

Maputo's residents can now use gas, but dropping charcoal proves hard

By [Vanessa Castán Broto](#)

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Like many other men and women in Mozambique's capital, Maputo, Agostinho feels optimistic about the future. After years of living in extreme poverty, he now has his own business and lives with his family in Zimpeto, a growing neighbourhood in the northern outer end of Maputo.



The benefits of gas improved in Mozambique in June this year when the price halved. Shutterstock

One of the things that has made the biggest difference to him and his family's life has been improvements in the energy system. In Zimpeto his household is linked to the electricity grid. Agostinho buys electricity through a prepaid system called [Credelec](#). Thanks to Credelec Agostinho has [greater control](#) over his electricity spending but prices have gone up and he's now paying more. Using electricity for cooking is too expensive.

Thus, the game changer in Agostinho's life has been the arrival of gas. Until last year, the family relied entirely on charcoal for all their cooking needs, a [common occurrence](#) in Maputo's low-income neighbourhoods. Last year he invested in a new gas cook stove and a gas cylinder. The convenience soon became apparent. The gas stove cooks faster, is cleaner and can be used inside the house. While the cook stove and gas cylinder cost a fair amount, this represents a significant advancement.

Benefits of gas

The benefits of gas improved further when in June this year [the price halved](#). An 11kg bottle that used to cost \$13 (773 MZN) now costs \$7 (446 MZN), making it cheaper than charcoal. In a country where firewood and charcoal account for [77%](#) of the total energy balance, the transition to gas can make an enormous difference to the lives of the poorest people.

The drop in prices came just after Mozambique's Minister of Mineral Resources and Energy, Leticia Klemens, and the

Vice-President of Shell, Clare Harris, signed a [memorandum of understanding](#) for the domestic exploitation of Mozambique's gas reserves in the Rovuma Basin. This is one of the [largest](#) reserves of natural gas in southern Africa. The announcement of the agreement alone has been sufficient for the government to drop consumer prices.

The agreement follows a public tender to exploit gas reserves for domestic purposes. The government also awarded [two other projects](#). In the past, Mozambique's energy policy focused on generating revenue [through](#) exporting natural resources, such as hydropower and coal, at the expense of developing internal markets. If maintained, these projects will mark a significant departure from previous energy policies.

The one dark cloud hanging over this development is the [country's debt crisis](#). Many expect that gas revenues will help palliate the consequences of this odious debt, but gas is still [not flowing](#). After last year's scandal, the government is anxious to show that it's able to mobilise the country's natural gas reserves to benefit ordinary Mozambicans.

Difficult transition

The drop in gas prices was a key theme at a [workshop](#) with local leaders of some of the poorest neighbourhoods in Maputo.

"People are transitioning to gas", explained one participant. This transition is clearly visible in Maputo. The charcoal-based urban landscape is disappearing. Gone are the days when there was a charcoal-selling point in every corner, although the charcoal depots remain strong in large markets. As deforestation advances, charcoal is produced farther and farther away, with most coming from the relatively unstable province of Gaza. Charcoal is now so expensive that gas has become a more affordable option for many people.

Yet, for now, charcoal continues to be the [fuel of choice](#) for most households in Maputo. The transition to gas is, as yet, incomplete.

In their discussions, local leaders explained that gas is the new norm in cooking practices but most households have not yet adopted it. A heated discussion emerged about why people continue to use charcoal. Is it because gas cook stoves are too expensive? Is it because people prefer to cook with charcoal through habit? Or are they used to the taste of the meat cooked with charcoal? Perhaps people are unaware of the possibilities of gas and how to use it? Or maybe many families perceive gas to be unsafe?

One neighbourhood leader said:

“ We are just like this, it is difficult to change us! ”

He said this to justify the need for civic education. Yet, it's not people who have to change. Rather, a range of institutional, infrastructural and socio-economic factors determine the possibilities for sustainable transitions to universal energy access. For example, in some neighbourhoods, accessing gas supplies is difficult whereas charcoal sellers will

bring charcoal right to the door of households in portions small enough to be affordable on a day-to-day basis. Moreover, households may not provide a safe setting to install a gas cook stove, even when the family can afford it.

The transition to gas is not inevitable. As one of the community leaders in the workshop stated, “accessing energy is a process”. Gas may contribute to improving the lives of Maputo’s inhabitants. However, this depends on a gradual process of adjustment of local practices of energy use, changes in the built environment to fit gas technologies and the development of local energy markets to facilitate access to gas supplies.

*Names are pseudonyms

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