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CASE STUDY: ADDRESSING POLICY MAKERS – is it useful or not?

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This is a short experience report on a case where influencing policy-makers has changed the outcome of a project considerably. The story comes from the early days of disseminating energy-efficient stoves in Kenya in the middle of the eighties, when working at grass-roots level was the order of the day.

The project focussed on working with women groups, which was basically sound and moderately successful. The problem was that there were not enough project staff members to train all the women who wanted to learn how to construct efficient stoves for their homes. On the other hand there were the home economists, who were qualified staff from the Ministry of Agriculture. They were highly interested in being trained in stove building, because for one thing an efficiently managed home was one of their tasks, and for the other many women asked for this kind of assistance from their agricultural advisors.

In the beginning a number of home economists came on their own to the sessions with the women groups, but of course, since this was not part of their normal schedule, they soon were admonished that they did not fulfil their duties. It was at this point that the project management unit decided to approach the Director of Extension from the Ministry of Agriculture to ask permission for his staff to include the construction of energy-efficient stoves as part of their regular duties.

In order to convince the Director of the usefulness of this new technology for the Kenyan people, he was invited on a field visit to talk with women in households who had already had a new stove installed in their kitchen and received kitchen management training. For one whole day the director went from home to home and spoke to the new stove owners. He critically questioned the women on the advantages and disadvantages of the new technology in order to shape his own opinion of the value of the new product.

In the evening a meeting was scheduled with the community and the project staff to hear what impression the Director had gained. He made further enquiries as to what approach the project staff were using, what strategies they had employed to reach the people, and he also tried to find out more details about the costs of the program for the people and the community. In the end he was so convinced of the usefulness of the whole program that he promised then and

there to assign one full-time home economics staff member for each district the project was working in (which was five at the time) on the budget of the Ministry of Agriculture in order to speed up the dissemination of the technology.

This was an enormous advantage for the project, as the responsible home economics officers in the five districts concentrated on training all the other home economics staff members and even interested regular agricultural advisors in stove construction and efficient kitchen management. Since these home economists and other staff members had already been working in their districts sometimes for many years, they were trusted by the people and had immediate access to their homes. So because of the fact that the policy maker – in this case the Director of Extension of the Ministry of Agriculture – was sensitized to the problems of the women in the smoky kitchens and had been given the chance to see for himself and talk personally to the women, the whole structure of the project changed and the number of households reached was quickly multiplied.

The question posed at the beginning of this article can definitely be answered in the positive in this case. While this approach may not always work in the same way, there is no doubt that government support is useful and necessary, even if their intervention is limited to assuring supportive frame conditions.