

Electricity lights the way to better health

SAVERA KALIDEEN

IF YOU'RE sitting in one of Kimberley's suburbs, bemoaning your fate as the electricity blackouts roll out across South Africa, consider this: The country-wide blackouts will have a disproportionate impact on our country's poor.

The reality is that access to electricity mirrors the unequal distribution of health services in our society.

More and more South African homes have been lit up since the advent of democracy with an almost 10 percent increase in the last decade alone. The percentage of households connected to the electricity supply increased from 77,1 percent in 2002 to 85 percent in 2013.

And while urban areas saw a decline in the use of wood and paraffin for cooking – rural areas across the Northern Cape still depend on these unsustainable forms of energy.

We know that electrification improves quality of life. The use of electricity – not just for cooking but also for lighting, preserving food and watching television – leads to socio-economic benefits including access to information, improved opportunities to take advantage of education, improvements in health because of safer sources of heat and light and improved security at home and in areas around the home. Many studies also suggest a direct impact on economic benefits.

As we are now in the season of matric and tertiary exams, electricity allows students to study at night – thus increasing time spent on education and improving their chances of better results. In addition, access to communication improves as South Africans are able to charge their phones, and even expand their business or working hours by continuing production or the

LATEST UPDATE

Eskom yesterday said that South Africa's power system was severely constrained and the utility might have to cut electricity to users if the required energy can't be saved. "The loss of additional generation capacity as a result of technical faults and the change in weather conditions" has increased demand, the state-owned company said in a statement. "Should we not achieve the required energy savings, we may need to go into load shedding."

provision of services after hours.

The increased safety provided by connection to the electricity grid is particularly important for children. Fire-related burns are responsible for about 265 000 deaths annually with over 90 percent occurring in developing or low and middle income countries (LMICs). About 1 300 of these are young South Africans according to the Household Energy Safety Association of South Africa (HESASA).

The Medical Research Council reports that South Africa has a high rate of childhood burns – with about 1 600 000 children in total experiencing burns – many of which are preventable. Victims are mostly young children from poorer communities with risk factors including overcrowding, inadequate electrification and the use of paraffin and wood fires.

Electricity outside the home means that there is no interruption in health services, an extension of health care services at local clinics, as well as improvement in storage of vaccines and medicines needing to be stored in the cold chain.

There is a significant impact on the health of rural communities following the introduction of electricity. Apart from a drop in energy and lighting-related accidents, access to electricity – and thus to media such as radio and television – also

improves awareness of healthcare issues.

There is anecdotal evidence of a reduction of pollution inside the home – and a linked reduction of respiratory diseases.

It should come as no surprise then that the World Health Organisation regards health as a universal indicator of progress in the UN Sustainable Energy for All initiative. By measuring an indicator such as access to energy, the crucial role of access to and sufficient energy supply to ensure basic conditions of health and livelihoods is correctly highlighted.

By 2011, more than 80 percent of South African households had access to electricity. Just as household access is not universal, so too, is uneven access of electricity available to our health services. This limits their ability to provide after-hour services, to support a cold chain and to use essential medical equipment that requires electrical power.

We urgently need to look at cleaner, renewable sources of energy for both communities and public infrastructure such as clinics, hospitals, schools and tertiary education settings.

So as the electricity restrictions continue, the power failures are an apt reminder that for many South Africans, the lack of access to electricity is the norm. And, for millions more, the high cost of

electricity remains an inhibiting factor to access as electricity continues to increase above the inflation rate since the 27 percent increase in 2009.

It is a structural limitation to access that has far-reaching repercussions for both households and poorer municipalities who are deprived of their right to a better life.

There are specific gender impacts to this lack of access too: women and girls are heavily affected as they have to spend excessive amounts of time collecting wood for cooking and heating.

This not only has an educational and economic impact – as time spent on this activity could be otherwise spent on income generation or education – but also has a safety impact.

The search for fuel takes women and girls into areas that are often isolated and risky, thereby making them vulnerable to violence and assault.

The electricity crisis that began in 2008 shows no signs of improvement today. South Africans are right to demand answers and better services. It is not acceptable that a service that impacts on the safety of children, the time, safety and opportunities of women and girls, and the health of us all is allowed to lurch from one crisis to the next.

We deserve so much better than the current leadership of Eskom can provide. It is time that Eskom be forced to take on board the views of the collective intellectual capital of the country working on energy as they clearly cannot do this on their own.

Access to energy and electricity is far more than a mere utility; it has a real impact on the health of the nation and it is time for Eskom to stop harming our health.

• Saver Kalideen is senior advocacy officer at Soul City Institute

