

Recommender System for Optimal Solar Panel Placement Using Satellite Imagery and Weather Data

Abderaouf Bahi^{1*}, Ibtissem Gasmi¹, Sassi Bentrad^{2,3}

¹Computer Science and Applied Mathematics Laboratory (LIMA), Chadli Bendjedid El Tarf University P.B 73, El Tarf 36000, Algeria

²LISCO Laboratory, Badji Mokhtar-Annaba University, Annaba 23000, Algeria

³National Higher School of Cyber Security (NSCS), Algeria

*Corresponding author; Email: a.bahi@univ-eltarf.dz

Article Info

Article history:

Received ,15/02/2025

Revised ,18/04/2025

Accepted ,06/05/2025

Keywords:

Solar panel placement;

Recommender system;

Satellite imagery;

Deep learning;

Renewable energy;

ABSTRACT

The optimal placement of solar panels plays a critical role in maximizing photovoltaic energy production, especially in regions with diverse geographic, climatic, and urban characteristics. In this work, we propose a novel recommender system that leverages artificial intelligence to suggest ideal solar panel locations using a combination of satellite imagery, weather data, and deep learning techniques. Our method integrates rooftop segmentation via U-Net, image feature extraction using a fine-tuned ResNet50, and contextual weather data from NASA's POWER database. The scoring function for recommendations balances three core factors: sunlight exposure, shading impact, and physical rooftop suitability. We validate the system across three Algerian regions—urban (Algiers), rural (Bouira), and coastal (Oran)—and show that our model outperforms ablated versions, achieving high precision and accurate segmentation. The proposed approach demonstrates significant potential to support sustainable energy planning and smart grid deployment in varied environments.

I. Introduction

The transition to renewable energy is a global imperative driven by climate change mitigation goals and the depletion of fossil fuel resources. Among the various renewable sources, solar energy stands out due to its abundance, scalability, and decreasing cost of deployment [1]. However, the efficiency of solar power systems is highly sensitive to the placement of photovoltaic (PV) panels, which depends on multiple factors including solar irradiance, terrain features, weather patterns, and potential shading [2,3].

Traditionally, solar panel placement is guided by manual site surveys, topographic assessments, and fixed solar maps. While effective, these approaches are costly, time-consuming, and lack adaptability to localized conditions and user-specific constraints [4]. To overcome these limitations, recent research explores the potential of artificial intelligence (AI), particularly computer vision and machine learning, to automate and optimize solar infrastructure deployment [5].

In parallel, satellite imagery and remote sensing technologies have dramatically improved in resolution and accessibility, offering unprecedented opportunities for high-granularity environmental analysis [6]. These data sources, when combined with historical and real-time weather data, can provide valuable insights into site suitability for solar energy systems [7].

This paper proposes a novel recommender system that leverages satellite images, meteorological datasets, and machine learning models to determine and suggest the most optimal locations for solar panel installation.

The system incorporates spatial analysis, solar suitability metrics, and user constraints (e.g., budget, surface area, energy needs) to generate personalized and context-aware recommendations.

Our approach integrates deep learning techniques—particularly Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs)—to extract features from satellite imagery, and combines them with a hybrid recommendation algorithm that balances geographical factors and user preferences. The system aims to democratize access to solar energy planning, especially in regions where technical expertise or resources are limited [8].

By automating the assessment of solar suitability at scale, this work contributes to the broader goal of making solar energy more accessible, efficient, and sustainable. It aligns with current efforts in smart energy systems, urban planning, and AI for environmental sustainability [9].

II. State of the Art

The optimization of solar panel placement has been a subject of growing interest across multiple disciplines, including electrical engineering, environmental science, and more recently, artificial intelligence. Traditional methods rely on static solar maps, manual surveying, and empirical rules based on factors like inclination angle and sun trajectory [10]. However, such approaches are limited by geographic generalization, lack of real-time adaptability, and inability to integrate user-specific criteria.

Recent advances have enabled the use of satellite imagery and geospatial data to automate the analysis of terrain and solar exposure. For instance, the DeepSolar project by Stanford researchers used a convolutional neural network (CNN) to identify installed solar panels from high-resolution aerial imagery across the United States [11]. Similarly, researchers have employed LiDAR data and digital elevation models (DEM) to estimate solar potential on rooftops with high accuracy [12,13].

