



Pioneers of the Planet

Episode Four: Shiela Oparaocha

Merim Tenev - Hello, I'm Merim Tenev. On today's programme I have a person who is proud to be influenced by her upbringing in her developing country. Proud to have the opportunity to work in the environment where she belongs, proud to be working for change. Sheila Oparaocha is from Zambia. She is the Secretariat Coordinator for the international ENERGIA network on gender and sustainable energy. She is involved in assessing the implications of energy policies and programmes on gender related issues and supports the organisations research capacity, building networking activities throughout Africa and Asia. It's a pleasure to you have you here with us Shelia. Welcome to the programme.

Shelia Oparaocha – Thank you very much, it's a pleasure to be in the programme.

Merim Tenev – Let's start with the question, what provoked you to become involved with gender and energy issues?

Shelia Oparaocha – Okay, well first of all, like you said, I come from a developing country; I'm from Zambia. And Zambia is one of the least developed countries and so issues around poverty and particularly issues around women's poverty are very pronounced in our country. So that was one. And secondly I travelled to Thailand and I did my post-graduate degree in gender and development. My first degree was in veterinary medicine and I think you look at things in a very technical way. When I left Zambia and went to Thailand, I found that there were a lot of similarities in issues of poverty and what struck me was that it was not just a technical solution that was necessary but really trying to understand what are some of the social problems and how can you really consult and get the views of people. And so I think just seeing the similarities in problems between my own country, Zambia, and in another country, Thailand, and now I'm also living in Europe and I'm also seeing similar issues, really I decided it is not just technical issues but social issues that need to be discussed, what people needs are.

Merim Tenev – And can you explain what is the connection between energy and gender issues?

Shelia Oparaocha – Well when you look at gender, you're really looking at what are the different needs and interests of men and women within a community? Communities are not homogenous, you have rich people, you have poor people, you have girls, you have boys, you have men and women and we have all got different roles that we play within that community and we all have different activities that we perform. And based on that we have different needs, we have different interests. There are also different levels of decision making and how you can influence each other, and those have a very strong role to play on what we do. If you link it to energy, as you know in our developing countries you still have 1.6 billion people who don't have access to modern forms of energy and are still relying on things like firewood, which is completely outdated in many parts of Europe. So we are still using that and then you find that it is mainly women who are involved in the collection and used by women, mainly within the household for cooking. So there are a lot of gender issues and because they spend a lot of time and effort in being involved in these sort of basic activities and household activities, they have very little time to spend on household activities so this influences their opportunities to actually increase their income and have access to better opportunities in their lives. It influences girls being able to go to school for instance, so there are a lot of very important issues linked to access to energy within developing countries and women's roles and women's rights.

Merim Tenev – And which are the biggest problems in the developing countries that you are working on?

Shelia Oparaocha – Well, similar to what I mentioned, in developing countries we still rely very much on bio-mass and it is not the most efficient form of energy, using bio-mass for instance to cook your food has health hazards, for instance it produces toxic fumes. Also when we look at our developing countries, we have energy policies which mostly tend to focus on industries and in urban areas and on high level power generation and don't always necessarily focus on rural areas. For instance the needs and issues of poor people living in rural areas. So also the lack of attention to some of these critical social issues in our energy policies is a critical issue in developing

countries and also the finance and the budgets, the large energy budgets that our government spends, don't tend to focus on these issues.

Merim Tenev – And what about renewable sources of energy? Is it possible to have them in the developing countries?

Shelia Oparaocha – Yes, very much so. The beauty about renewable energy is that it is modular so it can be stand alone. You can have it big, you can have it small, it can be adapted to the needs of an individual household, and it can be adapted to the needs of a large industry. A lot of the electricity generation is still very much what we call 'along the grid' and an extension of the grid is very expensive particularly in rural areas where you have people living very dispersed who might also not be able to pay the high cost of electricity. So when you have renewable energy, this really offers an opportunity to provide energy for poorer households. For instance you can have micro-hydro. You can have improved cook stoves, you can have bio gas, you can have solar cookers. These are all forms of technology that can really be adapted to the needs of poor people.

Merim Tenev – And what about countries like India and China which are developing quite quickly and are also are beginning to use renewable? Any lessons we can learn from them?

Shelia Oparaocha – Yes. India and China are developing very rapidly but they have very large populations of poor, rural people. I don't work in India, the ENERGIA network works in 22 countries and in Asia in 9 countries and India is one of the countries that we work in, so our experience is more based in India. India has also taken the lead in developing countries, in the promotion, the dissemination, the implementation of renewable energy. I think one key issue is, in fact you'll be surprised to know that India and China have got one of the largest programs of improved cook stoves and in India this first began with the government giving improved cook stoves free of charge to a lot of rural households. And what was surprising was that rural households did not take them and did not adapt them so there was this technology being given free of charge but it was not being used. And later on when people discovered and asked 'why are you not using the technology?' the response was 'well the technology is not adapted to my pots, it's not adapted to the way I like to cook, it breaks too easily, I cannot afford it.' When they did that and

the technology was actually adapted to the people's needs, people were actually willing to buy it.

