

BOOKS

WHY HIGHER PRICES COULD SPEED UP ELECTRIFICATION

THE most important step which could be taken to spread rural electrification is to raise the price people pay for it. This paradox arises because the current high subsidies are counter-productive: they are simply bleeding electricity utilities of the money they need to deliver reliable supplies and increase the pace of rural coverage.

Demolishing myths and misconceptions about electricity is vital, because electricity opens the door to the modern world and for more than three billion people in developing countries the door remains tightly shut.

Rural people are well aware of what they are missing and the pressure for rural electrification is intense. A former head of the Bangladesh Rural Electrification Board said he received daily visits from members of parliament asking him to bring a supply to their areas. Some pleaded with him to "just put up a few poles to show that something is happening even if you can't provide any current."

Although rural electrification is essential for the long-

term development of Third World countries, rural electrification in itself does not cause development. It is development which creates the conditions under which rural electrification programmes can succeed.

There is no point in taking electricity to an area so poor that people cannot afford to wire their houses or buy electric appliances. But taking a supply to an area where people are better off produces an immediate impact, with homes and businesses connecting up and using electricity for all sorts of purposes.

A similar myth exists about rural electrification and agriculture. Areas are electrified in the belief that this will cause an increase in irrigated agriculture and rise in output. But it is not the availability of an electricity supply which determines whether a farmer invests in irrigated agriculture.

The key questions are to do with farm and plot size, the availability of credit, and access to profitable markets. When these conditions are

By Gerald Foley, author of Electricity for Rural People, which has just been published by the Pansos Institute, London.

right, farmers invest in irrigated agriculture, using diesel pumpsets if there is no electricity supply.

As a study by the Asian Development Bank put it, subsidised electricity for agriculture increases the profits from irrigation but does little to increase irrigation.

Electrifying an area brings huge benefits to people able to afford supply. It opens a world of improved lighting and labour-saving appliances for households, and new opportunities for business people and industrialists.

One kilowatt hour (kWh), the normal unit of electricity, in a 60 watt light bulb provides as much light as 12 litres of kerosene in a wick lamp. The output of a small power tool in an hour is equivalent to ten hours work by an adult.

But these benefits go to the people actually using the elec-

tricity. There are broader social benefits like improved street lighting and wider availability of goods and services. But they are minor compared with the benefits which flow to those who have their own electricity supply.

Subsidies to the rural consumers who obtain these benefits can be extremely high. In India, the states of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka are proposing the provision of free electricity to farmers. In Tanzania, householders obtain the first 1,000 units at about 0.5 US cents; in some areas this covers only about 10% of the fuel cost of supply.

Such low tariffs subsidise the better-off, have other damaging effects. They lead to wasteful consumption and overloading the supply system. With consequent power cuts and damage to industrial output. Low tariffs also deprive

the electricity utility of money for proper repair and maintenance as well as for expansion of the supply system into rural areas.

Many utilities are on the verge of bankruptcy because they charge consumers only a fraction of the real cost of supply. Large increases in charges are bound to be a feature of the 1990s.

Given the benefits of rural electrification and who obtains them, generating costs should be passed on to consumers. This will often involve charges equivalent to 20 US cents per unit or more. For consumers accustomed to paying far less, such tariffs may appear impossibly high. But in comparison with the benefits of an electricity supply, they still represent extremely good value for money.

Nor are such tariffs unknown in the developing world. Pacific Island states such as the Solomon Islands and Tonga have domestic tariffs in the range of 15-30 US cents per unit. The same is true in Niger, Mali, Malaysia and a number of other developing countries. In Indonesia consumers pay an average of 18 US cents per unit for electricity from private suppliers.



Dolly Anwar with Aly Zaker in a scene from her last TV play, "Swapaner Shimana," telecast barely a week before she committed suicide.

A new book on Africa is almost savage in its exposure of top-level corruption and venality.

Blaine Harden, former bureau chief for the Washington Post based in Nairobi from 1985 to 1989, will not be popular. Few writers on Africa have been so brutally frank in peeling away the scabs on the continent's festering political sores.

If the book gets a wide reading many Africans will be very angry, for Harden writes with penetrating style and he knows how to marshal and select his facts.

He starts with a journey which for him was a nightmare, on a ferry down the Zaire River from Kisangani. This was no African Queen-type experience. Harden's experiences on this particular journey encapsulated everything that he considers sordid, corrupt and heart-wrenchingly

painful about Africa.

Harden booked a "deluxe" cabin, but found by the time he arrived it had been taken over by a Zairean army sergeant. The boat teemed with people, luggage, food and live and dead animals.

An alternative "first-class" cabin was crawling with cockroaches and bedbugs, and Harden writes that he had to bribe another passenger to allow him to sleep on his floor.

