Idea

Globally there are **1.3 billion people** who live without regular or reliable access to electricity. Most of those living 'off-grid' are in India and Sub-Saharan Africa. In recent years great strides have been made towards increasing electricity access in these areas through the use of solar.

Research into solar technologies is usually conducted by engineers, physicists and chemists. However, there is a growing community of scholars in the UK approaching the subject, specifically in this 'off-grid' context, from **a social perspective** – from subjects like politics, economics, sociology and anthropology.

This project brought together, **for the first time** in the UK, those interested in the social dynamics of off-grid applications for solar photovoltaic power. At the centre of the project was a two-day conference which advanced understanding, fostered partnerships and facilitated networking amongst those active in the field.

Inside the MeshPower control unit

Sponsors

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Email d.r.murray@sms.ed.ac.uk for more

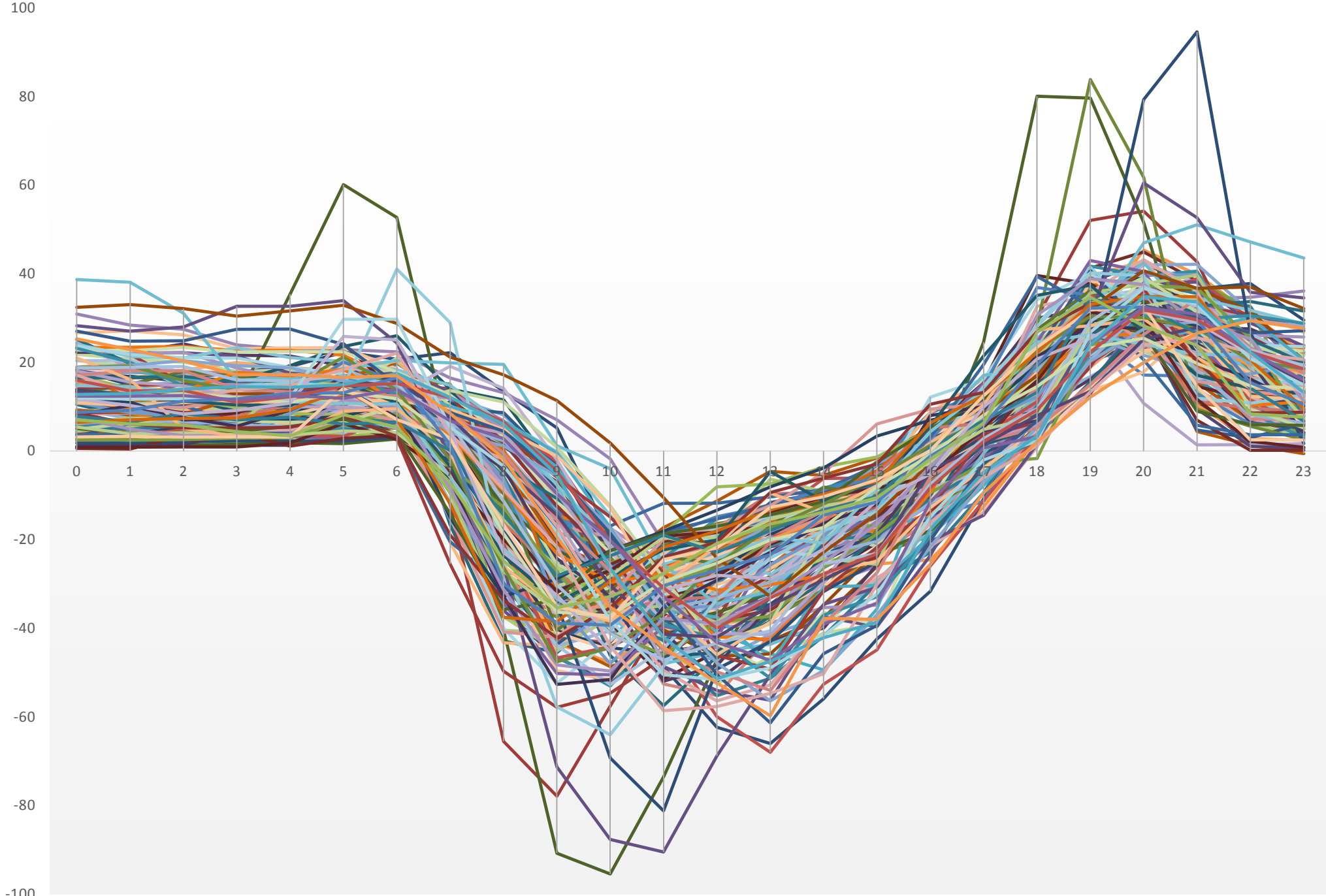*All lectures available on YouTube*

Format

Each main session consisted of a 30 minute keynote followed by three 10 minute presentations before we broke out on to four tables for a further 45 minutes. Participants really enjoyed this opportunity for more **in-depth discussion** with the speaker of their choice. At the end of each break-out a spokesperson from each table summarised their discussion to the rest of the room. The final session was an open summary panel.

The **five main sessions** looked at: Business and technology design, User experience, Effects and impacts, The role of policy and Futures.

