

# New Sun Road



## CLOSING THE GENDER DIGITAL DIVIDE

### THE PROBLEM

Globally, men are 21 percent more likely to be online than women—a figure that rises to 52 percent in Least Developed Countries.<sup>1</sup> The USAID/Microsoft Airband Initiative aims to tackle this digital divide by piloting innovative ways to improve Internet access for women around the world.

In Guatemala, access to energy is a major barrier to Internet uptake across the country, especially in rural and remote communities. In the Alta Verapaz region in the north central part of Guatemala, home to 1.2 million people, only 51 percent of the population have electricity<sup>2</sup> and only 13 percent have access to an Internet connection. In contrast, the average electrification rate in the rest of the country is 89 percent. To tackle this challenge of improving rural connectivity, USAID enlisted the help of New Sun Road, a public benefit corporation that specializes in solar power systems and bringing Internet access to under-served communities. Through the USAID/Microsoft Airband Initiative, New Sun Road developed solar-powered digital community centers and provided digital skills training to indigenous women in Alta Verapaz.

New Sun Road began activities in the Alta Verapaz region in 2021, following a series of assessments that showed women were eager to learn digital skills. During community interviews, women pointed to the lack of energy and electricity as a principal problem in their communities, which prevented access to health and educational resources, and economic opportunities online. Focus groups revealed over 99 percent of women were interested in learning how to use a computer and the Internet. “I would like to have light and technology in our community for us women,” shared Carmelina, a participant in one of the focus groups. “[The center] serves us and our children, too. We must learn.”

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CARMELINA, FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

### THE PROJECT

Since the project’s inception, New Sun Road has established 10 digital community centers called Stellar Ixq-Saq’e (SIS Centers) in 10 unelectrified communities in the region. These technological hubs are equipped with solar-powered energy systems, batteries for energy storage, and Internet connection. The centers provide digital literacy skills courses for all women and their children in the communities, including training on subjects like Microsoft office applications, Internet browsing, email, and social media, in the local language Q’eqchi’. Digital centers also serve as safe and inclusive gathering spaces for the communities.

The centers are run as microbusinesses by a women’s leadership committee, responsible for the administration, maintenance, and longevity of the digital centers. New Sun Road worked with the committees to co-develop a business model for each center. For example, women are employed to work shifts at the center, and their salaries are funded by fees for Internet use and one off-services like mobile phone charging, printing, and securing government documentation online. People from surrounding communities now travel to the centers to have access to these useful services.

1. <https://webfoundation.org/research/costs-of-exclusion-report/>

2. <https://mem.gob.gt/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Indice-de-Cobertura-Elctrica-2021-01.pdf>

To support community engagement, the program also has partnered with four organizations that have a history of working in the area, the World Food Program, Plan International, UN Women, and Mercy Corps—an approach that New Sun Road says has been critical to their success.

## THE RESULTS

Since 2021, all digital community centers are now open and generating revenue, following the installation of solar power and Internet connectivity. Over a thousand women have received digital literacy training and 187 women have served on the women’s leadership committees to manage the centers.

“Thanks to this project, my perspective on life has changed.”

MARÍA

María Concepción Xí Ja, a housewife who works in the digital centers said, “Thanks to this project, my perspective on life has changed and that is why I have made so much effort to participate in the program. We are grateful to the institutions that support women, we must not only take care of our homes; we must also get ahead and learn new things.”

New Sun Road’s work advances the overarching goal of the USAID/Microsoft Airband Initiative to bring meaningful connectivity to more women around the world. To learn more about the USAID/Microsoft Airband Initiative, click [here](#).



Figures between Feb. 2021 – Dec. 2022