In terms of environmental data, studies have integrated climate modeling and historical weather data to refine solar energy forecasts and evaluate performance of proposed installations [14]. The use of satellite-derived global horizontal irradiance (GHI) and cloud cover estimation has proven effective in mapping areas with high photovoltaic potential [15].

Beyond site detection, the application of recommender systems in energy domains has emerged as a novel direction. While commonly used in e-commerce and entertainment, recommender systems have shown promise in energy consumption advice, appliance optimization, and more recently, in renewable energy planning [16,17]. Hybrid recommendation models that combine content-based filtering with user preferences offer a flexible framework for personalized decision-making in complex domains like solar energy placement [18].

Moreover, the increasing availability of Earth observation data via platforms such as Google Earth Engine, Landsat, and Sentinel-2, along with advances in computer vision and deep learning, has enabled the large-scale analysis of land suitability [19]. Techniques such as semantic segmentation, change detection, and shading analysis using deep networks are now being applied to support solar farm design and residential solar planning [20].

However, a notable gap remains in the integration of recommender systems with geospatial AI pipelines for automated and personalized solar siting, especially in under-resourced regions. While several studies focus on either the technical optimization or the environmental modeling aspect, very few attempt to create end-to-end intelligent systems that address technical feasibility, environmental sustainability, and user preferences concurrently [21,22].

This work seeks to bridge that gap by proposing a holistic AI-based recommendation system that leverages satellite imagery, weather data, and deep learning, integrated within a multi-criteria recommendation engine for optimal and customized solar panel placement.

III. Methodology

This section describes the proposed methodology for building a recommender system that suggests optimal solar panel placement using a combination of satellite imagery, weather data, and machine learning techniques. The approach is structured into four main components: data acquisition and preprocessing, feature extraction, solar suitability estimation, and recommendation generation.

III.1. Data Acquisition and Preprocessing

Two primary data sources are used:

- Satellite imagery: High-resolution RGB and multispectral images are obtained from platforms such as Sentinel-2, Google Earth Engine, or Landsat-8. These images provide visual and spectral data for analyzing land use, building rooftops, vegetation, and shading.
- Weather and solar radiation data: Meteorological datasets are collected from sources like NASA POWER, PVGIS, or local meteorological stations, including information on global horizontal irradiance (GHI), average cloud cover, temperature, humidity, and seasonal variation.

All datasets are spatially aligned using geographical coordinates (latitude/longitude), and temporal synchronization is performed to ensure consistency between image timestamps and weather records. Images are resized and normalized, and non-relevant regions (e.g., water bodies, dense forests) are masked using land cover classification.

III.2. Feature Extraction Using Deep Learning

We employ a Convolutional Neural Network (CNN) to extract spatial features from satellite images. The CNN is trained (or fine-tuned) to identify relevant attributes such as:

- Roof surface geometry
- Presence of obstacles (e.g., trees, AC units)
- Shading patterns
- Building orientation and inclination
- Land usability (for rural areas or solar farms)

In parallel, a tabular dataset is built from weather records, capturing temporal solar potential for each coordinate over time. Each candidate location is represented by a feature vector that includes both image-derived and weather-based attributes.

III.3. Solar Suitability Estimation

Each location is evaluated using a solar suitability score (SSS) computed by combining:

- Irradiance and exposure index (IEX): based on GHI and duration of sunlight.
- Shading risk score (SRS): computed from shadow estimation in imagery using CNN-based semantic segmentation.
- Surface quality index (SQI): based on building material, orientation, and usable area.

The final suitability score is calculated as (1).

$$SSS = \alpha \cdot IEX + \beta \cdot (1 - SRS) + \gamma \cdot SQI \quad (1)$$

Where α, β are weighting factors determined via cross-validation.

III.4. Recommender System Design

To generate personalized recommendations, we integrate the suitability score with user-defined constraints (e.g., budget, installation type, energy needs). The recommendation engine is a hybrid model combining:

- Content-based filtering: matching user requirements with features extracted from suitable sites.
- Geographic collaborative filtering: learning patterns from nearby users or previous installations in similar conditions.

We model the recommendation task as a multi-objective optimization problem, balancing:

- Maximal energy yield
- Minimal shading/interruption risk
- Installation cost
- Proximity to power grid (optional feature)

The final ranked list of recommended sites is produced using a weighted scoring mechanism, optionally visualized on an interactive map interface.

