

## Urja Unlimited : Solar Powering Villages

Faridabad, India



Puneet Ahuja

**Organization type:**

for profit

Project Stage:

Growth

**Budget:**

\$500,000 - \$1 million

Website:

<http://www.urjaunlimited.in>

- [Renewable energy](#)

### Project Summary

#### Elevator Pitch

**Concise Summary: Help us pitch this solution! Provide an explanation within 3-4 short sentences.**

Urja Unlimited provides solar energy business solutions to rural entrepreneurs, empowering them to earn livelihoods through providing solar energy to rural community. Ours is therefore a clean energy + livelihoods venture that has a triple bottomline impact. We build & implement solutions that allow solar energy to be installed as a product OR a service. Over 75,000 villages in India lack access to energy, which forces a majority of the rural community to remain trapped into poverty. At Urja Unlimited, we believe a sustainable solution lies in setting up Urja Unnati centers that build, develop & support solar entrepreneurs - solving the main problem of lack of energy access. This leads to a far larger and broad-based positive social impact in the area around the Urja Unnati centers. Over the last 3 years, we have impacted over 15000 lives across 3 states in India. We are now aiming at to increasing this impact 10X over the next 12 months and increasing our footprint to 5 states in India. By 2015, we aim to have impacted 1 million lives through a range of energy solutions across the Indian sub continent.

#### About Project

**Problem: What problem is this project trying to address?**

It is ironical that the rural poor pay twice as much as urban consumers pay for similar lighting needs. And they reside in 75000 villages in India. Lack of Energy access is also the reason that they remain poor, entrapped in a downward spiral, spending upto 15% of their monthly cashflows around meeting energy needs. Figures vary, but it is estimated that over 450 million in India lack energy access - and hence burn fossil fuels to meet lighting needs. This creates an unhealthy environment inside the household, is unsafe, and expensive as an energy option. The requirements vary and while lighting is one need, there has emerged an acute need to charge mobile phones and stay 'connected'. In In a large number of households, children's education has started to occupy a prominent place in the minds of parents, and need to have a reliable lighting source exists to ensure a better facility for the child. Over the years, the administration has not been able to provide grid connectivity since it is not viable in many instances ( and most of the times, the tail end becomes last priority for the state to supply electricity to).

**Solution: What is the proposed solution? Please be specific!**

Urja Unlimited relies on an active network of alliance partners that range from Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and Micro Finance Institutions, bilateral aid organisations, corporates and CSR activities and programs, and other civil society organisations / entities working the development sector. Unlike 'Chinese products' that have swamped the market, our products and solutions have been designed keeping in mind the rural market and its needs. Over the past 3 years, we have ensured a regular feedback mechanism that has helped us provide solutions for specific regions / problems. We have consciously kept ourselves away from 'import and sale' models. Over time, our endeavour is to get 'manufacturing' as close to the last mile as possible without compromising quality. This will ensure ready uptake, lower costs for the end user, and a robust post sales mechanism that can tackle most problems faced by beneficiaries adopting new technology. Our solutions are now powered through MPPT technology for low voltages, that shall make them amongst the most efficient in the low cost products category (< INR 600 = USD 12) in the world and while tests are underway, lab results have been on target.

Impact: How does it Work

**Example: Walk us through a specific example(s) of how this solution makes a difference; include its primary activities.**

Urja Unlimited is setting up one of the largest livelihood program based around clean energy. With this, the challenge of solving energy needs in rural communities gets largely solved. Urja Unnati centers allow entrepreneurs to earn livelihoods in the range of INR 3000-5000 (USD 100) per month. This is over and above any current farm based income ( agriculture being the main occupation in most cases) that the household earns. The Urja Unnati centers are being developed as full scale distributor models catering to a set of villages ensuring that the last mile gets connected. Each entrepreneur caters to 6-8 new customers every month on an average. Of the 6 entrepreneur models that we set up, 4 have survived for the last 18 months, and now registering growth in income. The distributors have also shown willingness to distribute other products, such as energy saving cook-stoves and met with success. This allows them to cater to a broader client base in the local community. Through regional rural banks, many of the community projects have started to gain acceptance and receive funding. With 2 banks being signed on as our partners for funding, we have been able to help the Urja Unnati center owners part finance the entire business. Our energy models are being fine-tuned continually for larger energy requirements - with DC mini grids being promoted and established in villages to help increase impact and income (more stable revenue) for the rural entrepreneur.

Sustainability

**Marketplace: Who else is addressing the problem outlined here? How does the proposed project differ from these approaches?**

Many village distribution models exist for different product categories ranging from FMCG products, mobiles / mobile services to electrical goods and others for rural markets. We view these as complimentary models, that can help increase attractiveness of establishing Urja Unnati centers. The continuous innovation and focus on our product development helps us access leading technology from across the world, and bring this to rural entrepreneurs for them to leverage. Some of the solar products are proprietary and others are co-developed with our partners. The ability to bring new, cost effective technology has helped increase attractiveness for our rural entrepreneurs. Also, the fact, that our focus has remained on providing solutions has helped stay ahead of larger players who operate mostly as 'distributor led' 'product companies'. The distributors largely focus on high margin product lines and miss out on 'high value, low cost solutions' simply because the larger companies do not provide these. We encourage our rural entrepreneurs to bring back problems to which we help find solutions. This process also builds stronger understanding and effectively trains our rural entrepreneurs. Having partnered with third party organisations has helped us increase the footprint, and we are in a strong position to replicate the Urja Unnati model in other parts of the country.

**Source URL:** <https://www.changemakers.com/node306408/entries/urja-unlimited-solar-powering-villages>