

## GUNTINGAN BERITA

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# Solar cookers can help fight deforestation

**L**eaning over for a closer look, Lucas Nsukazi frowned at a black pot in a plastic bag sitting in a reflector made of cardboard and aluminum foil. "Does it really work?" he asked.

But when he was served a bowl of steaming rice, he broke into a smile. "For the first time I am eating and enjoying rice that is cooked directly by the sun's rays, which to me is unbelievable," the South African rural education activist said.

Solar cookers, which come in a variety of designs, have been causing a stir at the World Summit for Sustainable Development.

Among the aims of the con-

ference, which began Monday, are to extend modern energy sources to the world's poor, while increasing the share of renewable sources in energy production and consumption. Solar cooking can

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help meet both those goals, advocates say.

At its most basic, solar cooking requires a dark pot to absorb the sun's rays and convert them into heat energy, and a plastic bag sealed with a rubber band to trap

the heat inside. A reflector speeds up the process by concentrating more light onto the pot.

This model - which costs just US\$2 to make - produces temperatures of up to 135 degrees Celsius (275 degrees Fahrenheit), according to Sacramento-based Solar Cooking International, a non-profit group which is displaying the cooker at the summit and a parallel gathering of activist groups. It cooks a chicken stew in a few hours and can be left unattended.

Across Johannesburg at the Ubuntu, or Unity, Village, visitors can eat an entire meal prepared with solar energy at the Unplugged

Kitchen. The village features cultural performances, crafts markets and international exhibitions.

On the menu are solar-cooked stews, beans, mashed potatoes, sausages, bread and cake. Solar panels illuminate the restaurant, where the walls, tables and chairs are made of recycled tin cans.

"The bread's really good," said Laurie Duker, a lake conservation activist from Silver Spring, Maryland, who stopped by for dinner. "It's nice to do something sustainably, especially as an American."

Mmathabo Mrubata, who works in the kitchen, uses more elaborate solar cookers

to produce her more ambitious menu.

They include an insulated box with a glass or plastic top, which operates like a greenhouse, and a version that uses a shiny parabolic disk to reflect the sun onto a pot. These models cost between US\$16 and \$150 to make and

produce temperatures of up to 200 degrees Celsius (392 degrees Fahrenheit).

"I cook, bake, everything in these things... and the food is delicious," said Mrubata, a mother of two from South Africa's rural Northern Cape region. "This is so good because women in rural areas walk up to four hours to get wood, and they do it four

times a week."

About 2 billion people living in developing countries still rely on wood, charcoal and dung for cooking, heat and light, according to UN figures. This puts enormous pressure on the environment, contributing to deforestation in these countries.

Used regularly, a single solar cooker can save a ton of firewood per year, according to SCI. It also reduces carbon dioxide emissions associated with the use of other heat sources.

Working with the UN refugee agency, SCI has taught 21,000 refugee families in Kenya and Ethiopia to use the cookers. The group

also has programs in dozens of other countries around the world.

A separate project sponsored by the German Agency for Technical Cooperation, or GTZ, tested a number of solar cooker models in the Northern Cape. The 66 families and 14 institutions that tried out different models over a year were almost all happy with the results, and carbon dioxide emissions were reduced by about one ton per household per year, GTZ said.

The organization, which is behind the Unplugged Kitchen, is now developing ways to market and finance the cookers in South Africa and around the world.