

Getting to know the change agents

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What are 'change agents'?

Energy improvements in households are important levers for improving the position of women within the family, providing opportunities for home businesses, and improving health, particularly for young children. These improvements can make a real contribution to poverty alleviation and improved livelihoods. As people belonging to organizations working in the field of household energy, we know how important energy improvements are, but how do we convince others of these benefits and bring about the changes in society that are needed?

Changes come about, for better or worse – in society, in the world, in a country, a region, or an organization – through the activities of people. Positive changes come about through the actions of people who have the courage to take the lead when it comes to changing things for the better. These people are the 'change agents', and if household energy organizations want to make a difference, it will be through being change agents, and through influencing other change agents.

Change agents are positive people: they do not see problems – they only see challenges. Change agents also have the ability to motivate others to accept change. They are contributing members of society and of their workplace.

Keeping household energy on the agenda

Organizations and individuals working in household energy have, however, been largely unable to keep pace with changes in the development community, and we have consequently struggled to interest practitioners from other non-energy sectors, decision-makers and change agents. Many organizations are barely at the beginning of the learning curve of how to energize and empower people to make positive and thoughtful changes in their lives, their workplaces and their communities. We seem to have difficulty

Apprendre à connaître les agents de développement

Les agents de développement peuvent être définis comme les personnes disposées à entreprendre des actions visant à des changements positifs au sein de la société. Au sein du secteur de l'énergie domestique, les acteurs de terrain doivent être au courant des changements dans la communauté en montrant comment des investissements visant à améliorer l'approvisionnement en énergie vont conduire à des revenus durables. Le dialogue et les réseaux d'acteurs doivent être les moyens privilégiés de communication de la connaissance.

explaining clearly and consistently how investments in improving household energy will lead to more sustainable and poverty-free livelihoods. We face barriers in incorporating our knowledge and perspectives into local, regional or global decision making.

Need for communication of knowledge

The need for communication of research and knowledge is increasingly recognized and stressed by funders, and an increasing number of projects have, at the very least, a dissemination phase. With an increasing quantity of information being made available, decision makers are finding it more and more difficult to absorb it. Organizations consequently have to 'shout louder', as it were, (and target and tailor messages) to get themselves heard. One government research funder even admitted '... we are paying you and others to generate all this research and information. But we don't have the time to even read the executive summaries of your outputs.' (Saywell & Cotton 1999:21).

Real engagement with change agents, however, needs more than just communication of targeted messages. Just as there has been a growing consensus in development, that communities need to participate in developing solutions in order to understand them and to want to implement them, decision makers and change agents at all levels need to be engaged in the process of knowledge generation (Figure 1). Effective engagement strategies can lead directly from knowledge to action; they are important tools for moving ideas and practices from innovators to broad-based implementation.

Is generating good research enough?

Within some circles there is a belief that the *generation* of good research and the *development* of solutions are sufficient to cause people to take action. Information and knowledge, however, tend to stay where they are generated, unless action is taken to disseminate. Many organizations have now reached the point where they understand that they have to make an effort to be heard, so they try to *disseminate* their knowledge as widely as possible through reports and journal articles.

A smaller number of organizations have internal processes for creating these *communications strategies* that



Figure 1 'Women's Voices' in Kenya, planning a script for a video about poverty (photo: Zul, ITDG: Kenya K5-A1.12 2002)

target specific audiences with tailored messages delivered through a variety of communications media. These organizations build in pathways for communications from the beginning of projects and initiatives to ensure that clear messages are developed and delivered.

Engaging change agents in dialogue

Very few organizations working in poverty reduction through household energy improvements have to date worked to *engage decision makers and change agents* in real conversations and collaborative research and action. Engagement strategies serve to bridge the gap between knowledge and action by systematically fostering relationships with policy-makers and change agents. These relationships serve as the foundation for joint learning and innovation. The 'engagement' process allows organizations to take into account the many processes used by policy makers (Sutton 1999).

Engagement is a process of relationship building

Relationship building with change agents in the household energy field is much like any other relationship building: it starts with getting to know each other and moves on to learning to trust each other. In their book *Strategic Intentions*, Creech and Willard (2001) point out that a successful strategy:

- has goals and a clear focus
- acknowledges that people are the most important resource for sustainable development
- uses tangible projects as a way of focusing conversations and attracting interesting people to learn from each other
- provides graduated steps for the participation of stakeholders – from information provision, through the nurturing of relationships, to joint action and learning. Household energy organizations should work to build action orientated relationships, that grow over time (see Figure 2).

