

Conclusions and international lessons

A WORKSHOP HELD IN Colombo in November 1997 brought together the Sri Lanka and Zimbabwe teams along with members of Intermediate Technology's energy programmes in Nepal and Peru. The main aim of this meeting was to draw out the common elements from the various experiences of rural community energy projects in an attempt to identify a generic approach to participatory planning in energy service and off-grid electricity provision. Some of the common elements identified at this meeting are outlined in this section.

Further common elements were highlighted at a second workshop held in the UK, in October 1999, as a culmination of the project.

Lessons for developing village-level participatory planning and management manuals

This section is aimed at development agencies that wish to produce material that can be understood by villagers, and used by a facilitator as part of a participatory planning process for off-grid electrification.

It should be stressed that this section does not aim to give guidelines on how to run a participatory planning workshop, or techniques and approaches that can be used. This is dealt with adequately in other publications (for example, Abbot et al., 1999; Malhotra et al., 1998).

The following guidelines are based on the direct project experience from Sri Lanka and Zimbabwe, and additional experience and feedback from IT energy programme staff in Peru and Nepal.

- ***Be clear about the target audience*** – the project staff found that in Zimbabwe, by trying to produce a manual that was aimed at a range of stakeholders, including villagers, facilitators and institutions, the target audience was missed – the resulting manual was too complex for most village people to understand.
- ***Be clear about what the manuals are trying to achieve*** – the experience of the project has shown that it is unrealistic to expect that a manual, on its own, would enable a village to come up with a bankable proposal. Therefore, the manual should be either:
 - designed to be stand-alone, giving very basic information, with contact details for an accredited expert or intermediary to approach for further information and assistance. The aim of this would be to enable people to make an initial contact; or
 - designed to be used with a facilitator – this would contain more detailed

information, worked examples, etc. that the facilitator would guide people through. The aim of this guide would be to work towards producing a bankable proposal for a project.

- **Keep it simple** – this follows from the previous point. The content should be geared to suit the level of understanding in the village – pictures and images, for example, will allow people who can't read to be included. In addition to this, of course, the manuals should be in the local language and should be culturally sensitive.
- **Focus on end-uses** – energy is a very abstract concept, especially to people in a remote village. Any discussion of energy technologies should focus on what the power produced could be used for. This then enables a discussion of the feasibility and cost of being able to provide that power – for example, a solar home system will provide only enough power for a light and perhaps a radio for one household, whereas a micro-hydro scheme could power a sawmill. A successful approach in Zimbabwe was to link the energy technology uses to agricultural information, with which people were already familiar.
- **Involve village people in the design of manuals** – this would appear to be obvious, yet, following on from the first point, if the community is not identified as the principal target audience in the first place then they may not be included in the initial development of the manuals. The first drafts of manuals in Zimbabwe and Sri Lanka were both developed with considerable input from experts and institutions, but with no participation from village users. As result, the first field trials showed that the manuals were too complex for people to understand.
- **Use pictures or photos and case studies of actual schemes where possible** – this was recommended by villagers in Sri Lanka. They help to increase understanding, and make the technical options more 'concrete'.
- **Provide information on community organization and management** – If villagers are to be involved in implementing, managing and operating community projects, then in order to decide what form these should take, they need information on the following:
 - how to form committees
 - different models of ownership and management of schemes, and their benefits and disadvantages
 - legal aspects
 - methods of collecting revenue.

The facilitator will play a crucial role in delivering this information.

- **Participation to what extent?** – Implicit in the production of planning material for villagers is the extent to which they are expected to participate. This is a complex question, and will depend on the capacity in a village. However, the experience of the energy team in Zimbabwe has shown that communities can participate to a significant extent.
- **Capacity building** – All the field teams stressed the need for technical and managerial training in the village from the early stages of project development.

- *The need for a facilitator or intermediary* – In contrast to conventional methods of participation used in development work in agriculture and water projects, the participatory planning of rural energy service provision requires a ‘catalyst’ or intermediary to provide a bridge with external agencies, including facilitating linkages with financial institutions. This introduces the issue of the cost of mediation and, of course, who should bear that cost.

All the field teams pointed out that rural communities cannot be expected to produce a finished proposal for power scheme funding, but that they can produce the ideas, and make the key decisions that underlie such a proposal. An intermediary organization should be available to help the communities develop a proposal to be presented to the financial institution.

It is not clear whether such an intermediary should be an NGO or a quasi-governmental body, such as a rural electrification agency. In Sri Lanka there was experience of both NGOs (such as Sarvodaya and IT Sri Lanka) taking such a role and the growing possibility that the CEB (the state electricity board) could take such a role in future (once there had been some capacity building with CEB staff).

There is therefore a need to develop in the future a set of guidelines for the intermediary or catalyst. This was also reinforced by the feedback from Nepal and Kenya.

