

SOLARCOOKING FOR AFRICA: THREE YEARS OF INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION FROM MILANO, ITALY

Mercedes Mas Solè, Assoc. Salvambiente
V. Monti 9, 20090 Trezzano SN (Milano), Italy
Email: salvambiente@yahoo.it
oltreilconfine@tiscali.it
www.digifiera.com/enersud

ABSTRACT

Two small associations in the North of Italy cooperated to promote the project SOLARCOOKING FOR AFRICA. They sent nearly 100 solar cookers to 30 different countries through organizations and volunteers.

1. HOW EVERYTHING STARTED

Once we read about solar cooking as a solution to prevent southern countries' desertification and its consequences on poverty, we decided to buy a solar cooker and to show it at our children's schools. We told them of the advantages of using sun instead of wood, gas or petroleum, and a whole class decided to help us promoting a campaign to collect money and buy the first solar cooker for India. When the man who took the first solar cooker came back to tell the experience in the school, children and adults were surprised about the potentialities of solar cookers.

That was the moment in which we decided to invest energy and time to develop this small idea into a bigger campaign, spreading awareness, sending solar cookers, and promoting the local construction.

2. THE PROJECT

Since 2001 two small associations in the North of Italy ("Salvambiente" and "Oltreilconfine") cooperated to promote the project SOLAR COOKING FOR AFRICA. One of them works mainly in the field of environmental care, the other works in fair trade and North-South projects. The goal of the project is spreading solar cooking in the South of the world in order to:

1. prevent deforestation and desertification
2. give an alternative to carrying wood
3. prevent breathing illnesses in women
4. promote health by easily boiling water
5. give access to energy for poor people
6. prevent conflicts caused by energy sources

7. promote sustainable projects of international cooperation.

3. SENDING SOLARCOOKERS

Our first objective is to find money to send solar cookers to missions, projects of other NGOs or organizations, as an assay of how populations welcome this new technology. Until now, we have sent nearly 130 solar cookers

Where we sent solar cookers

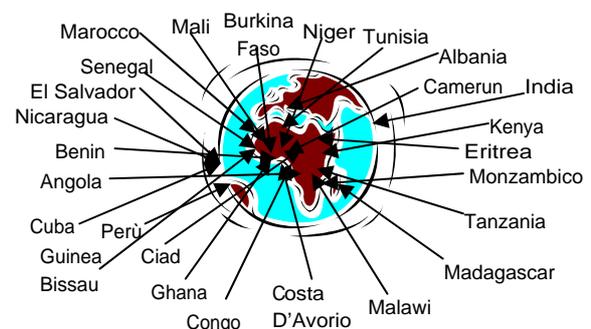


Figure 1.

to 30 different countries through organizations and volunteers (Fig. 1)

Nearly 30 cooperation organizations are involved in the project, and nearly 10 Italian associations are our partners to promote this project. We ask each organisation to which we give a solar cooker for Africa, Southamerica or Asia, to give us a feed back about the acceptance and about the efficiency. Some of them tell us that the solar cooker works wonderfully, and that local people (in a school, for example) use it frequently. Some of them said that women work all day long in the fields, and they go back home when sun is gone, so they cannot use it. Others tell us that a difficulty is that there is no fire, and they like to sit close to the fire. But others said it's very useful to boil water. One missionary said that solar cookers free women from fire slavery. They finally have time to do other activities: to seed, to sell on the market, to keep

the family, to study. He built 50 solar cookers in a year, giving work and salary to 7 men, in Chad.

How do we get money to send solar cookers? In spite of the rather poor advertising and rather unexpectedly, we got money from many people who heard about our project and immediately contributed with enthusiasm. Quite often, young couples who got married decided to give part of the money they got as a wedding gift from their family/friends. As an example, a young couple put a box during the wedding party and asked to contribute to buy 1 solar cooker. At the end of the party the money in the box was enough for 10 solar cookers.

4. SPREADING AWARENESS

Definitely we are not experts in marketing. But time after time we managed to promote solar cookers in newspapers, magazines, radios, TVs, web sites, NGO's, environmental organizations, universities and schools (nearly 40 articles as a whole). We have been sun-cooking in schools, and we have attended expositions so that we can spread awareness about energy-deforestation-poverty, promote alternatives, and get funds to make it possible.

