Promoting solar cookers through the Solar Cookers International

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Guide to building and using simple solar cookers

When Solar Cookers International (SCI) formed in 1987, an early action was to publish a simple, illustrated guide to building and using simple solar cookers (Figures 1 & 2). These cookers require less than 16 Euro worth of supplies to make. They enable families in many countries to reduce their use of firewood, charcoal and kerosene for cooking by 30 to 60 percent per year.

Now in its 10th edition, the booklet includes diagrams of models that can be built for less than 4 Euro in supplies. Many thousands of copies of the booklet have been sold. Free copies have been sent on request to ten thousand organizations worldwide – small self-help organizations, schools, women's organizations, health and development groups, local governments, and national government agencies in countries suffering the effects of deforestation.

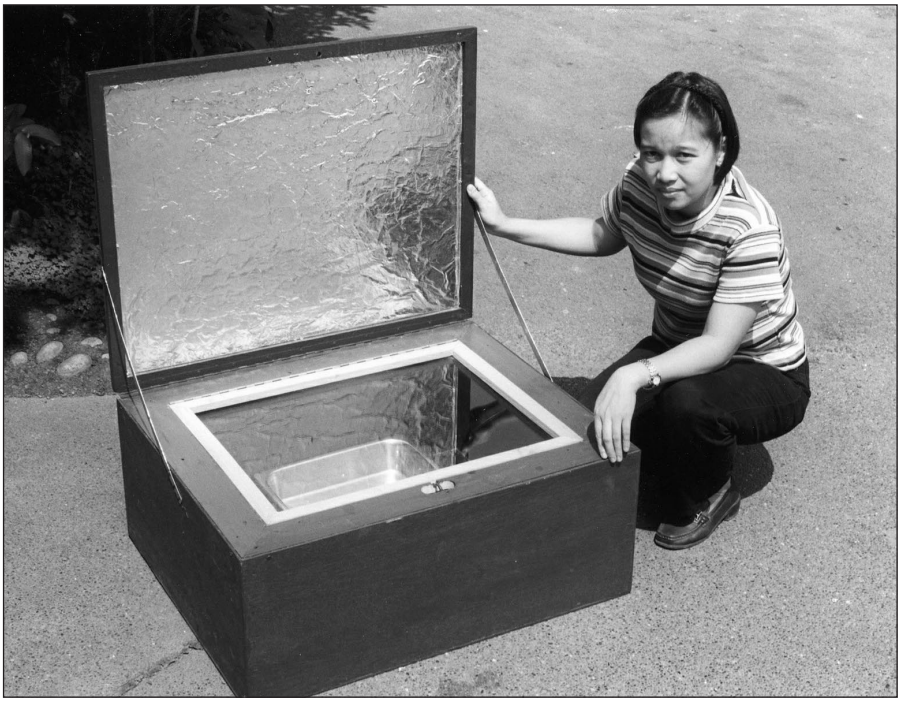

Figure 1 Solar box cooker (*photo: SCI*)

Figure 2 Solar cookers can save valuable fuelwood (*photo: SCI*)

Cooker dissemination

Another booklet is being distributed to help people evaluate whether a given community is likely to embrace solar cooking. This booklet describes steps to a successful programme to spread solar cooking, potential obstacles and ideas for recruiting allied organizations with needed skills and resources. As thousands of requests for information flow into our office, we sent out the booklets – available in several languages – and provide additional answers to specific questions.

SCI newsletter

From its beginning, SCI has published a newsletter three times per year. We began sending it to all the people in the developing world who contacted us. We then began receiving reports of new solar cooking activity started by people who had received our booklets.

Feedback

SCI repeatedly asked this growing international audience for feedback, sometimes through formal surveys. Over time, the system of adding new contacts to the newsletter mailing list, providing them with self-help guides, and asking for feedback has enabled SCI to identify hundreds of small- and medium-scale solar cooking projects worldwide. SCI also has made contact with at least 50 other solar cooking promoters in the developed world and

with representatives of solar cooking programs in China and India–two countries in which more than 500,000 solar cookers have been distributed.

International directory

We added all these names to our newsletter mailing list. From this large list, we extracted the names and contact information for those who reported solar cooking activity. This list of the world's solar cooking promoters was published and distributed as an international directory.

SCI archive on the web

In 1996, a volunteer established a Web site – The Solar Cooking Archive at www.solarcooking.org It posted key resources from SCI's expanding library of international solar cooking information. Other solar activists were encouraged to provide articles, project reports, studies relating to cooking fuel, deforestation (Figure 3), smoke-related lung disease, and global climate change, etc. Our international directory was added to this web page, as were SCI's newsletters.

