Slaying the 'killer in the kitchen'

▸ The majority of the deaths caused by air pollution from cooking are among women and girls.

CAROLINE CHEBET

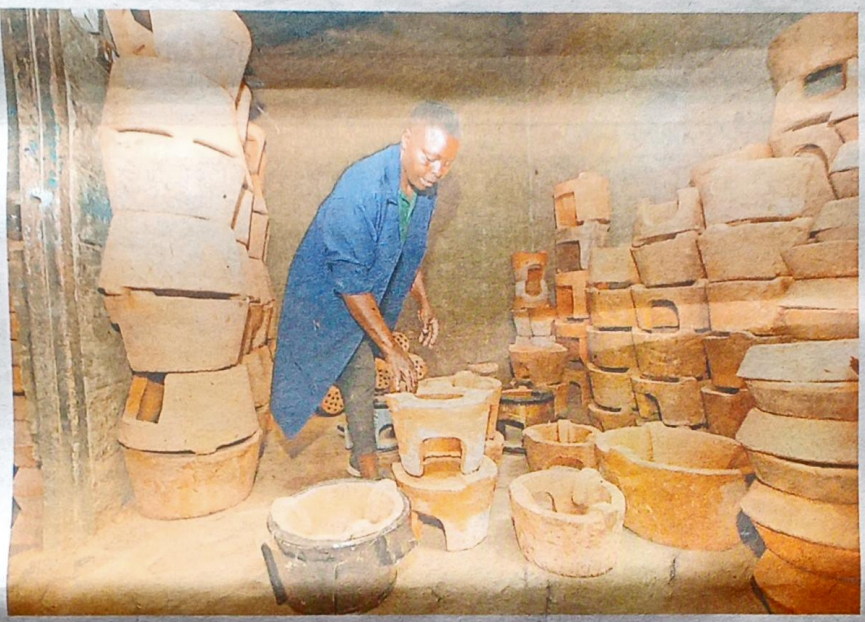
Josephine Abongo's shop in Nakuru's Burma market would not win any beauty contests. From afar, it resembles a forgotten shack.

But a close-up through the gaps in the wood planks lining the windows reveals a flicker of warmth- a bustling hive of progress, fuelled by the relentless energy of a woman who traded research reports for revolutionary cook stoves.

Josephine, once a research consultant with a nose for data, now has a nose for cleaner air, and the roar of her motorbike engine characterises her days as she delivers the future of healthy cooking, one less smoky kitchen at a time.

"Unlike the traditional Kenya Ceramic Jikos, these improved jikos consume less firewood and charcoal. Women also do not have to 'cry' as they cook because of too much smoke," Josephine said.

While Josephine might have traded graphs for grills and the hum of air conditioners for the satisfying sizzle of a well-lit fire, her efforts are heavily contributing to the conservation of trees and saving thousands of lives of Kenyans who die yearly as a result of indoor air pollution from cooking.



Josephine Abongo at her shop in Nakuru's Burma Market on May 16, 2024. She sells improved cooking stoves. Unlike traditional Kenya Ceramic Jikos, these improved stoves consume less firewood or charcoal, significantly contributing to tree conservation and saving thousands of Kenyan lives lost yearly due to indoor air pollution from cooking. [Kipsang Joseph, Standard]

Heart disease

The Ministry of Health estimates that 21,500 premature deaths occur yearly as a result of air pollution due to cooking. Health complications resulting from these deaths include pneumonia, ischemic heart disease (coronary artery disease), and lung cancer. Smoke from cooking also causes eye irritation and a runny nose.

It is estimated that the majority of the deaths as a result of air pollution from cooking are among women and girls.

And now, Improved Cook stove entrepreneurs like Josephine are part of the over 300 entrepreneurs in Nakuru, Nyandarua, Baringo and Kericho Counties who have been trained by Practical Action to produce, distribute and sell the cook stoves to boost their income while advancing clean cooking in the four counties.

Improved Cook stoves use significantly less charcoal, or firewood compared to traditional cook stoves. It is estimated that the improved cook stoves use up to 40 percent less charcoal or firewood to cook compared to traditional Kenya Ceramic Jikos and open fires. They also produce less pollution and save families money.

"These improved cook stoves are revolutionary. It is changing the narratives that you have to 'cry' for food to cook while using firewood or charcoal in rural areas. Women are no longer crying because of smoke," Josephine says.

The improved cook stove project is part of a larger initiative that seeks to promote climate-friendly cooking in Kenya and Senegal. It is supported by Energising Development and the Green Climate Fund.

Already, there is a rising demand of the improved cook stoves in the counties as users are finding it more economical on the consumption of charcoal and firewood. The cook stoves are designed in a way that one can use either charcoal or firewood.

"You can only use two pieces of firewood for cooking a meal at home and if one is using charcoal, they can use four times the same amount of charcoal that can only be used once in a traditional jiko," Lilian Adhiambo, an entrepreneur and a user says.

Kagoto Vocational Training College in Nakuru is one of the latest institutions who have adopted cleaner cooking technology. According to the institution's principal Malachi Manase, the institution's move to embrace the technology is as a result of cutting on the expenses of buying firewood.

"The institution decided to install the improved cook stove to cut on the expenditure and hassle of getting firewood. We have been using the traditional three stones but it consumes a lot of firewood and makes the kitchen untidy because of soot," Mr Manase said.

Besides transiting to innovations that saves on energy while also saving on health of people around, the institution has partnered with Practical Action to train its learners on making and installing the cook stoves.

"Students are now being trained on this as an added skill so that when they finish their studies, they can generate an income through it," Manase said.

Since 2021, the 303 entrepreneurs in the four counties have sold over 200,000 improved cook stoves, a number estimated to have served nearly 700,000 people.

Following the rising demand, entrepreneurs like Joseph Njenga's diary is always full. Mr Njenga installs the improved cook stoves for homes and institutions across the country. To him, the role he plays not only empowered him economically but also contributed to the global goal of promoting clean cooking.

"I have installed the cook stoves for several households not only within the four counties. Interestingly, the majority of those are members of parliament, a trend that is encouraging because they are leading the way in adapting to climate-friendly cooking," he says.

Jonathan Waita, the Programme manager at Practical Action says the Kenya Improved Cook Stove Last Mile project is trying to reduce indoor pollution while saving on forests.

"Women in hardship areas and those in rural areas are the hardest hit by indoor pollution. They also face insecurity while walking for distances to look for firewood. While these improved cookstoves will drastically reduce the amount of firewood or charcoal used, it will address several challenges that these women face," Waita says.

He says they are currently working with counties to come up with energy plans to help in championing for national clean cooking strategy.

"There is a need for counties to put energy needs in their budgets as part of the efforts to transition all families to using clean energy by 2028," Waita added.

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> Jonathan Waita, Programme manager at Practical Action

Joseph Njenga installing an improved cooking stove at Kagoto Vocational Training College in Nakuru on May 16, 2024. [Kipsang Joseph, Standard]

EFFICIENCY

- 40% — Improved cook stoves use up to 40 percent less charcoal or firewood to cook compared to traditional Kenya Ceramic Jikos and open fires. They also produce less pollution and save families money.
- 80% — Over 80 percent of Kenyans, especially in rural areas, still use charcoal or firewood to cook.
- An estimated 21,500 Kenyans die yearly, mostly women and girls, from air pollution from cooking.
- Inefficient cooking produces carbon emissions and contributes to climate change.
- The government aims to achieve 100 percent access to clean cooking by 2028. This includes facilitating the availability of various — 100%