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Cooperative Expands Energy Use in South Asia

Pakistan and Afghanistan are the latest additions to the South Asia Regional Initiative for Energy Cooperation and Development (SARI/Energy), a program that promotes collaboration and improvements in energy use among South Asian nations.

The two join Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, and Sri Lanka in the USAID-backed effort.

Energy is one of the cornerstones of development, fueling economic growth and social progress. Yet USAID estimates that today 40 percent of poor people who live in urban areas have no access to electricity. Instead, they rely on batteries, wood, charcoal, or kerosene for heat and cooking, or get electricity illegally.

The few people who have electricity in developing countries often find it unreliable—subject to rolling blackouts or out of service.

The International Energy Agency (IEA) says demand will double in developing countries between now and 2030. City residents will have an easier time getting electricity than rural residents as development happens, but “the absolute number of people without electricity will increase slightly in towns and cities,” according to an IEA report.

In Afghanistan, about 6 percent of the population is connected to the public grid, according to the World Bank, which provided a \$105 million line of credit in 2004 to improve power supply in the country. The situation in Pakistan is marginally better: about half the population is connected to the public grid.

SARI/Energy considered it a watershed event in October when Afghan and Pakistani energy officials traveled to India to participate in the program’s semiannual review.

“The fact that India and Pakistan are now talking to each other on energy issues in the context of our regional effort is what makes this special,” said Bob Beckman, regional coordinator and program manager for SARI/Energy. With energy cooperation in South Asia, “there are no losers, only gainers, as trade in hydropower and natural gas will even trade balances, boost government budgets, and provide increased security of supply.”

Since its start in 2000, SARI/Energy has focused on four broad areas: energy security, regulatory reform, distribution improvements, and efficiency. It has brought 3,500 energy sector professionals together. These exchanges, said Beckman, have spurred reform in countries “because seeing is believing, and decision makers went home believing they could do the same or better.”

SARI/Energy’s efforts build the framework that allows developing countries to move forward with power projects. In Sri Lanka, for example, SARI/Energy helped establish a fund for energy efficiency investments and helped the country map renewable energy sources on the island for the first time.

Pakistan and Afghanistan will gradually increase their participation with SARI/Energy. Pakistani efforts, for instance, will likely feature regulatory reform and development of renewable energy.



Andhra Pradesh Central Power Distribution Company representatives discusses operations and maintenance procedures with SARI/Energy executives from Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka.

Electricity generation and transmission, as well as renewable energy, are being emphasized in Afghanistan. “We’re going to complement bilateral efforts to keep the lights on by drawing on regional resources that can efficiently address Afghan needs,” Beckman said, who visited Kabul recently to prepare an initial work plan.