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Documentation and evaluation of cases studies of energy interventions will highlight women's specific energy needs and how they can be attained. (Photo AIWC, India)

## News from the Editors

### Policies, Projects or the Market - enabling Women's access to Energy

**In the coming eighteen months, the international stage will see some important events relevant to women and sustainable energy.**

These include the UN Special Session in June this year on Women 2000: Gender Equality, Development and Peace for the 21st Century (also known as Beijing +5); the World Summit for Social Development (also known as Copenhagen +5) and the UN Commission on Sustainable Development Meetings (on Energy and Transport in April 2001). *ENERGIA* aims to be active in the preparatory processes which lead up to these meetings as well to

contribute to events around the main plenary sessions. To assist in our advocacy we have been reviewing what has been happening with women and energy at both the field and policy levels. As is well known, there has been a general policy shift in all development co-operation away from public sector projects to private sector, more market-based, initiatives. This raises important questions: which is the better mechanism for assisting women in meeting their energy needs, and do policies support those processes?

#### Policies on women and energy

At the international level, the topic of women and energy now appears more frequently on the agendas of international conferences than it did a decade ago. The >

> policies and programmes of multilateral agencies are responding to the advocacy in these conferences and other forums. For example, the UNDP Energy and Atmosphere Programme has a programme called *Energy and Women: Generating Opportunities for Development*. This type of initiative is to be welcomed. However, if our goal is mainstreaming women in energy, then we still have a long way to go. Why does addressing women's special needs in the energy sector not match developments in other sectors, such as water and forestry, despite commitment at the international policy level to the Beijing Platform for Action to gender mainstream in all sectors of the economy? International agencies require their own gender expertise in order to be able to assist governments in the South with their efforts to mainstream gender. Developing this capacity clearly takes time.

**At the national level**, many rural households still do not have adequate energy services. When women's energy needs are addressed, this tends to be restricted to household energy, which is equated to cookstoves, and even then wood energy and improved cookstoves receive relatively little attention compared to other energy sources. As a consequence, the household energy sector has been under resourced and increasingly marginalised.

**What can be done** to improve the situation? Policies can be analysed for their lack of gender perspective and proposals made for policy development. The number of people currently active in gender and energy is small (but growing). As part of building up this capacity, more women should be encouraged to work in the energy sector, not only with renewables but also with conventional energy systems.

**Formulating more women-friendly energy policies** needs accurate gender disaggregated data, including data on the effects of particular policies (or lack of them) on women. This requires the application of appropriate tools. It is possible that decision-makers do not know either about the availability of gender tools or how to use them.

### **Have projects failed women?**

**Women's energy needs** have in the past been primarily addressed by externally funded projects. These projects seem to have developed a bad reputation as a sustainable mechanism for meeting women's energy needs. Too often pilot projects are discontinued and new projects started up without assimilating the lessons learnt from previous experiences. This type of criticism is common and is often linked to the short time horizon of donors. Projects have been unsustainable, not only financially but also institutionally, sometimes relying on the enthusiasm and drive of one individual (often an outsider). Another reason for project failure is a lack of consultation with women. Women's priorities have been neglected, their indigenous knowledge of natural resources left untapped, and their potential contribution to solving their own energy problems disregarded.

**Support is increasing** for income generation projects. Certainly providing women with access to cash resources can be viewed positively if it allows them to determine their own priorities and make choices about the energy forms they want. However, entrepreneurial activity needs more than a good idea to succeed. The energy inputs are often overlooked, as are appropriate markets for products and the transport to reach them.

**There have been** a number of micro-credit projects aimed at providing women with access to funding denied by the

commercial banks. On the surface, at least, micro-credit systems do appear to be welcomed by women. However, do they really provide sufficient levels of funding to move women out of poverty? Do they enable women to develop as entrepreneurs?

**The current trend** with energy projects is the promotion of electricity. What are the implications for women? Although electricity has many benefits, it does not help address the major energy problem facing most poor women, meeting daily cooking needs. Cooking with electricity is not cheap, running costs are significant and a stove has to be purchased.

### **Will the market serve women better?**

**The trend in the energy sector** at present is to allow the market to deliver energy services. Is this necessarily bad for women as end-users? Some modern marketing strategies would take gender differences into account when analysing the potential clients. Advertising would sell products to men and women in different ways. A company could promote their new products through imaginative training programmes that are client-centred, taking into account availability and skills. The company could arrange financing for its products.

**The negative side** is that the market might not be interested in targeting poor households if the firms concerned feel that the returns would be negligible. Since many poor households are headed by women, it might be considered that the market approach does not benefit women.

**Market approaches would** probably address gender issues on an efficiency basis. Enabling equity or empowerment is not a market objective. However, these objectives might be achieved indirectly. For example, women entrepreneurs would certainly be empowered and possibly would move towards greater equality in their family through the increased status gained from contributing to household income.

### **Where do we go from here?**

**These are clearly** exciting times in women and energy. Practical projects are increasing women's access to energy and allowing them to become energy entrepreneurs. Networks are starting at the regional level (for example in Central America), at the national level (for example in Tanzania and India), and based around sectors (for example the Oil and Gas Sector Women's Network in Pakistan), to provide support and exchange ideas. We need to document success stories, evaluate and build on the lessons learnt. This material could support advocacy work, it emphasises women's specific energy needs and how these can be sustainably attained, and it highlights the important role that women play in the energy sector. In the coming months, Energia intends to make the development of case studies one of its major objectives. ■

◆ For more information contact:

**Joy Clancy**

**Technology and Development Group**

**University of Twente, PO Box 217, 7500 AE Enschede, The Netherlands**

*This article is taken from a paper presented at a recent workshop sponsored by ENERGIA on "Policies, projects and the market: Empowering women?". A full copy of the paper can be obtained by writing to Joy at the address above, or by e-mail to [j.s.clancy@tdg.utwente.nl](mailto:j.s.clancy@tdg.utwente.nl), or fax +31-53-4893087.*