

Senegal in renewables drive as new solar park unveiled

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Technicians operate electrical cabinets on October 22, 2016 during the opening ceremony of a new photovoltaic energy production site in Bokhol

Senegal put into service one of sub-Saharan Africa's largest solar energy projects Saturday as it pushes to become a regional player in renewables on a continent where the majority remain off-grid.

The 20-megawatt Senergy 2 project in Bokhol, close to the Mauritanian border, will serve 160,000 people with electricity, and will contribute to

Senegal's target of serving 20 percent of its energy needs with renewables by the end of 2017.

"Without energy there can be neither growth nor development," said Senegalese President Macky Sall at the opening ceremony.

"With the Bokhol facility, we take a new step and Senegal enters wholeheartedly into a new, clean-energy era," he told the audience in a country where 45 percent currently lack power at home.

The \$28 million project was developed by French renewables firm GreenWish and backed by the Senegalese state, with financing through Britain and Norway via their joint development investment vehicle Green Africa Power.

It will prevent the emission of 23,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide every year, according to GreenWish.

Two more upcoming solar projects will add another 50 MW of power to the Senegalese grid by the end of January alone, boosting a current capacity of 850 MW according to figures from national electricity firm Senelec.

The Bokhol project is dwarfed by the size of continental leaders Morocco and South Africa's solar parks, however.

Senegal is pushing to become an example for renewables in west Africa, which lags behind other regions in its uptake of the technology.

"There was a real engagement on the part of the Senegalese government to develop renewable energy," said Charlotte Aubin Kalaidjian, CEO of GreenWish, told AFP ahead of the ceremony.

"Senegal was really ahead of the game," she added.

A tiny percentage of sub-Saharan Africa's energy needs are currently served by solar energy despite abundant, year-round sunshine and unused land on much of the continent.

Around 600 million of sub-Saharan Africa's billion-strong population lacks access to electricity.

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