



Sam Judd

Comment on the environment from nzherald.co.nz columnist Sam Judd

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Sam Judd: Let there be light



The Apia Racecourse Solar Array. Photo / Henrietta McNeill

Without a doubt, one of the biggest issues facing Small Island Developing States (and the rest of the world for that matter), is where we get the energy to switch on the lights.

Due to their obvious remoteness, fuel is extremely expensive, which means that island economies are constantly held to ransom by fluctuating prices. This lack of certainty makes investment difficult and is a real holdback.

The head of the United Nations Environment Program, Achim Steiner, put it well when he quoted the President of Palau in saying that "The environment is our economy" - particularly in the islands. He also explained the significant barrier presented to sustainable economic development in that energy costs in small islands is often 200-400% higher than in the United States.

In places like Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea ([where we have done some development work](#)), less than [30% of households](#) have access to electricity.

Alongside energy security is of course, the inevitable discussion around climate change. There is now essentially a consensus of acceptance and small islands - the least equipped to deal with it - are already bearing the brunt of the problems.

There are stories of villages in Fiji that have already been moved inland as adaptation measures and unprecedented natural disasters that pose a huge threat to people in the Pacific.

So what can we do to bring light to these people without leaving them tied to dirty fossil-fuel-powered generators?

New Zealand, realising our important role in the region, but relatively low ability to fund aid projects, has carved out a space in technical capacity building.

We partnered with the European Union (who alongside our \$7.5 million contribution, has provided the lion's share of the funding) to deliver an impressive project and today - the biggest solar array in the South Pacific was launched here in Samoa. Check out a time lapse of the construction below.



The world - including big funders like the EU - now realises that we have the expertise to deliver these projects: Auckland-based innovators [Reid Technology](#) played a major role in the project and we managed the European funds to launch the array in record time.

The result? Along with two other solar projects, this 2.2 Megawatt array will provide 4.5% of the total energy demand in Samoa, saving millions in fuel costs as well as associated benefits in air quality and economic resilience.

Many of the small island states are aiming to set an example with these projects by shifting their energy use to 100% renewable. As worldwide demand for solar continues to grow exponentially - [more people are now employed in renewables in the US](#) and [Australia](#) than coal - we can expect that the sunny islands will soon be able to save on energy and be able to invest more in essentials such as health and education.