The captain appeared only interested in filling his freezer with the best meat to sell at a huge profit in Kinshasa. And though the boat was already so packed that there was hardly room to stand up, the captain kept taking on more passengers. They had paid for their tickets and they also had to pay a bribe to come aboard.

US Reporter Takes a Scalpel to Africa

Blaine Harden, a US news correspondent formerly based in Nairobi, has written a blistering book on his four years' experience in East Africa. In it, reports Gemini News Service, he exposes corruption, venality and a lust for power among a few of the leaders in a continent where millions of people are struggling for peace, prosperity and a decent life.

by Alan Rake

The lavatories overflowed. The stench in the humidity was appalling. The decks were awash with slime and excreta. Slops were tossed from upper decks on to the lower.

Every day it rained hard, drenching the people sleeping on deck. Outbreaks of diarrhoea, dysentery and cholera were common.

Thus, for Harden, the boat

journey became a symbol of sorts, a microcosm of all that he considered bad in Zaire.

Corruption was everywhere. From the captain who was stuffing his freezer with the meat, bought at derisory prices from peasants, to the security men who would not let anyone aboard without paying bribes.

Harden quotes two American academics who examined the method of doing things in President Mobutu Sese-Seko's Zaire: "Corruption has become the system; it is a system by which the powerful exploit the less powerful, who in turn exploit the powerless."

Government ministers demand pay-offs for construction projects, teachers demand pay-offs from students, policemen demand pay-offs from drivers. "It is like termites nibbling away at the structure of society."

However, Harden is not totally pessimistic or condemnatory. He seeks the "real" Africa by telling the stories of a number of remarkable Africans scattered across the continent.

He tells of the Ghanaian Kwasi Oduro, a sociology lecturer at the University of Ghana, who struggles to keep

his huge extended family happy on his wages of \$83 a month.

He tells of the westernised, urbanised Nairobi lawyer S. M. Otieno, whose death provoked a tribal fracas between the Luos, who wanted him returned home to be buried according to tribal custom, and his Kikuyu wife who wanted him buried in Kikuyuland.

He tells too of Manute Bol, an illiterate Sudanese Dinka who ran away from home when he was 12 because he did not like herding his father's cattle.

Bol got lucky. Because he was nearly 7 feet 7 inches tall (2.3m) he made the US basketball circuit and \$12,500 for two minutes' work advertising fried chicken. In one leap he had moved from abject poverty to a world of megabucks.

Harden's literary scalpel cuts into the mythology of Africa's "big men." He got to know a few leaders well —

Kaunda, Doe, Moi and Mobutu — and he uses his knife with clinical precision.

He tells how he was issued with a deportation order after Moi had read his story in the Washington Post headlined "Police torture is charged in Kenya." Harden was given no time to pack and was actually waiting for his flight to take him away when the US Embassy intervened.

They told Moi that it would be bad for Kenya's image to expel a western journalist. It could mean a cut in US aid.

Harden was relieved. The next day his telephone rang. "Moi here," said a gravelly voice, and Harden was told to be at State House at 8 am the next morning.

At the appointment he was told that his deportation had been a mistake. Moi said he always avoided press interviews because he does not like to "advertise" himself, but

Harden proceeded to ask him about torture in Kenya.

"There has never been torture in Kenya," Moi said. "We are the freest country in Africa."

Just a month earlier a lawyer, Gibson Kamau Karia, had been arrested and was to be held for nine months. His "crime" was that he had dared to defend detainees who claimed they had been brutally tortured, beaten by security men and kept in flooded cells without food or water.

Harden's is an extraordinary and frightening book. He does not entirely ignore the brighter said of Africa.

— GEMINI NEWS

* Africa — Dispatches from a Fragile Continent by Blaine Harden. Published by Harper-Collins, London Price £16.99 hardback.

Mexican City Refuses to Host Gays

When they suggested holding the 1991 annual conference of the International Gay and Lesbian Association in Guadalajara, Mexico, homosexuals in Latin America were hoping it would be a big step forward in their quest for liberation. Instead, reports Gemini News, the conference was forced out of the city, demonstrating that intolerance of homosexuals in Latin America is still very strong. by John Ross.

THE first open international gay and lesbian gathering ever scheduled to take place in the Third World has been forced into hiding.

The annual conference of the International Gay and Lesbian Association (ILGA) was planned for the first week in July in Guadalajara, Mexico, but became groups. Slogans were painted on downtown walls threatening homosexuals with death, blaming them for the spread of Aids and declaring that Guadalajara would not become another "Sodom".

Leaflets denouncing the event were distributed at the airport and religious groups like the Civil Moral Association marched in the streets carrying the Virgin of Guadalupe.

