The Weekly

Information Resource Bulletin

FOCUS

Charcoal Destroys Forests

Charcoal is one of Malawi's biggest industries – and as the country's population continues to grow rapidly – it likely will become even bigger.

According to the International Institute for Environment and Development, Charcoal provides jobs for over 45,000 people and supplies the energy needs to more than 85 percent of Malawian households. More than half of the charcoal comes from the country's forest reserves and its production is destroying these reserves.

Wood and charcoal are the preferred cooking and heating fuels in Malawi, particularly in the poorer parts of cities, and the demand is huge.

The World Bank estimated in 2001 that charcoal consumption alone was twice what the nation's woodlands could sustain without further deforestation.

According to a study of charcoal consumption by the International Institute for Environment and Development in 2007, the estimated consumption of charcoal in the four largest urban areas of Malawi is more than six million bags per year.

To produce this much charcoal requires more than a million cubic meters of wood. This means about 15,000 hectares of forestland is being cut each year.

Without alternative fuel sources, continued use of charcoal could wipe out Malawi's forests.

The goals of the Weekly Bulletin are:

- To give the participating journalists guidance and tips on their reporting on charcoal production and climate change issues
- To help journalists discuss with their listeners the effects of charcoal and firewood use on the environment
- To help journalists engage their communities in the search for alternatives to charcoal and firewood use
- To make journalists aware of the impact that rapid population growth can have on environmental resources.

The Problem: Charcoal Production

The use of charcoal and firewood for cooking and heating is having a big impact on Malawi's environment.

An International Institute for Environment and Development study reports that efforts to protect the forests are failing, as shown by continued charcoal production. In all areas where the researchers of this study visited, traditional leaders are aware of unlicensed charcoal production in their areas but either participate in or ignore what is happening.

Not only are the country's forests being destroyed, charcoal use is itself bad for our environment. Burning charcoal in cook stoves emits carbon monoxide, which can have significant health and environmental consequences.

Carbon monoxide is an odorless, poisonous gas. If burned indoors, the gas can make people very sick and even kill.

Carbon monoxide is also an air pollutant that can contribute to climate change.

For instance, this greenhouse gas plays a much bigger role in global warming than many scientists previously thought. According to studies, it is second only to carbon dioxide in the amount of heat it traps in the atmosphere.

This suggests that cutting carbon emissions could go a long way to slowing climate change.

Community members (including the traditional leaders) can do their part to cut carbon emissions.

There is need to think about how the use of firewood and charcoal is affecting the environment in Malawi – and what alternatives might be used to slow the cutting of trees and reduce the amount of carbon being released into the air.

Another point to keep in mind is that as the population continues to grow rapidly – Malawi will be forced to use more and more of its natural resources at a rate that is not sustainable.

Activities for Journalists

Use your community radio station to help listeners understand how charcoal and firewood is bad for their own health and the environment.

Also explain to them about what alternatives are available, such as the use of Chitetezo Mbaula, a portable clay-fired stove.

According to the MEAVE projects, improved stoves, such as the Chitetezo Mbaula, can improve the quality of life for the people who rely on firewood as their main source of fuel. These stoves are designed to to burn firewood efficiently. When used correctly, this reduces the amount of firewood that is needed and reduces the amount of harmful smoke in the kitchen.

As a result of its design, the stove keeps the fire contained within a fire-chamber – helping reduce the number of accidental burns and gaining a nickname – the protecting stove.

The Chitetezo Mbaula is a simple conical pottery structure that is locally produced using local clay.

The stove is designed to burn firewood, although it can also burn crop waste such as cobs and stalks from maize, pigeon peas, sorghum and other crops.

It is not designed to burn charcoal.

Have a Vox pop with people from your area. Let them talk about their experiences with using charcoal and firewood for cooking and heating.

Ask them if they are aware that these contribute to climate change.

Is anyone in your community using a fuel-efficient stove that causes less pollution? If so, interview them about it. Do they like the stove? Are they able to save money each week? How much are they able to save?

Are fuel-efficient stoves sold in your community?

You also have to ask them of any of alternatives to firewood or charcoal in your community.

YOU CAN ADD MORE QUESTIONS

Interview a local environmentalist on the effects that charcoal and firewood have on the environment. He or she should also offer alternatives to firewood or charcoal.

Have another interview with the producers of Chitetezo Mbaula. They should explain how this stove works in ensuring that it does not add damage to the environment.

Community Engagement

Urge listeners to send SMS, call or stop by the radio station to talk about alternatives to charcoal and firewood available in the community

Useful Contacts

- Mbumba Chigalu Marketing Manager; Maeve(Chitetezo Mbaula)-contacts (265) 888 846 262
- Welton Phalira- Lake Chilwa Basin Climate Change Adaptation Programme; Phone: +265(0)888 308074
- www.iied.org/justice-forests-malawi
- http://pubs.iied.org/pdfs/13544IIED.pdf