



“Lucy Shillingi Sheds Light on the Solar Suitcase’s Role in Pathfinder’s Maternal and Newborn Care Work”, by Pathfinders International

The idea of a solar suitcase was born in Nigeria when American doctor Laura Stachel witnessed physicians performing an emergency cesarean section on a woman even after the lights went out. In countries like Nigeria, giving birth can be a risk to both the life of the mother and her child for a myriad of reasons. Giving birth is even riskier without dependable access to adequate lighting and the electricity that supports it.

Seeing a possible solution, Dr. Stachel and her husband developed the solar suitcase—an easy-to-use, portable power unit that offers a dependable form of renewable and environmentally friendly energy. In addition to providing light, the suitcase contains headlamps, a cell phone charger, and a fetal Doppler for monitoring a baby’s heart rate. Dr. Stache’s first solar suitcases were so successful that she started a nonprofit called We Care Solar, an initiative recently highlighted on the global television network CNN.

Today, Pathfinder-trained health care providers use the solar suitcase in Tanzania and Uganda to ensure women don’t give birth in the dark. The solar suitcase also means providers don’t have to use kerosene lamps that give off toxic fumes harmful to newborns. Pathfinder spoke with Lucy Shillingi, Pathfinder’s Country Representative in Uganda, to learn more about the solar suitcase as a part of Pathfinder’s maternal health work in Uganda.

Did anything surprise you in the CNN piece about the solar suitcase?

It is not only the light in the solar suitcase that is important, but the innovation to have other items enclosed in it such as the fetal Doppler and phone charger. The long cables, the extra lights, and chargeable batteries are great contributions that make a great difference in the lives of those managing the health facility. A midwife at one of our Pathfinder-supported health facilities exclaimed, “You mean I can now deliver women’s babies in the night with bright solar light and not kerosene candles? And I can go to the drug store with another light without leaving a mother in darkness? God is great!”

What do you like most about the solar suitcase in our programs?

The simplicity of installation, the packages, and the immediate light it provides to a health facility, which would usually close at 6 p.m.—it all sounds like magic. The light gives hope to the mother in the delivery process as well as confidence to the midwife who is able to see what she is doing with enough light. Even more, the newborn baby is born in healthy environment and he or she is not breathing in contaminated air from a kerosene lamp. The solar suitcase is environmentally friendly. That is the whole magic about the linkage between healthy environment and good health. Individuals can see that linkage from a health facility. It’s making a difference in people’s lives and fulfilling their right to quality life.

Gender and Energy



Topic 4: Gender and clean energy (renewable energy and energy efficiency) Case study

Another nurse mentioned that we now have light so mothers and children can come in the night. In the past nurses were not motivated to keep the health facility open in the night. Now they stay open until late. In addition they also mentioned that their security has improved around the health facility because there is light.

Phone charging is also another way youth, women, and others can be attracted to health talks and environmental talks at the health facility as they sit waiting for their phone to charge and they are engaged in dialogues about their health and environment. These points become strong information points.

From what you've seen in the project, is it something we can scale-up?

Oh, yes. On our project site, the islands of Lake Victoria and other islands have heard about the wonderful magic solar suitcase and the community leaders there have approached our team asking if they can buy these solar suitcases for their health facilities. Light is life. Light is hope and where there is light, there is development. It's easy to install and manage, making it a scalable product.

What, if any, do you think are the barriers to using it? What are the benefits?

Due to wide spread lack of hydropower or solar power in many areas in Uganda, the solar suitcase can be used outside the delivery room—in homes, shops, etc. and thus not serve its original purpose. In other cases, phone charging is in high demand, and this can exploit the battery.

However, as earlier mentioned, if the solar suitcase is used for its purpose and is well maintained, it will serve its original purpose. It can be used during outreach service delivery too. It is a mobile tool that can be used in emergencies and where light is needed for safe delivery of babies.