

Power to the People: Building Solutions to Energy Poverty in Africa

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There cannot be any single approach to rural electrification bringing power to the people. That fundamental fact was emphasized by Koosum P. Kalyan, Senior Business Development Adviser, Africa, and Exploration, Shell International Petroleum Company, United Kingdom. But, she asked, what are the alternative solutions?

Anders Ellegard, Senior Analyst, Renewable Energy, Environment and Socio Economic Issues, SwedPower International, Sweden, pointed out that the Energy Poverty Action Task Force is seeking effective ways to bring electricity to those remote areas the grid does not reach. There is often, Ellegard said, infrastructure that is not working, in which re investment is needed for sustained operation. "If we can develop a sustainable mechanism, then the poor who receive the service will be able to pay for continuing maintenance. But we cannot recover capital from the poor. Capital investment has to be found elsewhere."

Monyane Moleleki, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Lesotho, shared his country's experiences the experiences of a country where some 90% of the population is rural and where many live in remote settlements. It is, Moleleki said, prohibitively expensive to take grid power to every home. But concessioning is making the service of providing grid power attractive to private enterprise. Lesotho, Moleleki believes, is uniquely endowed because of its geography and topography to construct small hydro power facilities and, because of the country's altitude and location near the tropics, to generate wind power.

Carlos Po Chief Executive Officer and Head, Sub Sahara Region, ABB Holdings, South Africa, was frank companies such as ABB that are part of the Task Force are participating because it does good. He cited two examples of village electrification projects in Mozambique and Tanzania, where the electrical infrastructure has been provided but is being maintained by the villagers themselves.

Pedro Sanchez, Director, Tropical Agriculture, and Coordinator, Millennium Project Hunger Task Force, Earth Institute at Columbia University, USA, made the important point that villagers themselves should set their own priorities. In one example, villagers priorities are firstly and equally improved agricultural development and health facilities. Water, power, sanitation, etc., follow these first two. In the villages cited, power was initially supplied to schools and clinics while households were supplied with rechargeable lamps that could be re charged at school. Children have more time to do homework.

From the floor, one participant pointed to the example of Ghana, where the introduction of the first hydro power scheme has been accompanied by connection of villages to the grid. The state provides the high tension cables and poles. Villagers are helped with the low tension section and maintain it themselves. If they do not do homework at night, children tend to watch more television (a universal problem for parents!), although, as Ellegard pointed out, this helps make the children more aware of the wider world.

While some people cannot afford electrical power, others, free riders, can afford to pay but will not. Coercion does not help, a participant said from the floor. But in South Africa, loyalty programmes with rewards for prompt payment of bills are helping to change the culture of non payment.

The driving force in any electrification programme must be what villagers themselves want, Ellegard re emphasized. And while the capital cost of equipment is often beyond the resources of the villagers, they can and do run the various services. Ellegard's views were echoed by Po People, he said, are willing to pay for what they use and they can afford the cost of operating and maintaining a service. How does one measure the benefits of electrification? Sanchez believes there are several measures: increased school performance; the existence of

small businesses; a shift away from growing maize towards processed, value added crops; and lower rates of respiratory infections as villagers move away from smoky indoor cookers.

In answer to one participant's worry that once villagers are trained to maintain their electrical services, they will quit the village and head to the cities' bright lights, Sanchez replied, "Not in Kenya". There are few job opportunities in Nairobi, and people are moving back to the relative security of their villages where electricity brings new employment opportunities.

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