

Smoke Gets in Their Eyes: The Women Fish Smokers of Lagos

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Women fish smokers in Lagos, Nigeria (Photo: FOTE, Nigeria)

There is very little empirical evidence showing the role of energy in informal sector urban enterprises, and in particular in women's income-generating activities. Given the recent large increases in oil prices, we urgently need to see how these businesses, which play a significant role in the income of poor households, are responding to these shocks. The DFID-KaR financed "Enabling Urban Livelihoods Policy Making: Understanding the Role of Energy Services" project is geared towards contributing towards a holistic understanding of the role of energy services in sustainable urban livelihoods, as well as forming a basis for making policies that address these issues. As part of this project, Friends of the Environment (FOTE) from Lagos, Nigeria, surveyed 147 enterprises in four peri-urban communities in Lagos and Abuja. The enterprises chosen were active in fish harvesting/smoking, cassava processing, pottery making and akara (bean pudding) frying. These are all activities where women are active as owners and operators. This article reports on the findings related to the women fish smokers from the Amukoko community in Lagos.

The Amukoko Community

Amukoko is one of the five low-income communities, with a total population of 120,000, that make up the Ifelodun Local Government Area of Lagos State, Nigeria. Amukoko is the largest of these communities with a land area of about 41 hectares and a population of about 50,000 people. It has a tribal mix of Yoruba, Ibo, Ijaw and Hausa plus some minority groups. The major occupation for both men and women is trading, although some are engaged in white-collar jobs. There is a significant demand for potable water which residents obtain from boreholes, wells and water vendors. Kerosene is used to boil water before drinking.

Most of the entrepreneurs involved in fish smoking are women. Generally, Nigerian women are very entrepreneurial, learning the necessary skills from an early age by accompanying their mothers to the markets. Where their religion does not allow them to go to the market, women engage in home-based enterprises, and their children or even their husbands take their products to the markets to sell.

Amukoko Fish Smokers Association

The Amukoko Fish Smokers Association is a women's cooperative, with about fifty members, formed about twenty years ago to assist women in regulating the cost of fish and to assist members financially, for example with the costs of funerals, child dedications and weddings. The association also helps its members to solve social issues such as marital problems. All the women interviewed in the FOTE survey were members of the association.

Interviewing the Fish Smokers

Focus group discussions with the women were used to gather preliminary information about their enterprises before conducting a more detailed survey. The women were very enthusiastic because they hoped that FOTE would be able to assist them in their enterprises. There is always this danger of raised expectations and anticipation of

something in return when communities provide you with information about their lives. FOTE, therefore, intends to "repay" the women in the follow-up activities to the DFID project by raising public awareness of the conditions under which these women work. It is hoped that this will pressurise the government to introduce policies that will support the women in their livelihoods.

The survey team consisted of two facilitators and two translators. The team met with members of the association including the market leader, who is the president of the cooperative, to sensitise them to the team's mission.

The questionnaires covered both enterprise and household incomes and expenditures, with a particular focus on energy-related expenses, their impact on the sustainability of the enterprise and the corresponding influence on the livelihoods of the respondents. However, it was very difficult to get a clear idea of the income and expenditure of the householders interviewed because the women were unwilling to disclose their incomes fearing that the interviewers could be tax officials.

Fish Smoking as a Livelihood

Women become fish smokers either by inheriting the business from their mothers, or by taking it up because it is seen as a profitable activity that needs little capital investment. Women do not usually have too much difficulty mobilising the necessary finances to set up in such a business: the capital required is usually small, and family members willingly contribute money towards the initial capital.

The women are fully in control of their businesses without interference from their spouses. The money earned is first used for their children's education and other family commitments before meeting their own needs including re-investment in their businesses. Indeed, most of these women are their families' breadwinners. Therefore, the families are generally highly dependent on the women's incomes, and any threats to the women's enterprises increase household vulnerability. Generally, these women do not rely on their

husbands for their social life, the care of the children and other family maintenance needs. However, in many cases, despite the fact that they look after their husbands, the women still regard their men as the head of the family.

The women are conscious that their enterprises are the major source of income for their families and this makes them rather reluctant to take risks. They generally do not have plans to expand their businesses, or to switch to another business which would have higher returns and be cleaner. They perceive their enterprise as an asset that will eventually be handed over to their children.