Another way we tried was giving a PRIZE. During the beginning of the Iraq war, we sponsored the prize "Renewable sources of energy to promote Peace". Two solar cookers were won by the best projects dealing in diffusion of renewable sources of energy. From a pedagogical standpoint, our objective was to discuss how our energy models can promote war or peace.

At the moment we are writing a book for middle school teachers to help schools teach about renewable energy sources and support projects like ours.

Before we started this diffusion work in Italy, solar cooking was rather unknown. Now we can say this is no longer true. Every week somebody contacts us to get information, to give money, to buy a solar cooker, and so on.



5. LOCAL CONSTRUCTION

As we said, our first objective is to send solar cookers to poor countries and to test the answer of the population, but we have a further objective. In the places where we send the solar cookers we meet the local people interested in solar cooking and we try to promote the local manufacturing of solar cookers. This helps local employment, contributes to lowering the price of the solar cookers, and promotes local development by teaching an appropriate technology. At the moment we support one missionary man who organized a workshop in Chad, which gives work to 15 handicapped men. They have already built about 500 solar cookers. Our contribution is to help him buy aluminium, a nearly impossible task in Chad. Pietro Rusconi, the enthusiastic missionary, says: "Solar cooking takes women out from the slavery of fire. They usually use 4 to 5 hours a day to look for wood. They finally get time for their family, to seed, to sell something in the market, to learn... Now they wear elegant clothes when they cook, because they can stand up instead of sitting on the dirty floor. Women put the water into the pot, and after one hour the water is purified. Then they put the water into big jars and they prevent illness in the community. Moreover they no longer breathe the smoke."

We support other projects starting in the same way, for example in Eritrea and Zanzibar (where people are preparing the training for introducing Sheffield's cookers, and developing efficient wood cookers).

6. COORDINATING EXPERIENCES

There is a further objective, which was born by working on the field with other organizations. During this last 3 years we have known many examples of using renewable sources of energy in poor countries. Quite often the organisations which promote these projects don't know each others'. We decided to organize an Italian national congress in April 2006 for NGOs which are developing sustainable projects in the Southern world, using renewable sources of energy and appropriate technologies. The main aim of the meeting is to know what other organizations are doing about energy sources and poverty, and to discuss about alternatives. We started by sending a questionnaire asking the organisations if they had projects to promote access to energy for poor people. Quite a few of them actually worked with that goal, but many of them were very interested in knowing positive experiences in using solar, wind, and hydraulic energy sources. The aim of the congress is to give visibility to all these issues and to allow a better coordination among different projects.



Figure 2. Solar cookers in Tchad

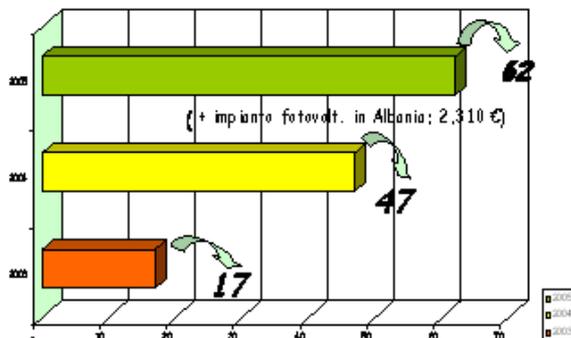


Figure 3. Number of solar cookers distributed abroad

Projects

- Centro Energetica (PV)
- Progetto Friuli per il Ciad
- PIME Camerun
- Mozambico Cevitem
- PAEA (Reggio Emilia)
- Riserva Naturale Monterano (Roma)
- Legambiente Lombardia
- Legambiente Convento S.Giorgio, (AQ)
- Mozambico-Caritas Spagna
- Tanzania-Missionari Rosminiani
- Albania-Padri rogazionisti
- Assoc. Yacouba (Mali-Malawi)
- Assoc. Bondeko - Como (Congo)
- COE (Camerun)
- Assoc. Kolonkandya (Congo)



Figure 4: projects supported

7. CONCLUSIONS

[What are the conclusions?] The small experience we have presented is an empowerment experience. It shows that small realities can successfully promote knowledge diffusion and spread awareness. They can plant their small seeds and help solve some aspects of really huge problems.