

Viewpoints



An interview with Benard Muok

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Can you talk a bit about yourself, where you live, your work history and your involvement with household energy?

My name is Benard Muok and I work at the African Centre for Technology Studies (ACTS) in Kenya as the project manager of PISCES. I have a PhD in Agriculture with a focus on livelihoods and poverty alleviation in the drylands of sub-Saharan Africa. I first became involved with household energy when I researched woodfuel use and its effect on farmland trees as an undergraduate student of forestry at Moi University, Kenya. Since then I've spent over 10 years in the research and management of natural resources and have focused on energy access, food security as well as environmental conservation, climate change and water security.

What would you say are the major issues in the Household Energy Sector today?

We need to develop strategies that are based on increasing the use of energy carriers other than biomass, or on using biomass in more modern ways. Poverty alleviation and development depend on universal access to energy services that are affordable, reliable, and of good quality. The idea is to not only provide energy access but also for the production of bioenergy to power rural development through the creation of new livelihoods opportunities.

Poverty is the most fundamental reality of developing countries - and the energy consumption patterns of poor people tend to add to their misery and aggravate their poverty. A direct improvement in energy services would allow the poor to enjoy both short and long-term advances in living standards. In spite of the enormous biomass potential in Africa, the very unequal distribution of resources is a major barrier to ensuring a sustainable supply. In many areas wood-fuel resources are under severe pressure, a fact reflected in the growing use of inefficient and unhealthy non-woody biomass resources such as animal wastes and crop residues in some rural areas, and increasing prices for woody biomass in most urban centres.

What is the PISCES project and why should we pay attention to it?

The PISCES project is a 5-year energy research programme consortium funded

by DFID that operates in India, Kenya, Sri Lanka, and Tanzania. The group is led by the African Centre for Technology Studies and the main partners are The University of Dar es Salaam, Practical Action, The University of Edinburgh, and the M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation.

The main thrust of the PISCES project is to develop policy approaches that can unlock the potential of bioenergy to improve energy access and livelihoods. The project is guided by four principles: that livelihoods are contingent on food, water and energy security; and bioenergy is the pivotal issue intersecting these factors; it is vital to look at bioenergy holistically; and this needs better data and an improved framework for decision making.

Can liquid biofuels be grown sustainably and benefit local people? What impact do you think they might have on poverty and more specifically energy poverty?

Yes they can. However, the recent dialogue around biofuels has tended to focus on large-scale production to supply liquid transport fuels to the global market. Discussions on livelihoods implications have tended to take a backseat. My view is that the questions of where and how to produce biofuels is better considered at a smaller scale, where ecosystem services and livelihoods from agricultural lands are of fundamental importance.

Liquid biofuels have the potential to unlock significant socio-economic benefits in rural areas. The ability to grow some feedstocks on agriculturally marginal land and the labour-intensive production chain could prove important drivers for rural development. This in turn would help to alleviate poverty, stem rural urban migration, increase income generation for poor families, create employment and reverse environmental degradation.

The production of biofuels on small farms can increase diversification and provide an additional revenue source. This is in contrast to larger scale systems where producers sell feedstocks to consolidated processing facilities with the profits going to outside corporations. Furthermore, the creation of distributed, small-scale energy systems in rural areas increases energy

security and reduces dependence on dirty, labour intensive traditional biomass fuels.

If there is a place for liquid biofuels in developing countries, what delivery mechanisms would you advocate?

To consider this a few questions need to be addressed - What models of financing, incentives and capacity development can create, sustain and scale-up access to biofuels in poor communities? How can sustainable supply and value chains be enabled and regulated for delivery of biofuels to poor communities while minimising negative impacts on food and water resources? What are the impacts and trade offs between centralised versus decentralised biofuel service delivery?

While I am not trying to give a 'doctors' prescription for this, I believe that a mechanism that addresses the above questions should be considered as our best option.

Is there anything else you would like to mention in this interview?

Ooh, yeah my favourite quote, "The humming of bees and whistling of birds is an indicator of a healthy environment" - Prof. M.S. Swaminathan. So let us keep our environment healthy.

Profile of the author

Benard Muok holds a PhD in Agriculture from Kyoto Prefectural University, Japan. He also holds MSc and BSc degrees in Forestry from Moi University, Kenya, as well as an International Certificate in Plant Conservation from the Royal Botanical Gardens, Kew, UK. Dr. Muok is a specialist in natural resource management for improved livelihoods and poverty alleviation and his research interest is in the area of bioenergy and food security. He started his career with the Kenya Forestry Research Institute (KEFRI) where he rose to the level of a senior research officer in charge of species domestication and introduction. Dr Muok has extensively published in international journals and books and is currently project manager of the DFID funded Policy Innovation Systems for Clean Energy Security (PISCES).