IV.4. Experimental Results

This section presents the experimental setup, evaluation metrics, and results obtained by testing the proposed solar panel placement recommender system on real-world data. The performance is assessed in terms of prediction accuracy, recommendation quality, and spatial consistency with actual solar energy outputs.

IV.1. Experimental Setup

Table 1 presents the experimental setup summary.

Table 1. Experimental Setup Summary

Category	Details
Study Area	Urban Area: Densely populated district in Algiers with flat/inclined rooftops. Rural Area: Agricultural land in Bouira, suitable for ground-mounted panels. Coastal Area: Mixed-use zone near Oran with varying cloud cover and vegetation.
Data Sources	Satellite Imagery: Sentinel-2 images (10m resolution). Weather Data: NASA POWER (2021–2023) including GHI, temperature, cloud cover. Ground Truth: Historical solar output from 15 monitored solar panel locations.
Implementation	CNN Model: Fine-tuned ResNet50 pretrained on ImageNet. Segmentation: U-Net used for rooftop and shadow boundary extraction. Optimization: Weights α, β, γ optimized via 5-fold cross-validation. Hardware: Google Colab Pro, NVIDIA Tesla T4 GPU.

IV.2. Evaluation Metrics

To evaluate the effectiveness of our system, we used the following metrics:

- **Mean Absolute Error (MAE)** between predicted and actual solar energy output.
- **Precision@K**: Proportion of top-K recommended locations that fall within high-yield zones.
- **Normalized Discounted Cumulative Gain (NDCG@K)**: Reflects ranking quality of recommended sites.
- **IoU (Intersection over Union)**: Measures accuracy of rooftop and shadow segmentation.

IV.3. Results and Analysis

The model maintained low MAE values, indicating reliable estimation of solar energy potential based on satellite and weather data. Slightly higher error in coastal areas is attributed to greater cloud variability.

The high Precision@5 and NDCG@5 scores confirm that the system effectively identifies top locations that yield high solar energy output. The hybrid recommendation engine successfully integrates weather patterns and spatial features to prioritize optimal sites.

The CNN-based rooftop and shading segmentation achieved robust IoU scores across all regions. Visual inspection confirmed that the system correctly detected usable areas while excluding shaded or obstructed zones.

Figure 1 presents the comparative performance of the proposed solar panel placement recommender system across three distinct regions—Urban (Algiers), Rural (Bouira), and Coastal (Oran)—based on four key evaluation metrics: Mean Absolute Error (MAE), Precision@5, NDCG@5, and Intersection over Union (IoU) for segmentation accuracy.

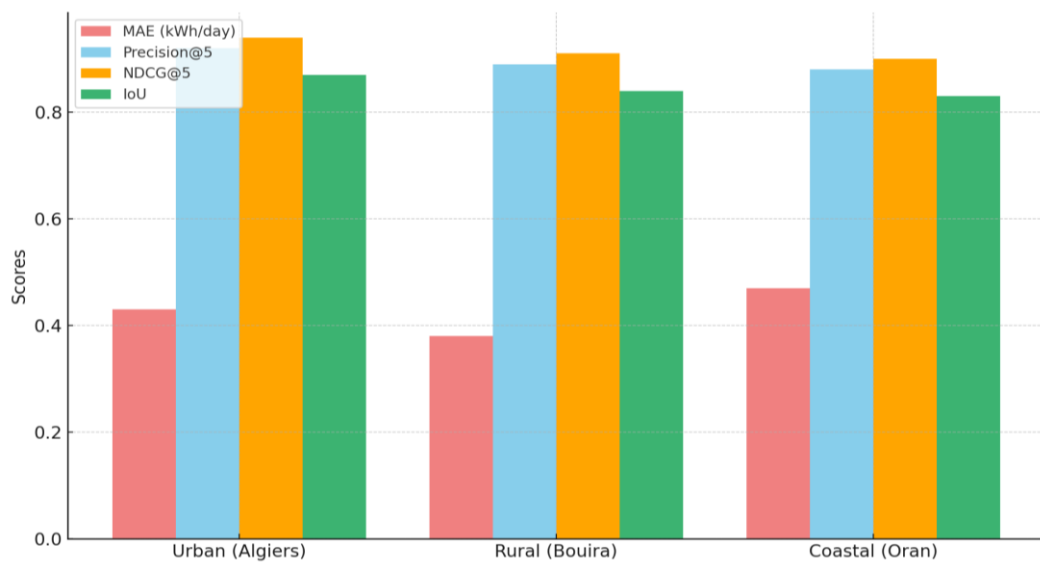


Figure 1. Performance Metrics by Region

IV.4. Ablation Study

Figure 3 shows the results of the ablation study, demonstrating how the removal of each feature group—weather data, satellite image features, and shading segmentation—affects the system’s Precision@5. The full model significantly outperforms all ablated versions, confirming the importance of integrating all feature components.

