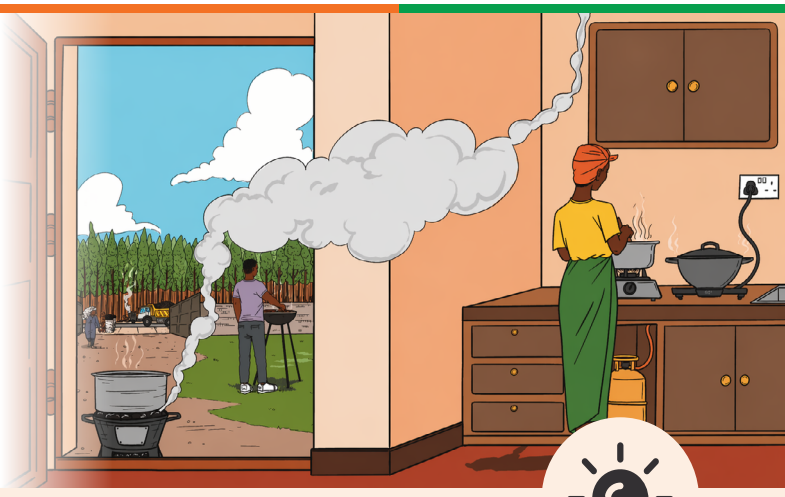
Communiqué

Sustainable Charcoal Transitions workshop

February 2026 | Limuru, Kenya



This communiqué summarises key messages emerging from a high-level workshop convened by the International Renewable Energy Agency, Nuvoni Centre for Innovation Research and University College London with support from the Climate Compatible Growth programme and the British Academy **on 17-18 February 2026 in Limuru, Kenya**. The workshop brought together representatives from six African governments responsible for clean cooking policy, i.e. **Kenya, Malawi, Uganda, Rwanda, Zambia and Ethiopia, along with international organisations, private sector organisations, nongovernmental organisations, researchers and community-based organisations**, to revisit the role of charcoal within clean cooking and the broader energy transitions in Africa.

It's time to revisit the role of charcoal

Today, an estimated 195 million people in Africa rely on charcoal as their primary fuel, with 200 million more using it as a secondary fuel[1]. While fuelwood use is projected to gradually decline, the population using charcoal as a primary fuel is projected to double before 2050, despite significant investment and donor emphasis on alternatives like liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) and electricity[2]. It is therefore time to revisit the role of charcoal in energy transitions.

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Why this conversation matters now

- **Clean cooking** transitions are receiving unprecedented global attention and investment.
- African countries are increasingly **prioritising energy resource sovereignty, resilience** and **diversified locally available solutions**.
- **Urbanisation**, **income volatility, increasing scarcity of firewood** in rural areas and **climate shocks** are reshaping cooking energy demand.

Ignoring charcoal in national energy planning risks undermining livelihoods and may result in policies that do not account for local realities. Therefore, the use of charcoal for cooking must be addressed strategically.

1. Rose, J., Bensch, G., Munyehirwe, A., & Peters, J. (2022). The forgotten coal: Charcoal demand in sub-Saharan Africa. *World Development Perspectives, 25*, 100401.
2. Stoner, O., Lewis, J., Martínez, I.L. et al (2021). Household cooking fuel estimates at global and country level for 1990 to 2030. *Nat Commun* 12, 5793.

Key messages emerging from the workshop

Charcoal as part of the cooking energy stack

Charcoal is, and will remain in the next couple of decades, a significant component of the household cooking energy stack in many African countries. Policies should therefore be realistic about continued charcoal demand and formally recognise charcoal as part of the cooking fuel mix within broader transition strategies. Charcoal already complements electricity and other cooking fuels in many households, helping to meet people's cooking and heating energy needs and build affordability, reliability and resilience during income, supply and climate shocks. Ignoring charcoal in policy debates does not make it disappear; rather, it risks pushing the sector further towards informality, creating unintended consequences for livelihoods and forests. Integrating charcoal into the clean cooking conversation is not about endorsing unsustainable or illegal practices, but rather taking a pragmatic step towards modernising, regulating and improving sustainability of charcoal within the clean cooking transition.

Charcoal has diverse benefits for different communities

Charcoal is supported by extensive formal and/or informal market infrastructure and has diverse benefits for different communities on both the demand and supply sides. For consumers, it is energy-dense, reliably available in flexible quantities, relatively affordable and a culturally preferred fuel choice for cooking and heating. On the supply-side, economic benefits are linked to an estimated 12 million people projected to work across the value chain by 2030[3,4]—ranging from foresters, loggers and charcoal producers, to transporters, wholesalers and retailers. Charcoal value chains sustain livelihoods and provide particularly important income-generation opportunities during periods of income volatility and climate-related shocks, thereby supporting both rural and urban resilience. The majority of wood used in charcoal production is produced from private and communal land, as opposed to the popular misconception that it is from protected forests. Any proposed transition pathway must therefore account for these dimensions.

Rethink how charcoal is categorised alongside other biomass fuels in policy and research

While legitimate concerns exist regarding health, climate and environmental impacts of charcoal, the evidence base remains mixed and highly context-specific. When discussing health impacts, charcoal is typically lumped together with other biomass fuels (e.g. firewood, dung and agricultural residues), despite its vastly different emissions profile. Evidence suggests that air pollution generated from cooking with charcoal is lower than other woodfuels. There is a need for more robust research that disaggregates biomass into specific fuel types to more accurately assess the environmental and climate effects of charcoal and real-world health implications. Policy narratives and planning frameworks should reflect this greater level of nuance.

Innovation exists for sustainable charcoal

Emerging advances include more sustainable production methods, improved kilns and carbonisation technologies, certification and traceability systems, cleaner combustion technologies, and circular bio-waste charcoal products. A theory of change for Africa describes how to address inefficiencies at every stage of charcoal's supply and use chain[5]. These innovations have the potential to accelerate the transformation within the charcoal system making it clean(er) as part of the energy mix, while maximising the use of local resources, and delivering economic, climate and environmental resilience.

The case for defining and supporting a "modern and sustainable charcoal" agenda

There is a need to clearly differentiate between unsustainable and sustainable charcoal. While definitions require further discussion and evidence, these distinctions must be more clearly articulated and reflected in future research, policy design and implementation. It is likely that cooking with modern charcoal can lead to a reduced environmental footprint, health benefits and positive economic impacts relative to the use of traditional charcoal.

Charcoal remains deeply embedded in African energy systems. It is time to define and support a modern, sustainable charcoal agenda for Africa.

3. Mwampamba, T. H., Ghilardi, A., Sander, K., & Chaix, K. J. (2013). Dispelling common misconceptions to improve attitudes and policy outlook on charcoal in developing countries. *Energy for sustainable development, 17*(2), 75-85.
4. Statistic extrapolated from "IEA. World energy outlook 2009. Paris Cedex, France: International Energy Agency (IEA); 2009" based on its projections of traditional use of biomass by 2030
5. Njenga M, Sears R R and Mendum R. 2023 Sustainable woodfuel systems: A theory of change for sub-Saharan Africa. Environ. Res. Commun 5 (5) 051003