The Archive is a blend of voices from around the world in dialogue about the promise and practice of solar cooking. Information exchange is multi-directional. Meanwhile, feedback from the world of solar cooking promoters appears in our newsletters in ever-greater amounts. One recent issue included updates from 20 different countries.

Information exchange

The newsletter, directory and Web site enable and encourage hundreds of promoters in developing countries to contact each other to share information. These promoters can serve as independent sources of expertise for others in their district, country or region. They already do serve as models for countless others – both in their communities and through their influence on our newsletter and web page.

SCI has grown with time and pursues other programs as well – including management of field projects in eastern Africa and sponsorship of international and regional conferences on solar cooking. Information sharing services, like the ones discussed in this article, are being developed in a regional centre in Nairobi, Kenya.

Impacts

Our main information sharing system – despite its simple nature – has yielded profound results. For example, with SCI information, a group in Uganda helped 9000 families obtain solar cookers. A project in Haiti, using SCI information, has helped 5000 families make their own cookers. A project in Madagascar has served 2000 families, while one in Turkey has passed the 1200 mark. One promoter in West Africa who borrowed the idea of our lowest-cost cooker has spread the idea to several other organizations, and one of these organizations in turn is spreading it to more groups.

In addition to those 17 000 cookers disseminated, more than 100 other projects that have made use of our services have helped 10 to 20 thousand additional families in developing countries to obtain solar cookers. (Our information services account for another 20 000 or more cookers produced in the USA and some other industrial countries.)

Financing dissemination

This system has not cost much to run. Most non-profit organizations in the United States have newsletters, web pages and someone to answer questions from the public. Much of our information sharing system was grafted on top of these basic services, raising costs only incrementally. The cost to SCI of these many thousands of cookers disseminated in the developing world has been under 15 Euro per cooker. This cost per cooker will continue to fall as more promotion groups form and grow. The low cost to SCI is explained by the fact that the work and funding for these projects are provided by a host of other people and organizations in many communities. Yet the power of practical solar cooking information is proven.

Genius is found in the design of the various solar cookers. The information system, however, is made up of simple, obvious parts. The only slightly difficult thing was the persistence – to answer *every* request for information, to add *every* appropriate name and address to our database, to gradually add features and improve services and to persist in gathering, studying and sharing feedback.

Ramón maintains SCI's database of contacts, responds to inquiries, and maintains relationships with solar cooking practitioners from across the globe. He puts individuals and groups working in the same region in touch with one another. Ramón has an extensive knowledge of the history, technical assistance and information exchange functions of Solar Cookers International.

Ramón has a Bachelor of Arts in English Literature and a certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages. He has travelled extensively and reads and writes Spanish. He joined SCI in the summer of 1990.

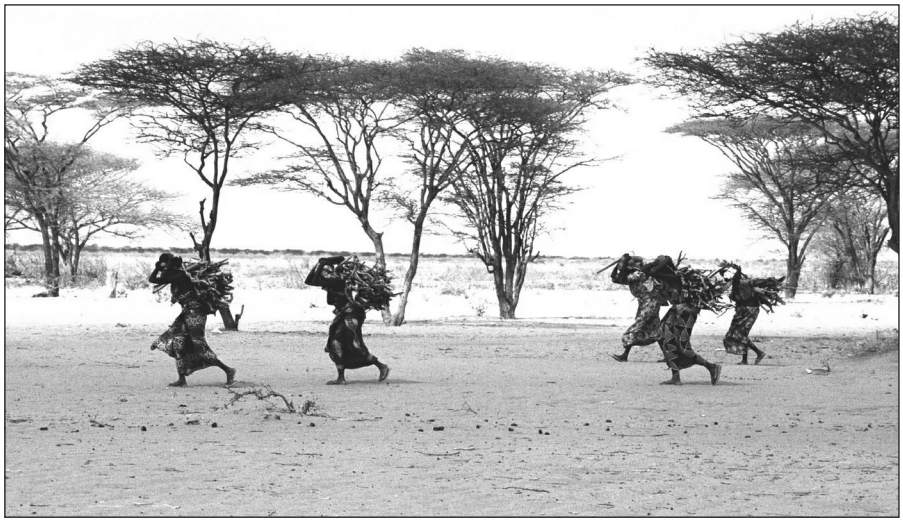

Figure 3 Collecting fuel becomes increasingly difficult with deforestation (*photo: SCI*)