

Home from home for Teo

Teo Sanchez is a man who has more reason than most to put his heart and soul into his job. Today he is Practical Action's UK-based Energy Technical and Policy Advisor – yet he was born in the mountains of Peru, not many miles from where dozens of micro-hydro energy projects have since been successfully established by Practical Action during the last two decades.

Teo's journey to his key post at the international development organisation's headquarters, near Rugby, began 57 years ago in a village without electricity or many services at all. He didn't experience electricity until 13 at high school, then saw TV for the first time at 17 when starting college in Lima, where unusually for someone from his background he studied mechanical engineering.

After some years with a national research institute in Peru, he came to the UK for the first time and completed a Masters degree at Reading, then returned to a job with Practical Action in the Peru office. He later completed a PhD in the UK as a part-time student, while working for Practical Action.

"I've been involved with many projects, but it still gives me great satisfaction to see people's joy when they get electricity and learn how it can benefit their community," said Teo.

"I've visited many places where people living in poverty encounter similar problems. Only when people experience electricity do they realise its potential to change their lives and the way they live, so a lot of our job is about educating people to fully utilise the technologies they acquire.

"Practical Action places great emphasis on 'human' engineering – by that I mean training people to think like an engineer, to understand that technology has a life span, that it can fail and need to be replaced and, importantly, that it has a value and cost. Our organisational models allow them to think about local tariffs, and people's duties and responsibilities."

In his advisory role, Teo has more time and opportunity to see the bigger picture and contribute to new thinking about emerging energy technologies. Teo believes it is best for a number of projects to be grouped in the same region so that demand, capacity, knowledge and manufacturing infrastructure can grow together, thereby promoting continuity and sustainability.

"In Peru I see projects still operating 20 years after they were installed. It is great to witness the people running and maintaining the energy systems and no longer needing our help. This is sustainability."

He still enjoys hands-on work when opportunities arise, as they did last year in Zimbabwe when he was able to join an EU funded project that saw the creation of 16 micro-hydro schemes.