Energy Use in Fish Smoking

Fish smoking is mainly done using fuelwood. The association plays no role in influencing the members' access to fuelwood, and the women, individually, make purchases from wood vendors. Although weather changes do not affect the availability of fuelwood, it was reported that the recent increase in the price of petroleum products in the country has resulted in a hike in the price of wood due to increased transportation costs for bringing the wood into the cities.

A few women use kerosene and sawdust for fish smoking. However, despite the increasing cost of kerosene, there has not been an increased demand for fuelwood for fish smoking; instead the enterprises have reduced their output due to their shrinking purchasing power for inputs.

Old petrol drums are usually adapted as stoves for fish smoking (as shown in the photograph). The top of the drum is removed and discarded, and a hole is cut in the side to insert the firewood; the mouth of the drum is covered with wire netting, on which the fish are placed in layers. Apart from the fuelwood smoke, there are fumes of unknown toxicity from the petroleum residues in the drum. There has been no research done on the long-term effects of the chemicals in the fumes, either on the women preparing the fish or on those who eat the product.

Women Identify their Priorities

The women's perception of wellbeing is having a successful business, a healthy appearance and having prosperous children. The women have their own ideas on how to upgrade their enterprises.

The main need identified by the women was for the reconstruction of the field kitchens they use for fish smoking, which in most cases are unhygienic with old, leaking roofs and mud floors. Those using fuelwood would like to improve the method of fish smoking but they are not willing to switch to a better quality fuel, such as LPG, that would produce less smoke since they are concerned that the fish will lose the flavour of the wood smoke and that this will result in the loss of customers. The women would also like goggles to shield their eyes from the smoke.

The women complained about the lack of access to micro-credit financing schemes that would help them improve their working conditions and improve their product quality.

The women also have priorities for improvements in their own lives and their children's futures. Most of the women do not have time for leisure activities as they are busy in the kitchen seven days a week. They smoke and sell the fish for about seven hours a day while the preparation takes a further three hours. The only time they formally break from work is for three hours every Thursday, when the state government has made it compulsory for the women to clean their markets and the surroundings. Their daughters tend to do the cleaning. Not unsurprisingly, the women wish they had more time for social activities.

Although many of the women are illiterate, they all send their children to school, and the children only help them after school hours. In most cases, however, the children stop their education after high school, at about 16 years of age, due to the high cost of sending them to higher institutions of learning in the country. Most of the women would like their children to attend tertiary institutions so that they would have a chance of a better future. Fulfilling both of these wishes requires more profitable enterprises.

What Can the Government Do?

Clearly, given the key role the informal sector enterprises play in household security, there is a need for the government to develop policies that reduce enterprise vulnerability. In addition, much more needs to be done to identify the health hazards that women and men are exposed to in the course of their daily work, and to find simple and low-cost solutions that eliminate these threats to health. Healthy workers are crucial for high productivity and for increasing household income. Often, such informal sector enterprises revolve around one family member who cannot afford to be ill, and usually continues to work even when they should be receiving medical treatment.

So what can be done? Firstly, there is a need to educate the women on the hazards of their daily exposure to smoke from the fuelwood and the petroleum residues in the drums. A priority must be to work with the women to find solutions to smoke exposure. Access to improved technology and safety equipment, such as the goggles to protect against smoke, could be acquired with the help of micro-credit programmes.

The women are worried about losing customers if they switch to using kerosene or LPG. This requires a two-pronged approach: allaying the women's fears about loss of customers, and educating consumers about the benefits of eating fish prepared in more hygienic conditions. Since a number of women have clearly found benefits in using kerosene, they could be used to persuade the other wood smokers of the benefits of fuel switching. The fish smokers association would provide an excellent entry point for working with the women.

Encouraging a change in fuel use also requires the government to look at its fuel pricing policies so that the price of kerosene or LPG is not a barrier to low-income users switching from fuelwood to such better quality fuels. Also the impacts that the oil price rises have had on transport costs need to be assessed, and smart subsidies used to ensure that low-income households are able to cope with such shocks.

General support to enterprise development could also encourage informal sector businesses to upgrade fuels. This was one of the findings from the pottery industry, which was also part of the FOTE survey. A small number of entrepreneurs were found to be using electricity and LPG, which they had switched to as part of a government programme of general support (not specifically aimed at upgrading the energy source used) to develop an industry with a high-value product. There is clearly a need to make the government in Nigeria aware that also "low-value" products, such as the food the poor eat produced by enterprises that support families, also need support. ■

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