Faith in Action: Empowering the Poor to Reach Universal Energy Access
Report of a workshop on Tuesday, October 2, 2012

Hosted by the World Faiths Development Dialogue and the United Nations Foundation
At the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs, Georgetown University
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On October 2, 2012, the United Nations Foundation and the World Faiths Development Dialogue organized a day-long workshop at the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs in Washington, DC. In lieu of a sharpened international focus on achieving universal energy access, the meeting explored the various actual and potential roles of faith-inspired actors in contributing to this effort. The event brought together energy experts, faith leaders, and development practitioners to highlight present initiatives by various faiths actors (insofar as these are known), their theological rationales, and the challenges that faith-inspired leaders and organizations confront in their efforts to alleviate energy poverty. The initiative grows from a June 2012 report by the United Nations Foundation—“Towards achieving universal energy access by 2030”—which is the first of three objectives under the UN Secretary-General’s Sustainable Energy for All initiative.

Session 1: The UN Secretary-General’s Sustainable Energy for All Initiative

Richenda Van Leeuwen (United Nations Foundation - UNF) outlined the new international push to bring energy access to unelectrified regions, highlighting the UN objective to achieve universal energy access by 2030. Innovative and market-led approaches are seen as the best route towards effective energy services for low-income communities. UNF-supported work in unelectrified areas is promising and illustrates the health and livelihood issues that energy poverty represents. Improved energy access could contribute to achieving each and every Millennium Development Goal. The human face of limited energy access is stark: in a Haitian pediatric ward, 80 percent of the children seeking treatment had burns from kerosene lamps. Energy poverty in sub-Saharan Africa is especially acute. The UN Sustainability for All initiative recognizes that progress can only be made through expansive, and, more importantly, effective and efficient partnerships with businesses, multilateral organizations, non-profit organizations, and, of course, faith communities. This is an exciting time because many solutions are becoming available—in the fields of technology, software, and optimization. There is rapid change and opportunities to seize.
Session 2: Overview of the Energy Access Issue

I. Clean Cookstoves and Fuels

Radha Muthiah (Global Alliance for Clean Cookstoves) highlighted one well-developed avenue to improve energy access: clean and efficient cooking options. Improved stoves can bring material improvements to health, environment, women’s roles, and family incomes. Roughly three billion people depend on rudimentary fires for cooking. Smoke inhalation exposure from cooking indoors can be up to 100 times more than is recommended for households. An estimated two million people die annually as a result of exposure to this smoke. In many energy poor areas, roughly 30 percent of household income is spent on fuel. Those who do not purchase kerosene or charcoal spend several hours a day collecting firewood, often with safety risks (women can be attacked or raped as they gather fuel, especially in insecure areas). Clean efficient cookstoves can bring important benefits. Technological advances have improved the quality of available cookstoves as well as new ways to finance them. Governments are increasingly interested in this avenue, seeing improved cookstoves as a key development issue.

The Global Alliance emerged two years ago at the Clinton Global Initiative, with an emphasis on public-private partnership. It differs from other initiatives in its partnership approach—bringing in 19 partners with UNF hosting the alliance and serving as an incubator. There is significant potential for partnerships with faith-linked actors, especially in awareness and capacity building in priority countries.

II. Electrification and Economic Development

Through the Sustainable Energy for All Initiative, UNF has partnered with the band Linkin Park to launch “Power the World,” an effort to encourage people to support clean energy access around the world by donating US$10 and pledging support to the Secretary-General’s Sustainable Energy for All initiative. This effort engages the band’s wide fan base, including 42 million Facebook fans.

There is potential for faith-inspired musical and other art-related partnerships. Technology breakthroughs open new avenues, and there are energy solutions that did not exist five years ago. Pricing of solar modules has also come down exponentially, with some devices selling for as little as US$5.

