkness. Some think that solar energy has come as a burden to the village. Consequently, that solar energy is very useful, especially for those remote villages that electricity might never reach there in the nearest future. Another area of research could be conducted on the adaptations of solar energy for rural development in Bayomen-Cameroon.

Key words: Perceptions, Solar, Energy, Cameroon.

INTRODUCTION

Life is directly linked to the quality of the natural environment and the availability of natural resources. Environment and life are interdependent concepts. Maintaining a balance in the world ecosystem is necessary for preserving life. Our planet's atmosphere is a valuable and sensitive resource to be protected. On the contrary, undesirable inflows into the ecosystem, caused by anthropogenic activity can shake this harmony and degrade living conditions, Mariani et al. (2010). Human influence on the environment is increasing due to the mass production of technological goods, Lam (2011), the intensification of agriculture, Ockenden (2014), the rapid rate of urbanization, and growing demand for fossil fuels for energy and transport Van Gent, (1993). According to data from the International Energy Agency, between 1971 and 2014, global primary energy consumption has increased by 2.5 times, from 5.5 GTOE in 1971 to 13.7 GTOE in 2014 IEA (2017). Over the same period, carbon dioxide emissions (from now on, CO2) have doubled. Climate change poses a significant environmental, social, and economic Threat-Bell, (2011). The increase in anthropogenic carbon emissions is linked to global warming. Scientists point out that CO2 concentration in the atmosphere has significantly increased over the last century compared to relatively stable levels of the pre-industrial era, Canadell (2007). Since 1751, about 400 billion tons of coal has been released into the atmosphere due to fossil fuel combustion and cement production. Half of those CO2 emissions were added in the late 1980s, Boden (2017). There are scientific publications from the early 1970s.

METHODOLOGY

In this work, we deployed the qualitative research methodology, which allows the researcher to capture the meanings in individual lives as Lincoln et Denzin (2000:3) shows and discovers the meaning in a specific socio-cultural setting, Neuman (2011: 174) which is therefore appropriate. A quantitative research measures attitudes, opinions, behaviors, and other defined variables and generalises results from a larger sample population, as stated by Given (2000). Therefore, in seeking to amplify the understanding of the ethnography of energy sources in the Bayomen community, we used qualitative techniques like FGD, In-depth individual interviews, direct observation and photographs to permit us to collect our data which involves investigating the belief and opinions of the inhabitants in their cultural context. We integrated excel to come out with charts. Purposive sampling was used in the study. Semi-structured interviews with open questions were conducted to collect data as this was an appropriate way to find out what people feel and think about their world, Rubin et Rubin (2000). We organized one focus group discussion with informants from diverse backgrounds and from different country regions. Their voices were recorded from the interview and focus discussions. Free listing was capitalised to get their standpoint on perceptions of solar energy in Bayomen.

Content Analysis

This study brought out a clear distinction of separating analyses from interpretation. Our analysis was based purely on the emic approach or the native point of view. According to Mbonji (2005), an analysis that is based on resolutions, discoveries of answers, and the clearance of solutions by the combination of elements of a problem under study.

RESULTS

From the extracts of the 50 informants who participated in this work, four main themes were identified; characteristics of new sources of energy, positive appreciation of solar energy, negative reactions of solar energy, and rural electrification through solar energy.

Presentation of Research area

Bayomen is one of the twelve villages found under Kon-Yambetta Subdivision in the Centre Region of Cameroon. It is located somewhere around Bafia along the national route No 4, the road linking Bafoussam and Yaoundé; some 75miles (120km) North-West of Yaoundé. Bayomen is one of the villages under the Mbam-and-Inoubou division found in the Centre Region of Cameroon. It is situated about 148km from Yaounde. Bayomen shares boundaries with the following villages; to the East by Bamako, to the South by Kon and Dii, to the West by Babetta and finally to the North by Deuk. The surface area of Bayomen is approximately 534 km.

Review of perceptions of solar energy in the

The benefits of implementing an electricity tariff structure can outweigh the initial project costs of developing and implementing such a structure, Foster et al. (1999) notes that the budget required to install metering and related equipment in the town of Xcalak was less than 7 % of the original total cost of the hybrid power generating system. Furthermore, they conclude that if the investment had been made at the time of implementation (it was done eight years after implementation), electricity tariffs would have provided crucial funds for preventive maintenance, and system performance would have improved, Foster et al. (1999). Furthermore, the findings indicate that any new program that intends to foster commercial energy use in the region should have components for facilitating flexible access to capital and developing technical and business skills (e.g., accounting, identification of niche opportunities, and marketing). Such initiatives have been implemented in rural areas of other countries and have demonstrated beneficial community-development results.

