Increasing Gender Sensitivity when Planning for Energy and Transport Services

by Mattias Nordström, SEI

On 9 December 2003, the Swedish Ministry of Environment, on behalf of the Network of Women Ministers for the Environment, organised a side event to the UNFCCC COP 9 in Milan titled "Promoting Gender Equality, Providing Energy Solutions, and Preventing Climate Change". The seminar was partly based on a discussion paper prepared by the Stockholm Environment Institute.

The event was chaired by Hon. Lena Sommestad, the Swedish Minister for Environment. Four experts presented their work: Ms. Aster Zaoude, Gender Specialist for the United Nations Development Programme, Dr. Fatima Denton, Gender and Energy Analyst for ENDA Tiers-Monde in Senegal, Mrs. Fatou Ndeye Gaye, Head of the Gambian delegation, and Dr. Hermann Ott of the Wuppertal Institute in Germany.

A gender perspective

The overall question for the seminar was how a gender equality perspective can be mainstreamed in the energy and transport planning cycle, while at the same time economic, political, social and environmental requirements are addressed.

In order to achieve the targets set out in the Millennium Development Goals, the WSSD Plan of Implementation as well as other national and international development programmes, substantial improvements will have to be made towards the provision of modern energy and transport services. There is also an urgent need for a more equitable distribution of these services. Moreover, with a view to achieving the objectives of the climate convention, energy services will have to become more sustainable with an increasing share of renewable energy and more efficient use of energy. This would lead to beneficial side effects, e.g. reduced emissions of pollutants such as particles and volatile organic.

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A woman's daily chore in many developing countries

The shift to modern, flick-of-the-switch energy and transport services, has freed women to access higher education and wage labour while remaining responsible for the mainstay of household work. No matter how convenient and efficient household energy services have become, women still carry out a majority of the household work – in all countries in all social groups. The access to convenient and sufficient household energy and transport services is not the only requirement for equal opportunities in education or on the labour market. It is, however, a prerequisite for allowing more household members to be active outside the household, as well as for a greater degree of sharing of household work by both sexes.

How can a transition to sustainable energy and transport infrasystems that contribute to the objectives of the climate convention be made more sensitive to differences in access and needs of men and women? How can these systems be made to service the needs for public goods, private enterprise as well as individual households?

There are no universal solutions that will suit every country, or every group within a country. Hence, when extensions of basic services are planned, it is important that there are adequate resources set aside for decentralised and flexible solutions to cater for those who will not get access to the centrally planned system.

Main challenges

A number of key challenges have emerged concerning reforms of traditionally state-run bodies and the increasing emphasis on sustainability and equity:

1. **A gender equality perspective** should be one of the fundamental considerations used in designing energy and transportation systems in order to make sure that the right questions are asked to the right people in terms of needs and priorities. It is thus a highly consultative and iterative process. It is not acceptable to restrict the analysis to a small number of specialists that fail to understand the complexity of these questions Restricting the diversity of ex-

pertise involved has often led to limited impact assessments well after development plans have already been made.

2. In order to provide basic household energy services for large proportions of poor populations, **decentralised and cheaper systems will have to be available**. These can take the form of small independent grids around a locally available energy resource (a factory with surplus electricity generation capacity or a stream used for hydroelectric generation), or of individual diesel or gasoline generators (maybe converted to run on bio-fuel that can be locally produced). Using renewable energy such as solar photovoltaics, wind electricity generators, hydropower or bio-fuelled power generation will simultaneously contribute to the objectives of the Climate Convention and enhance sustainable development. While large centralised grid-based systems provide unique advantages in terms of economy of scale and access to large volumes of energy, they are not always the most cost-effective solution and they are too expensive to cater to poor communities without being heavily subsidised.

3. Even in times of large-scale deregulation and privatisation of public energy and transport service providers, **governments should continue to supervise the planning process**. Otherwise, there is a risk that the accessibility of important public sector functions and institutions is diminished. In particular, rural and peri-urban health clinics and schools appear to be affected, which is part of the explanation why they are routinely deprived of modern energy and transport services, while at the same time catering to the segments of the population most in need of health care and education.

4. **Government policy should include giving the same status, conditions and public backing to small private companies and cooperatives** as to larger state utilities in servicing poor and dispersed populations. Locally-based energy utilities can have the advantage of being flexible, sensitive and above all accountable to paying customers or members.

The last few decades have shown that the issue of reducing poverty globally and providing a growing world population with the energy and transport services demanded will probably not be straightforward. While the trend is that economic development allows people to reduce local environmental and health impacts away from themselves – both spatially and temporally[1] – vast shares of today's world population will not see this shift completed in their lifetimes. In many countries, people will face simultaneously energy- and transport impacts on local health, regional pollution and global climate change. This will put high demands on policymakers to address a range of issues in parallel. ■

[1] Negative impacts are moved from the immediate user level (toxics and soot), to regional level (eutrophication, acidification) to global level (climate change). The impacts are also shifted in time, from the directly inhaled, to the indirect effects on water and forests, to extremely complex and diffuse impacts on a global scale.

The full report from the seminar can be downloaded at www.sei.se/html

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Woman in search of firewood, India