

Strategies for a Sustainable Future: A Decade of Rural Electrification in South Africa (1991–2000)

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Approximately 66 % of all South African households currently have access to electricity. Over 80 % of urban households and about 46 % of rural households are connected to the national grid. An ambitious rural electrification program has more than doubled the share of electrified households in less than ten years. Does this mean that South Africa is well on its way to addressing energy and development goals for poor rural households?

The answer requires going beyond the statistics to deeper level questions about the impact of electricity on rural people's livelihoods. Has access to electricity stimulated the growth of small businesses? What impacts does it have on household energy use patterns? Is the use of fuelwood reduced? Does access to electricity decrease household expenditure on fuels? What about the energy use patterns of the majority of rural households, who still do not have access to electricity?

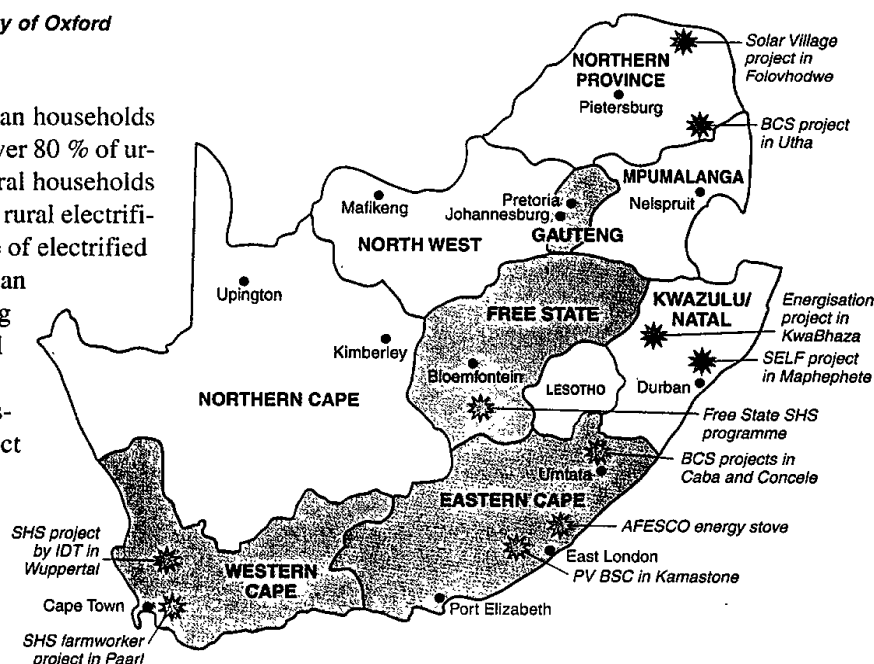


Figure 1: Distribution of some renewable energy projects in South Africa.

Electricity and development

Access to electricity does not mean that people can or will use it optimally. It serves no purpose to provide access to electricity which the target beneficiaries cannot afford or which does not improve their quality of life. It is also important to assess the status of households that do not have access to electricity. It is estimated that almost two million households in South Africa will not have access to grid electricity by 2012, unless a more aggressive rural electrification programme is undertaken.

In looking for a sustainable approach, there is a principle that is often mentioned, but is much less often taken seriously: *electricity is not a panacea for rural development*. There tends to be too much emphasis on disseminating technologies and playing the "numbers game" in which the number of households with electricity is the most important statistic. The focus instead should be on meeting the needs of rural households in a meaningful and sustainable manner. In this article, particular attention is paid to the new energy service delivery mechanisms provided through the solar concession programme.

Extending the grid

In 1991, South Africa's state utility, Eskom¹, began a concerted effort to extend grid electricity throughout the country. In 1994, the new African National Congress (ANC) government highlighted its commitment to increase electricity access for the pre-

Continued on p. 2

In this issue:

Strategies for a Sustainable Future: A Decade of Rural Electrification in South Africa (1991–2000) Monga Mehlwana	1
Renewable Energy for Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development in Honduras Bert van der Plas, Gustavo Best, Bart van Campen (FAO) and Reinerio Zepeda (SERNA)	4
Swedish Rural Energy Cooperation in Vietnam Anders Arvidson, Göran Haag, Mirjam Palm	6