



African Energy Solar Success Series

Power Couple

By Lincoln Dahl

I looked over my cold mango juice at the Mint Café in Lusaka and wondered what would become of the man in front of me. It was September 2014, and Dirkpieter Idzenga's very hopeful solar sales and installation company was dissolving. He and his business partner had struggled to make a profit and to agree on a workable business model, so they had decided to close down the company. Dirkpieter was about to be unemployed and out of business in his adopted country of Zambia. As we sat together and thought through options for his future, I encouraged him to get back in the business. This was selfish, because he had been one of my best customers and I wanted to see him back again. But I didn't have much confidence – he had little capital, no business premises, no inventory, and besides, he looked downright depressed.

A few days ago, in January 2018, I sat across the table from Dirkpieter again. But this time he was not alone – and he was definitely not depressed.

After the business closure in 2014, he decided to open ID Solar Solutions and somehow negotiated to get the lease on the former business location. Working from the servant's quarters of the property on a tiny budget, Dirkpieter and his lead installer William – whom have been working together from the beginning – set up a new team and focused on power back-up systems as a quick path to liquidity. They were blessed with severe

power failures at the time and the business did so well that he became one of my best customers again. After the first year in business, he was working non-stop and badly needed some management help to keep up. Fortunately, this was about the time that his wife Joke was ready to move on from her employment and he convinced her to join him in the business. With an MBA degree, she was probably over-qualified for the job, but her impact has been immense.



ID Solar Solutions Team

Today ID Solar Solutions is a bustling place, bursting with ideas, employees and inventory. In 2017, it was African Energy's best customer in Zambia. When I asked Joke and Dirkpieter what has made it work so well, Dirkpieter said "I think it has been quality and consistency – we never compromised that. It was tough in the beginning, but it made the difference in the end".

"We stay focused, and do what we are good at", says Joke. "We are not big enough to offer

solutions to everyone”.

Dirkpieter always had a passion for renewables, and so the solar business was a natural fit for Zambia. They were grateful for backup work when they needed it and it makes good money, but selling backup systems is not as rewarding as other parts of their business. Their faces brighten when I ask them to talk about their favorite systems.

“Schools and health centres are still very rewarding”, says Joke. “And when you light up a village for the first time”, adds Dirkpieter.

They recently finished a maternity ward and an operation theatre at a rural hospital and it is still amazing to them to see the difference that electricity makes. Soon after they finished another hospital system (a midwifery training hospital), the generator broke down, but all appliances kept working on solar power. These systems are what keeps them working hard together in the solar business. They make a great pair and, if you will pardon the pun, a power couple.

But I think I discovered Dirkpieter’s secret for success and happiness towards the end of the conversation. “You need someone next to you who you know you can trust”, he said. “It’s not fun doing it alone.”



A PV system being installed on a hospital in Katondwe