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Green energy can help reduce poverty

The Indonesian government has been urged to pay serious attention to the use of renewable energy, especially in rural villages, as it can help drive the economy by creating job opportunities and generating income that, in turn, can reduce poverty, a scholar has said.Speaking in Yogyakarta on Tuesday, Jakarta-based Darma Persada University's (UNSADA) graduate school/renewable energy director, Kamaruddin Abdullah, said the government already possessed several regulations to push the use of renewable energy.

"In practice, however, the government has yet to allocate sufficient funds to put renewable energy into practice," Kamaruddin said after speaking in a discussion on renewable energy, which was jointly organized by UNSADA, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and Support for Economic Analysis Development in Indonesia (SEADI).

Currently, according to Kamaruddin, only 67 percent of Indonesia's total regions had access to electricity. The remainder, especially villages, has no such access depite the fact that they are rich in renewable energy sources such as firewood and biomass.

Kamaruddin has just completed research on a renewable energy-based economically independent village in Tangsi village, Gunung Halu, West Java, and in Banyumeneng village, Panggang, Gunung Kidul. Both villages have problems with access to clean water.

He expressed his hope that his research would help in the formulation of an energy development strategy for the 2050 Regional Energy Policy (KED), as well as determining the most suitable renewable energy sources for different villages based on their economic development, and offering recommendations on related policies, local incentives and the private sector's role in helping to develop rural economies.

In Banyumeneng, he said, 30 families utilized solar energy to pump water from the Gede River. "The villagers no longer have difficulties with their water supply," said Kamaruddin, who is ready to conduct his next research project in Seriwe village, East Lombok, in West Nusa Tenggara (NTB).

According to Kamaruddin, the use of renewable energy in Banyumeneng has increased the village's overall income because each family that received a solar energy device was obliged to pay a monthly charge of Rp 15,000 (US$1.54).

Banyumeneng resident Suryanto said his village had received great benefits from the solar-powered water pumps. "Previously, we had to count on the rain for our water supply," he said. During dry seasons in the past, he added, locals had to pay Rp 150,000 for one 4,000-liter tank of clean water.

Head of the Gunungkidul regency Development Planning Board (Bappeda), Syarief Armunanto, said that renewable energy was urgent for coastal areas that were not yet connected to the electricity network, as it would support the development of tourism.

"The presence of renewable energy can boost the local economy and absorb manpower," he said. He added, however, that a key challenge was in the high cost of renewable energy devices. With solar energy, for example, the price of a battery to store the energy can cost Rp 4 million per unit.

"This is a burden for villagers," he said, adding that the government should come up with a solution to this problem.

Separately, the chairman of the USAID-SEADI consulting team, Carunia Mulya Firdausy, said that rural communities were the largest enclaves of poverty in Indonesia.

"The use of renewable energy can help eradicate poverty in villages because it has a chain-reaction effect," he said.