

Niembain Charlotte
Solar Mama of Cameroon
Trained in India 2020



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GRANDMOTHER AND SOLAR ENGINEER

Niembain Charlotte, a 60-year old former farmer, travelled to Rajasthan, India in 2019 to learn solar engineering with Barefoot College International. At her age, it was unthinkable that she'd be offered an opportunity to study anything. But women like Charlotte are actually those who are most encouraged to enrol. When she was asked to come to India to study, she envisioned a future with meaningful work that would help boost prosperity in her own community.

In 2020, 400 solar home lighting systems arrived in Cameroon, assigned to very remote regions where grid electricity is not available, to benefit 2800 villagers. Such villages rely entirely on wood and kerosene as light sources. Kerosene is a costly and dangerous source of light that creates plumes of black smoke indoors. Acquiring it can require long-distance travels to larger villages.

Barefoot College International followed Charlotte to Mpagne where she began solar electrifying villagers' homes. It's a region with only one road in and out that winds through a rainforest. The clay road is frequently inundated with water and can be reached only by motorcycle. With good weather, the road takes 3 hours one-way. On bad days, the road becomes impassable.



CHARLOTTE'S JOURNEY

Her village, Mballa in central Cameroon, is in the French-speaking muslim region and is home to around 3000 residents. She has been a widow since 2007, has one surviving daughter who is 27 and a grandson.

In her region, it's the woman's job to collect water. Each collection is an hour's walk each way, and the source isn't generally clean. Bottled water is available, but it is costly and only the wealthy can afford to purchase it regularly. Like the rest of the villagers in Mballa, Charlotte's home does not come equipped with indoor plumbing, so every drop of water counts and must be used for daily tasks such as bathing, cleaning and drinking. Charlotte urges that water has become increasingly scarce- there are still no hand-pumps for the inhabitants.

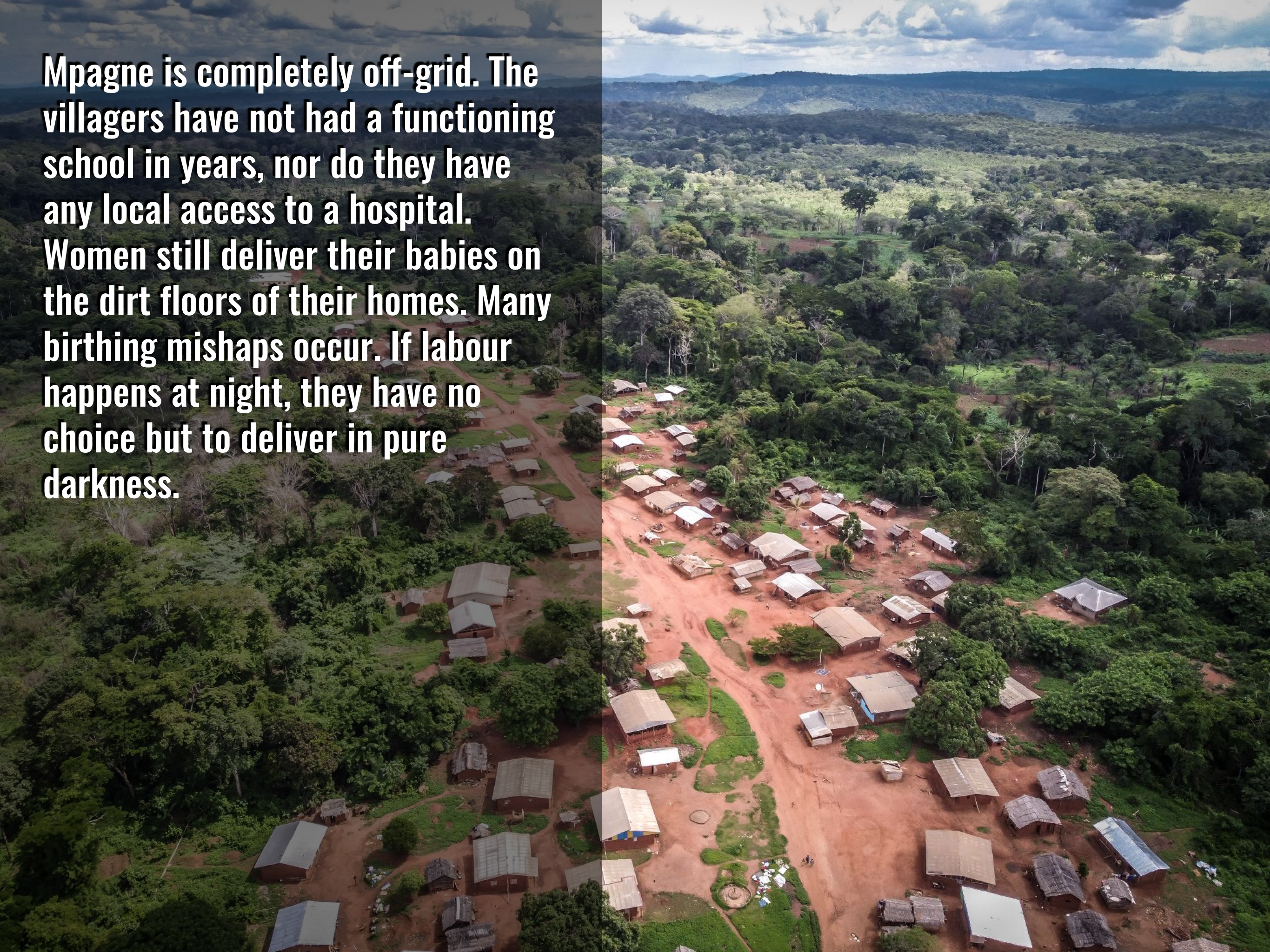
Women are also expected to collect and chop wood, which is needed as a light source and for cooking. A lot of open-flame cooking indoors still occurs, which is a main factor in respiratory issues that are developed by rural inhabitants. Wood collection also results in deforestation. Charlotte is fortunate that her village is still lush and surrounded by old-growth forests, but this is changing dangerously fast and with little local regulation.