The Lions and the Rotary clubs demanded that the conference be moved from the city. Local police threatened rounding people up and closing the hotels for permitting "immoral behavior" if the conference were held there.

The location was decided upon two years ago, at the request of Third World members of ILGA.

Latin America has long been a killing ground for lesbians and gays. Death squads still stalk homosexuals in "zona rosas" (tolerance zones) of Brazil and Colombia. Persecution is well known in Cuba and Mexico as well. When lesbians from Latin America met in Cuernavaca two years ago, they had to pretend they were an association of religious women.

The mayor of San Francisco in the United States, home to a large homosexual population, wrote to Guadalajara officials pleading them to allow the conference to be held in an "atmosphere of tolerance". Guadalajara maintained it is a "traditional city and the conference is a moral aggression against our citizens. We are not as modern as San Francisco."

Guadalajara has a large homosexual community although it is historically conservative and Catholic. "As long as we stayed in our ghetto here, there were no problems," said one member of the local gay

community. He compared homosexuals to victims of apartheid.

Since homosexual groups have become more visible in Guadalajara and other Mexican cities in recent years, tensions have increased. The gay community centre was firebombed here three years ago and the Homosexual Pride Liberation Group (GOHL — Grupo Orgulloso Homosexual de Liberacion) reports increases in incidents of "gay bashing".

On June 12, GOHL reluctantly reported to ILGA in

where US homosexuals have always spent their money freely.

Sensitive to demonstrations there and in Washington DC and hundreds of angry telegrams from Europe, the Salinas government found an alternative site for the conference at the last minute. It was held in Acapulco, where prices at 5-star hotels were prohibitive to many who hoped to attend the conference.

Although several of Mexico's left parties have openly welcomed homosexuals the ruling



Brussels that it could not guarantee the safety of the thousand delegates from 30 countries slated to attend the annual convention.

The meeting was seen as a new beginning for the movement in Latin America. One goal of the conference was set up a Latin American Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission. Amnesty International is already being pressed to expand its definition of "prisoners of conscience" to include those jailed, tortured, and executed because of their sexual orientation.

At a demonstration outside the Mexican Consulate in San Francisco in June, the group threatened a tourist boycott of Guadalajara and Jalisco state.

Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) has taken no stand on homosexual rights. Mayor Corvorrubias is a close collaborator of Governor Guillermo Cosío, an old-line PRI mover and shaker, who also condemned the conference in repeated press statements.

In the early 1980s, Aids largely affected homosexual and bisexual men and injecting drug users, as is still the case in North America, Western Europe and Australasia.

However, now in Latin America the predominant mode of HIV spread is relations between bisexual men and their heterosexual partners and between female prostitutes and their contacts, according to the World Health Organization.

Now It's Designer Status for Illegal Drugs

IMPORTING of illegal drugs into Britain is big business. In fact it's the size of corporate giants such as Unigate Dairies or Whitbread Breweries.

It's worth around £2500 million a year according to the National Drugs Intelligence Unit, based at Scotland Yard. And nearly two million customers spend an average £1400 a year on cannabis, amphetamines, heroin, cocaine and other drugs.

The business supports 90,000 importers and dealers working part or full-time supplying drug users.

And like most consumers, from drinkers to health food customers, they like to know what they are getting.

So do the importers.

Cannabis producers in particular, are happy to oblige. They are proud of their drugs and market them with brand names, stamped on the hashish itself, or on the packaging.

The Home Office forensic laboratory has compiled a top-secret catalogue of over 100 drug trade marks and an expert said: "They are trade marks of quality. They are there to tell the purchaser that this particular drug is from a good source and is of high quality."

"And just as you get counterfeit cassette tapes and other goods especially in the Third World, we have come across faked cannabis trade marks where people try to pass off drugs of inferior quality."

The cannabis trade are varied, and many carry distinctive logos like a pair of doves, lions, trees, Pepsi bottles, crocodiles and crossed swords.

One stamp depicting a pair of blooms proclaims "Golden Flower — Special Quality; another official looking stamp says "Government Ganja Store House" and gives a crop number; and the "Cobra Brand — Gold Label" shows a coiled snake.

Philip O'Neil, a forensic scientist who analyses drugs seized by customs officers said: "In some countries like Lebanon, cannabis production is regarded as a legitimate business, and they tend to stamp their products with symbols like the Cedar of Lebanon, the American Eagle, and even a copy of the Rolls Royce logo."

In the early Eighties there were over five tonnes of Lebanese resin packed in cotton bags marked "Princess", stored in an Amsterdam warehouse. People from this country would go over in drabs and drabs, coming back with various amounts of the cannabis, all in bags stamped "Princess". He said that dealers buying

cannabis in bulk would perhaps test a portion of the drug, and if satisfied, may then insist on the purchase being made up entirely of slabs with the same trade mark.

