

A Reflection on the Domestic User's Conference

By Patrick Kulati assisted by Amanda Tavares

Eskom speaks on the state of electricity supply

On 18 March, I attended the Domestic Use of Energy (DUE) conference. In this edition, I reflect on some papers that were of interest to me. The DUE conference is a very important event among industries and organisations that work with domestic energy issues. It started off with a very frank key note address by Eskom spokesman, Andrew Ertzinger. The gist of his talk was that electricity prices will have to increase and that the problem with electricity supply issues remains on the horizon at least for the next 4 years. He also outlined their demand side management plans going forward. It became clear that householders and commerce continue to use electricity inefficiently and wastefully. The funniest moment of the conference came straight after Andrew Ertzinger spoke. As he was literally taking his seat, load shedding kicked in and the whole room was blanketed in darkness as the electricity was cut. For a few minutes we had no idea what was going to happen, and Andrew took the time to quietly pick up his briefcase and left the conference. Who can blame the guy? I would have done the same. But, what he said was a clear message: we are indeed in a deep energy crisis for the foreseeable future!!!

Three papers on paraffin

What was of key interest to me was the fact that there were 3 papers on paraffin issues. The first paper was presented by Mmabatho Mrubata from Association for Renewable Energy Cooking Appliances. The paper was about a study they did in Phiri, Soweto to assess the impact of the implementation of standards which effectively removed from the South African market the old unsafe paraffin appliances. Another one was presented by Prof Phillip Lloyd, a well respected authority in the energy field from nuclear to domestic energy from the Energy Research Centre, UCT. His main thesis was that paraffin could play a critical role in the Demand Side Management and reduce the demand if it was used through a modern, more efficient and a safe system. He argued that as paraffin becomes a safer fuel for domestic use, it needs to be considered as an alternative source of energy given the current energy crisis.

He also compared the benefits and costs of both paraffin and solar interventions. He calculated that "domestic cooking makes up 4% of the total demand during the daily peak in electricity consumption" consisting of 1 500MW of energy. He said that the estimated cost to install this generating capacity is R25bn, whereas the cost to replace electrical stoves with paraffin stoves is only around R8bn. He also made a comparison between the solar water heaters and a possible paraffin stove intervention (if it were to be implemented) looking at how much megawatts of energy each would save and at what costs. The paper concluded by stating that replacing 7.8million electrical stoves in South Africa with paraffin stoves could alleviate a lot of the pressure on electricity consumption. He wrote the paper together with our General Manager, Glenn Turan.

The third paper entitled "*The Emperor's New Stoves: An evidence based approach to dispelling domestic energy safety myths*" was presented by Amanda Tavares, who is concluding her internship with the Paraffin Safety Association. Her presentation focused on debunking some of the myths about energy sources. As some know, the PSA created the National Household Energy Surveillance System in order to better understand energy usage, consumer behaviour and harmful energy-related injuries. The paper revealed that the most common form of household energy-related injury was liquid burns (scalds), especially when electrical appliances are used. This enforces the fact that injuries will continue to persist even if paraffin is phased out. This also places a great importance on the need for more safety education across all household energy carriers. Regardless of the fuel type, consumers must know how to set-up a safe cooking environment and know not to leave appliances or children unattended.

Another startling revelation in the paper was that, one third of all paraffin-related injuries coming out of Prince Mshiyeni Memorial Hospital in Umlazi, Durban, were ingestions. The majority of these cases were children under the age of four emphasising the importance of proper labeling, packaging and storage.

Missing ingredients

Even though, I did not attend the whole conference, I identified a missing ingredient. There were very few community based organisations or NGOs there. Amanda also commented that she would have expected more university students especially in the area of energy to be there. This is where I think the conference organizers need to focus on. They must bring in the experiences of the domestic users of energy, not through researchers and academics, but directly. The members of communities can add tremendous value to the debates. Students would gain a much better understanding of the energy industry, be able to engage with organisations and this would add value to their studies and experiences.

As I sat there listening, it became increasingly clear in my mind that alternative energy sources will have a significant role to play particularly in the domestic energy arena.