Making Women’s Energy More Visible Through Integrated Rural Development

This year’s annual meeting of the Household Energy Network (HEDON) discussed the issue of whether or not household energy should be integrated into other sectors of the economy.

Some of the arguments heard there have already been set out in the second issue of ENERGIA News, in an article about the GTZ Household Energy Programme. The authors asserted that household energy programmes (HHE) should have more than a technical focus and not just be about cook stoves. In addition, HHE could be integrated into other sector projects or alternatively components of other sectors should be integrated into HHE projects. Although, in the context of rural development, is this really something new? Isn’t integrating household energy with forestry, agriculture, transport, small and medium scale industries etc. just integrated rural development under another name? Integrated rural development recognises that energy is a basic input in all development activities. When, energy supply is constrained, as is the case in many rural areas, basic needs and human development will not be met. An integrated development approach is considered to produce more effective solutions to these problems. However, so, does it adequately meet both women’s and men’s needs?

The need for an integrated approach

Integrated rural development as a planning approach is based on the recognition that there is a complex linkage between energy, environment and agricultural production. Agriculture is the main economic activity in rural areas. In addition, the majority of rural industry is strongly dependent, directly or indirectly, upon agriculture, for example, grain millers and blacksmiths. Therefore the impact of agriculture on all rural households, including their energy supply and demand, is significant. For example, agriculture produces both food and income for the household. Agricultural output could be increased with energy inputs and thereby benefit household members’ nutrition and wealth. Extra income could be used in turn to buy improved energy services for the household. Crops are transported to the household by headloading and to market by mechanised means, such as carts, buses, and lorries, again each type of transport with its own form of energy input. Agriculture residues can be the main energy source for households or rural industries, or they can be used as a time saving strategy at busy times of the year, for example, post harvest. However, residues also play a number of other roles, for example, as raw materials for making household articles, such as mats and baskets, or play a significant environmental role as a fertiliser or for erosion prevention. Diversion of residues from their environmental protection role can lead to soil degradation. A good understanding of the dynamics of agriculture and how they are influenced by the local conditions, is necessary to make appropriate energy interventions. These examples illustrate that the interaction between energy, environment and development dictates an integrated approach to energy planning.

The close interconnection of farming and related activities forms the background to rural peoples’ daily lives. They already perceive these as an integrated whole. Energy is not seen as an end in itself. This may help to explain why people generally do not rank the provision of energy highly as an issue, even in areas of severe fuelwood stress. Energy
supply cannot be considered in isolation from its end-use and the potential environmental impacts. Nor can other sector development activities be formulated without considering how they are to be fuelled.

Starting point for rural energy planning: The household - but makes sure women's voices are heard?

Where should an integrated analysis of the rural situation begin? With agriculture? Probably a better starting point to trace the sectoral linkages is the household. This will reveal not only agricultural activities and household basic needs, but also a whole range of subsistence activities taking place in the household which are otherwise often overlooked. These so-called cottage industries provide market goods and services, for example, beer brewing, palm oil processing, soap making, hair-dressing, sewing, spinning and weaving. Many of these activities are important sources of income for women. For example, beer brewing is often the single most significant income generating activity for rural women in Africa. A large number of these activities are energy intensive with low efficiencies of energy conversion, as well as having low productivity rates. Constraints on fuelwood availability is threatening this access to cash. However, because subsistence activities are not included in GNP statistics they are generally neglected by energy (and development) planners. This has implications for energy policies which tend to concentrate on large scale infrastructure projects, which tend to benefit men, for example, large scale dam-based irrigation schemes, and not on small scale solutions more suitable at the household level, for example, hand pumps. On the other hand, if HHE programmes focus on cooking, lighting and space heating, often with women as the target primary beneficiaries, they miss the opportunity to benefit women by the promotion of more energy efficient systems for the household income generating activities. By not taking an integrated analytical approach we run the risk of creating gaps in our understanding of the rural situation and making ineffective interventions. In addition, by ignoring the gender dimension of rural activities makes these gaps bigger. As a consequence, a large number of women's energy needs go unmet.

How can we ensure that women's and men's needs are both incorporated into the planning process? The centralised top-down prescriptions to integrated rural development of late 70s/early 80s obviously failed. Planners tended to focus only on technical solutions, many of which did not match peoples' needs. The antidote to top-down planning, which emerged at the end of the 80s, was community participation. However, we should not assume that community participation automatically means that women's views are heard and acted upon. To contribute effectively requires knowledge and skills which may be lacking in rural communities, and particularly amongst women. Elsewhere in this issue, Soma Dutta looks at some of the social, economic and knowledge barriers which hinder the effective participation of women in energy planning. Soma then goes on to make some suggestions as to how these barriers may be overcome.

Gender analysis as a tool for more effective interventions

If integrated rural development is to succeed in drawing together needs/ideas from all the sectors within rural societies, it requires a logical framework with a particular methodology of analysis. If we want to ensure that both women's and men's needs are taken into account in the planning process, the methodology must include gender analysis among its tools. This type of approach will ensure the design or more effective energy interventions than in the past. For example, gender disaggregated activity calendars would show that men and women grow different crops, which have different energy input requirements, processing and transport needs. An analysis of “Who does what? Who owns what? Who has access to what resources? Who controls which resources?” in the household would show that decision making within households has a distinct gender dimension. Cash purchases are decided primarily by men, although women may be consulted. On the other hand, women are usually free to make decisions about matters which fall under their management. If women are to be the sole target group for an intervention, then solutions will probably be easier to implement if they do not involve the purchase of goods or equipment. An alternative strategy may be working with both women and men so that both perceive the benefits of a particular intervention to the household as a whole. Improvements in children's education and income generation may prove to be
acceptable common aims.

**Women's metabolic energy: the forgotten input**

When taking an integrated development approach, *"What is the form of the energy input?"* should automatically follow *"Who does what?"*. This will highlight another forgotten aspect of rural energy: just how many activities actually use substantial quantities of women's own energy. One of the frequently stated goals of rural development is the raising of living standards through a reduction in drudgery. This then begs the question: why is the reduction of women's metabolic energy input not being tackled as an energy issue? Is it because planners only respond to statistics? Perhaps then to give it a more widespread recognition, women's energy should be included in national energy statistics. Anyone who has tried to argue this point will be well aware of the reactions. The polite response is that measurement is too complex and methodologically problematical. There is some truth in this but this should not been seen as a reason for not doing it, but rather as a challenge to be overcome! What it needs is the political will. The struggle to have non-commercial biomass energy included in energy statistics encountered similar arguments but there are increasing numbers of countries which now include at least crude estimates. Let battle now commence to make women's own energy more visible!

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