

There are many examples of energy initiatives for the poor, including projects that attend to the distinct energy needs of women. While these illustrate how focused energy interventions can reduce poverty and empower women, in the end they are just that – illustrations of an idea or a concept, or a different way of doing things. The stories they tell, however pertinent or poignant, barely scratch the surface of the staggering problem of a third of humanity still without access to modern energy, still getting by on wood fuels, a dim light from kerosene and sheer muscle power. This in an age of electric cars, nanotechnology, space exploration and an electronically coalescing global community. **K V RAMANI and VEENA JOSHI**

Energy Policies for the Poor and Women

International organisations routinely publish numbers on this wholesale energy deprivation in developing countries, numbers that hardly change as the years go by. It is a crying shame, especially today when one hears of incomprehensible sums of money, trillions of dol-

lars, being pumped into financial markets to kick-start a faltering global economic architecture fixated on growth without equity. In contrast, the UN Secretary General's recent funding appeal for the MDGs yielded a mere \$16 billion. It should surprise no-one that the goal of

universal access to modern energy services remains as elusive as it was decades ago.

The crux of the issue is that energy policies have remained, above all, enablers of broader macroeconomic policies ob-



sessed by economic growth and all that it implies. If they have paid attention to the energy needs of the poor, and the women among them, this has been incidental to their main preoccupation. Universal access to energy will not come about without policymakers listening to the voices of the poor, and there will be no breakthrough in terms of poverty reduction or women's empowerment without access to modern energy for productive uses that lie beyond meeting day-to-day survival needs. Only when moved to the top of the policy agenda, rather than being a codicil to it, and only when backed by political will and sufficient resources will the scattered examples of energy access successes gain a critical mass where progress is not measured in mincing steps but visible to the naked eye.

This special issue of *ENERGIA News* focuses on a series of activities culminating in the launch of an Asia-Pacific Policy Innovation Forum that seeks to place poverty and gender at the heart of energy policies in the region. Two high profile interviews and five articles by leading energy practitioners analyse prevailing energy policies and offer a range of ideas on the way forward. What is striking about them is that, even in these troubled times, they all retain a sense of optimism about the prospects for change. Their message of fresh opportunities in the midst of a seeming calamity takes a page off the economist Schumpeter's book on *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, in which he spoke about 'gales of creative destruction'.

In the first interview, Noeleen Heyzer, the first woman to head the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, expresses concern over the compounding effects of the energy, food and financial crises that have brought the Asia-Pacific economic juggernaut to a shuddering halt. With three-quarters of the region's population lacking basic social protection, she sees poverty, hunger and unemployment worsening, and urges governments not to lose sight of the MDGs in their preoccupation with short-term economic stimuli. She sees energy security as a core priority for the region, and the current fall in energy prices as offering no more than a decep-

tive comfort. However, she believes the current low prices provide an opportunity to invest in a new regional energy infrastructure that can facilitate energy efficiency, renewable energy technology development and transfer, and transboundary energy trade. She believes that universal access to energy is integral to energy security, and the traditional view of energy security as a matter of supply and demand needs to be replaced by a new approach directed towards inclusive and sustainable development. She calls for greater participation of non-governmental stakeholders, especially the private sector, to ensure energy services for all.

In the second interview, Kirit Parikh, Energy Advisor to India's Planning Commission, similarly cautions against letting the guard down on energy security because of the currently low global oil prices. He feels the risk of high prices returning, and the threat of climate change, requires an ongoing focus on energy security, and an expanded role for renewable energy. Commenting on the large number of people still lacking adequate modern energy in India, he cites the lack of resources and poor institutional co-ordination as the main reasons why previous programmes have failed to meet their targets. He notes that India's new Integrated Energy Policy seeks to overcome these problems through transparent and targeted subsidies, and direct cash support for the poor's lifeline energy requirements, combined with tax reforms and improved inter-ministerial coordination. The policy also recognises the disproportionate impacts of energy deprivation on women and offers support to women's self-help groups and women-operated energy enterprises.

In the first article, Conrado Heruela and Anoja Wickramasinghe examine the household energy needs of the poor - especially cooking energy needs that directly impact on women's health, time, productivity and social inclusion, and form 80-90% of the energy consumed by poor households. Noting how high energy prices and declining subsidies have forced millions of poor households to consume even less, or stop consuming altogether the already small quantities of fossil fuels they used, they make a case

for expanding the use of renewable energy resources and technologies. Their menu of options includes biogas, jatropha oil, gelfuel, biomass gasification, improved wood and gasifier stoves, solar cookers, solar water heaters and photovoltaic home systems, wind turbines and small-scale hydropower. While acknowledging the need for subsidies to bridge the poor's affordability gap, they accept that protracted subsidies distort markets and discourage private investment. As an alternative, they seek policies that promote small-scale renewable energy systems, rental models to replace conventional owner-user models, increasing affordability through income-generation, microcredit and other innovative consumer financing, and public-private partnerships.

