

Malawi solar mini-grid shows promise as way of electrifying rural Africa

By [Eldson Chagara](#)

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A solar mini-grid in rural Malawi is powering maize mills, a sunflower oil facility and will help a welder in a nearby village expand his business, showing that centralised grid systems are not Africa's only route towards low-carbon power.



Source: www.unsplash.com

Development experts say village-level solar power is a more promising way of bringing electricity to Africa's remotest areas than conventional grids, which often do not reach them, tend to prioritise more privileged neighbourhoods, and are often powered by polluting fossil-fuel generation.

"I see myself prospering with this electricity project," welder Bartholomew Soko told Reuters TV in the village of Ndawambe. He plans to start making door frames, television stands and drying racks for plates, as well as the bicycles he already repairs.

"If electricity is extended to other rural areas, it would help people with disabilities be self-reliant," Soko, who was injured in a car accident and uses a wheelchair, added.

In Malawi, more than three-quarters of the country's roughly 20 million population does not have access to electricity - a higher proportion than the continental average of roughly half.



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Solar power less costly

The cost of solar power has fallen by more than three quarters globally over the past decade.

The Sitolo project connects more than 700 people across three villages, and local farmers no longer have to trek long distances to get their maize milled or sunflower seeds pressed.

Brenda Limbikani, a sunflower farmer, said local people never used to grow sunflowers. "But with this oil-pressing machine, more people have planted the crop," she said. "This year the number of farmers growing sunflowers is more than ever."

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