Question 1: Did you ever hear of this new energy source before now?

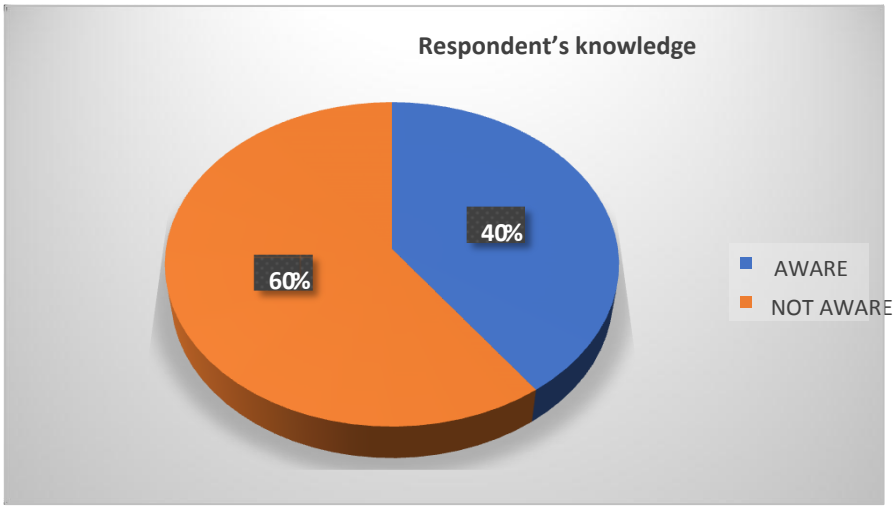

Chart 1: Demonstrate percentages of respondents on the awareness of new sources of energy before now.

From the fieldwork that we conducted, we sampled the opinion of 50 informants. We discovered that out of the 50 informants, 20 accepted that they had an idea about the existence of this new energy source, representing 40% of the study. About 30 of the informants refused that they had any idea about this new energy source and that it was the first time they had heard of it, representing 60%. With this study, one can say that solar energy is new in Bayomen. That was why some of the inhabitants of the Bayomen are seeing it for the first time. It means that, if this project was not introduced here, they wouldn't have known solar energy in their lifetime.

Characteristics of new sources of energy in Bayomen

Below are some of the transcripts obtained from our informants on the characteristics of new energy sources:

What makes it new in this place is that, at first, they were no electricity here as I heard. They were first using but generators. If you had to charge your phone, you could only use a generator. Generators, at one moment, became the only means of energy. We got up one day to discover that a construction team had been deployed to work here. So, I can say that it was a new energy source because there was no energy in Bayomen village. They were living like villagers, (solar energy consumers).

It is new because it is the first of its kind. There has never been any most significant energy source like this one here. So, it is considered the most significant energy source that the inhabitants of Bayomen have ever had as far as energies are concerned. It is the only energy source that can electrify the whole Bayomen. (solar energy consumer).

I think it is the government that brought it here because we have never seen energy here. (FDG)

This informant thinks that solar energy is a new energy source in Bayomen because they are uncivilized, making it strange in their eyes because some of them are seeing it, and they first qualify it to be new in their village.

Maybe it is because the people here are uncivilized or they are just limited here. It is a new energy source in the sense that people that were living here before and had not seen any energy sources except solar or have not seen people using it. So, I just think it is new because as I came here, I saw that everybody is using but the same solar energy, making it new in this village. (solar energy consumer).

This energy source is new because, I was told that there was no source of energy in this village before the arrival of solar energy. So it is new. In addition, it is because of the transformation taking place right now. Technology is dominating the other energy sources. (FDG).

Recently the population of Bayomen has been increasing by the day due to the introduction of solar energy, which is an element

of development pulling out people from different regions to come and exploit it.

What qualifies this energy source to be new is that it has multiplied the riches of some individuals of Bayomen more than others. Things are moving here faster than before because every day people are coming into Bayomen with business ideas and want to invest in one way or another. (solar energy consumer).

Positive feedback of Solar Energy

Here are some of the transcripts on the positive feedback of solar energy which we gathered from our informants:

It is good because there are no frequent power cuts like the case with Eneo, here, it is the airtime that matters the most. If there is no airtime, there is no electricity. That is how it functions. But the impact of solar energy is that it has brought development in Bayomen village. (FDG)

Most of our informants made it clear that the advent of solar energy in their village has done a lot by alleviating poverty and speeding up development in their village. It is considered a breakthrough.

