

INNOVATIONS FOR AFRICA



-What drives me is the fact that we talk about real needs in Africa. The challenge is to come up with solutions that will provide long-term sustainable development on a small-scale basis. A solution that the local population can afford and build further economic activity on.

Sten Bergman the founder of the Swedish company Stonepower AB is a busy man. He spends most of his time travelling the African continent. His self-proclaimed task is to find innovative solutions to the challenge of providing electricity to Africa's rural population.

The need he talks about is immense and fact speaks for it self. 80 percent of Africa's sub-Saharan population lives in non-or semi urban areas. Only nine percent of those have electricity.

With electricity so many things can be turned around, children can study after sunset, small business and income generating projects can be set up, water can be pumped to fields and create a surplus of food.

The creativity of people could be set free.

Yet the leadership of many African countries and their aid partners including the World Bank has for years chosen to build bigger systems that have excluded the rural population.

In the rural areas of Uganda, for example, only 1 percent of households have electricity, and even in some big cities, tens of thousands have no access to the grid. Instead, residents run their shops and grain mills off small diesel generators, spending between 50 cents and a dollar per kilowatt-hour (compared to around 5 cents in the United States). "The poorest people, who can only afford kerosene for lighting their homes and charcoal for cooking, spend 30 percent of their income on energy.

- Today there is a better understanding that Africa's urban population cannot grow much further. People need to be able to stay in the countryside.

Access to low-cost power is crucial for Africa's development, explains, Sten Bergman.

Bergman is the new kind of entrepreneur and consultant who has chosen to work in close partnership with engineers in Tanzania. His counterparts have the direct contact with the villages and help to identify and formulate their needs. Together with Sten Bergman a plan for electrification is produced that will be appropriate. Often that means biomass systems that create power with cow dung or other locally available fuel.

Sten Bergman has for a long time had an interest in developmental issues and he wants to use his expertise to help the poorest of the poor. When he was offered the opportunity to work at the World Bank in Washington in 1999, to develop the Bank's Africa Rural and Renewable Energy Initiative, he saw that as a useful task.

The initiative's philosophy was a radical departure from traditional development approaches. Rather than pursuing the centralized power systems favoured by big utilities and international lending agencies, the initiative encourages the private sector to develop small independent grids in remote regions.

Bergman is trained as an electrical engineer and has worked at Asea Atom as commissioning engineer for nuclear control systems for power plants. He has also worked at Sydkraft where he developed wind power systems.

- Another great part of working in Africa is that we are not bound to plug into, often outdated, systems, like in Europe. We can work with the latest most environmental and cost effective power and telecommunications systems.

StonePower has been operational since 2003 and has had projects and consultancy work in several African countries including, South Africa, Mozambique, Uganda, Tanzania and Swaziland.

Sten Bergman also offers to introduce other Nordic business people who are interested in partnership with local counterparts to Africa.

It is not easy to find local partners, he says, because there is a long standing Idea shared by both governments in Africa and lending Institutions like the World Bank and aid agencies that there is less risk with big projects that require big money.

But what is needed is middle size and small self-driven projects that are firmly rooted with the local decision makers and the people in the village. For that you need to get to know people, take time and create real partnerships.