Jaza Says Solar Energy is a 'Gateway' for Solving Africa's Energy, Communication Needs

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Jaza founders Jeff Schnurr (left) and Sebastian Manchester (right).

A New Brunswick startup is bringing sustainable energy to Sub-Saharan Africa, where around 600-million people live without access to energy.

Jaza Energy uses local energy "hubs" powered by solar panels to charge motorcycle-style batteries from locals to take home to charge their electronics and power their homes. Customers pay a fee per battery charge and wire kits.

Jaza's co-founder and CEO Jeff Schnurr founded Sackville-based organization Community Forests International about 10 years ago. In a Skype interview with Huddle from Tanzania, he says got the idea for Jaza about two and a half years ago while planting trees on the Tanzanian coast.

"About two and a half years ago, a woman we were working with in one of the communities said, 'Jeff, trees are great, but how we can we charge our phones?' In that community, in particular, people were travelling by boat to go to a town … to actually pay someone to charge their phones," says Schnurr. "Then people are lighting their homes with kerosene. They spend around 20 per cent of their entire household income each year just on cell phone charging and kerosene."

"We wanted to see if there was something we could do solve that challenged. I contacted a friend of mine who is a masters engineering student at Dalhousie, doing his masters in mechanical engineering. He was working with a startup in San Francisco on energy storage. We started tossing around ideas to see the cheapest way that could provide power to these communities."

Schnurr's engineering friend would turn out to be Jaza's other co-founder Sebastian Manchester.

An outside view of one of the Jaza charging stations.
Image: Submitted

"What we came up with is really just a way that we can build a small building, put some solar panels on the roof," says Schnurr, "That building serves as a charging station where we charge batteries where our customers come and swap out batteries for new ones that are charged, carry them home, plug them in, and use those batteries to power with their households."

Since its inception in early 2016, Jaza now powers more than 500 households in the Sub-Saharan Africa and has staff based in both New Brunswick and Halifax.

Jaza is on track to power more than 30 more communities by the end of this year. Schnurr says providing these communities access to sustainable electricity helps on a couple different levels.

It really extends people's day. Typically in these communities when the sun goes down, everything stops," he says. "It's completely transformative. Students can study late, parents can stay up later, it's absolutely transformative on the households"

It also helps with connectivity.

"Lots of people have cell phones, but in the communities we're going to, even if they have them, there's no guarantee that they will be charged," says Schnurr. "It's really energy as a gateway to communication as well and connecting people."

Jaza isn't the only New Brunswick startup that's bringing sustainable electricity to rural Africa. Fredericton-based Mbissa focuses on bringing sustainable energy to West Africa with a very similar model. But Shurr says solar power and batteries are just the beginning for Jaza.

 "We are using solar as our gateway. There are a lot of great companies working in the energy access space and with 600 million Africans without energy, there's lots of room for collaboration and competition," he says. "Our model is based on the idea that when we treat individuals as customers and not beneficiaries we can serve their needs through a sustainable solution. Energy is our starting point, but the sky is the limit for the other products and services we can provide."

He says Jaza plans on reaching a million customers over the next five years.

Jaza customers and the company's lighting kit.
Image: Submitted.

"Once we build a customer base and start providing electricity we can offer other products like TVs, cellphones or anything else our customers might want," says Schnurr. "If Amazon had of started in Africa they would have begun with solar and not books. We want to connect our customers to the world and then continue to serve their needs."

Others in Canada's startup community see the potential for Jaza as well. The company was recently [one of two from New Brunswick startups](#) named in the prestigious Candian Innovation Exchange Top 20, something Schnurr says shows the need for startups to tackle big issues.

"The biggest thing for me is the recognition from the startup community that entrepreneurs should be thinking about truly large challenges. A lot of the waves in technology are based on AI, machine learning, the tools, and I think it's really important for entrepreneurs to think about the largest challenges that threaten humanity, whether it's climate change, food security, recognizing clean and renewable energy," says Schnurr.

"I think it's really important to see that the Canadian startup community is recognizing the large business opportunity in connecting the next billion people, but also recognizing us as people who are trying to take that on."