

Advocacy and the role of Civil Society in coordinated solutions: Reflections following the WHO 7th Global Conference on Health Promotion

Dr. Prof. Sonia Heptonstall, Solar Cookers International (SCI), Representative to the UNECOSOC, Geneva, Switzerland

Many thanks indeed to Dr. Alain Jenny for inviting me to add a few words to this afternoon's discussions. The meeting has offered great ideas and great thoughts with interesting insights in the search for integrated solutions to build the green economy. If such projects are to develop their full potential, however, action by governments is essential to provide the appropriate conditions. The best guarantee that this will happen lies in mobilising pressure from civil society.

Civil society is a broad term that represents institutions with many origins: private business, charitable organisations, religious groups, private associations and social networks all reflecting various aspects of public opinion and working to build social capital, trust and shared values. My own particular interest is how this can be facilitated by the UN system.

As Representative for Solar Cookers international at the United Nations Economic and Social, I am speaking from one particular aspect of civil society; the non governmental sector, and in particular those ngos that have consultative status with the UN system. The need to link civil society initiatives from the bottom up to government decision making and back to implementation, however, is overwhelming and applies to all.

This is far from easy because of the diverse nature of civil society In this respect, I would like to share with you how Solar Cookers International came into being. Many institutions begin the same way: from ordinary members of the public asking questions about their environment and finding simple answers. This is the creative process at work, as it is in any new business innovation, product or service.

Creativity is not restricted to professionals (although credibility often is).

Cooking with the sun is not new. It was Horace de Saussure, a French-Swiss scientist, whose experiments in 1767 with a glass box led the way. There were later experiments but then the idea languished (although Baden Powell with the Scouts and Girl Guides did revive the use of the hay box). The real breakthrough came when de Saussure's ideas reappeared in 1979, when two Californians realised that solar cooking had important applications in the household environment. They set about spreading the word. Development since then has been rapid.

A major step was the designing of a simple reflector called the Cookit, which could be produced and sold at a price that even African villagers could afford. Its use, as an alternative to wood and charcoal fires, brought many benefits. Women had been forced to walk further and further afield to gather wood, and were often attacked en route. The Cookit offered a means to reduce environmental degradation through deforestation, to counteract a serious health hazard from indoor smoke inhalation, and a reduction in burns. It offered employment from local manufacturing, firstly of the Cookit and then of the many more sophisticated designs that have followed. By itself a solar cooker is a small step for man - or perhaps more appropriately for women. The fact is, though, one that attracted amusement back in 1979 is now seen a valuable element in integrated solar technology. For it to become a solution is had to be understood in the context of improving social and economic policy. As and of itself solar cookers are tools among many other tools.

Solar cookers now provide food and comfort for Dafur refugees and many others in developing countries. At one extreme it means that a Genevan office worker arrives home to a waiting hot meal that has been cooking on the balcony of her apartment: at the other the use of advanced solar reflectors provide a staggering 20,000 meals a day for Brahma Kumaris pilgrims in Northern India. But there is still has a long way to go before solar cookers are generally accessible.

I have just returned from Nairobi and the WHO 7th Global Conference on Health Promotion: Closing the Implementation Gap. Solar

technology received only limited attention. At the same time the Mtaa Community Health Department of the Aga Khan Development network and there will surely be others, is calling for greater solar installation. There is a need for a clearing house to connect just such calls for action to the policymaking process that can provide the necessary answers.

If we want a green economy it is essential to catalyse opinion across civil society, and this is already happening. There are a myriad ways in which success can be achieved. It can emerge from participating in public and private events, taking advantage of international, regional and local forums, the use of television, radio, newspapers and the internet but implementation demands making the link with national regional and international decision making.

Civil society itself must also work to make the link both horizontally to other institutions working in a similar vein and vertically via government hierarchies. To achieve project prominence it is necessary to provide evidenced based data and input regarding the best way to scale up projects and civil society requires access to such methodology.

Overall, I believe that civil society is a catalyst whose role is to make things happen. To be effective, to work for the green economy as the universal economy, civil society must employ well founded advocacy. Consultative Status with the United Nations system has a key role, calling for cooperation with other non governmental organisations to change language, provide relevant data, question received wisdom, and advance solutions. There are other opportunities that should be explored at the community, national and regional level.