UNF’s Energy Access Practitioner Network, with 700 members from the private sector, social enterprises, and nonprofits, is seeking solutions that will create a revolution in providing clean energy access to the 1.3 billion people who lack it. In Uganda, UNF works with an organization called Solar Sister to sell solar solutions door-to-door. This new movement is at the nexus of improved technology and lower cost solutions that can meet the capacity of very poor families. There are opportunities for enhanced support through development banks, multilateral organizations, and many others interested in this initiative.
Session 3: Practitioner Perspectives

Jacques Sebisaho (Amani Global Works), who is a medical doctor, described his work beginning in 2003 on Idjwi Island (located between the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Rwanda on Lake Kivu). The original project was to provide health clinics for this isolated population of almost 250,000, but it quickly became apparent that electrifying the clinics was critical to safe operation and staff retention. To achieve this, religious communities were a necessary partner. “Like many parts of Africa, you cannot really access without going through faith communities.” More than 90 percent of the people in the region are Christian. Working in partnership with the Catholic Church and the local Protestant church, they imported We Care Solar’s solar suitcases. During a major cholera outbreak on the island, many people showed up only at night, because of embarrassment associated with the disease and an inability to leave working in the fields until dark. The small solar suitcase allowed the clinic to stay open through the night and powered refrigeration for medicine. This kept patients alive. People began to meet at night at the clinic because it had light. Mr. Sebisaho commented, “For us, giving light has been life-giving.”

Rev. Ruston Seaman (New Vision Energy) has worked in West Virginia to promote domestic energy independence in his church and the broader community. With his colleague John Prusa, he assembled simple solar panels out of old shower doors and misprinted solar panels to generate electricity and heat water cheaply. The two men formed a partnership to teach the broader community how to build solar panels, to become energy independent, and even sell power back to the grid. Mr. Seaman’s congregation took the church off the grid. New Vision Energy has since expanded their mission internationally, providing solar energy and solar heating to low income communities in Africa. Their innovative low-cost model has inspired missions to these communities, with hopes for future expansion.

Rachel Ishofsky (Innovation Africa) described efforts to bring Israeli sustainable energy technologies to unelectrified communities in Africa. Solar powered water pumps can distribute 20,000 L per day into low-income African villages. Innovation Africa was also involved in a campaign in Uganda to vaccinate children against polio utilizing solar energy: “If you provide light in a medical clinic, not only can you find the clinic, but also power solar power refrigerators that store vaccines.” Another promising avenue is solar businesses for communities. Many people with cell phones are willing to pay to charge their phones at IA charging stations. The money then goes to buy the lanterns and run the business. Off-grid power boxes that connect to the solar system send a text message to indicate how much energy the solar panel is producing, thus allowing them to identify problems before they start.

Bishop William Rukirande (Solar Light for Africa) described his experience as a local Bishop in the Ugandan Anglican Church, where he witnessed firsthand the impact of solar energy on rural
communities. He noted that from space, much of Africa is “a dark continent,” with places like his community experiencing “12 hours of light and 12 hours of darkness.” Solar Light for Africa’s mission was to send young students from the United States to work on energy issues with Ugandan students.

**Brady Luceno** (Project Gaia) described efforts to bring clean-burning bioethanol cook stoves to rural villages in Africa. Using a design originally created for Swedish yachts, Project Gaia developed high quality stoves at an affordable price. The stoves have performed for an equivalent of 3.5 million days without a single accident. Project Gaia works in the Horn of Africa, in places that are 98 percent deforested. With no wood or charcoal in these areas, bioethanol has become a viable solution. Project Gaia’s mission is centered on supporting women in development. All training is done by women, for women, and with stoves that are sold by women. These stoves can save women “40 hours a week” from time otherwise spent seeking wood and water, scrubbing pots, and waiting on the slow-cooking stove.

**Session 4: Keynote Address**

**Jim Wallis**, CEO of Sojourners, spoke to the theological and moral responsibilities of faith communities and individuals to provide light and energy. He highlighted the interest of the millennial generation in faith, economic justice, and alleviating poverty. “Light in the darkness’ is a powerful frame for us technologically and spiritually.” It provides a connection to Christian theology, but goes far beyond, calling to a responsibility of all individuals, not only faith-inspired organizations and practitioners. Bringing light is an essential gift and right to all humans and a responsibility for us all. “God is personal but never private,” and so are our moral responsibilities. When asked “What is wrong with the world?” we should respond as GK Chesterton did: “I am.”

Faith-inspired organizations and religious individuals have the power to share sincerely their beliefs and the influence of spirituality on their work. “When you do things that you believe, people are surprised and attracted.” Christian leaders shared the words of Jesus to Millennials at the Occupy movement, and this made an impact. The Christian teaching, the message of serving “the least among us” has great appeal. Wallis urged a change from dangerous short term visions to long term goals. We must evaluate our decisions today based on their impact on the seventh generation from now. Youth will play critical roles in healthier energy use in the U.S. and providing energy to impoverished nations. That is why Millennials must become more involved in these initiatives as one of the major causes of their generation.

