

Powering Africa

Copperbelt Energy Corporation Plc Managing Director Owen Silavwe is making a difference to energy in Zambia, and Africa.

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When Owen Silavwe first stepped into his role as Managing Director of Copperbelt Energy Corporation Plc (CEC), he had one big question on his mind: What difference can I make and what value can I bring?

“What I thought was important was for me to try and engage everybody in the company; just to understand what people’s expectations were,” Owen tells *The CEO Magazine*. “I had to go through that process of talking to various people in the organisation and for me that was quite insightful. It probably shaped some of the strategies that had to be improved.”

CEC is one of Zambia’s leading energy companies; owning and operating a network of transmission, distribution and power generation assets including high-voltage substations and transmission lines. The company accounts for 50 per cent of Zambia’s energy consumption and supplies power to the country’s largest industry – copper mining.

Prior to his role as managing director, Owen served as CEC’s Commercial Director. He then rose to COO before becoming Managing Director of Operations. At the time (2013), CEC was undertaking a major acquisition in Nigeria through its then wholly owned subsidiary, CEC Africa Investments Limited (CEC Africa).

“The managing director at the time was then sent to run the new acquisition in Nigeria,” Owen says. “There was a lot of work to do in terms of the focus »



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to turn around the business in Nigeria. At that time I was identified to pick up the position of managing director in an acting capacity.

“Entering the Nigerian market was going to introduce a new dimension to the company that had to be managed,” Owen explains, “and it was going to cause totally different risks. You believe that you understand these risks but when they begin to materialise, their magnitude becomes much clearer and it challenges all the systems you had in place back when those decisions were made.”

In December 2016, the two companies – CEC and CEC Africa – were demerged and now operate as separate entities. “CEC is growing and it continues to make profit,” says Owen.

Owen reflects on how, when he became managing director in 2014, he saw the opportunity for CEC to thrive even more. “I thought we had been looking quite narrowly in terms of what our market was

and indeed who our suppliers were,” he says. “We needed to look at how we could expand both on the supply side, as well as on the demand side.”

This also meant taking the copper market into consideration. “The biggest sector of the business is linked to copper, which has cyclic patterns on the global market,” Owen says, adding there is always an associated risk to the copper industry. “The main issue here was how to outgrow this risk and begin to grow.”

One of the methods Owen used to lead the company to further growth was by tapping into the resources available within the Southern African Power Pool (SAPP). “That was more of the focus for me; how can we begin to look at not just the Zambian market but at opportunities that the SAPP offers.”

The SAPP is a collection of 12 member countries in Africa including Zambia, Botswana and South Africa, that plan and operate an electric power system using their collective utilities. It also provides an



reliable service to the customer,” Owen says. “And we’ve started with a pilot project in terms of the company beginning to acquire capabilities in renewables. The important technology for renewables is obviously solar and this country has got a lot of it.”

In 2017, CEC began constructing a one-megawatt photovoltaic solar plant on 2.5 hectares of its land near Copperbelt University (CBU) in Kitwe. The US\$1.53-million Riverside Solar PV Project was executed in a tripartite collaboration with Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) of Germany, who are supporting the solar technology curriculum development component of the project, and the CBU as recipients of this all-new curriculum, including controlled access to the solar PV plant. It is set to produce 1,900 megawatts of energy a year for 25 years, and involves a solar energy curriculum for CBU’s Master of Science in Electrical Engineering course.

opportunity for members to discuss solutions to energy supply issues.

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is another member of the SAPP. CEC co-owns with DRC state utility, SNEL, a transmission interconnection that connects the power systems of Zambia and DRC, as well as the DRC to the rest of Southern Africa. The first line was built in 1956 while construction of a second line to increase the carrying capacity of the interconnection stayed in the pipeline for a long time.

In 2016, the second line of this interconnection, a dual circuit line, was commissioned following the execution of an agreement between the parties for its construction in 2014. The additional line increased the capacity from 250 megawatts to 550 megawatts and also increased the security of supply within the SAPP.

CEC’s expansion also requires looking at distributed generation, and a major component of that, Owen says, is renewable energy. “It’s important that we position the company to be able to liberate the increasing role of renewables as a way of delivering

“One of our key capabilities has been building a strong team.”

The company’s expansion wouldn’t be complete without its workers and suppliers. “Our most important product is electricity,” Owen says. “For us, our suppliers are critical, and it is important that we have a good relationship with them.

“We’ve been able to build the CEC brand and, as part of that brand, one of our chief capabilities has been building a strong team. Our capabilities are focused on service delivery. Because of that our customers have come to believe in our service so I believe our reputation, not only as a company but also the company’s offering, is good.” ■

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