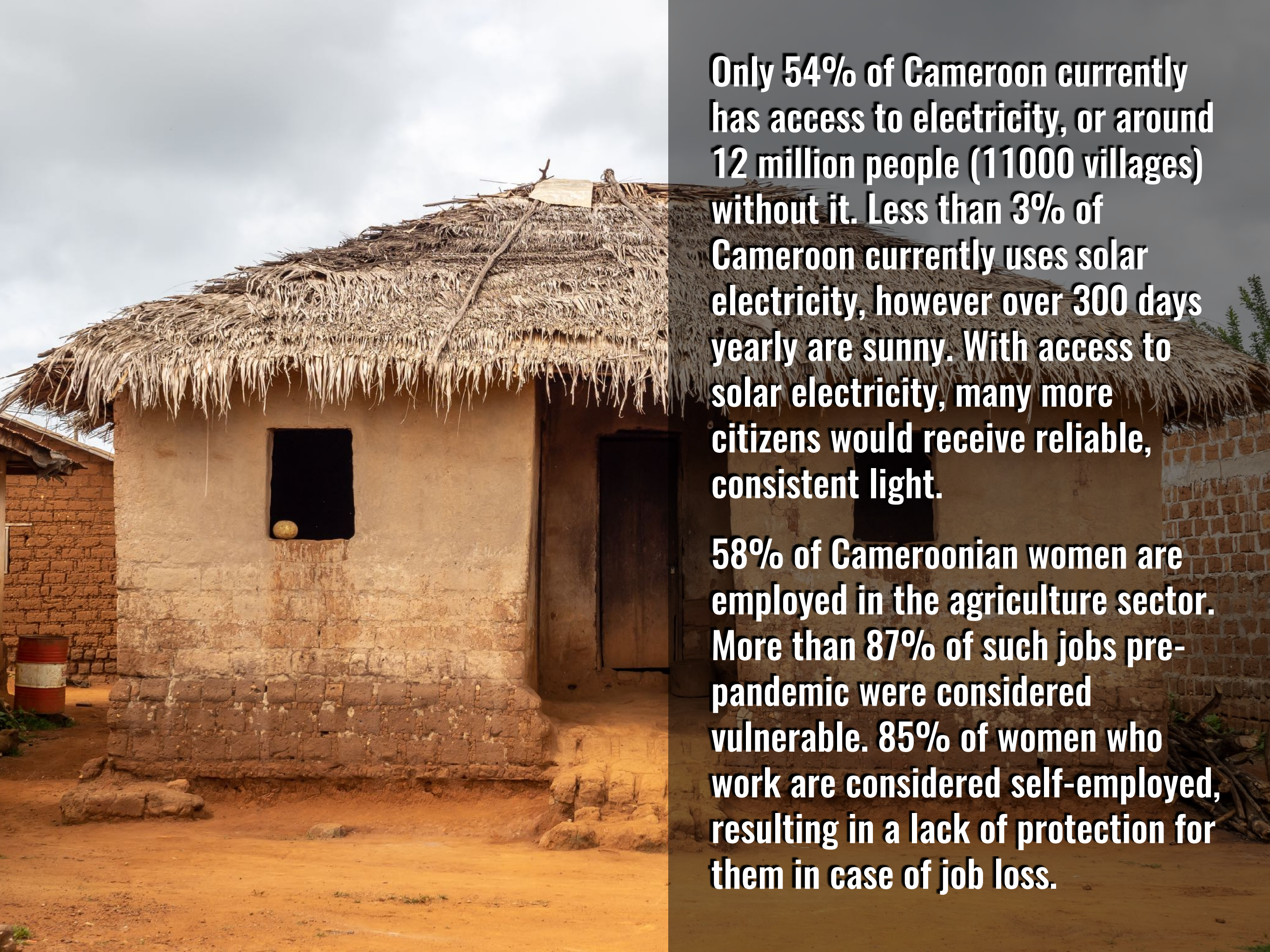
Charlotte married young and had to abandon studies as a young woman to take on the tasks of a housewife and mother. Having the opportunity to study again was a no-brainer to her and she seized the chance as soon as it was offered to her. She appreciated the kindness and generosity of her teachers in India. Because of the lessons she received about carbon emissions and Climate Change, Charlotte is eager to distribute the solar panels and lanterns to the communities nearby.