“Faith in Action: Empowering the poor” is an effective mission statement for what we need to do both as faith communities and individuals. We need to create a movement rather than a series of events. The
primary difference between events and movements is sacrifice and courage. In a movement, people are fighting for the same thing that you are fighting for, and that is powerful inspiration.

**Session 5: Faith Perspectives on Energy Access for the Poorest of the Poor**

**Ryan Hobert** (United Nations Foundation) moderated a discussion among practitioners of various faith traditions about the theological perspectives and inspiration for work in energy access initiatives.

**Mary Hennigan** (Catholic Relief Services CRS) linked Catholic approaches to energy access work to integral human development. Energy access itself is not an end. All people in the world are entitled to achieve the best they can. CRS programming is centered on this “integral human development” (IHD), emphasizing that sustainability starts with “stewardship.” How do people come to own and access their assets? Seeing people's entire families and entire communities leads to a different approach to energy access. The focus is on how to help people achieve the best in life.

**Bishop Alden Hathaway** (Solar Light for Africa), Episcopal bishop, emphasized the Biblical phrase, “I am the light of the world, you are the light of world, let your light so shine that people may see your good works and glorify God.” Solar Light for Africa began as a collaboration of church, government, and enterprise. When Bishop Hathaway first visited Uganda, he was moved that a small orphanage had to shut down at night for lack of electricity. With his son’s help, he raised funds among church groups in the United States for the orphanage. But when that project was complete, he was challenged to do more for the community there. Solar Light for Africa was the response. It mobilized churches and students and had an impact on both as well as Ugandan communities. There are visible benefits—a little maternity clinic in the bush, a young boy from a high school in Florida standing on top of a birthing bed while fixing a wire from the ceiling with a local Ugandan girl. In the past a baby’s first breath would take in kerosene fumes; with electric lights, babies born in that clinic at night breathed in the fresh air. Communities have an overwhelming response: “‘You came and brought us the light. Thank you, Jesus. The lord Jesus wants the light to prevail.’ That’s a revolutionary thing for people: light revolutionizes life.”

**Richard Cizik** (New Evangelical Partnership for the Common Good), saw an onion’s layers of complexity in Evangelical development work. Motivations involve relationships with Jesus, personal morality, politics, and societal attitudes. Evangelicals need to build a theological vision consistent with a Biblical vision that appeals to people, because “a vision without a strategy is a hallucination.” Energy access can and should be framed as a way to live one’s faith. Missionaries will also note that access to light will help them promote study of the Bible.
Zachary Rosenberg (Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism) highlighted energy poverty in the Jewish tradition. Light is one of Judaism’s most important symbols. Jewish homes always have a light burning in the sanctuary and every holiday and Sabbath begins with lighting. The concept of tikum olam, perfecting of the world, calls Jews to take part in bettering the world. The concepts of mitzvah, a good deed or charity, and tzedakah, a concept of charity with eight levels, follow from this core. Teaching a person how to cook for themselves is a high form of charity because it is sustainable. “There is nothing more Jewish than bringing light to the most impoverished of the world in a sustainable way.”

Sarah Jawaid (Green Muslims) highlighted the Islamic ethos that inspires her work, noting that it underpins the Islamic approach to energy, environment, and light. The concept of khalifa, or stewardship, mandates protecting the earth for future generations. Ayat means both nature and a verse of the Qur’an. This, combined with the dual concepts of adl (“justice”) and mizan (“balance”), give a sense of ownership and responsibility to take care of the environment. When it comes to light and energy, one of God’s 99 names in Arabic is Noor, meaning “the Light.” Many Muslim environmentalists use the concept of tawhid (“unity”), to give the idea that all is God’s creation and therefore must be protected.

Session 6: Taking Action - “Lighting the World for the Light of the World”

Galen Carey (National Association of Evangelicals) highlighted practical faith action for energy access. World Relief has long been involved in work for energy, motivated by a “concern for people who are needy and suffering.” Concern for the poor can (and should) be tied to environmental stewardship. There is potential to engage missionaries who have worked to fight poverty for over a hundred years now in this effort. Our energy stewardship also comes to mind: some people don’t have a single light bulb and how many light bulbs do we have?

