First solar vientiane

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With both a strong domestic production centre and a commitment to reaching net-zero emissions by 2050, Thailand"s power development plan (PDP 2018-2037) aims to establish a total installed capacity of 15.6 GW of solar energy by 2035. Benefitting from relaxed domestic policies, Thailand has witnessed a yearly compound growth rate exceeding 20% in photovoltaic installations since 2012, resulting in approximately 4.96 GW of installed capacity as of late 2023.

By the 2036 target, solar energy will account for around half of the 29.4 GW allocated to renewables in Thailand"s PDP. Thailand ranks among Southeast Asia"s solar capacity leaders, second only to Vietnam.

Following US anti-dumping tariffs on Chinese solar panels, Thailand emerged as amanufacturing hub, particularly in the Eastern Economic Corridor, although most production is exported. Recent tariff adjustments have prompted some manufacturers in Thailand and Vietnam to announce temporary production shutdowns.

Innovative projects like the world"s largest hydro-floating solar project at Sirindhorn Dam, operational since 2022 in Ubon Ratchathani Province, demonstrate Thailand"s reliance on solar energy. The Sirindhorn Dam project from the Electric Generating Authority of Thailand (Egat) only generates 45 MW, but Egat has plans for a further 15 floating solar farms across Thailand with a combined capacity of 2,750 MW.

Efforts to expand rooftop solar have been stymied in recent years by a sluggish net metering system, where solar-generated electricity goes to the grid transmission line for sale. As of last year, plans for a new net metering schemewere put on holdfollowing legal and technical problems identified by the energy ministry.

Laos, blessed with abundantsunshine, has significant solar energy potential. However, hydropower still dominates its renewable energy sector, accounting for about73%of electricity generation. As of 2023, solar energy made up less than1%of the energy mix.

The Laotian government has set ambitious goals to diversify its renewable energy portfolio. By 2030, Laos aims to achieve a combined solar and wind capacity of 1 GW as part of a broader strategy to reduce dependence on hydropower and enhance energy security. However, current projections suggest it is expected to fall well short of this target.

In 2017, Laos marked a milestone in its renewable energy journey by opening its first solar farm in Vientiane with a capacity of 10 MW. Building on this initial success, Laos embarked on its largest solar venture to date in 2022, with a 50 MW solar project. Reports indicate that eight smaller plants are now operational across Laos, signalling a slow but steady expansion in solar infrastructure.

However, a report from Global Energy Monitor indicates that Laos" total operational solar capacity may not be as substantial as these developments suggest. Nevertheless, significant projects are in the pipeline: a 64 MW solar plant is currently under construction and a huge 240 MW floating solar farm, by French energy giant EDF, is in the pre-construction phase.

These larger projects are crucial for significantly boosting Laos" solar power capabilities and moving towards a sustainable energy future, although they have yet to contribute to the national grid. The contrast between operational plants and those under development underscores the evolving nature of Laos"s commitment to expanding its solar energy capacity. Challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, limited investment and regulatory hurdles act as significant barriers.

To attract more investment, the government has introduced measures such asimport duty exemptionson capital machinery and equipment to help make projects more financially viable. Laos needs to build on this by implementing policies that facilitate the adoption of feed-in tariffs, making solar more attractive to investors and energy producers.

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Web: https://sumthingtasty.co.za/contact-us/
Email: energystorage2000@gmail.com
WhatsApp: 8613816583346