O'Neil continued: "One of the reasons is that cannabis may be good when new, but not so good after two years say. But unfortunately for the dealers, the trade mark is no guarantee."

For example, Nepalese cannabis is regarded as the best you can buy. So dealers

will look out for cannabis bearing a Nepal stamp.

"But they are being conned. Most of the Nepalese cannabis is actually produced in Pakistan."

LSD in sold on tiny paper squares made up like sheets of stamps. And each stamp may carry a logo like the head of ET, or the flying figure of Superman.

In the USA and Holland, cocaine dealers often wrap up drugs for sale in specially printed pieces of paper —

folded like Beechams Powder packets, complete with fold marks. They are printed with a trade name, "Sno-Seal", and carry a drawing of a seal on lump of ice. "Snow" is a drug-user nickname for cocaine.

A undercover Scotland Yard drugs detective said: "The drugs business is a business like any other and they pass on new developments to each other. Like when one finds a new way to smuggle in drugs or a new way of laundering the money."

"It's not at all like American big business. Drugs dealers mirror — the way legitimate business is done in Britain. It's private enterprise, British-style."

But some drugs dealer's tend to think big, and think internationally. The detective explained: "For some, it's like the futures market. They'll import cocaine — which does not have a lot of bulk — and store it in a freezer. That way they can wait to see how the street prices go."

"If it's selling very well in Denmark, or Sweden, say, they'll re-export it there."

Some dealers specialise in cannabis, while others go for the bigger profits — but run the risk of longer sentences if they're caught.

WRITE TO MITA

Dear Mita,

You once wrote about an elderly widowed woman who got married and lived happily ever after. Well tell me you that this is very rare. There is still a deep taboo against widows remarrying. I personally know of an attractive woman in her early fifties whose husband died few years ago. It seems unlikely that she will ever remarry because society will not accept it.

Khaleda, Shantinagar, Dhaka.

Dear Khaleda,

Though remarriage for widow is rare there has been a slight change of attitude in recent years. Our religion permits remarriage but social customs which have been observed for years take time to change. Society expects more loyalty from a woman than from a man, even after death. This is also another way of exploiting woman and limiting their freedom. But on the other hand, when something is done or an action taken with belief and conviction society ultimately accepts it.

Dear Mita,

My wife is very untidy and keeps the house very dirty. When I complain she makes many excuses. But I know many housewives who keep the house clean even without servants. This has become so serious that it is creating problem between us. What can I do to change her.

Rafiq Alam, Mouchak, Dhaka.

Dear Rafiq,

I have written many times that habits formed over the years are very difficult to change. Maybe there is some validity in the excuses she gives. Therefore at least listen to what she is saying. Come to some kind of compromise where you solve her immediate household problems and she will try to keep the house clean. If this does not work then try to supervise house cleaning yourself. Please don't make it into an issue that disrupts your normal family life.

Dear Mita,

My husband loves to eat and does not do any exercise no matter what I tell him. He is over weight and I am very worried that he will have a heart attack someday. He makes me cook rich food and gets upset when I refuse. I don't know what to do with him. He is always giving some silly excuses and jokes about dying soon. This is not funny at all.

Nasreen, Banani, Dhaka.

Dear Nasreen,

I agree that it is not funny. Some people like to remain childish and immature forever. It has to do with their upbringing. I don't know what his weight is, but if it is causing you alarm than persuade him to see a doctor at least. He might heed a doctors advice. Make sure that the doctor is not a friend, otherwise he might suspect a conspiracy between you two. Give the rich food that he loves, only after he has done a certain amount of exercise. Rich food is not harmful if taken once in a while, especially if regular meals are balanced.

Dear Mita,

You once advised a young man to marry anyone he wants to without taking permission from his mother. I am a mother of a 20 yr. old son and I shall be very disappointed if my son took your advice. Children have a responsibility towards their parents and should show respect for their wishes even after growing up.

Kudista, Chittagong.

Dear Kudista,

Please accept my apology if I have hurt your feeling. Of course children have a responsibility towards their parents, but parents too must have respect for the wishes and desires of their children, especially after they have become adults. Some parents find it hard to let them go and create obstacles whenever they want to take an independent step. The test of successful parenting is to prepare children to become independent, to go out in the world in such a way that they will always return someday.

Run by a trained and experienced Family and Marriage counselor, assisted by a professional team of doctor, psychologist and lawyer, this column will answer questions relating to family, marriage, health, family laws, and social and interpersonal relationships. Please address letters to Mita, The Daily Star, GPO Box 3257 or to 28/1, Toynebe Circular Road, Motijheel, Dhaka-1000.