

WakaWaka says the Power+ solar charger can power its LED device for up to 200 hours via a USB connection. It can also be used to charge a smartphone 1.5 times.

 WakaWaka



SUSTAINABILITY: WAKAWAKA

A brighter future for millions

With around third of the world's population living without access to reliable energy, half of these completely off-grid, it is little wonder Maurits Groen says his ambitions are "limitless" in terms of providing people with a safe source of energy. The CEO of Dutch social enterprise WakaWaka heard first-hand the plight of people, often children, dying following kerosene lamp fires on a trip to South Africa and was determined there must be a solution. "300,000 perish annually in a horrible death," he says, adding millions more globally are maimed from accidental fires, made worse by the fact many houses that use the lamps are made from flammable material like wood and there is often no nearby water source to extinguish the fire. Around 4.3 million die each year from household air pollution, of which kerosene is a major source, and unintended ingestion of kerosene is also one of the most common causes of child poisoning, according to the World Health Organization (WHO). "That's unacceptable in this day and age," says Mr Groen, "and something we need to change, rapidly."

Having worked for nearly 40 years in the sustainability field as a consultant and author, Mr Groen – whose name means 'green' in Dutch – was well placed to help South Africa find solutions to making the 2010 football World Cup carbon neutral through its Green Goal programme. He and business partner Camille van Gestel suggested replacing millions of incandescent lightbulbs (which convert 90% of the energy they use into heat rather than light) with LEDs (light-emitting diodes); football body FIFA was delighted with the idea and named the company a Green Goal partner. "The only problem at that time was the LEDs were still very expensive, even in an economy like South Africa; although it is the most advanced economy in Africa, the average person only earns \$2 a day. So, they were more or less forced to keep using the wasteful lightbulbs."

The experience taught them much about



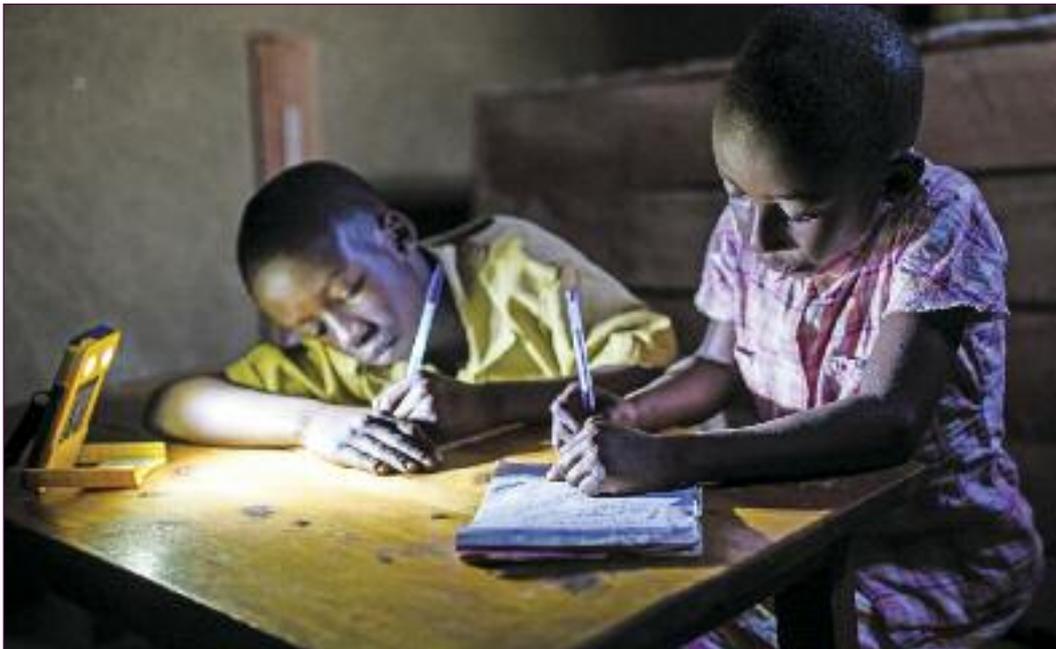
WakaWaka founder and CEO Maurits Groen explains how solar energy works to children in Rwanda.

