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Zambezi Secondary School pupils during a Computers lesson

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Gibson Mhaka

IN 2021, when 18-year-old Lyconse Munkombwe enrolled as a Form One pupil at Zambezi Secondary School in Kadika North Village under Chief Saba in Ward 9 of Binga District, Matabeleland North Province, her dream of pursuing a science career seemed out of reach.

This is because the school lacked both electricity and internet access, making it difficult for her to access essential educational resources and research materials. Like many of her classmates at Zambezi Secondary School, Lyconse, now a Form Four student, had never had the opportunity to use a computer before.

However, a turning point came last month when computer lessons were introduced to the school for the first time. This was after the school benefitted from a solarisation programme being rolled out in the District. The project is being implemented by the Government in partnership with the United Nations Development Fund (UNDP)-led Climate Adaptation Water and Energy Programme (Cawep) and funded by the UK government through a £13.6 million grant.

Under the project, 10 schools in the area were solarised. These include Zambezi Primary, Chalumba Primary, Jumamina Primary, Siansundu Primary, Mankobole Primary, Bunsiswa Primary, Saba Primary School, Zambezi Secondary, Saba Secondary and Siansundu High.

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Freddy Anesu

The Government and its partners are making strides to improve the quality of education for all children through the implementation of a solarisation project that seeks to power rural schools and give learners relevant, inclusive and sustainable education. The move will serve as a backbone to the initiative to provide internet access to all schools by 2030.

Lyconse and her peers at Zambezi Secondary School are beaming with joy. They can't seem to tear themselves away from the laptops provided by the school, a clear sign of their excitement about finally having access to this new technology.

"I want to be an engineer when I finish school, but I initially had moments of doubt since I thought I had enrolled at school without electricity and computers. The solarisation of the school, however, opened up a world of possibilities to actively engage in computers. The introduction of the solar panels has helped us in many ways. Now, we have the chance to study in the evening and complete our homework. We are also writing Calas (Continuous Assessment Learning Activities), which require a lot of research. Thankfully, we now have Wi-Fi at school and this helps us tremendously," Lyconse said.



Zambezi Secondary School headmistress Thabita Muzamba

Another pupil, Twalumba Munkuli doing Form Three at the school, also expressed his appreciation for the solar project. He highlighted how it would empower them to dedicate more time to in-depth online research, a valuable tool for their academic success.

"The introduction of solar power allowed us to finally begin computer studies at school. I'm eager to dedicate more time to practical applications before progressing to Form Four. This hands-on experience will be invaluable in preparing me for the more advanced curriculum," said Twalumba.

The solarisation programme extended its impact beyond electricity. It also provided the schools and the surrounding communities with clean water by utilising solar power to pump water from the rehabilitated Zimbabwe National Water Authority (Zinwa) scheme, specifically its 65-kilometre pipeline.

"I want to thank the Government, the United Nations Development Fund and the UK government for implementing this transformative project in our school. I'm confident that our school's pass rate will improve. With electricity and the availability of internet access, pupils will be able to easily access numerous educational

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“Access to water is also important for us teachers. We used to walk seven kilometres to get water and sometimes we even relied on students to bring water from their homes. Having readily available water is also beneficial for hygiene, especially for the girls, as it allows them to practice proper menstrual hygiene,” said the head of the school, Thabita Muzamba.



Lyconse Munkombwe

A teacher at the school, Thubelihle Sibanda said the installation of the solar panels has been a huge benefit for both students and teachers.

“Now, students can study in the evenings and participate in computer classes. As teachers, we can also conduct research, plan lessons and prepare handouts more effectively. Additionally, the project has provided the school with clean water, solving a major issue we previously faced. This new found access to water extends to the agriculture department as well. With these improvements, there’s no longer a reason for teachers to transfer or students to leave the school. Previously, the lack of basic amenities like electricity and clean water led to teacher turnover,” said Sibanda.

Ward 9 Councillor, Urgent Ndlovu, expressed appreciation to the Cawep programme for the solarisation of schools and the Zambezi Clinic in the area. He said that this initiative will have a significant and lasting positive impact on the community.

The District School Inspector for Binga, Edson Masungu said that the solarisation of schools in the district has led to a reduction in high staff turnover. Previously, many teachers left these schools due to a lack of electricity and clean water.

UNDP Communications Associate, Freddy Anesu explained that the programme’s overarching goal in providing these social amenities was to alleviate the burdens faced by students, communities and clinics.

“So, the scope of the work happening here in Mlibizi of Binga district, which has been generously funded by the UK government and supported by the government of Zimbabwe, which we are implementing as UNDP, includes working with social institutions, schools and clinics and also working with the communities. In total, in terms of solar, we have supported 12 institutions, 10 schools, one clinic and one office of the water authorities to be able to run on renewable energy. In terms of clean water access, what we’ve also done is connected all the schools and the clinic and the communities so that they get clear water,” said Freddy.

He said they complimented Zinwa’s efforts to expand water capacity and ensure clean water access for all schools and communities.

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