It is good, we welcomed it. At least my children will live well, and we are advancing. If it continues like this, our children will not suffer anymore. They will live without any problem because this electricity will help them carry out their studies. It has done so much good to this village that one cannot forget so fast. Finally, without this solar energy Bayomen would not have been what it is today. Go ahead and find out yourself how this village was in the past. (solar energy consumer).

Solar energy has lifted us because it has facilitated life here in Bayomen village. Before, it was not easy as we used to pay transport to Bafia to go and buy petrol to fuel our bush lamps, generators and watch T.V. In those days, it was not everybody had the means to buy a generator, talk less about purchasing fuel. This energy source is good even though it is cheaper in solving our problems quickly. (solar energy consumer).

In addition, these informants emphasized that the mechanism put in place to manage this solar system is stress-free:

We do not spend money anymore, it is good. We appreciate it a lot because it is very economical, since we are consuming as we recharge. It does not stress us in any way because it is something that you recharge and use the way you want. If you recharge airtime, let's say 5000 FCFA and you decide to use heavy equipment, it will exhaust all the airtime within a short while, but if you are using it only for home lighting. It can last for a long time. (solar energy consumer).

Yes, it is good because it informs us immediately when your airtime is exhausted. It is just like a cell phone that you cannot use without airtime, meaning that when the airtime runs out, you need to recharge it again to stay connected and continue benefiting from the system. If you recharge airtime for 2500 FCFA, when the airtime gets exhausted, another recharge is required to feed the meter. If I do not recharge airtime, there will be no electricity but it is good that you consume what you have paid for. It has brought development to Bayomen. (solar energy consumer).

One of our informants gives credit to solar energy for the impact it has created in their village:

I do not have anything to bother about it except for the fact that it is good. I really appreciate this solar energy because the way it is functioning is assuring. After subscribing to the system, you are given a meter, and it will depend on how much you will be spending on airtime. Solar energy has added value to the lives of the inhabitants of Bayomen. (FDG).

Also, this user mentioned that the running of this project is very efficient:

I think that the utilization of this energy source is good because it has some advantages over Eneo. It is good because there is no Chinese agent is running behind you to ensure that you pay your bills. Eneo has bills that they move and distribute to their customers. Nevertheless, the Chinese man doesn’t have that time to waste. With your code, you can pay your bills through orange money or MTN money, and they will send you a code for you to key it into their system; that is how it functions. (solar energy consumer).

Furthermore, a businessman said that:

Solar energy has encouraged and lifted us because we now have MTN money and orange;

they have opened their doors here, in Bayomen because of electricity. The functioning of all these businesses is thanks to solar energy that has made it possible for them to operate. We are very happy because solar energy has brought so much joy to our hearts. We don't need to move from one place to another anymore. Other businesses like cold stores can function 24/24, other activities like bars, and small kiosks that are operating because of this solar energy. We can repair telephones here, repair and charge laptops and computers. This was not the case in the past; we used to go and charge them in our neighboring villages. (solar energy consumer).

Negative feedback of solar energy

A good number of our informants mentioned that the introduction of solar energy in Bayomen by the government has recorded some negative feedback, such as low capacity, recharging, and above all, expensive. Below are some of the thoughts we collected:

We need a backup especially when there is the problem of low voltage caused by poor weather conditions. It is one of the main issues that we have at the moment. This problem is occurring because the population has increased and solar energy is unable to satisfy all its users. That is why we cannot use heavy equipment. Also, there are times when your airtime is about to run out, a signal will be sent to you from the system. You might wish to recharge airtime but a poor network will not permit you to carry out successful transaction. (solar energy consumer).

Another informant added that:

This energy source is not powerful because people are ready to buy freezers, fridges, and grinding machines, and I do not think this energy can operate them. Again, we have difficulties recharging the meter, as you need to move up and down. At times you need to call someone in the town for him to help you buy airtime. For example, if you have 2000 FCFA to recharge and after you send it to an agent, he will deduct 500 FCFA from the amount for himself and will send airtime for 1500 FCFA which cannot even last for two weeks and it will get exhausted before you know it. (solar energy consumer).

I told you earlier that it is costly as compared to Eneo. Talking about its users if it was left to me, it should not have existed in the first place; talk less of being installed here, in my opinion. You cannot iron dresses with this electricity in the house. (solar energy consumer).

