

## More Deadly Than AIDS



The report said that if nothing is done to address energy poverty, by 2030 nearly 4,000 people per day around the world will die due to the toxic smoke and indoor fires from unsafe primitive cookstoves more than the premature death estimates for malaria, tuberculosis, or HIV/AIDS. The “greatest challenge,” the report said, is in sub-Saharan Africa, where only 31 percent of people have electricity and 80 percent are using so-called “traditional biomass” for cooking. Exposure to burning crop waste, wood, or dung burned on open fires causes lung and heart disease as well as acute respiratory ailments.

The report was released amid a three-day summit on progress toward the UN’s Millennium Development Goals, a kick-off to this week’s opening of the General Assembly. Nearly 140 heads of state and high-ranking government officials were expected to attend the session to identify what remains to be done to reach the goal adopted by the UN in 2000 to address the world’s most extreme poverty by 2015.

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has signaled that he views access to energy as essential for reaching that goal, after a special advisory panel this spring detailed the importance of energy in assuring proper function of health clinics and schools, providing pumping capacity for clean water and sanitation, and assuring delivery of food. Ban is expected to call on the United Nations to adopt a goal of universal world energy access by 2030.

Of course, the UN already has trouble gaining the financial commitments needed to achieve its Millennium Development Goals on poverty without adding a new challenge on energy. The UN has called for nations to set aside 70 cents of every \$100 generated by their economic activity to fight poverty. But only five European countries now meet that level of giving, and the United States, which has never agreed to the target, spends no more than 20 cents per \$100 of GDP.

### **Targeting Solutions For Rural Poor**

To finance global energy solutions for the poor, aid agencies will need to break from thinking that they need to fund huge projects or model initiatives, said Thomas Taha Rassam Culhane, co-founder of Solar CITIES, a nonprofit organization that works with residents of the poorest neighborhoods in Cairo, Egypt, and other African countries to install rooftop solar water heaters and home-scale biofuel systems. Instead, Culhane, who was a 2009 National Geographic Emerging Explorer, argues that aid organizations should use their financial clout to buy in huge quantity the materials needed for small energy and cooking projects and make them available to people in poor communities at a radically reduced cost. That would liberate their innovation and entrepreneurial skills, he says.

For example, a biogas digester that takes less than a day to turn kitchen scraps and other organic waste into clean-burning methane that can be used for cooking and electricity would cost \$400. “For people living on \$2 a day, this is a tough investment,” said Culhane. But with help to buy such systems for groups of residents, communities could easily switch from primitive cookstoves and tackle waste-related health problems at the same time.

“We need to emphasize ‘parts and patterns’ rather than ‘packages and services,’ “ he said. “People can be fairly easily given capacity building training to solve their own energy problems.”