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“Energy, Gender and Poverty Reduction”

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I want to begin with a simple notion. That is, no country large or small can succeed in eradicating poverty, unless her citizens -- especially women and children -- are healthy and educated.

The development challenge we confront today lies not in what we do, but in *how we think about what we do*.

For many, the word “energy” might suggest:

- flip of a light switch;
- a power station; or
- wind mills, solar panels, and the like.

Where is the gender in this image? Where is the woman?

Let me take you to her, in a mud house deep inside rural India:

It is dark.

We can barely see her but for the dim glow and flicker of a wood fire.

At a glance she seems awfully efficient – “multitasking” we might say.

She squats deeply -- a baby on her back, an eye and a gentle word to a toddler nearby.

She is pummeling dough and slapping a flat round of it onto the mud wall of her stove.

She stirs a sizzling pot, hushes the baby as he begins to cry.

The baby coughs, and she pats his little back.

She turns to us and smiles ambiguously. Her eyes squint, water.

In rural India, shifting from fuel wood to cleaner sources of energy (like kerosene and LPG) halves the mortality rate for children under five.

In the Gambia, too, a child strapped to a mother’s back over a smoky stove is found six times more likely to develop an acute respiratory tract infection than a child protected from smoke.

Indoor air pollution kills. It kills two million women and young children every year.

Let us leave the smoke-filled hut and grab a lungful of air, before going next door.
A young girl, her head covered, squeezes past us as we enter another mud house.
She must be barely twenty, but is already heavy with child.
She returns with more wood, and smoke billows as the green wood tries to catch.
She is embarrassed by our obvious discomfort.

Will her child be among the World Bank statistics? One among the 50 percent increase in stillbirths in western India, among women exposed to indoor smoke during pregnancy?

But, we should take leave of this young expectant mother.
She is tired -- having walked several hours in punishing heat to gather as much firewood as she could carry.

Women of all developing countries spend anywhere between two to nine hours each day in fuel and fodder collection and cooking chores. In India, these chores mean six hours per day.

A study in Uttarachal, India, found miscarriages to be five times the national average at 30 percent, and linked it to heavy load-bearing work during pregnancy.

In Nepal, women suffer a high incidence of uterine prolapse that is in all likelihood linked to carrying heavy loads of wood soon after childbirth.

Men of developing world spend about 10 times less on such daily "drudgery."

It is drudgery, indeed -- drudgery of an inescapable toil.

Wherever I go in South Asia, rural women use the word "darkness" to tell me about their drudgery:

Anxiety that their family and animals must be fed.
Anxiety, also, of knowing that this is all you have to pass on to your daughters.
Anxiety of being trapped in a dark prison, from which even death offers no escape.

Those who can talk about the darkness are better off. Too many women can only share with me their hopelessness with silence.

They do not, cannot, and will not talk about it.
But, their eyes tell it all -- like those of a dead fish.

Harmful physical consequences on lungs, eyes, reproductive organs and immune systems, are one thing. The drudgery also takes its mental toll. Women are the prime victims.

After a long silence, one woman in Rajasthan India responded to my question.
She said: "This, is not life. It is only keeping a body alive."

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What is the solution -- a solution that begins to shift the drudgery, for the 2 billion people in the world who rely on bio-mass fuels for their daily existence?

To repeat, the development challenge we confront today lies not in what we do, but *in how we think about what we do*.

Unless we are prepared, mentally at least and preferably in real life, to squat down next to a choking fire to cook, and feel that rasp in our throats, we may just piece together a wrong approach.

Where do we start? Is it a policy issue? Yes.

Relative prices of energy -- price of LPG and kerosene, for example.

Is it a technical issue? Yes.

- fuel-efficient stoves
- clean-fuel stoves
- stoves that last, with local access to maintenance.

It is all of these things, and more. But, I would caution against pursuing any ideas until we have listened to the woman at the stove:

What kind of stove will she use?

What can her family afford -- LPG or kerosene?

Who holds the purse strings here?

How can we convince the purse holder of the danger to the health of his family?

Women are at the very center of rural life in the provision and use of household energy, yet tend to have little voice in how things might change.

We might also ask her what she would do with the hours saved if she did not have to collect firewood. She would surely smile and tell you that it would indeed be a gift:

"I can look after my children better."

"I will cough less, if there is not so much smoke in the house."

"I might even have a little time left -- to care for myself."

We might ask her, if electricity was the option, what would she do? She would beam, and say:

"My daughter could learn to read and write, so she would not have to live like me."

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In the course of such conversations, women's dreams and hopes will have taken us from "inputs" that we habitually count, to "*outcomes*" of improved energy services for the rural poor.

One such *outcome* is improvement in the health of women and children. As an economist I need the rigor of the numbers:

- Using improved stoves saves \$50 to \$100 per Disability Adjusted Life Year, a measure used for the burden of disease; and
- Switching to cleaner household fuels saves \$100 to \$200 per DALY.

Just imagine the impact of such savings on developing nations' fiscal resources!

Another *outcome*, associated with the electrification of rural communities, is a strong connection to literacy – especially among women -- and children's participation in school.

I return to that simple notion: no country large or small can succeed eradicating poverty, unless her citizens -- especially women and children -- are healthy and educated.

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Energy, gender and poverty reduction...

I would like to conclude my thoughts today by bringing my pictures of women – at the stove, under the tower of fuel wood balanced on her head – into the context of poverty reduction.

I used to think of development as poverty reduction measured in concrete terms like per-capita income or literacy rate. This kind of thinking shaped my personal commitment to poverty alleviation. I never doubted the strength of that commitment. But, looking back, I think there was this little voice somewhere deep in my subconscious that kept calling me a liar, questioning how I could possibly commit myself to an outcome that would never be realized in my lifetime.

Thanks to many patient colleagues and those even more patient women bearing the enormous drudgery of the daily work I have described, I now think very differently. I think of development as the *transformation of a society*.

- I think of development process as an ever-lasting learning process of change, where people of a society choose to gain more control over their own destiny, enrich lives by widening their horizons, reduce afflictions and shackles of poverty, and improve the very vitality of life.
- I think of development strategy as first and foremost that of a society -- a living and dynamic strategic “framework” that is based on a long-term vision of the society's own; that identifies structural barriers for its transformation; that selects those who can serve as catalysts for change; and that is founded on a participatory process among the people in creating, revising, adapting and realising that vision.

- And I think of an outsiders' role, be they governments, NGOs or international agencies like the World Bank, as a facilitator for the process, invited by the people to serve as a catalyst for change as "honest brokers."

These are the very essence of what we have come to call the "Comprehensive Development Framework." I hope we can practice it in everything we – in this very room -- do, individually and collectively, working together for a happier future of all the women, as well as men, of the developing world.

Let us not think just about what we do. Let us always think also about how we do what we do, to be part of the work of social transformation. If we include in our thinking the central players in a social transformation, we might indeed be honored as facilitators.