We have difficulties here because when you want to recharge airtime, they will tell you to send the money first, for example, I lost my wife on the 27th of June, and I gave my son 5000 FCFA to recharge airtime, and he went and came back. His elder brother wanted to iron his shirt, and the meter started alarming when we verified, we discovered that only 870 FCFA was left and 5000 FCFA had disappeared. I ordered for another airtime of 3000 FCFA on the 1st of July, and we spent 7days in darkness without electricity. When we investigated, they told us that there is one central computer in Cameroon, that handles issues related to the solar energy recharge. Also, if the code is not available, you cannot receive airtime, which hinders access to the electricity supply. I have my grandchildren who came for the burial ceremony of their grandmother. They were forced to spend a whole week in darkness before the airtime that I ordered for 3000 FCFA arrived one week after. I felt bad, with the inconveniencies that I encountered in the course of recharging airtime not forgetting my financial situation. (solar energy consumer).

Furthermore, another informant cited that:

Not all the households in this village are electrified with solar energy because we have neither the poles nor the electricity. We lack cables to transport solar electricity. (FDG)

Rural electrification through solar energy

Access to electricity is essential for improving the livelihood of the inhabitants of any remote area. It will permit them to use fridges, storing food, preserve medicine, charge mobile phones, and staying connected, home lighting up, light up streets and schools during the day and at night, power local businesses and power administrative offices. Those who have access rely on polluting unreliable, and costly diesel-powered generators. Solar-powered mini-grids could be the answer to rural access and dirty energy. Well suited to small remote communities, renewable mini-grid energy has become a cheaper and greener option for rural electrification.

Question 2: Do you think solar energy should be introduced in other villages?

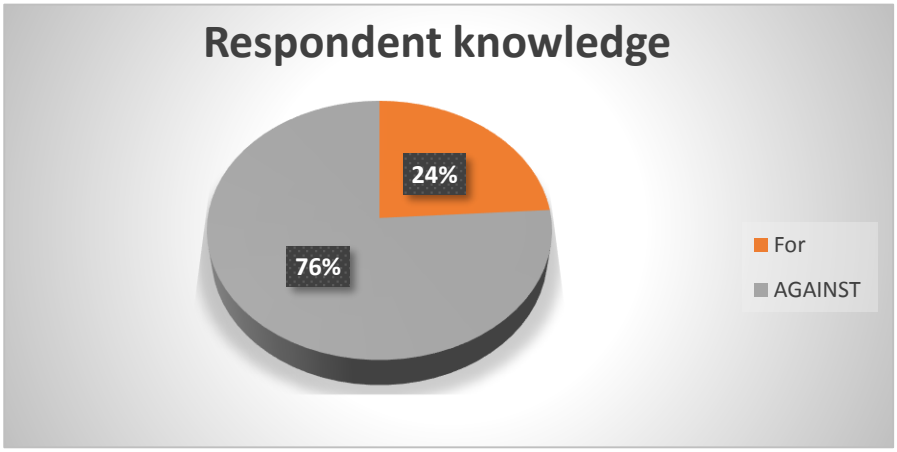

Chart 2: Demonstrate percentages of respondents on the introduction of solar energy.

From our fieldwork, 38 of a cross-section of informants interviewed, supported the fact that solar energy should be introduced in other communities irrespective of the fact that they have electricity representing 76%. The reason is apparent, a majority sees solar energy to be that energy source that is reliable, available, affordable, and above all, sustainable. Most of the informants think that solar energy is suitable for remote areas because transporting HEP to these communities is costly, difficult with bad roads, and they may eventually stay for a long time before having electricity. The role that electricity plays as far as development is concerned can never be undermined. Whereas, 12 informants were against the notion that it should not be introduced in other communities as they don't see anything good about this source of energy representing 24%.

Nevertheless, the coming of solar energy in Bayomen village has opened the eyes of its inhabitants, and it has promoted development in this area. With all these good memories in mind, their wish is to see it being installed in other remote areas so that some of those communities that may never have electricity soon should be electrified with solar energy. Below are some opinions to indicate that solar energy should be introduced in other villages:

Yes, it should be sent to other villages, it will be very excellent. If possible, it should be installed in Bafia because the inhabitants of the Bafia are always appreciating this solar energy. We do not have any problem as far as power cuts are concerned. So, if there is a way that they can even introduce also in other villages it will be good. (solar energy consumer).

Truly; it should be introduced to other places; it is normal because it is independent of things like water and maybe fuel, and we do not have too much maintenance, or some types of problems associated with its usage. (FDG)

In addition, another informant pointed out that:

In fact, it should be used in almost all the communities in Cameroon, but unfortunately, not every community in Cameroon is lucky to have solar energy. It is beneficial, it has succeeded to ameliorate our living conditions, and also make life very easy. It shows the level of blessings being poured on us. (solar energy consumer).

