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Village Goes Online with Solar Power



Solar powered telecenter in Suruacá, Brazil.

While Brazil is already the world's 14th largest energy consumer, the lack of access to reliable energy remains a significant barrier to sustainable socio-economic development. This is especially true for those in the lower income strata, for whom access to power is often sporadic or altogether lacking. These people are largely concentrated in the north and northeastern parts of the country.

According to the Government of Brazil, the number of Brazilians without access to energy services is estimated to be 12 million. Disparities between rural and urban areas are widespread, with over 80% of Brazil's population without access to electrical power located in rural areas.

Since October 2002, USAID has financed an energy program that focuses its resources to more effectively reach those millions of Brazilians unconnected to the grid.

USAID, with support from Sandia National Laboratory, Acumen International, Greenstar Corporation, and Projeto Saúde e Alegria (PSA, a

local NGO), plans to install two solar-powered internet-enabled telecenters in the Amazon as tools to support a range of health, educational and cultural programs. In the longer term, the goal is to work with local communities to stimulate the development of sustainable entrepreneurial activities. The first of the communities identified, Suruacá, had its telecenter inaugurated on December 14, 2003. The installation of the second telecenter took place in March 2004 in the community of Maguary, on the east bank of the Tapajós River.

In Suruacá, while the equipment was provided by USAID, the local communities took responsibility for designing and building the telecenter building. Over 50 community members participated in planning and construction of the telecenter, which took four months to get ready.

The hardware provided by USAID includes a 2.0 kW photovoltaic system, with the capacity to provide energy for four computers to operate 8 hours per day, and a local radio broadcast station to operate 4 hours per day. In addition, the telecenter was also equipped with printers, scanners, digital cameras, and satellite Internet connection (provided by the Government of Brazil). Located next to the local community school, it will also be used to improve educational curricula and benefit over 200 children.

Next steps on this project include the use of the telecom network to implement an entrepreneurship capacity building program for the communities in the Tapajós region.

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