Until a few years ago, life in the remote village of Sukatani in western Java was not much different than it had been for centuries. As the sun went down in the evening, families gathered around flickering candles or smoky oil lamps to eat supper. The rusty pulley on the village well squeaked as someone drew a pail of water for the night. A few people walked home through the growing dusk as fireflies blinked above the rice paddies. Here on the equator, nights are 12 hours long year round—a long time to be in the dark. There wasn't much to do and not much money to spend on luxuries like batteries for a portable radio or a flashlight. Isolated by mountainous terrain and bumpy, unpaved roads, Sukatani wasn't likely to be hooked up to the national power grid or telecommunications system anytime soon.

Everything changed in 1989 when Sukatani was chosen as the first of fifty rural Indonesian villages to participate in an innovative renewable power program. Jointly designed and financed by a Dutch firm and the Indonesian government, this project demonstrates the promise of sustainable energy systems. Today, photovoltaic panels on tall utility poles convert sunshine into electricity. Homeowners pay only about $2.50 per month for power, less than they previously paid for kerosene, batteries, and battery charging.

"Compact fluorescent bulbs now provide light so that children can do homework after supper, and a new motorized pump on the village well provides a steady supply of water for better sanitation. Adults use evening hours sewing, weaving, or carving items to sell at the market. A few households have a "warung" (shop) that now can be open after dark. The village even has a few television sets that provide evening entertainment and a window on the wider world. The village has joined the global telecommunications network decades earlier than was expected.

The project offers hope for how both developing and developed countries can benefit from sustainable energy. Nonrenewable sources (fossil fuels and nuclear power currently provide nearly 90 percent of all the commercial energy used worldwide. If the rest of the world were to use energy at the rate that those of us in the richer countries do, known fuel supplies wouldn't last long. Furthermore, our environment couldn't withstand the assault of extracting and burning all that fuel.

Fortunately, as Sukatani demonstrates, fossil fuels and nuclear power are not our only energy sources. A combination of energy conservation and renewables might reduce our dependence on coal and oil to about 15 percent of our energy supply rather than the 65 percent they now provide. By utilizing sustainable energy sources, developing countries may be able to provide a real increase in the standard of living for their residents while also helping to preserve our global environment.