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ALTERNATIVE FUEL SAVES MONEY AND TREES IN WAR-TORN CONGO



Uvira, DRC: Banana peels, sugar cane and manioc are widely found in the trash piles that collect outside of homes in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo.

They're also the ingredients being used by environmental advocates to create a light, inexpensive cooking fuel that could ease deforestation in the region.

Clement Kitambala, a Congolese advocate (photo) and [Ned Meerdink](#), an Advocacy Project (AP) Peace Fellow, came upon an [idea online](#) to make briquettes out of organic waste material. Mr Kitambala, who also produces the environmental newsletter [Tunza Mazingira](#) ("Conserve the Environment" in Swahili), secured \$150 in funding from a United Nations fieldworker to construct a wood press for making the briquettes (shown below). He recently produced the first batch of about 500.

"The briquette project...is a prime example of the cleavage between social and environmental issues, given that the deforestation in eastern Congo has shown itself to be dangerous for both the environment and people's budgets," Mr Meerdink wrote in his [blog](#).

Environmental concerns often go ignored in eastern Congo because of the extreme violence and food insecurity. But human rights groups point out that environmental degradation has actually fueled the conflict, because armed groups vie for scarce resources and less usable land.

Mr Kitambala began exploring alternative fuels after realizing that "makala" - traditional charcoal made from eucalyptus trees - was putting pressure on the forests and the finances of local villagers. Makala is essential for daily cooking, but it involves cutting down eucalyptus trees, digging a series of large holes, and burning the eucalyptus with other branches and mud in

the holes for several days until the charcoal is created.

The constant cutting has created major problems for forests in eastern Congo, and this, in turn, has increased the price of makala, since people must travel to more and more remote areas to find eucalyptus. According to Mr Meerdink, in 2005, the price for 100 kilograms of makala (about a week's worth) was \$5. Now, it costs \$22. A modified bombula

Mr Kitambala's briquettes are easier to light, burn longer and at a higher temperature, cost less, and require only small amounts of wood. To make the briquettes, about 50 kilograms of organic waste is processed into a pulp and mixed with water to make a dough. The mixture is then put in the press and compacted into briquettes, which are left in the sun to dry for a day or two. A batch of about 500 briquettes produces cooking fuel for a family for about two weeks.

Families will need to modify their existing metal cookers, known as bombulas (shown at left), in order to use the briquettes. This costs about \$3, and Mr Kitambala is seeking a few hundred dollars to help families modify their bombulas. If the idea catches on, he feels, villagers could prepare their meals less expensively, while making a small contribution towards preserving trees.

Mr Kitambala would also like to secure funding for five more presses, which could be distributed to five different areas of Uvira. He has identified groups of demobilized female militia soldiers in each area who could, he hopes, work on the project and earn a badly-needed income.

This summer, AP is sending two more Peace Fellows to join Mr Meerdink in eastern Congo. [Walter James](#) will be volunteering with [Arche d'Alliance](#), a conflict survivors' group in Uvira, and Elisa Garcia-Mingo will be volunteering with [Bureau pour le Volontariat au service de l'Enfance et de la Sante \(BVES\)](#), a child welfare organization in Bukavu.

- Check out [Tunza Mazingira](#)
- Read the [blog](#) of Peace Fellow Ned Meerdink
- Learn more about the [briquette-making process](#)