Take expert caution on biodigesters seriously

A new study by the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering at Makerere University has raised concerns over the increasing use of biodigester technology in Uganda.

The study cites poor installation, improper handling of untreated waste, structural weaknesses and the general safety of the new sewage solution for homes with limited space.

A biodigester is an on-site sewage system suitable for homes with limited space. They represent a sustainable modern solution to organic waste management.

For many Ugandans, biodigesters are becoming a viable alternative to traditional septic tanks. Biodigesters utilise an anaerobic digestion system to break down wastewater and solid waste. The method has an extra advantage of reducing waste into clear water that can be used for irrigation.

For households, adopting biodigester technology is an effective step towards sustainable waste management. It is also a source of energy and an experience that mitigates environmental pollution.

However, instead of reducing the ecological footprint of human waste, studies indicate that the biodigester system might become the new time bomb for Uganda.

Instead of hiring professionals to build these systems, many Ugandans are opting for informal local builders around their communities. In the end, instead of using proper culverts, these local community 'experts' approach the construction of these biodigester with poorly-designed culverts.

And the results have been dire. Complaints about foul smell, toxic gas leaks, groundwater contamination and other environmental and structural risks have been reported. These risks, experts said, are directly linked to mistakes in construction and the total failure to treat waste properly.

Other key installation mistakes include poor site assessment, inadequate soak-away systems that trigger waterlogged soil, improper waste management, use of non-airtight materials, improperly treated digestate and poor soil sampling. All these mistakes combine to overload the system, leading to rising complaints of foul smell within communities.

Therefore, this calls for a return to the drawing table and the experts have guided well. Biodigesters can surely work effectively even in highly populated communities if properly designed and installed by professionals.

We cannot rule out biodigester use completely because it is the new normal. However, for households and communities adopting biodigester technology, let's listen to the experts and take the recent study seriously.

If you want to install biodigesters at your home, do not gamble. Stick to professional guidance.

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