

Illegal paraffin appliances are flooding poor communities

MD's Word or Two
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This morning as I was writing this article, Glenn Truran our General Manager called me from Johannesburg about a fire in George Goch. I immediately turned on the radio and heard that a primus stove exploded and as result 40 shacks were burned down whilst three people were injured. This is an unfortunate situation especially at this time of year when families get together. It is time to analyse what are some of the key underlying problems.

Unbridled proliferation of illegal paraffin appliances

South Africa faces a problem of unbridled illegal proliferation and inflow of dangerous appliances from China into poor communities. We have been informed that the paraffin stoves, which resemble, but are much worse than, the old Panda stoves illegally come through our ports and borders. They get put into containers and transported in trucks. The trucks then are driven into communities where the illegal and unsafe appliances are sold to communities cheaply from the back of the trucks.

It presents a number of problems. First of all, the chances of the stoves bursting into flames and causing injury and death among poor people are too high. Secondly, this illegal supply of appliances impacts negatively on the legitimate appliance manufacturers which are trying to comply with the regulations. This has direct implications on the local labour as local manufacturers have to retrench people. The third problem is that this is costing the South Africa economy tremendously as the profits are exported out of the country.

So what can be done about this? For starters, communities must be vigilant and safety conscious. They must not sacrifice their safety for cheap and dangerous products. Even though the initial cost of buying the product is relatively low, the accumulated costs of dealing with property destruction, injuries and even death are extremely exponential. Government authorities have to do inspections, enforce resolutions, monitor our border and prevent the illegal appliances from getting to our communities.

Impact of paraffin price hikes on paraffin safety

Another problem that we are dealing with is the impact of paraffin price hikes on paraffin safety. 2008 has been an extremely difficult year, particularly for the communities we work with. The global financial melt-down continues to wreak havoc among all the sectors of South African society. For our constituency, perhaps the most devastating has been the unprecedented increases in paraffin prices in particular and energy prices in general. The food prices also increased exponentially.

I remember visiting the George Goch area in August this year, on a door-to-door awareness campaign, where a group of women asked us to please ensure that government reduce the paraffin price. They explained how they were experiencing the difficulties. They found themselves forced to choose between food and energy. In terms of paraffin price hikes, we have engaged government to try and understand how the pricing system works and to consider what could be done to buffer the poor from the ravages of price hikes which are linked to the international oil price fluctuations.

On the face of it, paraffin price hikes are not an issue of priority for us. But prices impact negatively on the work we do. For example, we have been made aware that, paraffin is being recycled from industries and farms to be sold cheaply in poor communities in

Alexandra. We do not know whether this is not a widespread practice. This is very dangerous because the paraffin is contaminated and its integrity is compromised.

Poverty the overriding problem

The greatest challenge here is that as long as we have poverty in our country, the problem of fires and ingestion is likely to persist regardless of our attempts. As long as people use combustible materials to construct their houses, as long as houses are built so close to each other, we will always have relatively small fires burn whole communities down. So the existence of poverty lies at the very foundation of our problems. It is for that reason that we are engaging other government departments such as housing and health to attack the problem from all angles.

We are making progress

Our mandate is the promotion of safety in the use of paraffin. As such, we are extremely concerned that during this year, communities continued to experience fires, energy related injuries and ingestions in their homes. Even a single injury is worrisome for us. However, we are seeing that our campaigns are making an impact. From our social surveys and interactions with communities, it is clear that people are implementing our preventative strategies in their own homes. We are realizing that our campaigns are not only helping the poor paraffin users, but other communities as well, as the following email extract states:

“Hey guys.

Firstly, I think you all should be up for the highest medal of valour there is! Great job! I know you guys are, by definition of the resource and our reliance on electricity, focussed on getting your message to communities who are underprivileged and do not have access to the internet (or electricity) ... but guess what ... you saved the lives of my family, including the life of our infant son, regardless of the fact that we are “privileged and “informed” ... so keep up the good work despite the obstacles!...

Please remember: I am just an email away. If assistance is required, my services will be free of charge, with the condition that it is understood that the assistance offered by me falls within my capabilities and budget.

Many Thanks

Norman Harris
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Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to wish all our stakeholders, staff and board members a wonderful and a safe Christmas period. At this time of festivities, may our communities enjoy injury free holidays. May God continue to bless all of us, even in this time of financial turbulences.