



Biogas Brings a Better Life to Pakistan's Rural Women

Thanks to an ADB project, women in rural Pakistan are now using biogas to cook meals for their families, freeing their kitchens from unhealthy fumes and giving them more time for other activities.



Shameem Bibi collecting dung cakes to refill the biogas plant next to her home in village Mega, Narowal district. Photo: M. I. Khan/ADB

Shameem Bibi, who lives in the rural village of Mega in Narowal district near the India-Pakistan border, lives a tough life. Her daily chores include tending the buffalos, working with men in the paddy fields, growing vegetables in kitchen gardens, collecting fuel wood and preparing meals. Life is tough, but in some areas at least, things are getting better.

Until not long ago she had to cook meals in a smoke-filled kitchen where cow dung was used as fuel. Now, thanks to an ADB-funded project that introduced biogas plants in the district, Shameem Bibi and other women in the village are able to cook meals without having to breathe in harmful smoke, which used to cause them to cough up - something they had to endure for many years.

"The biogas stoves are not only relieving rural women of kitchen drudgeries, it is also casting a positive spell on their health and family life."

"As if the day-long donkey work was not enough, we used to go sleep worrying about waking up early in the morning to fetch dry fuel wood so that we could prepare breakfast for our children before they go to school," says Shameem Bibi, 35, who has 5 daughters and 2 sons. "But now with a biogas connection in the kitchen, we can sleep with peace of mind knowing that we can sleep longer and prepare meals in minutes."

The biogas stoves are not only relieving rural women of kitchen drudgeries, it is also casting a positive spell on their health and family life. Shameem Bibi and other women in her village used to spend a lot of time making patties from buffalo dung and pasting the dung on walls to let it dry for use as fuel later. Freed from this unpleasant, time-consuming and unhealthy task, now they have time to rest and bond with their children and family members.

Change came with a loan

The change in these women's lives came about as a result of a unique community-based and demand-driven partnership for which ADB provided a \$41 million soft loan to the provincial government of Punjab. The multifaceted livelihood support project has helped improve the quality of life for millions of poor rural communities in Punjab's 10 barani (rain-fed) districts.

Punjab has a large cattle population, which presents a massive opportunity to produce energy out of animal waste. Through the project, biogas plants were provided to villagers who own cattle so that they could ensure a supply of biofuel to run the

plants. A total of 2,517 biogas plants were built, which, at an estimated Pak Rupees 10,500 per plant, paved the way to save \$0.33 million per year on alternate fuel.

The biogas plants potential has been recognized by the people, with communities constructing over 5,000 biogas plants on their own.

Breaking the gender barrier

The biogas project also led to the participation of men in what were traditionally female-dominated chores such as dung cake preparation and fuel wood collection. Men now assist in the operation and maintenance of the biogas plants, as they work alongside women scooping up cow dung into the inlet tank. This is then mixed with water until it converts into slurry passing through an airtight underground tank where gas is produced.

A total of 2,517 families have been trained in the operations and maintenance of biogas plants.

"We are happy that with the support of the project we built our biogas plant, which has been a great blessing for my mother and me. Without the facility I would have not been able to attend my school as my mother would need my help in collecting firewood and prepare food for the family," says Nazia in village of Lorai, who just completed her tenth grade at the local school.

On the other hand, her neighbor Razia Bibi, who still uses dung and straw to prepare food for her 6 sons and 4 daughters, has not been so lucky. She was unable to avail of the opportunity made available by the ADB-supported project to build a biogas plant for her family. But she too is hopeful that one day she will not have to spend hours scrubbing utensils blackened by using dung-cakes as fuel.

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