



CleanAirSIG e-conference:

16 – 27 July 2007

**“Taking ACTION to rid the world of Indoor
Air Pollution”**

Status: Draft

The role of awareness creation in igniting interest in smoke alleviating technologies; a study in mobilization and community involvement

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The primary demonstration item at the meeting was the zero-cost fireless cooker. This was quickly assembled at the awareness meeting, and a simple meal of rice and potatoes was prepared and set to cook. At the end of the demonstration, everyone wanted to have a taste of the food – not just to eat it, but also to find out if such a simple technology would work for her. The effects were immediate – the women wanted a fireless cooker, and left the meeting with the magic of new knowledge still fresh in their minds.

The experience of the Practical Action smoke-alleviation project is that all the women taking part in such community meetings have experienced the negative effects of exposure to smoke – the tears, running noses, coughs and colds, chest pains, and so they are already keen to receive information on how to alleviate smoke.

What is more significant, and perhaps surprising, is that the most attractive technology to the women with whom the project works is the fireless cooker. It also happens to be the most convenient to demonstrate for the Community Resource Persons, who are the link between the project staff and their own communities. The fireless cooker is portable, it is easy to move around, and its benefits are immediately visible to the women attending.

Community Resource Persons

Community Resource Persons are women and men whom Practical Action have trained in awareness raising of smoke and health problems. They have become the change agents in the community as they continue to train other community members.

Community resource persons live in the community with their potential customers and understand their requirements.

They were elected by the community, using criteria that did not focus on particular skills but they were felt by the community to be:

- Trustworthy
- Prepared to pass on the knowledge learnt through working with the Practical Action team
- Willing to represent the needs and aspirations of the community

This group now runs the network which supplies smoke alleviation products to the community. The profit margin on each item provides a small payment to them for the time that they spend. In future they will be responsible for continuing to promote and sell smoke-alleviating technologies within their own communities.

The fireless cooker....a starting point



Fireless cooker

The fireless cooker now forms the entry point for other technologies into the kitchen –LPG, improved stoves and smoke-hoods, and improved ventilation. Why is this the case? There is a story behind each woman, each kitchen and each household.

- *I am just recently married, and I am still sharing a kitchen with my mother in law, so I cannot make any changes . . .*
- *My husband died last year, and so I cannot make any changes to the kitchen or to the main house until I am permitted . . .*

- *My mother in law does not have an improved stove of her own, so I cannot buy one for myself . .*
- *I cannot put up any improved ventilations until my husband comes back from the big city...*
- *We are planning to build a new home, so do not wish to make any changes in this home . . .*

Regardless of the context, every woman likes the fireless cooker. It is simple, easy to use, goes on cooking after the food is removed from the stove, and allows the woman to 'do other things' while the meal is cooking. It also keeps the food warm throughout, and the pride of every cook – food hot off the pot – is ignited each time the food is served.

The woman does not have to 'light a new fire' in order to set food before the family – it is ready in the fireless cooker. The cooker does not have to be made elaborately – several households had their own fireless cookers made of used clothes, tucked away beneath the bed, and pulled out shyly for examination during our unscheduled walkabouts. Nonetheless, it is effective in reducing exposure to smoke.

It is the availability of this simple technology at the beginning of the smoke alleviation activity, during the initial mobilization and awareness, that secures the participation of other community members in the rest of the project. They see their own peers, even those with very little money, working magic with the fireless cookers.

Its presence in the kitchen serves as a pointer to demonstrate that the household itself has already initiated its own activities to reduce indoor smoke pollution. It is an item of technology that the household can brag about to other women, to refer to when talking about their progress in the kitchen. It symbolizes the household as being technologically adept, since the woman has 'made' the fireless cooker herself. In a community that idolizes knowledge and formal education, it is a constant reference point and reminder to other women that the cook is on a journey that she has yet to finalize...that the transition up the so-called 'energy-ladder' from polluting fuels to those that burn cleaner and hotter, and with less smoke, has begun.

Reinforcing the message



MOH visiting a project house

Another successful approach is the involvement of high profile women from their District at awareness meetings. One such meeting might host the District Medical Officer of Health, who rubs shoulders with the excited community women during the demonstration of the technologies. She quickly and tactfully fields questions reflecting concerns from the women, ranging from baby-related diet issues to their own personal health issues, and without any superior appearance, she talks to the women, encouraging them to define possible solutions.

This is a woman to whom they can relate, and they press close to her throughout the day, some of them slightly awed by the presence of this dignitary from the Ministry of Health, impressed that their simple 'kitchen problems' are receiving attention from the highest office in the district. The offshoot is to draw a keener participation from other women, eager to get

involved after knowing that the 'health boss' visited their neighbours' kitchen to examine their smoke-alleviation technologies.

Other keys to success

The timing of the initial awareness sessions was crucial - the areas that had awareness sessions conducted at the seasonal harvests recorded higher technology uptake and repayment levels. They benefited from the advantage of combining the new knowledge gained with the ability to pay for the new appliances..

Messages and slogans such as 'a kitchen that has defeated smoke'; a smokeless kitchen'; 'defeating smoke'; 'smoke is a silent killer', serve to put the message into the psyche of the community and enforce the perceptions already generated.

Step by step planning by the Community Resource Persons with each household has enabled a better follow up process. Within the project area, the beneficiaries are tagged to specific representative women's groups and resource persons, allowing for more personal support and easier follow up. The division of the project area into smaller sub-locations facilitated easier management by the Community Resource Persons.

Involvement of the local provincial administration officials in all the awareness meetings, has reinforced the message that this advice is endorsed 'by the government'. This is important in a community that esteems highly pronouncements from the central government.

...but it is not all easy

Sustaining on-going momentum within low-income areas is far from easy. The research has been implemented in generally low-income areas, where there are pockets within the communities whose overall income flows are not dependent on agriculture or other seasonal activities. In these areas, many families are dependent on external support from salaried family members in distant towns, or on the income from little-used small businesses selling groceries, farm products or cooked foodstuffs. This affects involvement of the participants in the formal revolving fund process; their reluctance to take out a loan is underlined by the fear of debt in the absence of regular income flows.

The Practical Action smoke-alleviation project is coming to an end and funding community-based awareness activities beyond the project will remain a challenge for the Community Resource Persons. Promotion will be confined to the marketing of specific smoke-alleviating technologies. The costs will be factored into the price of the products on sale, and promoting the reduction of indoor air pollution will take the form of commercial marketing campaigns rather than awareness-raising sessions. What role then for the fireless cooker?