

The effects of biomass fuel use upon the rural poor in Tanzania.

A brief summary of findings from dissertation research conducted by Catherine Smith for completion of MSc. Poverty Reduction and Development Management (University of Birmingham, UK).

The relationship between energy and poverty is complex and multidimensional. Despite the recognition by many development agencies and governments of the significant influence energy use has upon poverty, 1.6 billion people around the world remain without modern energy services.

Biomass fuel use refers to the use of traditional, inefficient cooking fuels such as wood, charcoal and crop residues using indoor open fires. Over 90% of rural households in Tanzania use traditional fuels in this way.

The negative impacts of these energy sources that have been well documented include respiratory and eye problems due to indoor air pollution (smoke), the time burden of firewood collection upon women and children, and the financial burden upon poor households who spend much of their meagre earnings on inefficient energy conversion methods.

The purpose of the research paper was to investigate the extent of the impacts of biomass energy consumption upon a wider range of indicators of household wellbeing – health, education and labour potential of its occupants, financial stocks, the quality of the home, its environment, social involvement. Discussions with 140 people from 9 villages in the Dodoma region of Tanzania.

Traditional fuel use was largely found to negatively impact upon all of the above-mentioned areas of household wellbeing, felt acutely by women and children. The negative effects upon social networks and relationships were locally significant and hitherto unreported in previous research, as were the negative effects upon education and the damage that smoke has upon the home. Several positive effects of traditional fuel use were found, such as household heating and strengthening of relationships between women during firewood collection.

The effectiveness of Tanzanian energy policy in addressing these impacts was also investigated. It was concluded that insufficient research with rural households has led to a limited understanding of the extent to which traditional energy use impacts upon household wellbeing. This, in turn, has led to government activity in this area to be sparse and inappropriate to the needs of the rural poor. The government has been encouraging the use of alternative energy sources, such as fuel-efficient smokeless stoves, but until this is backed up with the education and resources this requires, the improvement of the lives of rural Tanzanians will continue to be inhibited.

For a copy of the original, extended version of this dissertation, please contact Catherine Smith at catherine@sunseedtanzania.org