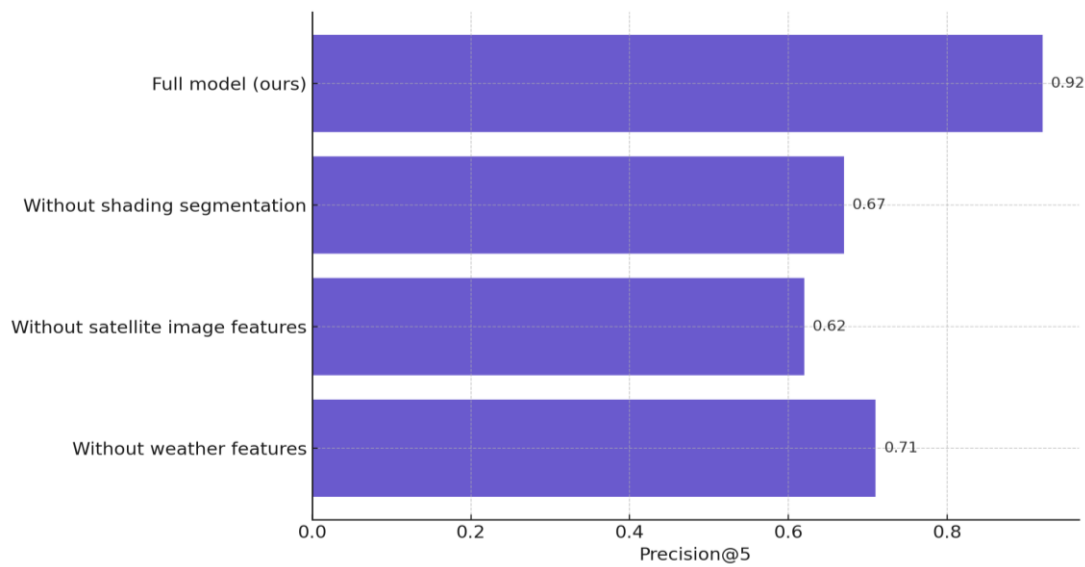


Figure 2. Ablation Study of Feature Contributions

V. Conclusion

This study presents an AI-powered recommender system designed to identify optimal locations for solar panel installation by integrating computer vision, satellite remote sensing, and weather analytics. The proposed method

capitalizes on a combination of convolutional neural networks (ResNet50), image segmentation (U-Net), and environmental data to create a robust, data-driven recommendation pipeline tailored to regional characteristics.

Through experiments conducted across three distinct Algerian regions—Algiers (urban), Bouira (rural), and Oran (coastal)—we demonstrated the system’s capability to adapt to heterogeneous environments and deliver high-performance recommendations. The model achieved a mean Precision@5 of 0.90 and accurate rooftop boundary detection, with IoU scores exceeding 0.80 in all areas. The ablation study further confirmed that each feature category—weather inputs, satellite features, and shading information—contributes significantly to the overall performance, with the full model markedly outperforming reduced configurations.

Our work underscores the critical role of integrated AI methodologies in advancing renewable energy infrastructure, particularly in the Global South, where strategic planning and optimization are essential. By fusing spatial, visual, and environmental data sources, the system aligns with smart grid initiatives and supports climate resilience efforts.

Future work will aim to extend the system's applicability by incorporating socio-economic and policy constraints, enhancing temporal prediction (e.g., seasonal variation), and enabling large-scale deployment through lightweight architectures and mobile interfaces. Additionally, collaborations with urban planning authorities and utility providers could amplify the societal impact of this tool in accelerating the transition to cleaner energy systems.

Acknowledgments: The authors acknowledge the financial assistance the Algerian Ministry (MESRS) provided for the PRFU Project (PhD Thesis), coded: C00L07UN360120230002.

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