



# African Energy Solar Success Series

## Resilience in Liberia

By Lincoln Dahl

Paul Kollie invited me to dinner at his solar-powered beach cottage near Monrovia a few months ago. Steve and I were in Liberia to do a bit of training in anticipation of the re-launching of the African Energy Depot, and Paul's company is our Depot manager there. I had sensed that Paul's life was a bit of a success story, but over some great Liberian food, Paul told me more.

Paul was a young man when the war broke out in Liberia. He was living in Monrovia as an apprentice mechanic and was separated from parents. As the war intensified, his boss asked him to help drive his vehicles to safety in Abidjan, which Paul did, repairing the vehicles along the way. However, once they arrived in Abidjan, his boss abandoned him and Paul found himself living on the streets in a strange Francophone city. He managed to find a vehicle repair shop that needed an electrical technician. Although his French was rudimentary, they gave him a chance to work, and he quickly proved himself. This gave him enough money for food, but not for lodging, so he slept rough. One day, shortly after he started, he encountered an American family staying in a guesthouse across the street from the shop.

This family was excited to hear Paul speak English because they were also having communication challenges in Cote d'Ivoire. They had intended to come to Liberia to serve as missionaries, but were denied entry due to the war, and were waiting in Abidjan. Paul was one of the first English speakers and first Liberians they had encountered. Thus began a friendship that would be life-changing for both parties.



As soon as they were able, Paul and this family moved to Monrovia, where Paul found work as a mechanic and the family started a church. As Liberia emerged from war, the lack of a working electricity grid was one of the greatest challenges. Soon Paul partnered with American missionary Brendon Shank to create West Coast Services. They started a small micro-grid powered by a diesel generator to serve 12 homes, since Liberia did not have a working grid. West Coast also started selling and installing solar products. As in most of Africa, Brendon and Paul were self-taught solar experts, learning from any source available and installing increasingly complex systems. African Energy was fortunate to be one of their first suppliers, and the relationship has grown strong over the last decade.



The solar market was just picking up when Ebola struck in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea. The outbreak effectively shut down business in the three countries, but it also had a very personal cost for Paul. His father in law was a health worker and was an unwitting carrier of the disease, eventually infecting his daughter, Paul's wife. Both father and daughter died from Ebola, leaving Paul alone with three small children and business at a standstill. But, as he had done all his life, Paul moved forward with faith. His partner Brendon had left the country at the beginning of the outbreak, so Paul took over the company and went to work trying to grow it. His persistence has paid off.



This month things are a lot better in Paul's life. He has remarried, Liberia has recovered from Ebola, and business is booming. The church his adopted family started (Monrovia Christian Fellowship) has become one of the largest churches in the country. Paul's mini-grids have grown to over 600 subscribers powered by a number of generators. West Coast Services was just nominated by a group of Liberian radio stations as the solar company of the year. They recently moved into a building that Paul built along one of Monrovia's main roads, which houses the West Coast store in the front and the African Energy Depot in the back. The grand opening was last week and already some of the Depot stock is sold out. These are encouraging signs, but as anywhere, the future of Liberia is uncertain. Anything could happen, but regardless of the challenges, we can imagine that Paul will make the best of it!

