

## Opinion

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### Challenge of lighting up remote areas

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**Dublin - When Andy Schroeter arrived in Laos as a freelance consultant in 1995, less than 40 per cent of the country had electricity.**

Some areas were so remote that the government's electricity grid could not reach, he said. Local residents mostly relied on kerosene, candles and rechargeable batteries. The very concept of being environmentally friendly was a foreign notion.

Working for Germany's GTZ to help build power infrastructures in Laos, Schroeter made the most neglected communities his priority. Taking on gigantic tasks has always been Schroeter's style. Back in Germany, he was heavily involved in the antinuclear power project.

"I have been an entrepreneur all my life. I saw enormous potential in renewable energy, so I founded my company Sunlabob [sun system]," Schroeter said.

He said he understood that local villagers would never be able to afford the infrastructure themselves, so Sunlabob had villagers pay for the energy they used.

Making the solar systems commercially viable for each village depends on the number of households. For instance, a solar home system for individual households is used in small villages and the hybrid grid is meant for a village with more than 150 households.

Sunlabob also provides locals with training so they are able to do the maintenance themselves, which makes the system sustainable and helps them link up with local entrepreneurs.

"Local people must decide what they want and have the responsibility in managing the resource in the long term," he said.

Over the past 13 years, this private energy provider has installed more than 6,000 solar systems in Laos, lighting up more than 480 villages through what is said to be an integrated model that involves public and private sectors working in tandem with the villagers.

With numerous internationally recognised awards under its belt, Sunlabob is now extending its franchise to Cambodia, and even as far as Uganda.

Just recently, Schroeter took part in the sixth roundtable of AsiaEurope Environment Forum (ENVforum) under the theme "Energy Sustainability Challenge: Fuelling Cooperation between Asia and Europe" in Dublin.

The twoday discussion focused on three broad themes: a society that uses sustainable energy, the role of the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM - a mechanism initiated under the Kyoto Protocol to help economies meeting their carbon emission reduction target), and AsiaEurope cooperation for sustainable energy. About a dozen presentations were given in front of more than 70 participants.

From the discussion, it was clear that Asia, with growing economies like China and India, would continue having high energy demands. In fact, an estimate by the International Energy Agency suggested that 45 per cent of the world's energy needs in 2030 would come from these two giants.

While heavily relying on oil and coal, there are also calls for policies in mixed energy - such as alternative fuel and renewable energy. And Europe is expected to help Asia tackle related financial, technological, institutional and policy gaps.

As for CDM, the verdict is still out.

"To me, CDM stands for 'complicated, difficult mechanism'," said Tri Mumpuni Iskandar, director of the Ideka foundation, which is helping provide electricity to remote areas in Indonesia through sustainable hydropower.

"I'm not trying to be cynical, but the truth is whatever laws have been released internationally, it is dealing with the money that finally goes back to where it belongs," Iskandar said.

Citing examples of several CDM projects that have been launched by the European Union in developing countries, she said they all had a "European component", meaning that all projects have to include European companies or organisations.

After calculations, as much as 80 per cent of the funding goes back to Europe, she explained.

"We are still struggling between the south and north. Whether the north would like to share with the south is questionable."

Still, Iskandar is hopeful the future will be brighter.

"I'm convinced that somehow, what we have discussed in this meeting - the real need at the ground level - will proceed to the government, where the real implementation is," she said.

And while the international top dogs slug it out with regards to various protocols and agreements, Schroeter and Iskandar said they preferred working on the ground level with real people.

At least this is what gives a very complicated and controversial issue a human face.