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Africa: To LED, or not to LED?

September 28th, 2009 | Posted in [Clean and Green](#), [Headlines](#), [Music Action](#), [Unlock Africa](#)



Affordable LED lights are coming to Africa - in droves. This could be great news for the millions of Africans living without reliable electricity, except the lights are being brought in *quantity* more than *quality*, and are largely unreliable. In fact, first-time LED buyers in Africa are so disappointed, according to a team of researchers from Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, Humboldt State University, and Kenya, that the technology's chances of market survival there are in jeopardy.

A [survey conducted](#) in Kenya by the [Lumina Project](#) found that 87 percent of LED users had trouble with their new flashlights. The most common complaint was LED "failure," the specific causes of which varied between users but the result was the same: a nonfunctional light source. While this might not sound like a crisis to many of us, if you'd spent a week's wages on an LED torch that doesn't work, you'd be upset.

The potential market for LED lights in the developing world is not small: the poorest sector of the world's population, according to Lumina research, spends about \$40 billion annually on kerosene and other fuels for inefficient, dangerous, and poor-quality light. Efficient LED lamps and flashlights hold the promise of affordable, clean, and long-lasting light for millions. Many vendors, however, are offering cheap LED lamps and torches, primarily imported from China, that last a fraction as long as promised and risk turning LED' into a bad word. In a market where even tiny purchases can put individuals at risk, chances are slim that people will come back and give LEDs a second try.

Right Opportunity

The widespread use of LEDs has the ability not only to improve the quality of many lives in Africa, but also to reduce harmful emissions from kerosene, a huge public health threat which also contributes to global warming. According to Lumina Project [research](#), emissions from kerosene lamps produce concentrations of particulate matter far in excess of levels permitted by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Specifically, during an average night market in Kenya, concentrations of 10-micron particulate matter measured up to five times what the EPA allows.

The chance to expand the use of LEDs in Africa is not lost yet: improvements are being made, now that standards of quality established by the Lumina project for LED lights are motivating manufacturers to correct some of the problems, and the World Bank has even run a workshop on the issue.

Among the features that users in Kenya explicitly said they would like to see: more durable casing for the light, a more durable on-off switch, a brighter light, and most importantly, larger batteries and longer battery life. Few electronics users wouldn't ask for longer battery life, but in areas where battery charging stations can be few and far between, and where the cost to recharge is not proportionate to the size of the battery, it is a crucial, make-or-break point.

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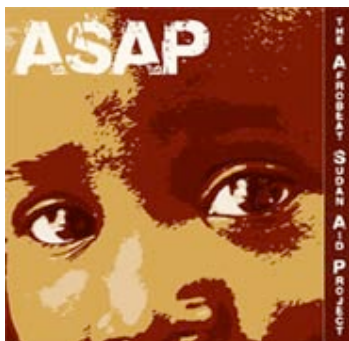
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