Grid electricity came to two villages near Bangladesh's border with West Bengal in India only recently (2013). And with that life in the village changed altogether. Pakuriya Bhangapara was electrified in 2016 and Dhakipara a year later in 2017. The change touched every resident, bringing economic prosperity to the 300-400 households in each village. The immediate impact of electrification in Dhakipara was that land price shot up by 25-40 percent. Small businesses grew in both villages because shops now stayed open even in the afternoon in the comfort of electric fans. Earlier the swelling heat drove owners to down the shutters.

Several young men acquired new skills in computer-printing, mobile repairing and operating battery charged kiosk vendors, particularly in Pakuriya Bhangapara, and started new businesses in the village. Electricity also changed life in so many ways by just extending the day. Shops stayed open after dusk; children studied late into the evening, the girl child's school attendance improved because she did not have to gather firewood any more, and women spent far less time on cooking.

Take rice, for example, the staple food of Bangladesh. Cooking rice meant gathering firewood, lighting the clay oven, and then cooking it for at least an hour. Salma Khattau, of Dhakipara, is around 35 years and a mother of two. She said she would have to sit and keep a watch on the fire, fanning it from time to time, to keep the wood burning. Cooking rice alone took a long time. And she did that morning and evening. Besides rice, there was fish curry and vegetables. Cooking took up a large part of her day. If she was not cooking, Salma would have to go and gather firewood as her children were too young to help her with gathering firewood when her husband took the household electricity connection nearly three years ago.

Electricity gave her time. And a longer day. One of the things Salma did when electricity came to her house was to buy an electric rice cooker. Cooking rice now became a matter of pressing on a switch. All you have to do is wash the grains and put it in the rice cooker adding water, a chore that takes only 5 minutes, she said. Like her, many women in the village have bought rice cookers. Like Salma, most of the women in Dhakipara, and also in Pakuriya Bhangapara, find their days have become longer. Electricity did not just reduce the time spent on gathering firewood and cooking; it also extended the day beyond daylight hours. Earlier life came to a standstill after dusk.

Now everyone has more time for other things. Several women in both the villages have taken up income generating activities, which they carry out in the evenings mostly, as the day goes by doing all the household chores. Women are now making important contribution to the family income with tailoring, sewing and making handicraft items in the evenings.

Electricity brought economic growth. Everyone IRADE spoke to in the villages said electrification gave them prosperity. The 400-taka monthly bill (at 3.88 taka per unit) was a worthy investment. Commercial connections cost a little more, though, but still worth it because earnings increase when there is light.
Now it is just he and his wife at home tending their farm and cattle. Husband and wife are able to manage without the help of their sons because there is electricity. His wife now has more time to care for the cattle, while he is able to manage the farm work with hired hands. He can afford it now because his sons are doing well.

Many young people and their parents IRADE spoke to in the village said electricity has given them access to various dehumidifiers and improved storage facilities for farm products. Tending the cattle at home is easier now with easy access to water from motor pumps.

As for the 35 percent villagers who are farmers, they prospered with the overall increase in agricultural productivity. This was a result of better irrigation using electric motor pumps and improved storage facilities for farm products. Tending the cattle at home is easier now with easy access to water from motor pumps.

With the new electricity connection, the family was in touch with relatives in other parts of the country.

During a phone conversation, Mohammed Khalil’s older son learnt that a new infrastructure project in Comilla would pay double the rate he was earning as a daily wage labourer in his own district – Kushtia. Comilla is located more than 300 km south of Bangladesh’s eastern edge, leading to Tripura in India, Kushtia is on the western fringe, bordering West Bengal. The labour rate in Kushtia is 200 takas, whereas in Comilla, he started earning 400 takas a day in an infrastructure project. Soon Mohammed Khalil’s younger son too started working in Comilla.

Energy poverty can impede a community from progress and lower its quality of life. This urgently calls for greater energy cooperation between nations in South Asia, as adequate energy supply can be all that is needed to pull a community out of extreme poverty. A more equal distribution of energy can contribute to greater equality in gender, health, nutrition and education in the world. While CBET offers huge benefits, there are various related technical, political and regulatory challenges that need to be addressed in a timely and effective manner. But it is well worth the effort as CBET has huge potential to support South Asia’s aggressive pursuit of economic growth and help achieve SDGs.