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The future looks solar bright for herders' kids

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By Erik Nilsson (China Daily)

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A solar panel in front of one of the seven tents that serve as "dorms" of the elementary school.

While Yege's children are the township's first generation who can read, they would effectively become illiterate after dusk.

That's because there was no electricity - hence, no light - in the seven tents that 78 of the primary school's 137 children call their "dorms".

But that changed in early August when the grassroots nonprofit Solidarity to End Poverty - United for Progress (Step Up) installed two high-voltage solar panels to launch its Brighter Future project. The electricity has transformed education in this Tibetan community of 2,000 nomadic yak herders in Qinghai province's Yushu prefecture.

"The solar panels have given our children new eyes," the school's deputy headmaster Yongdingquepab says.

The 5,000 yuan (\$783) panels provided by Step Up, a branch of Low-Income Visionary Education, enable the children to study after dusk, watch TV and learn how to use computers.

"Before, they had no way of knowing anything about the outside world that isn't in their textbooks," Yongdingquepab says.

Neither did their instructors, English teacher Tseringbum adds.

"We couldn't teach the children about the world, because we had no way to know about it ourselves," he says.

The solar panels make it possible for the children to use teachers' laptops, Tseringbum says. "They really want to learn how to use computers," he says.

The electricity also helps student retention, chief of Yege's Hongqi village Kangia says.

"Without power, the school was like a prison," he says. "So parents didn't want to send their kids. They thought it was more important for them to herd yaks than to study."

Having electric lights also saves the children's eyesight from the damage caused by straining to read and write by candlelight, he says.

The teachers asked Step Up to install the panels in the tents rather than the school - which doesn't have electricity - because they can see by the sunlight that streams through the windows during their daytime classes.

The children cheered when the lights turned on for the first time.

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