

WOMEN ENERGIZE WOMEN

Blog Article

Energy is everything

Energy access and women empowerment

When I was travelling around Thailand in 2017, I remember a tourist talking about rural villages in Southeast Asia. It was a European young man, and he was disappointed to see people sitting around with smartphones in the middle of nowhere in the jungle. He expected a romanticised rural village life, off the beaten track. Besides his ignorance, I, on the other hand, was impressed that the people had reception in the jungle. When I'm visiting my family in rural Germany, there is hardly any reception or internet connection at all. But I was also told that the people in this rural village in Thailand travel to a nearby slightly bigger village to charge their phones regularly. This setup wasn't and is not unusual. There are still more than 750 million people worldwide who don't have access to electricity, not even in the next village. And this is not just concerning in terms of communication devices and access to information, education, and entertainment via the internet. A lack of energy access also means no light in public hospitals causing medical catastrophes, agricultural produce going to waste because of having no fridge or students forced to study in stuffy, hot air failing exams.

No gender equality without energy access

In a more precarious situation are over 102 million people, according to UNHCR, currently forcibly displaced from their homes. The Russia-Ukraine crisis which started in February 2022 drives these figures up daily. In these protracted and emergency situations, the majority of displaced people do not have access to electricity and all the essential services it provides. Rising gas and oil prices are another obstacle they have to face.

As the press release of UNITAR during our first #womenenergize conference in May 2022 states, especially in precarious situations such as displacement settings, energy access is strongly connected to women empowerment and gender equality: Access to energy enables women and girls to gain greater control over their lives and futures, especially by reducing the time and physical burdens of collecting firewood, improving the sense of security at night, and improved maternal healthcare. Clean cooking and sustainable electricity can reduce indoor pollution and fire-related hazards whilst improving nutrition and providing the opportunity for prosperous, dignified, and healthy lives.

Three new strategies

Why are still so many people without energy access? Besides the lack of hardware and knowledge, the World Resources Institute's research on the impacts of small-scale electricity in India and Nepal revealed that too often, planners confront the electricity access gap by increasing supply without attention to how people actually use and pay for electricity. The WRI paper, *Strategies for Expanding Universal Access to Electricity Services for Development*, proposes three new strategies for policymakers, planners, and electricity service providers: First, understand electricity demand from the bottom up, since planners fail to take into account the very different levels of need amongst different consumers. A rural household doesn't need the same amount of electricity as a large agricultural processing facility. There is no one-size-fits-all set up. Second, link electricity access with development priorities. The relationship between electricity access and development is a two-way street. Development — such as improved healthcare, education, and agriculture — cannot be accelerated without access to electricity. Likewise, financially self-sustaining electricity access initiatives cannot be supported without successful development that underpins demand for electricity services. Third, ensure electricity services are reliable, affordable and of good quality. It's not enough to just have access to electricity; consumers must be able to pay for and use it to support their various needs.

Exemplary solutions

To further energy access of displaced people, UNITAR found that capacity building amongst women and girls is essential in the pursuit of achieving SDG7 for displacement settings. Female-led initiatives and female energy-entrepreneurs are leading the humanitarian energy sector in some of the most promising energy access projects for displacement settings. As an example of such gender inclusive action within humanitarian energy, Iman Hadi, an entrepreneur from Yemen's rural north leads a group of 10 women, with support from the Supporting Resilient Livelihoods and Food Security in Yemen Joint Programme and the Sustainable Development Foundation, to install a solar power plant providing clean energy for residents in her community in Abss. Hadi provided an alternative to the expensive and harmful diesel-generated power that so many households in her community were unable to afford. In March 2021, Hadi's solar power plant provided affordable energy for 43 households. The men in the village that were previously opposed to women working outside of their homes are now encouraging and supporting Hadi's activities. Hadi is determined to continue inspiring Yemeni women to seize equal opportunities in all areas of life.

On my next travels, I hope to see and hear about solar panels and off grid energy solutions in the jungle, and projects that are supported to ease the energy situation in displacement settings, especially for women and girls. Great projects are in the making that help to bring clean energy to those in utter need. Initiatives like Solar Sister, Ellesolaire, SunBox or IBEKA and Sustainable Energy for All, mostly led by women and therefore highlighted by the

#womenenergize campaign, are all committed to empower rural communities and people in precarious situations and help them gain access to electricity via renewable energy sources. And the first step is already done: The awareness that energy access is essential for a prosperous, dignified, and healthy life, and there is an important and not to be underestimated connection between energy access and gender equality.

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