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When a group of 15 women in Embu county entured into making briquettes out of charcoal dust, they were trying to solve an immediate household problem of unaffordable fuel. Today, their briquette making enterprise is helping overcome one of Kenya?s persistent problems?poverty, unemployment, and poor waste management?and contributing to the country?s sustainable development aspirations, too.

Charcoal briquettes are made by mixing charcoal dust with water and a binding agent such as soil, paper, mollasses or starch. The resultant ?dough? is passed through a metal press which presses it into cylindrical shaped units. These are then air-dried before packing for the market.

Three months into the venture the Goodwill women group was making good headway. With a sack of charcoal dust and chaff costing KShs. 100, the group makes briquettes out of it and sell for KShs.700 with a Kilogram of the briquettes retailing at KShs. 40, says Domitilla Nyaga, the group?s chair lady.

Jane, a 48-year-old mother of three and a member of the self-help group, makes her living by selling charcoal briquettes made by her group to residents of Embu town and neighboring rural centers like Kivwe. ?Briquettes are increasingly becoming popular with rural populations. Instead of spending hours collecting firewood, the women in the villages buy my briquettes because it allows them to spend more time on other activities like women group. It also relieves them off the daily burden of carrying firewood loads on their backs? Jane further reports that the briquette customer base for the urban dwellers is on a steep rise. This she explains to be as a result of gradually increasing prices of charcoal and kerosene which are popular with low income earners in urban setting. Briquetting is therefore a cheap energy alternative for cooking and heating in poor households.

Converting charcoal dust into usable fuel contributes towards UTaNRMP?s objective of sustainable management of natural resource in many ways. Elizabeth Kariuki, a Kenya Forest Service Officer in Embu West sub-county says ?Briquette enterprises are saving trees that would otherwise be cut down for charcoal production by maximizing the utilization of wood products. It also cleans up the environment.? Elizabeth further explains that charcoal dust poses a major disposal challenge to traders, with most of them pushing it into open drainage resulting in clogging. This may not be apparent until when it rains and the blocked trenches push contaminated water and all manner of toxic waste into people?s residencies, putting their health at risk.

?With charcoal briquettes, it costs about 25 Kenya Shillings to cook a traditional meal of maize and beans for a standard household of 5 people. This is six times cheaper than cooking the same meal with charcoal (KSh 150) and 8 times cheaper than cooking with kerosene (KSh 200)? says Jane.

The clean burn of charcoal briquettes dramatically reduces indoor air pollution which is one of the leading cause of respiratory diseases. Clearly, as members of Goodwill Women group collect charcoal dust for briquette making, they are not only generating income but are also conserving and cleaning the environment. By extension, they are cushioning their communities from hazardous waste.

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