

Media Release

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Pimaga Solar Grid Launch

How the power of the sun is building community resilience and helping the country's next generation develop vital job skills in the Southern Highlands

Aspiring electricians, carpenters and mechanics in Kutubu in PNG's Southern Highlands province will now be able to develop their skills using professional-grade tools connected to uninterrupted power supply, following the installation of a solar mini grid at the Pimaga Vocational Education and Training Centre (VET).

Together in partnership with SLB (Schlumberger) and USAID- PNG Electrification Partnership (PEP), the Santos Foundation and Pimaga VET officially launched the new solar mini grid and adjoining battery at the Pimaga VET Centre in Kutubu on 1st October 2024.

The 99KW rooftop solar system attached to a 149KWh capacity battery and Cummins 110KVA three-phase generator will ensure students at the VET Centre can now train and learn using the same tools and practices which are the standard throughout industry and are required to achieve nationally recognised trade qualifications.

The mini grid represents a piece of critical infrastructure in Pimaga needed to make high-quality education and vocational training accessible for more young people in Kutubu, according to Santos Foundation Chief Executive Jodie Hatherly.

"We know that skilled communities are resilient communities, and that's why the Santos Foundation is focused on improving and expanding the opportunities available for young people to study, to build new skills, and to learn trades that are in as much demand in their own community as they are the broader workforce," Ms Hatherly said.

"We want to empower communities and support the next generation to be healthy, educated and skilled to shape their own future. Education and vocational training is at the heart of economic advancement."

Speaking of the Santos Foundation's inaugural partnership with SLB and ongoing partnerships with USAID-PEP and Pimaga VET, Ms Hatherly said the united approach ensured the project was as impactful as possible.

The initiative demonstrates the Santos Foundation's approach in striking more partnerships with corporates, the government and development partners on the ground in PNG to leverage the Foundation's existing footprint, skills base and infrastructure, to affect more change.

For partner SLB, the initiative represented a meaningful and sustainable step to widen access to education in the community, according to SLB Australasia Managing Director Najib Gharib.

"This transformative project ... exemplifies our unwavering commitment to sustainability. As a global technology leader, sustainability is at the heart of everything we do, focusing on climate action, people, and nature. This project highlights our dedication to supporting communities, enhancing in-country value, and expanding educational opportunities," he said.

"Through collaboration with the SANTOS Foundation, US Aid, Pimaga VET, the local community, and the PNG government, it stands as a testament to the power of innovation & partnerships in driving sustainability and creating a better future together."

Ms Hatherly agreed.

“Working together with our corporate, development and community partners, including Pimaga VET Centre and the Kutubu Youth Council, enabled us to come up with a solution which was tailor-made to the needs of the community – from gauging the right infrastructure, to its size, to sourcing and installing the panels and battery.

“This mini grid project demonstrates how we can work to leverage Santos Foundation infrastructure, knowledge and relationships on the ground with the support of like-minded partners to deliver a really fantastic result. None of this would have been possible without our partners SLB, USAID-PEP and in Pimaga.”

USAID Country Representative to Papua New Guinea Nino Nadiradze said the challenge of providing power to remote communities requires private sector investment from forward thinking companies like Santos.

“USAID has partnered with Santos to develop mini-grids that not only improve health, education, and overall quality of life for the Pimaga community, but also serve as models for other companies.

“This initiative demonstrates how businesses can profitably deliver green power to rural communities,” Ms Nadiradze said.

Community and village support from the residents of Pimaga has also played a key role in the success of the VET Centre and surrounding development including teachers’ housing and a workshop, which are now regarded as a community assets which all residents protect and maintain.

Community members volunteered to clear the land for the teachers housing - by hand using no machines – and continue to work to maintain and protect the infrastructure.

“Partnering with the community from the very start means residents all feel a sense of ownership of what’s been delivered. It means the VET, solar grid and anything else we do in Pimaga has a better chance of being sustainable in the long term,” Ms Hatherly said.

Santos Foundation Senior Program Manager Anthony Uechtritz said that the new infrastructure was the lynchpin needed to make sure Pimaga VET students could access high-quality education and training opportunities aligned to national standards, and skills they need to find jobs in industry and in their community.

“Providing a renewable energy solution in such a remote area that needs energy for development is transformative,” Mr Uechtritz said. “This significant investment will enable the students to use modern tools and equipment as part of their trade training.”

Founded in PNG in 2011 and initially known as the Oil Search Foundation, the Santos Foundation has now been in operation for almost 14 years and is dedicated to helping communities thrive in every region Santos operates, through activities seeking to address health outcomes, youth opportunities, community development, and family and sexual violence.

Since 2016, the Foundation in PNG together with its partners has supported the administration of 1.5 million vaccines across 73 health facilities, delivered and invested more than \$US157 million in funding and helped more than 1500 children enrol in early learning centres. It has also provided more than 267 grants to Santos PNG based employees and contractors to support their communities.

More broadly, the Foundation supports Santos’ purpose of helping to create a better world for everyone through two target streams, including building community resilience and advancing economic pathways.

Installation of the solar mini grid comes as the Santos Foundation and its partners are investing in other IT infrastructure and training initiatives across Pimaga’s community learning facilities. Earlier this month, staff inside the Pimaga Literacy Library completed new training and refresher courses in Ipad and digital learning to help extend their teaching skills and to get more impact from their computer resources in class.

About the Santos Foundation

The Santos Foundation is a development partner dedicated to improving the lives of Papua New Guineans. It focuses on programs in health, community development, youth, and family and sexual violence.

In 2018, the Santos Foundation board sought to provide pathways for youths in local communities in the Southern Highlands of PNG. To address the youth bulge, the Foundation developed the Youth Opportunities program, supporting employment pathways and other learning opportunities for young people.

The Pimaga VET Centre was identified as an institution that could support employment pathways for young people in Kutubu. The centre offers young people learning and training opportunities to further their chances of employment, with a focus on trade and technical skills.

Since the Foundation began supporting the VET in late 2022, enrolments have more than doubled from 107 students to a current enrolment of 265, and female enrolments have risen more than four-fold to 31.