Mitch Hescox (Evangelical Environmental Network) highlighted future action. The Evangelical Environmental Network worked with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency on energy audits of congregations in the U.S., which was summarized in a report that noted that churches can easily save 5 percent of their energy. The Light Up the World program teaches churches about energy efficiency and speaks of the impacts of doing work around the world. This needs to be approached humbly: “We don't want to blind people with our ‘insights’ about energy access, but to express this as an opportunity to fully live out our faith.” With the Light of World, the aim is to talk to people about their energy saving, to make a win/win situation and educate about energy poverty. Partnership is also necessary to ensure that we do not do what is too common: providing lights or cook stoves that will never be used. The work must center on the message of human life, whether in the form of toxins, energy, or women.
Some themes that emerged in the discussion were cell phones as a metaphor and opening for power solutions, the respective merits and issues involving off and on grid solutions, the importance of sustainable jobs, and links to agriculture, food, and energy.

Session 7: Breakout Groups
“Mobilizing religious communities to spur development through energy access”

Breakout Group 1: Energy and Health/Education
Breakout Group 1 focused on the strengths of faith networks to enhance awareness and build support for energy and health access initiatives. U.S.-based faith communities offer a potential avenue. Additionally, the link between energy and health is an important way to communicate the issues. “Politicians can talk about the politics, scientists about the science, and we talk about the morals.” A University of Maryland study (November 2011) found that morality can play a role in educating individuals about issues; people do not need to be convinced of the science behind an issue to feel they have a responsibility to help. Religious communities can benefit from sculpting messages that relate morality with energy access initiatives. Faith-inspired institutions often meet on a regular basis in ways that secular partners cannot. A religious leader who wants to forward energy and health issues and garner support and awareness, can find a ready audience that generally speaks a similar language. Sojourners has reached out with projects like the Lutherans Restoring Creation, forming teams out of parishes to focus on certain initiatives.

Richenda Van Leeuwen challenged the group to find new ways to engage faith communities. Among the ideas discussed were adding donations to Bar and Bat Mitzvah gifts for solar suitcases. A “Lighting the Holidays” initiative might include a midnight lighting service at Christmas with solar lamps, with proceeds going to target areas. Reaching youth has special importance, both in the U.S. and in low income countries. Many U.S. youth organizations can be direct partners and help form a new generation committed to energy access. Linkin Park’s video and concerts are examples. In low-income areas that need energy access, bringing power to children in schools is a good way to get to their households and can encourage better education.

Breakout Group 2: Energy and Enterprise/Agriculture
There is a good basis of innovative ideas to pursue here, including aquaponics which set up a center to raise fish and crops more efficiently. Solar energy can help pump water. Meanwhile, there is a struggle to secure funding for energy access projects, because projects associated with health, education, and hunger receive the lion’s share of the funding. Many off-grid projects do not allure local governments.
Advocacy and public engagement for faith-based organizations are important. Faith-inspired organizations could be a great resource to bring attention to the issue. With Congressional attention and support around an issue, many more resources become available. A problem with energy access is that there are many different interventions available but no single “silver bullet.” Giving solar panels without support, training, or infrastructure is not effective in the long term. Promoting an issue, like promoting lighting for school children or energy for hospitals, is a promising advocacy route.

_Breakout Session 3: Energy in Humanitarian Contexts/Women’s Issues_

The focus was on what is actionable. Much can be done in refugee camps. Recent research highlights that every faith group wants to be a part of the change but needs the right channels, and tools to get their message out. What is essential is to frame a faith group’s message in the right way to incorporate the key message of energy, health, or safety that will appeal to common masses. It is not about offering solutions, but offering and promoting health, good parenting, and a means to live well. Approaching development in this way will ultimately be more successful.

_Session 8: Conclusions_

Richenda Van Leeuwen closed the event by encouraging the group to be innovative and take risks in trying new approaches. “Opening a can of worms isn’t a problem when you are teaching a person how to fish. We have 1.3 billion people to teach and reach.” She encouraged participants to think hard about how they and their organizations can take a step forward to be more effective and reach further. Success can only come with reaching both ends of the age spectrum and expanding on a global scale. That means taking into account a wide range of practitioners and related issues, from educating women to lessening child mortality. People in religious communities need to get excited about electrifying a house and electrifying a village. There is traction on this issue but greater efforts and growth on the part of religious individuals and communities can help transform a series of initiatives into a movement.