Merim Tenev – It's a nice lesson to learn that it's not only to have the idea and the technology; you have to teach the people to use that technology, to teach them what's good for them. So what about education? What are you doing about educating the people in the developing countries?

Shelia Oparaocha – We have a very large capacity building programme. And our programme focuses mainly on training energy planners and energy policy makers on how to address gender issues in their work. But education is very important, but its education on both sides, it's also the education from our sides; energy is a very technical field and it's quite an elitist field. It's also our education to understand that when you're dealing with rural people that they also know their own problems, that they have been coping with these problems for a long time, and so you have to listen to them, they know what they need to deal with their situation. So when we come with interventions and when we come with technologies, yes we have the ideas and the advice, but we also have to educate ourselves on what their problems are and listen to them and so that's one. But also on the other side we tend to...some of our traditional ways of doing things are not always the most efficient and they're not the best. One is we are using fuel wood, traditionally we just use it on open fires and our huts, our homes are not ventilated properly enough so we can also come in with technologies that say, 'if you use this technology and you have a chimney you are not going to have smoke so its education on both sides.

Merim Tenev – And are the people willing to change their way of life?

Shelia Oparaocha – People are willing to change if they see that the change benefits them and so they are not going to be willing to change if it is just imposed.

Merim Tenev – And let's go on a more personal level Sheila, tell me what are you proud of? What is one project that is going to be unforgettable for you from the results that it had?

Shelia Oparaocha – I think there are two programmes; one programme is the improved cook stove programme in Kenya that was started by the German technical assistance programme, mostly known as GTZ but also taken by other partners. And

this is really an improved cook stove, it is made out of clay, it is made of local ingredients, it's very simple, but this project started improving, coming from a point in the 1970's where Kenya was told they were heading to a stage where there was going to be a lot of deforestation and the way in which fuel wood was being used and being extracted was unsustainable. It was a critical issue and they are coming to a point now where they have managed to implement these improved cook stoves through the market, not just through subsidies but through developing entrepreneurs people actually make these improved cook stoves, they make the stoves, they sell them and people actually use them so you find that forests are being saved, women are spending less time, people are earning an income. This is very simple technology it is not hi-tech but it's really changing the lives of people and so I think the improved cook stove programme in Kenya is one that I would say we can be proud of and we can learn from.

Merim Tenev – What is happening on the ground and how are the local governments responding to the ideas that you are bringing to them?

Shelia Oparaocha – That is very important because I think governments are a very critical actor but we all have to know where our roles and responsibilities are so it's good to have partnerships. Where you have governments, you have civil society organisations but you also have the private sector that comes in and tries to see how we're going to resolve development issues. But government is very important in developing our policy so in this improved cook stoves, government's were very supportive and really developed the national energy policy. That was developed in Kenya for instance with the improved cook stoves, they really set targets and goals and tried to restructure and bring incentives that would allow the private sector to be able to produce renewable energy technologies. So governments adapting and developing policies that allow for renewable energies to be produced and disseminated are very important.

Merim Tenev – And on the overall climate negotiations, what is the policy that Africa needs?

Shelia Oparaocha – I'm more from the energy and development sector, I'm not so much from the climate sector but I think Africa is a developing country, if you look at our amount of emissions and compare them to countries, it's quite minimal so we do

need to have energy to improve. I think at the same time it's not to say that we shouldn't learn from lessons, they have shown that there are more efficient ways to do things and they save costs and I think our African governments should take that into consideration. I think adaptation, Africa suffers from droughts, we have deserts and desertification is a key issue also for the CSD. So adaptation is very important for Africa and also for Africa to be able to have the scope to try and explore different types of energy technology, more efficiently if you're talking about fuels but also really taking on board renewable energy and making policy so that they can be up scaled in a big way

Merim Tenev – And how optimistic are you about the changes that are going to come?

Shelia Oparaocha – I think we're all optimistic, we're living in the era of Obama! so if that can happen then I think that has really been a boost to all of our optimism and I think that you find that even though the financial crisis is there, people are still realising that climate change and poverty are very serious problems and that we need to stick to some of the commitments and be very serious about them to be able to move them forward. I think that we really need to look at our politicians to take leadership and make innovative and very drastic changes and policies and decisions that will lead us in the direction that we need to go.

Merim Tenev – Let's hope so! It was a pleasure having you here with us Sheila.