Using networks

Building action-orientated relationships involves the engagement of change agents in conversations. This may come

about through regular meetings with a change agent in local government, for example, leading to collaborative work and actions. The way in which one needs to communicate depends strongly on the type of relationship, and the most effective ways of building relationships with stakeholders. On an international level, modern internet communication, through email and the internet can be used effectively in the initial stages of engagement. SPARKNET (www.sparknet.info), a knowledge network being developed jointly by ITDG and *eco Ltd* and funded by the European Union, is working to engage decision makers in Europe and Southern and East Africa in household energy and poverty in precisely this way. The SPARKNET members, from seven Southern and East African organizations are actively involved in *joint action* within the project and in other joint activities being developed. Relationships are being *nurtured* (the second level in the engagement pyramid) with associates in each country, bringing over 50 change agents into the SPARKNET process. *Information provision* will take place through the web page and email system, and incentives are given for key stakeholders to get more involved in the work of the network. Through a network of carefully selected member organizations and associates, SPARKNET aims to build relationships with change agents and local and international levels. More information is available on the SPARKNET web page and will be made available in *Boiling Point* as the project develops.

Useful resources

The work of the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) is highly recommended for those wanting to find out more (www.iisd.org). Their address is 161 Portage Avenue East, 6th Floor, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, R3B 0Y4, Tel: +1 (204) 958-7700, and Fax: +1 (204) 958-7710. Creech and Willard (2001) *The Strategic Intentions: Managing knowledge networks for sustainable development* is available online at <http://www.iisd.org/networks/research.asp>.

The Water, Engineering and Development Centre (WEDC) at Loughborough University in the UK has done extensive research (mostly focused on water issues) for the UK government. Online visit <http://lboro.ac.uk/departments/cv/wedc/publications/stw.htm> and select 'Knowledge Transfer'. Their address is WEDC, Loughborough University, Leicestershire LE11 3TU United Kingdom, Tel: + 44 (0) 1509 222885, Fax: + 44 (0) 1509 211079.

eco Ltd, the consultancy to which the author belongs, is able to provide support to your organization in developing and implementing an engagement strategy for the organization or particular projects.

Project reports, news and events may be publicized without cost on the HEDON Household Energy Network web page: www.ecoharmony.net/hedon, and in *Boiling Point*.

Saywell & Cotton 1999: 21, online at <http://lboro.ac.uk/departments/cv/wedc/publications/stw.htm>

Dr Grant Ballard-Tremeer, director of eco Ltd, focuses on project and market development in Southern countries and in Central and Eastern Europe, and in tailor-made communications and information technology solutions to organizations.

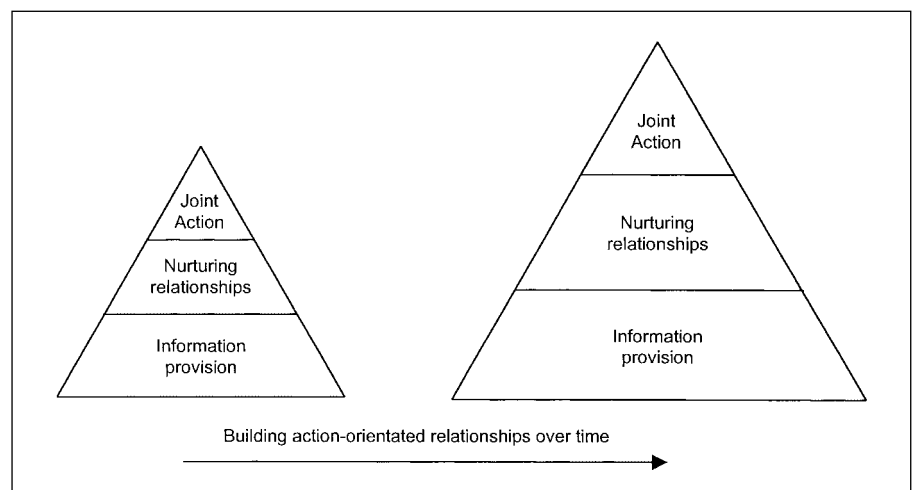


Figure 2 The Engagement Pyramid (source: Creech and Willard, 2001)