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Envisioning a positive energy future for Kartong, The Gambia

Our new community Energy Campaigner Anne Schiffer talks about her recent field trip to The Gambia, part of her ongoing PhD research with Queen's University Belfast

“Over several years of visiting the small coastal town of Kartong, I have built up an understanding of the local energy situation as well as strong personal relationships with local people. On my last visit in August, I wanted to work with *Kartonkas* on creating a positive energy vision. The plan was simple: engage a group of people in discussions about the current state of energy, articulate a positive vision for 2030 and define what is needed to get from one to the other.

“I originally trained as a product designer, with a keen interest in sustainability. My research in The Gambia correlates with a growing movement of designers working in community and international development. However, as a designer we are used to being the ones who innovate and come up with strategies or solutions and then hand them over. This is in conflict to creating local ownership through participation. As a white European I am also mindful of my engagement being perceived as a form of post-colonial intervention.

“Fortunately, I had support to ensure the success of the workshops and to create a local narrative: my host Sankung Sambou was key in selecting participants and mobilising people. His brother Kanjura, a lawyer, took on the role of explaining that considerations of energy should include transport and heating, not just electricity which is the common perception. Together with their friend Foday Jawara, a well respected businessman, he also ensured the session's aim, and limitation as a first step to developing a strategy, was clear. Foday offered his compound as workshop location and agreed to chair the sessions. I encouraged the inclusion of women and young people and insisted that I did not expect discussions to take place in English for my benefit.

“We ran two workshops. One on the current state of energy, the other on envisioning 2030 and how to get there.

“We concluded with a plan to present the resulting strategy to an energy official from the National Energy and Water Company (NAWEC), a relative to Foday.

“The next day news spread that one of the workshop participants had suddenly passed away. There was a sad irony that the funeral of a young man who had mobilised people to take part in a tree planting exercise during a football match the day before, was now the reason why nobody dared to speak of it.

“The excursion to Batokunku took place the day after the funeral. We had discussions with representative from the Batokunku Village Development Committee, which was a tremendous way for *Kartonkas* to learn about the benefits of a community energy project, the challenges that had to be overcome and simply be inspired.

Batokunku wind turbine

The Gambian coastal village of Batokunku is home to the first large wind turbine in West Africa. The project was initiated by German engineer Peter Weissferdt who imported the

150KW second hand turbine from Denmark. Weissferdt set up a charity to fund the project that includes underground cabling for a mini-grid. The village continues to rely on technical support from outside but manages the metering through its energy committee and has full ownership of the project. In Batokunku, a unit of electricity costs 22% of the cheapest tariff offered by NAWEC.

In memory of Muhammed Sussoko (Pa Boy).