

By Umar Nsubuga

Charcoal burners urged to go green

Charcoal is one of the main sources of fuel Ugandans use for cooking. As a result, this resource takes the lion's share of blame for deforestation. According to experts, although it is on high demand, most charcoal burners still use rudimentary and wasteful production methods. Alex Kalinda, a resident of Matugga village in Wakiso district, says the negative impact of such practices has robbed his village of its former lush green landscape. "Kasamba in Mubende district has become a sanctuary for charcoal burners, but with devastating environmental effects," he says. A few kilometres away from the Mubende-Fort Portal highway, Herberti Tito, a resident of Mubende town, says he cannot give up charcoal burning because he does not have an alternative source of income. Without it, Tito says it would be hard to take his children through school and look after his family. Last year, the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Development and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) carried out a sensitisation drive to showcase the damaging impact of charcoal burning on the environment. Statistics show that 90% of the Ugandan population depends on biomass for cooking.



Kawuki showing Lotet how the casamance works. Photos by Umar Nsubuga

Charcoal demand

According to the energy ministry's 2015 report, charcoal demand increases by 6% annually. The same study indicates that the number of households using charcoal rose from 15.2% in the 1990s to 18.5% in 2014. Households use 74% of the biomass, followed by the industrial sector at 18%, institutions 3% and the commercial sector, 5%. In Mubende district, most stakeholders in the charcoal production business have tried to join associations in order to get more from their work, the study says. The stakeholders in the industry include the land owners who supply wood for charcoal burning, burners, transporters, vendors and users. Muhammad Kawuki is one of the charcoal burners in Mubende, who received training under the Green Charcoal Project supported by UNDP. Kawuki has adopted charcoal production using a casamance instead of a traditional earth Kiln, which has helped him to increase production, while at the same time conserving the environment. According to Kawuki, when one uses traditional methods, most of the wood is wasted in form of residue and some of it does not get burnt. However, with the casamance, every piece of wood turns into charcoal in a shorter period of time.

UGANDA WATER WEEK



Environmentalists monitoring a eucalyptus forest

method, dangerous gases are not released into the atmosphere, since the steam is turned into water.

Green charcoal technologies
Attempts are being made by the Government and various partners to improve the methods of charcoal production. However, these are hindered by the negative perception many people have towards new improved charcoal technologies. To counter this, the energy ministry and some local communities are working in partnership with the UNDP Green Charcoal Project to promote more efficient technologies that enable them save the environment while still earning from biomass fuels. Ronald Lotet, a senior environment officer in Mubende, says they are sensitising locals to adopt technologies such as casamance improved rotot

ACCORDING TO THE ENERGY MINISTRY'S 2013 REPORT, CHARCOAL DEMAND INCREASES BY 6% ANNUALLY.

and conversion kilns, which are not only environmentally friendly, but also compatible with the expectations of the communities. "Our people must know that through such technologies, people generate good quality charcoal, using less wood," he says.

Simon Peter Amunau, the green charcoal manager at UNDP, says the main goal of the green charcoal project is to develop and promote improved charcoal production technologies and sustainable land management.

Challenges

Muhammad Kawuki, a charcoal burner in Mubende district, says he still faces problems such as lack of leather gloves, safety gear and other tools to use in the charcoal burning process. Aminah Namuddu, one of the charcoal retailers in Mubende, says although she has been able to sustain her family through the charcoal business, she still faces challenges such as high taxes and respiratory complications caused by charcoal residue and dust. Emmanuel Bikwaji, one of the transporters, says some National Forestry Authority officials ask them to pay double taxes every time they cross into another district yet they are supposed to pay once. Edward Birungi, the vice-chairman of Mubende, says although today there are efficient charcoal production methods, the charcoal burners are not aware of them and keep using traditional methods.

"With green charcoal technology, we expect to save up to 143,314 metric tonnes of wood from being felled for charcoal before the project ends. Furthermore, a big number of sustainable charcoal co-operatives are being strengthened, with over 2,400 charcoal champions secured in the pilot districts. The campaign is aimed at ensuring that the country has enough charcoal, as well as forests and trees for sustainable production.

Expert advice

According to Justine Nantume, the environment officer in Mubende district, tree owners need to cut mature trees for charcoal burning, burners need to sort tree species, burn dry wood and use modern technology. Transporters have to ensure that they do not overload, as well as use covered vehicles during transportation to prevent soaking and damaging charcoal, she says. Environment officials say charcoal vendors have to ensure proper storage of charcoal and final users must use energy efficient technology while cooking.

Statistics

The National charcoal survey 2016 shows that 39% of the charcoal is transported using lorries (fuso), 14% Elf trucks, 11% bicycles, 6% pickups, 5% trailers, 3% Forward trucks, 1% magulukumi (ten-wheeled trucks) and 21% by other means of transport. The same survey points out that 65.6% of the households use charcoal, while 33.4% use fire wood for cooking. In Kampala, a bag of charcoal costs around sh65,000 and sh80,000 in