*"WHEN THE PANELS ARRIVED, I WAS SO HAPPY.
VILLAGES WILL BE BRIGHT FOR THE FIRST TIME.
PEOPLE WILL BE ABLE TO MOVE SAFELY
DURING THE NIGHT."*

Charlotte is a bright light, admired in her village for her strong will and courage. Barefoot College International prefers older rural women because they are often respected in their villages and have strong convictions to improve the quality of life in their community. Their age is often associated with a wealth of wisdom, thus they are the most influential members in society. After their training, they are the most likely to share their new skills and knowledge with women and girls and lead by example for their peers to see.

Mpagne is completely off-grid. The villagers have not had a functioning school in years, nor do they have any local access to a hospital. Women still deliver their babies on the dirt floors of their homes. Many birthing mishaps occur. If labour happens at night, they have no choice but to deliver in pure darkness.



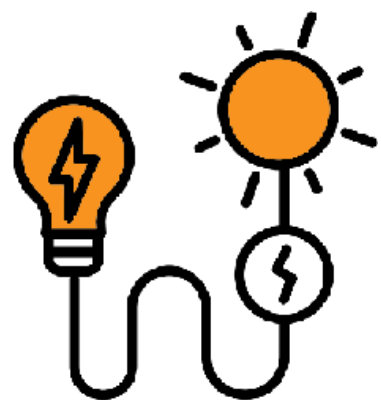


Only 54% of Cameroon currently has access to electricity, or around 12 million people (11000 villages) without it. Less than 3% of Cameroon currently uses solar electricity, however over 300 days yearly are sunny. With access to solar electricity, many more citizens would receive reliable, consistent light.

58% of Cameroonian women are employed in the agriculture sector. More than 87% of such jobs pre-pandemic were considered vulnerable. 85% of women who work are considered self-employed, resulting in a lack of protection for them in case of job loss.







400
Houses electrified



13
Villages



2800
Direct Beneficiaries





KNOWLEDGE AND EMPOWERMENT

She returned to her village in early 2020, just before the upheaval of the pandemic began. The Enriche and Solar training model provided her with a great amount of applicable information. Most noteworthy is the opportunity it gave to Charlotte as a woman, to work in a village where typically only men work in such occupations.

Her newfangled business and financial acumen will help her to save money and use a bank account. The cellphone she was provided with and digital literacy classes have helped her navigate the internet, make phone calls and take photos and videos by phone. She better understands Women's Rights and health and nutrition.

Learning English was a milestone for Charlotte, whose country has English as an official language, but is often divided due to civil unrest. She recalls learning how to make jewellery, build a healthier family life and health and sanitation- especially useful during the pandemic. She predicts a better future for children in her village, with increased opportunity and more employment regardless of their gender.

"I TOOK QUITE A JOURNEY- PEOPLE PERCEIVE ME DIFFERENTLY. THEY ADMIRE ME FOR MY COURAGE AND SACRIFICES!"

Niembain Charlotte

Barefoot College International demystifies and decentralizes technology, putting new tools in the hands of under-utilised rural communities, fostering resiliency and sustainability. With a geographic focus on the Least Developed Countries, we train women worldwide as solar engineers, entrepreneurs and educators. We have helped develop over 3200 women from 93 countries, solar electrifying over 125,000 households worldwide. These women, our “Solar Mamas”, return to their villages to bring light and scalable, regionally-specific livelihood opportunities to their community.

Our programmes naturally address 14 out of 17 of the Sustainable Development Goals.



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