

FROM LOCAL VOLUNTEER TO NATIONAL OPERATIONS MANAGER



EEP Africa 2020
**RISING ENERGY
LEADER**

CLEOPHAS AHISHAKIYE

Operations Manager,
MeshPower (Rwanda)

Cleophas grew up in a rural village in Rwanda without access to electricity. He understands first-hand the challenges this creates for children and families.

"I grew up in a very remote area. My mom and my siblings, we had no access to electricity at all. I faced a lot of negative impacts due to this, such as being unable to read my studies after school. I also had health complications like eyes itching and negative effects from inhaling wood smoke."

When Cleophas graduated from high school in 2012, he answered a call for local volunteers to help trial a new pay-as-you-go solar lighting kit. Cleophas received training from e.quinox, a humanitarian organisation, and helped assemble 65 Izuba Box stand-alone systems that were given to rural households, including his own home. This was Cleophas' first experience with clean energy solutions for remote communities and it inspired him to pursue a career in rural electrification.

During his second year of university, Cleophas started working part-time as a Customer Care Officer at the mini-grid start-up MeshPower. He helped the company manage its first 120 customers. By the time he graduated, Cleophas was working at MeshPower full-time and had risen to a Field Operations Officer.

Thanks to grants from EEP Africa and other funders, MeshPower quickly scaled up to over 2,200 households across the Bugesera and Ngoma districts of Rwanda. During this growth period, Cleophas was involved in identifying and surveying new micro-grid sites, conducting service demonstrations, signing up new customers, and liaising with local communities.

"Being hardworking, open to taking on new tasks and trying new things, even if I had never done them before, and being trustworthy are my key defining characteristics."



Cleophas (middle) together with two ALIGHT (formerly the American Refugee Committee) technicians after the installation of a big PV Solar mini-grid in Mahama Refugee Camp, Rwanda.

“It is assumed that the private sector is able to take on all the financial risks and still make a profit. Subsidies have been required in electrification plans around the world, but now [in Africa] the private sector is expected to make it work on their own. The cost for private energy developers (mini-grid developers especially) to set up and maintain their utilities is way too high, which means the cost for off-grid electricity is still high for the end user. If you want to produce a successful rural electrification plan, there is a need for subsidies.”

Within three years Cleophas had been promoted to his current role as MeshPower Rwanda’s Operations Manager, with oversight of all day-to-day field operations: He also manages special projects. For example, in a partnership with Alight (formerly the American Refugee Committee), Cleophas led the MeshPower design and installation teams to build a solar PV mini-grid in the Mahama Refugee Camp in Rwanda. The installation provides electricity for a hospital and administrative buildings and has reduced the camp’s energy costs by up to 70%.

Cleophas plans to continue his formal education by pursuing a graduate degree in renewable energy technologies. He wants to use his skills and knowledge to help governments develop effective energy policies and companies develop sustainable and profitable business models. Cleophas is committed to playing a leading role in bridging the energy gap in Rwanda and elsewhere in Africa.

In his work, Cleophas has observed that one of the key challenges for clean energy developers is the lack of clear policies governing the sector. Especially for mini-grid developers, it is important for national grid expansion plans to be transparent and incorporate compensation for existing off-grid investments. Cleophas also believes that subsidies are needed in order to reduce financial risks for developers.

“Cleophas has grown so much while he has been working at MeshPower. He has stepped up within this company and takes whatever we throw at him in stride. In the future, I fully expect Cleophas to take on more and more responsibility as the company grows.”

Richard Mori,
Co-Founder & CEO at MeshPower

