

## **Warming up to the sun: Mitaboni women introduced to solar cooking**

Bright and sunny, the warmth of the day didn't go unnoticed at least by our small group. We were elated with the way the day had turned out because after enduring months of icy cold weather and dreary grey days, the warm weather was a welcome change. As we drove southeast with Nairobi's skyline receding fast behind us; we exchanged looks of satisfaction because the weather was just perfect for the exciting work that lay ahead of us.

It was Thursday the 20<sup>th</sup> of September and I was accompanying Jacqueline and Rose, two solar cookers representatives (SCOREPS) to a village in Mitaboni location, Machakos district in the Eastern Province of Kenya. Our mission was to carry out a demonstration on solar cooking for women drawn from 15 different Community Based Organizations (CBO's). Each CBO had selected three representatives to attend the demonstration and so we had a total 45 of women. Together with us was Stella Odaba from Solar Cookers International. This is the organization that is partnering with us in this project in which women from Mitaboni will be trained to become both users and promoters of solar cookers or *Cookits*.

The journey which turned bumpy as we entered the dusty earth road that would take us to our destination was uneventful except for the discomfort Jackline and I experienced as we rode in the boot of the vehicle. Unfortunately, we had exceeded its carrying capacity and that's how we ended up thumping our heads against the roof of the car for a good part of the journey.

Two hours later we came to a stop in a dusty little town in the heart of Mitaboni where we were met by the jovial women whom we learnt had been waiting for us since dawn. Martha, the coordinator of the CBOs' umbrella organization explained this to us as we settled down to work. Our arrival immediately got us into the motions of selecting a suitable location to set up the demonstration, getting supplies out of the vehicle and generally getting a sense of our surroundings. For us, the slightest waste of time would translate to loss of precious hours of sunshine. This is something we had to avoid at all cost for on that day; the sun was our most important asset.

Martha was at hand to ensure that we had all we needed. She had selected a large open field that faced a row of low red-brick buildings that are characteristic of most small trading centers in rural Kenya. This is where we began setting the demo station. Soon the sleepy little town that went by the name of 'Kenol' would become a bee hive of activity as its residents swarmed the field to know what the fuss was all about. Men were also present in large numbers perhaps to witness a revolution that would solve the ever-present fuel crises for their wives, sisters and mothers.

Under the guidance of the trainers, the women were given the task of preparing the various cooking ingredients. We had bought a variety of food stuffs to make both local delicacies and other not so local but known dishes. There was a cake mixture being prepared, meat; a paste of maize flour and water that we call 'ugali' that is eaten with green vegetables, eggs, rice, sweet potatoes and a variety of vegetables.

The trainers were doing a good job explaining the art of cooking with the sun. "All ingredients have to be prepared in advance and mixed well together in a black coated cooking pot, like this one", Jackline said as she raised the pot for everyone to see. The crowd which was now swelling by the minute had formed a ring round the cooking area and onlookers craned their necks to have a better view. "Next insert the pot in a polythene bag and tie it tightly at one end with thread. Ensure that you leave room on both ends of the bag to allow circulation of heat within the bag. After you do this, place the pot inside the cooker and support it with three small stones or wooden blocks", she concluded. The black coating is obtained by painting aluminum pots with blackboard ink. This is done to ensure that the pots absorb maximum heat from the sun.

For close to three hours, the scorching sun mercilessly beat our backs but the excited murmur of the attentive crowd made us to ignore its harshness and instead dedicated ourselves to our objective. One woman told me, "I came to see with my own eyes if the sun can really cook and I will not leave here till that happens". And soon enough, the woman's wish was granted because before long, the aroma of baking cake and roast meat wafted in the air. When Rose proudly lifted the baking container out of the cooker, there were gasps of disbelief from the onlookers who were stunned to see a well-browned cake at the bottom of the tin. Likewise, Jackline followed and one by one lifted the remaining dishes off the cookers and displayed for all to see. The sight of roast meat caused a stir as people edged forward to catch a whiff of this popular dish. A short while later, about 100 onlookers and the 45 women were sampling delicious sun cooked meals that left many of them licking their fingers.

The demonstration culminated with an elaborate handing over ceremony of the six *Cookits* to several group leaders. This will facilitate the groups to carry out more demonstrations to many more group members and other interested individuals. This is scheduled to take about a month and will offer useful insights on the diffusion of the innovation in this community. The groups will carry out learning/exposure days of their own in which the group leaders will take charge of the activities. The women are very enthusiastic and vowed to transverse their village to raise awareness about solar cooking. "I did not know that the sun has so much potential. We have to help our people, especially the women realize this potential by taking this knowledge to them, remarked one women leader.

According to the design of this project, the solar cooking demonstration constituted the first phase in which beneficiaries are introduced to the technology. In the next phase local representatives drawn from the 15 CBO's will be selected for training on the production of *Cookits*. They will be equipped with skills to enable them promote solar cooking among their community members. Incorporated in this training will be basic business skills to enable the new SCOREPS start a '*cookits*' business.

*AfriAfya* as an info-mediary links information poor communities to information-rich sources to boost livelihoods. This project in particular is targeting rural women with skills and knowledge to build capacities in solar cooking. Through the project, a strong partnership with Solar Cookers International has been created. This has yielded opportunities for both organizations to educate rural women on the benefits of solar cooking. For the women in Mitaboni, the benefits of having an alternative cooking fuel cannot be understated and this was clearly demonstrated on Thursday.

#### **Demo Expenses**

- Paying two trainers – 15\$
- Transport for two trainers from their homes to Nairobi and back – 46.36\$
- Fuelling the vehicle ferrying the training team from Nairobi to Mitaboni and back – 48.48\$
- Purchasing food stuffs for the demonstration – 68.60\$
- Meals for the trainers the night before the training – 20.83\$
- Purchase of 6 solar *cookits* – 72.72\$
- Communication – 3.78\$

**Total expenditure = \$275.77**

Exchange rate: 1\$= Kshs. 66

This project still requires more funds to help us carry out the SCOREPS training for the Mitaboni women. Although we have some minimal funds remaining from what we have received from our donors, they are still not enough to cater for all the other project needs including the scheduled the production of communication materials to help spread the message of solar cooking amongst rural communities.