

# THEME EDITORIAL

## Household energy and the vulnerable: The handicapped in a disadvantaged community

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Many development workers wrestle with finding an acceptable generic title for the peoples they aim to serve, resulting in *underdeveloped nations, developing countries, Third World, underprivileged, etc.* However, within whichever of these titles is preferred, a second tier is readily recognised – a group of people who are handicapped within their own community.

Authors, contributing to this issue of Boiling Point on the theme *Household energy and the vulnerable*, have identified from their own experience, examples of people with specific handicaps and also have considered broader issues relating to the community in which they live and beyond.

**Alex Bush** describes the challenges facing **elderly people** resulting from the findings of a project conducted in the **Karagwe district of Tanzania**. Traditionally, older people passed on to the next generation good practice from the past, eg. in relation to resource allocation and

conservation. This is changing, and often older people are regarded as passive dependants, despite doing housework, cooking and watching the children. Household energy issues are identified and there are proposals for raising the profile of elderly people by increasing a community's social capital.

The plight of **women with physical disabilities** in the household cooking environment in **Pakistan's** North West Frontier Province is reported by **Farhat Rahman**. Disabled poor women are handicapped four times: their poverty, their rural background, their illness, and disability. They have little access to education, skills training, income-generating activities, transport and housing.

Strict purdah (or seclusion of women), restricts the introduction of community-based rehabilitation programmes. Since 1990 programmes have slowly gained acceptance, and household management skills, particular to women with disabilities, are being effec-

tively communicated without disturbing the centuries-old traditions.

Armed conflict resulting in a refugee problem presents a variety of difficulties; firstly for the displaced people themselves, then for the people already living in the locality where the refugees seek to find a place to live. Food is a basic requirement, but in **remote high cold locations** the first requirement may be for fuelwood (Figure 1). **Sudhirendar Sharma** describes how the challenge for aid agencies and, in the longer term for development agencies, is to consider the constraints and resources in such an area, and to evolve an appropriate response to build on the traditional way of life with the aim of achieving maximum self-sufficiency.

**Corinna Kreidler** describes the coping mechanisms employed by **internally displaced people** in Benguela Province, **Angola**, to provide household energy. Repeated wars forced hundreds of thousands of ordinary people to repeatedly flee their homes to



Figure 2: Simon Batchelor asks, 'Why does she collect fuel in the way she does?'



Figure 1: Fuelwood in Kargil, India is in short supply

camps in the coastal regions. There was little fuel available and people had to buy wood or charcoal: they had little money for these purchases and often sold relief-aid food or exchanged services for charcoal. The fuel problem is extremely complex with long distances to a natural source, the dangers of landmines, assaults and the fear of black magic. It is also a cultural shame not to bury a deceased relative in a coffin. Short-term solutions are improving the situation, including improved cooking techniques, community kitchen schemes and a limited amount of tree planting.

**AIDS** as a disease is ravaging communities in many countries and particularly in Africa. And there are many consequences including posing a threat to biomass energy conservation in the rural villages of Hurungwe district, north west of Harare, **Zimbabwe**, as described by **Lasten Mika**. An increased number of funerals, resulting from the disease, with prolonged periods of mourning and the requirement to heat and feed the mourners, results in the use of a lot of wood. Often the elderly and the young have to travel long distances in search of fuelwood; they are foregoing meals to preserve fuel; food is poorly prepared leading to health problems. Proposals are made to improve the quality of life of those with HIV/AIDS and their families.

**Chris Underhill** relates a moving tale of meeting with Mr and Mrs Ramalingappa in Karnataka, **South India**. Mrs Ramalingappa suffers from **mental illness** and is unable to fulfil her household tasks: however her husband lovingly supports her and together, against the advice of the community who wanted him to divorce her and return her to her own family, they make their way together. Her husband diagnosed that the pills she had been prescribed were too overpowering, but when they were reduced and she became more aware of the world around her they both



Figure 3: Margaret Foster stresses the need for training for women

realised she had *forgotten* all her normal life skills – the skills of the hearth! Over one hundred mentally distressed people and carers were met – only two of the primary carers were men.

**Simon Batchelor et al** describe a new assessment tool to assist the design of any development or emergency intervention. They have added *Why?* to the usual questions What – Where – When – How and Who? usually asked in participatory surveys. The underlying project involves the three activities: firewood collection, improved stove adoption, wood lot planting, seen as critical to fuel wood management in **Northern Ghana**. There is an underlying belief amongst all religions that God will not allow them to go without firewood; these beliefs are at the core of people's attitudes towards the issue of fuelwood and the environment. There has been a need to communicate the *management of resources* message in a way which is acceptable. The tool explains why people are doing the things they do, and identifies how educational messages can address the core barriers.

**Very poor women** often have most to lose when outsiders, introducing development projects, look for expertise held by (usually bet-

ter educated) men, ignoring women. **Margaret Foster** considers previous work undertaken in this area and reports on a further training manual being developed which will focus explicitly on the energy assets available to resource-poor women and the vulnerabilities they face. It will consider energy as a factor which influences every aspect of their lives.

It remains to be seen to what extent the nations of the world will honour their commitment to the Kyoto Protocol on controlling emissions of greenhouse gases. **Stuart Parkinson and Katie Begg** report on extra funding for developing countries for the promotion of clean technology. Three sources of finance are explained: Clean Development Mechanism; Convention Fund; Adaptation Fund. Full details of the three funding routes have yet to be clarified.

This issue of Boiling Point identifies some of the vulnerable groups, and also gives an update on some funding sources and publications aimed at addressing the problem. It is hoped that other authors with experience pertinent to *vulnerable groups and household energy* will be prompted to put pen to paper and publish in future issues of Boiling Point. 🍵