Really, it should go right to my village. I gave the mayor of my village the address of the solar energy project coordinator at Nlongkak. I asked the mayor of my village to verify all those rural areas that don't have electricity, and that electricity might not reach there in the nearest future. In that case something will be done to bring solar energy to them, as it has been given to Bayomen and Ngoron because they were all remote villages. (solar energy consumer).

Furthermore, this none user confirmed that:

Yes, because some communities need electricity, imagine you are in a village and at about 18h30 everyone is already back home because of the absence of electricity. it becomes very difficult for these inhabitants to carry out evening activities. (FDG).

DISCUSSION

The introduction of solar energy in Bayomen has prompted the inhabitants to have diverse opinions concerning this innovative energy source that was recently installed in their village. Solar energy is a new energy source in Bayomen. This explains why only a few of our informants indicated that it was the first time for them to come in contact with it, making it new to those who were seeing it for the first time. Also, it was the largest and dominant energy source.

One good thing about solar energy is that it is available at all times, which renders it reliable especially for home usage, either for lighting, cooking, heating, or for other purposes. Some users confirmed it was conducive, and that it had helped to relieve them from poverty. It brought about development in the village. This could be seen in the number of businesses that have opened their doors like mobile money transactions. Solar energy is very economical depending on how you are using it. For example, if you can use airtime for 2000 FCFA for a month as well as you can still use that same airtime for one hour. It all depends on the type of equipment that you are using.

In addition, if you want to use solar energy with heavy appliances, it will also warrant you to purchase enough airtime that will permit you to operate the equipment. The poor network is a big problem to the smooth functioning of solar systems because it uses. However, airtime and needs a network for airtime to be transferred, it usually hinders solar energy consumers and pushes them to spend more, and at times, the airtime arrives late, keeping them in darkness for a long time. The fact that it is not the whole village that is using solar energy is a call for concern. It is clear that it has some far-reaching challenges. That is why not everyone in the village is using it.

The benefits of solar energy are enormous; that is why its users in Bayomen have used it and have gained some confidence pushing them to wish that rural electrification through solar energy should not only end in their village but continue, most especially to remote and enclaved areas that HEP will never reach. The United Nations' endeavor to provide modern energy to everybody by 2030, U.N. (2010) and SE4All (2013) is based on the assumption that rural electrification contributes to various dimensions of human development. The living condition of the inhabitants of Bayomen village has been dramatically improved because of the recently installed solar energy in their village.

Another area of research could be conducted on the adaptations of solar energy for rural development in Bayomen-Cameroon. Electricity has been provided to so many villages in Cameroon through solar energy. The way the indigenes of these villages are adapting to these innovative energy sources is different. It will be imperative to find out the challenges encountered by the users of this energy sources.

CONCLUSION

The inhabitants of Bayomen have been living without electricity for so many years, until recently, when the government provided them electricity through solar energy. The inhabitants have been using it, permitting them to have multiple opinions concerning these innovative energy sources in their village. It is considered as a new energy source, and the largest of all the energy sources that has existed in the Bayomen village. Its introduction here has also created awareness amongst some inhabitants for the first time.

One of our findings was that solar energy had brought development to Bayomen village. The inhabitants can now watch T.V, and see what is happening worldwide. They used to pay transport to Bafia to carry out some tasks. The advent of solar energy to their village has stopped them from going to Bafia; they do their things on the spot without the stress of traveling.

We also discovered that solar energy is outstanding and it is also economical. For that reason, it had encouraged so many people from other different regions and communities have relocated to Bayomen because they want to come and earn a living from businesses like kiosks, bars, telephone repairs through solar energy. These users are very comfortable with the method of payment put in place by the company in charge, i.e., the pay as you go system, which uses airtime.

Consequently, when there is poor weather, the tendency is that there will be little sunlight. Faced with this situation, the plates will absorb a smaller quantity of sunlight, and which will eventually result in the tiny amount of energy stored. This brings the problem of low voltage. Also, because the population has doubled due to

this source, whenever they pluck their heavy appliances, it will lead to low voltage. A poor network problem can render the process of purchasing airtime complicated making the solar energy consumers to spend more to have airtime, and at times they can go for days without electricity.

The impact of solar energy has improved the well-being of the inhabitants of Bayomen village. It has dramatically changed the area. One can say that solar energy is a solution to villages since they do not need heavy appliances. If it is introduced in remote areas and villages, that will spark-off development, and the living conditions of its inhabitants will be upgraded.

Another area of research could be conducted on the adaptations of solar energy for rural development in Bayomen-Cameroon. Electricity has been provided to so many villages in Cameroon through energy sources; the indigenes of these villages are adapting to this innovative energy source different and at a different pace. It will be imperative to find out the challenges encountered by the users of this energy source.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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