 WakaWaka

access to power and that "even in South Africa, a quarter of the population is not connected to the grid". The country also spends around \$26 million a year caring for burns victims from kerosene cookstove incidents, according to the WHO.

"I thought we should do something about that. So that's when we went one step further, not only introducing LEDs but also introducing the power to light it, with a very efficient solar panel in a good-looking device that does not weigh much and which is very efficient. You can charge it in one day of good African sunshine and it gives you 200 hours of reading light. The excess power can be used to charge small devices, so you have eternal free power."

Following a year testing prototypes, the partners turned to crowdfunding website Kickstarter in 2012 to fund a large-scale batch, having found that venture capitalists demanded too high a stake, which would result in less control. "It appeals to people to be able to help, and to have a good, handy product for themselves at the same time," says Mr Groen on why the story appeals to Kickstarter backers.



Access to light means children can do their homework at night and progress at school.

 WakaWaka

Community managed

WakaWaka ('shine bright' in Swahili) operates in a number of ways: providing a useful, lightweight solar light and charger for outdoor enthusiasts around the world, which they can buy online or through outdoor retailers (700 as of January 2018). It is also available to buy in less developed countries, in some cases through financial schemes that enable customers to take the device for a low entry price and then pay off a number of cents at a time. Its partnership with World Vision Rwanda in the Energy Environment Partnership means revenues of these sales are kept in a community-managed fund, which accumulates community savings, providing income to resellers and enabling sustainable growth and reinvestment.

"I call it, jokingly, the Robin Hood pricing model," says Mr Groen. "We are not more expensive than similar quality products in the developed world, but instead of putting the money in our own pockets we are a social enterprise, a B Corp. We try not to disturb the emerging market. We do not want to associate it with a freebie, as that's not a sustainable way to go about it," says Mr Groen. "It is also psychologically important to supply the same products to everyone, and not have an inferior product for poorer people. We want to enable people to step out of poverty by enabling them to save money but also not running the risk of ruining their health or perishing in a fire."

Emergency relief

In emergency relief situations, such as during the aftermath of an earthquake, typhoon or a humanitarian conflict, access to power and light can make a huge difference in people's safety and wellbeing. Through its NGO arm, the WakaWaka Foundation, devices are donated through a 'buy

one, give one' scheme, called Share the Sun.

"Just this morning, I received a photo from my colleague on the Greek island of Lesbos where there are thousands of people crossing the Mediterranean, living in horrible conditions, they are very cold and have no access to light or power," Mr Groen tells us. "She showed me a young girl, who lives in a plastic tent in zero degrees, who we helped with our products. They have nothing, so it's really important to help them."

Working with organisations such as Save the Children, Movement on the Ground, Oxfam and Habitat for Humanity, free WakaWaka units have been sent to Zambia and Nigeria for AIDS orphans and families who fled from Boko Haram; to refugees in Lebanon and the Middle East; to Haiti, Nepal, Chile and Ecuador after earthquakes, where the devices can be used to look for survivors; to the Philippines, Syria and Iraq, among others.



WakaWaka donates devices to people who live without electricity as part of its 'Share the Sun' scheme.

 WakaWaka



Mutual benefits

At the beginning of this year, WakaWaka signed a partnership with US-based counterpart d.light to “leverage mutually available economies of scale”. WakaWaka will use d.light’s infrastructure to distribute more efficiently and cheaply, “especially the free ones we give out in emergency situations because they are on the ground in many places,” explains Mr Grown. “And we can co-develop new products and use our different strengths to reinforce each other.” The companies have a joint turnover of over \$75 million a year, which also means a purchasing power that will help them to negotiate better terms at the factories they work with in China.

From being stocked in 150 retail locations at the start of 2017, there are now 700 locations globally where consumers can buy the devices and the aim is to double this number by the end of this year. Visitors can find retailers on WakaWaka’s website, where they can also view an Impact Map that uses Google Earth to zoom in on areas that have been helped by the devices. “We really want to make it transparent as possible, in terms of both accountability and inspiration, to show people that you can really do something.”

He says he’s proud of that fact that that in only a few years, from starting with two people, no money and limited experience in the solar power design field, the company now has a bank of experts and employees that have helped 1.3 million people have access to power.

“Last year our turnover was about €500 million and we have ambitions to increase that considerably this year, and connections to d.light and other companies will certainly help us do that.”

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