Due to high demand and not enough space on the main programme we also ran a **poster exhibition** over the two days. The exhibition included work from Japan, Poland, Switzerland, and the UK. Exhibitors stood by their posters during the refreshments and lunch breaks to answer any questions from those interested. Poster topics included education, product design and economic improvement.
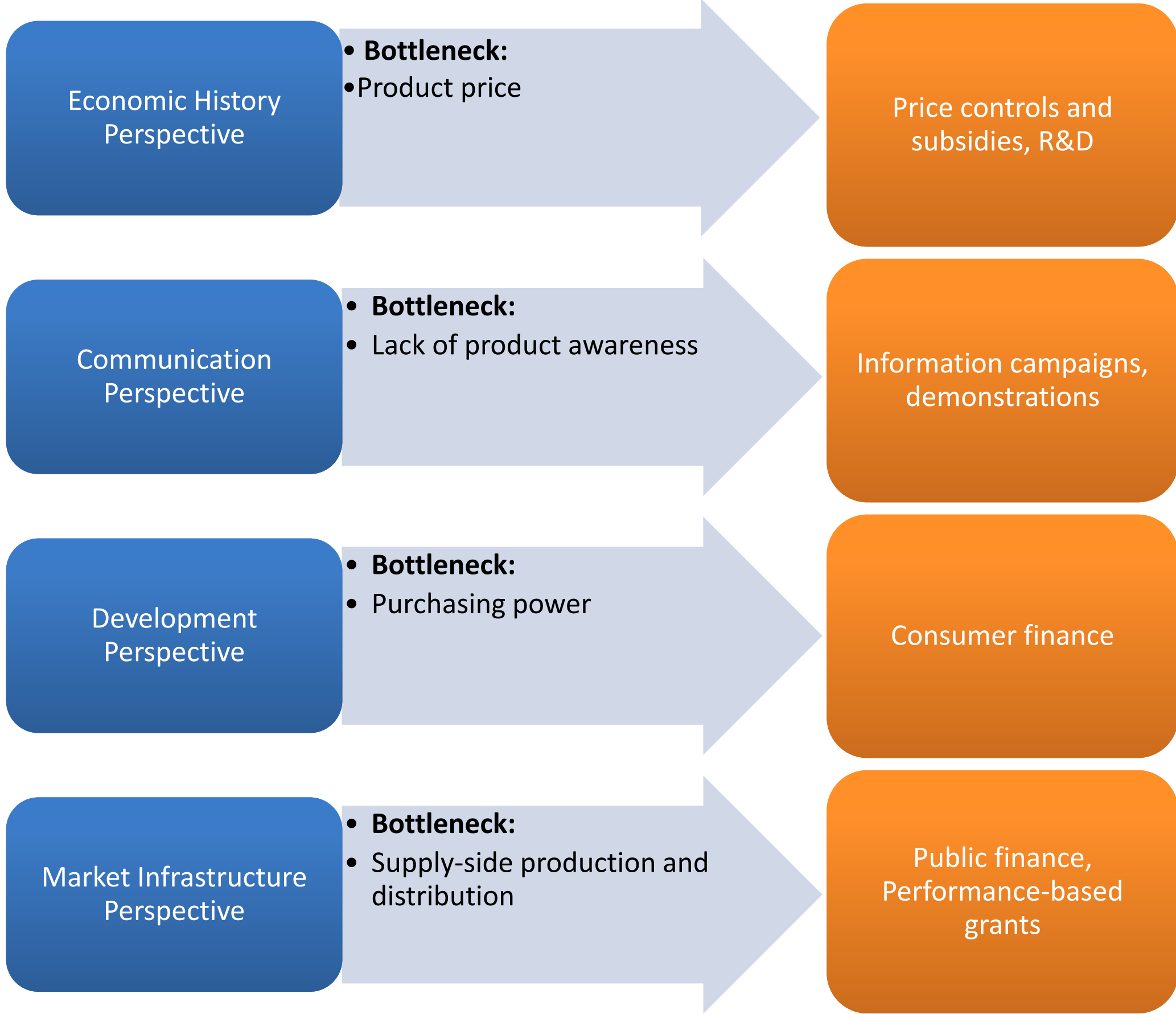

Data from a BBOXX Smart Solar Unit in Homa Bay, Kenya

20 *speakers from academia, industry and policy*

Social Research on Off-Grid Solar
A two day conference co-organised by UCL and the University of Edinburgh

Watch all presentations at: tinyurl.com/SROGS

#SROGS2015

6 different sessions

A slide from Ryan Hogarth's presentation exploring possible policy intervention areas

Over 60 participants

The Future

There is the possibility of **a follow-up event** in Edinburgh in 2017. Several of the presenters were Masters and PhD students whose work is ongoing. However, in 2017 they should be able to share more concrete findings from their studies. We could also re-examine whether any more evidence has arisen that will help justify some of the impact claims or fill other knowledge gaps identified here.

Participants and speakers are joining **a global community of researchers** in the sector hosted by the United Nations Capital Development Fund (UNCDF). This community will convene for monthly webinars where one researcher will offer an update on their work before discussing it collectively.

It is too early to tell if any of the networking from the event will grow into research collaborations or **new projects**. Again, a follow up event in 18 months time would help monitor success and progress on this front.

Solar waste from a DFID-funded project in India

Points of discussion

1) Data As products and systems become more 'intelligent', companies are able to tailor the service they provide or pre-warn of the need for payments or maintenance. However, concerns were raised over the privacy, ownership and use of this data. Others disagreed with a reliance on technology at the exclusion of local or social context.

2) Users Attendees reached a broad consensus that the user should have a more prominent place in product, business and project design. There were fears that solar might be at the mercy of existing social relations and could entrench rather than alleviate differences of class or gender.

3) Unknowns Whilst there is a connection between the use of solar and improvements in health, education and economic status, the evidence is not yet conclusive. It was similarly recognised that we know little about humanitarian or emergency settings or the situation in the black or informal market.

On the left a d.light product, on the right an unbranded, 'copycat' model.