Dominique Lallement looks at the impacts of high oil prices on the livelihood energy needs of the poor at large, and poor women in particular. She notes that the urban poor have been more affected by higher oil prices since they depend on petroleum fuels to a greater extent than the rural poor. More critically, she highlights how the indirect and longer term impacts of high energy prices can be severe on both rural and urban poor whose short-term coping strategies - cooking less, not boiling water, eating less nutritious food, reducing food intake, reverting to health-compromising biomass fuels, curtailing health and education expenses, and pledging or selling assets - undercut the very livelihood base they rely on to escape poverty. Echoing the call for targeted subsidies and greater reliance on renewable energy options, she stresses affordability as the key to ensuring the poor's livelihood energy needs. Her policy recommendations include social protection measures that soften the impacts of short-term energy price volatility, and longer term policies to reduce poverty through income generation.

Next, N. Sreekumar argues that energy market reforms have ignored the poor and worsened their energy access, with governments more preoccupied with mobilising private investment and promoting market efficiency. He draws on the Indian experience to illustrate how the already limited transparency and public participation in decision-making





A women's group in India has been economically empowered by drying, packaging and selling shrimps.

have deteriorated even further over the years, and how the government, by confining itself to the policy arena, has seen energy markets driven by the commercial short-term interests of private business to the detriment of poor energy consumers. He feels the remedy lies in balancing regulation and incentives, in particular through a stronger regulatory framework at national, sub-national and local levels as an instrument of democratic governance to promote transparency, accountability and participation. He calls for a demand-side approach, participatory planning, greater use of gender-disaggregated data, increasing women's access to energy information, meaningful consultations with disadvantaged groups, and effective legislative oversight.

Shirish Sinha, Ana Rojas, Poushali Maji and Jyoti Parikh focus on emerging carbon markets as a potential source of financial resources for pro-poor and pro-women energy interventions. They see the MDGs, which encompass poverty reduction, women's empowerment and environmental sustainability, as an enabling framework. They note that few of the projects under the clean development mechanism (CDM) of the Kyoto Protocol contribute to meeting MDG criteria, concentrating instead on large gains and quick returns. The growing number of international funds for the purpose also acts as a barrier since applying requires specialised financial and regulatory knowledge. They see the diverse impacts of climate change reinforcing the need to open up such funds to small-scale mitigation and adaptation projects that can enhance the poor's energy access. This, they argue, can be achieved by combining carbon market incentives, that encourage the long-term operation of clean energy technologies, with upfront poverty reduction funds, and by switching from project-based mechanisms to programmatic ones stressing capacity building, institutionalisation and organisational development.

In the concluding article of the series, Dev Nathan and Govind Kelkar address the question of *monitoring the effectiveness of pro-poor and pro-women energy policies*. They suggest a four-tier framework with indicators to measure the availability, access, end-uses and impacts on people's energy wellbeing. In measuring the availability of energy, they emphasise mobility and motive power as key determinants of the poor's production and productivity. They feel income and gender factors play important roles in determining energy access, particularly women's mobility and management and control of productive resources, including energy. Drawing a distinction between energy access in general and energy access by women, they suggest a number of gender-segregated indicators to measure the energy use in household production, micro-businesses, energy enterprises and transportation. For measuring impacts, they propose some indicators not normally associated with energy, such as changes in household decision-making, law and order, and the

use of community facilities. To implement the framework, they recommend policies that require energy service providers to collect the needed data, social audits and the participation of the poor and women in the monitoring and evaluation process.

The vision underlying the foregoing ideas is to push for change to achieve universal access to energy, not as a distant goal forever out of reach, but as something attainable in our lifetimes. Developing countries today face formidable new challenges on multiple fronts. However, these challenges also carry within themselves the seeds of such change because they cannot be resolved without knocking down the basic premises of an uncaring development paradigm that has shackled energy policy for far too long. We hope a new, more just and compassionate model of development will emerge from today's turmoil - one that will allow poor men and women to stop debasing themselves as surrogates for energy and, instead, start using it to realise their human potential.



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