

GOMA

BIOGAS HELPS CUT BILLS IN DRC

Julienne Mukelenge no longer worries about toxic fumes or power cuts when cooking at her home in Goma, in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, after switching to biogas, a renewable energy source that is cheaper and locally produced.

COOKING COSTS

"Electricity is expensive, but with biogas it's very economical," she said, standing in her kitchen, where blue flames licked the sides of a bubbling pot of that night's supper. Most of the city's nearly one million people cannot afford to use electricity and mostly depend on charcoal, called *makala*, for cooking and heating.

But the cost of a bag of charcoal has shot up after Goma, a strategic regional capital in the east, fell to the M23 armed group in January last year following fierce fighting with government forces.

After seizing control of Goma, the M23 banned logging in Virunga National Park near the city on the grounds it helped fund pro-Kinshasa militias, leading to the rise in the price of charcoal.

Currently, a 6kg (13-pound) cylinder of biogas, costing \$8, covers the needs of a household of five people for two weeks, unlike the \$30 a month for charcoal.

ECO-FRIENDLY FERTILISER

Biogas is produced by the decomposition of organic matter and it has been made in Goma since 2016 by Umoja, a local company whose stated aim is to offer an alternative to forests destroying firewood.

Yves Rubarura, an Umoja employee wearing overalls and safety goggles, collects "30 cartloads" of droppings every week from chicken coops belonging to the company and local partners to fill the biogas digesters.

These are cement pits where the waste is converted into methane before being bottled. He said Umoja had constructed around 50 biogas

digesters, which are easy to build and distributes 720kg of biogas monthly.

Production remains small-scale and limited for the time being. In Goma, residents lack the space and resources to install their own biogas digesters, said Umoja director Victor Materanya.

Storage is also an issue, given the lack of suitable equipment to pressurise the bottles.

He nevertheless hopes to roll out the technology in rural areas, where farmers who supply the compost can then recover the fertiliser produced at the end of the process.



Men filling a biogas digester in DRC. Biogas also helps to reduce the toxic fumes from waste incineration

AFP

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