India Case Study: Moving "Beyond Access"

Since 2017, Power for All has been working in India, by engaging with the decentralized renewable energy (DRE) sector to facilitate a shift in narrative that goes "beyond access", and by establishing a unified voice that communicates the co-benefits of DRE solutions in achieving the Indian government's non-energy related development goals, i.e. universal healthcare, doubling farmers' income, creating green jobs, clean cooking, and others.

CHALLENGE

The Government of India declared in 2019 that its grid extension program (known as Saubhagya) had achieved 100% household electrification. However, millions of homes and businesses, especially in rural India, still lack power, or suffer from significant quality and reliability issues, in part because state-owned utilities, already struggling financially, deprioritize servicing poorer rural communities[1]. Clearly there is a need for private-sector decentralized renewable energy (DRE) companies, including solar home systems and mini-grids, to be integrated into India's energy infrastructure to address this gap. But talking about "energy access" is no longer relevant in a country where, on paper at least, everyone has access. A new narrative was needed.

SOLUTION

Using its integrated, evidence-based campaign approach, Power for All used communications and data to re-orient the perspective of key decision-makers (nationally and at the state level) on the importance of mainstreaming DRE, and worked with local partners to shift the sector narrative to go "beyond access". This unified sector voice spotlighted the value that DRE adds to achieving the Indian government's non-energy related development goals (i.e. "co-benefits"): universal healthcare, doubling farmer income, creating green jobs, clean cooking, etc.

RESULTS

- In 2019, Power for All kicked off an editorial partnership with ET Energy World,[2] part of leading national media outlet Economic Times, to create a dedicated platform called "Energizing Rural India", publishing regular content focused on the "beyond access" theme. It has so far worked with over 40 DRE companies and research organizations to spotlight their work on healthcare, agriculture, education, micro-enterprise, innovation, jobs and finance. In addition, Power for All has secured media coverage in other leading national and global publications, including a story in The Economist that highlighted the success of

mini-grids in India. It also launched a media publication on Medium.com in 2017 dedicated to the India DRE sector, called Powering Rural India, which quickly gained more than 1,000 subscribers.

- Power for All developed a first-of-its-kind messaging guide for the DRE sector in India, which included comprehensive supporting evidence and data that was curated by Power for All's Platform for Energy Access Knowledge (PEAK). The PEAK team has also developed reports, factsheets, research summaries and data visualizations highlighting the work in India[3].

- Power for All established the first-ever India DRE communications secretariat with the goal of sharing information and coordinating external communications. This included CLEAN, Shakti Foundation, SELCO, IFC Lighting Asia, Smart Power India, CEEW, CEED, WRI, The Climate Group, cKinetics, IISD and others. Building on this, in 2019, Power for All led a sector workshop on repositioning DRE along the "beyond access" theme. This group, through follow up meetings and discussions, has helped transform how the Indian DRE sector is communicating.

- In 2019, Power for All launched the Powering Jobs India Census, unveiling the first comprehensive data on DRE jobs, including women and youth. The event was attended by over 70 participants, including government officials, sector experts, researchers, media, and the private sector. At the event, MNRE official Dr. PC Maithani spoke of the potential of linking the government's Suryamitra program (youth skills development) with the need for skilled labor in the renewable energy sector.

- Power for All has worked closely with CLEAN, providing communications support to both the DRE trade association and its members. Power for All supported the launch of the 2017 and 2019 State of the DRE Sector reports, conducted a masterclass on communications for DRE enterprises at the India Energy for All Summit 2020. In addition, a social media toolkit produced in partnership with CLEAN is sent out to 185 subscribers each month highlighting developments in the sector, to support partners and other stakeholders in amplifying messages.

- Since policies and mandates are ultimately implemented by states, Power for All worked to strengthen DRE support in Jharkhand by engaging government and other stakeholders. It has set up a coordination working group to ensure alignment among various players.

- In response to the COVID-19 crisis, Power for All brought together nearly 20 leading institutions from health and renewable energy to call for solarizing 40,000 unelectrified rural clinics, outlining four interventions in an open letter to the Government of India. The letter was delivered to multiple national and state ministries, funders and international development agencies, and covered widely in the media.

Notes:
1. Post Saubhagya - Moving Beyond Connections to Quality of Supply (Shakti Sustainable Energy Foundation)
2. ETEnergyWorld is produced by The Economic Times, India's fourth-largest English newspaper with a total readership of 3.7 million readers. Across business newspapers, ET is ahead by more than half of the combined readership of the other four – Hindu Business Line, Business Standard, Mint and Financial Express – which have a total readership of less than 2.4 million.
3. Examples include: Factsheet: Grid Still Failing Access in India; Powering Irrigation in India; Powering Jobs Census 2019

Mlinda has found Power for All to be an active and essential voice for the access-to-energy sector. Not only does it deliver accurate and well-researched pieces that are useful in themselves for the industry, but it has also successfully influenced mainstream media to shift broader perceptions of the rural electrification market.

- Rebecca Symington, Trustee, Mlinda Foundation

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