- *Variety of energy needs* – the village guidelines should be flexible and take account of the fact that communities, and their energy needs, are varied and are not homogeneous.
- *Directory of Energy Services and Suppliers* – this was something that was found to be very useful in both Zimbabwe and Sri Lanka. The addresses given provide a vital bridge between rural people and, often, urban-based experts and suppliers.
- *Monitoring and evaluation* – in order to be able to monitor the impact and effectiveness of planning manuals, and to refine them over time, an effective monitoring and evaluation programme should be put in place once the manuals have been developed.

Experience in producing guidelines for institutions and the private sector

The Sri Lanka project team identified financial institutions as the main targets for these guidelines. The teams found that many of the institutions lacked confidence in the management capabilities at the village level, as well as lacking awareness of the investment potential of energy schemes.

In both Zimbabwe and Sri Lanka the Energy Forums played a key role in enabling input from a wide range of stakeholders, and in disseminating the resulting guides.

The private sector is, in general, reluctant to become involved with rural communities. With the international move towards the privatization of electricity supply industries, it seemed to the field teams that rural electrification programmes would suffer unless governments introduced policies to encourage private sector involvement in rural community projects in general, and energy projects in particular.

Lessons for international agencies and donors on improving access to off-grid electricity

Participation is time consuming and complex

Participatory planning of off-grid energy projects is a complex and time-consuming process. The experience of people who attended the project workshops showed that all too often donors are not prepared to finance the time and capacity building in projects that is necessary to allow adequate participation to take place. A long-term approach is required, as part of more general rural development.

The field experience in Zimbabwe showed that any community energy project facilitator following a participatory approach must spend a large amount of time in meetings, consultations, training and institutional capacity building before the project takes off. In the Nyamarimbira project, the process of moving the project from the idea stage to the submission of bankable proposals took around 11 months. During this phase, the project facilitator incurs costs which would usually not be covered by financiers, and usually cannot be covered by the community.

This implies, of course, that off-grid electrification, if it is to be sustainable and involve the community in the planning, implementation and operation, cannot be left to the private sector alone. Substantial investment in capacity building and project development is required.

Box 7: The World Bank Community Based Rural Infrastructure Project (CBRI), Vietnam

In the autumn of 2000, the World Bank will launch a US\$100 million project, spread over five years, to improve the infrastructure in 500 of the poorest rural communes in Vietnam. Each commune will be given a budget of US\$120 000, over three years, to spend on infrastructure. A portion of this money will also be spent on training.

In total, 14 different infrastructure options will be available, including roads, schools, water supply, grid-extension and off-grid electricity. The project is to adopt a 'bottom-up' approach, whereby the commune members will be asked to decide which type of infrastructure options are their priority. This will be achieved by having trained community facilitators assigned to those districts that contain target communes. The facilitators will be responsible for working with the communes to produce meaningful proposals for their priority infrastructure options. ITC is involved in writing the training manuals for the off-grid electricity component of this. These manuals will be used by the community facilitator to explain options to the commune leaders, and to enable them to carry out a basic energy needs assessment, and to make key decisions about the end-uses, management, and the operation and maintenance of the schemes.

The need to set up and strengthen stakeholder Energy Forums

As mentioned above, the forums played a key role in managing and contributing to the development of the guides. The forums also play a much wider role in enabling community energy projects. These forums should continue to be supported.

Planning manuals as an aid to participation

The guidelines project has demonstrated that with the use of planning manuals and with the involvement of an appropriate facilitator, communities can participate effectively at all stages in the planning of their off-grid electricity projects. The manuals, and their development, have played a key role in Sri Lanka and Zimbabwe in:

- bridging the gap between people in off-grid village communities and external suppliers and financing institutions
- raising awareness among financing institutions of the management capabilities at village level, and the investment opportunity that off-grid electrification presents.

Energy services and livelihoods

The experience of the project team (in Zimbabwe, in particular), has highlighted the need to focus on end-uses and 'energy services' rather than thinking in terms of a particular energy technology. The fact is that people do not think in terms of energy per se, but rather in terms of the end-uses that the energy can be put to. These end-uses, whether household, productive or social, form part of the intricate web that makes up a person's livelihood, and often energy is involved in many different strands of this web. The adoption of a demand-led, participatory approach, which views energy from the perspective of livelihoods, is most likely to be able to recognize these interconnected aspects, and thereby more effectively support and strengthen people's livelihoods.

Many of the lessons and experience gained from this project have been synthesized and disseminated in a number of Rural Energy Options workshops that ITC has run in India, Uganda and Brazil. These workshops were sponsored by the British Council, and the material from them is consolidated in the IT Publication *Rural Energy Services* (Anderson et al., 1999), which presents in more detail the energy services approach to planning and implementing off-grid energy projects.