

# The socio-ecological effects of LPG price hikes

What are the schemes launched by the Government of India to increase the uptake of LPG connections?

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A worker unloads LPG cylinders from a truck. | Photo Credit: PTI

**The story so far:** Data from the 2014-2015 ACCESS survey, conducted by the Council on Energy, Environment and Water, found LPG's cost to be the foremost barrier to its adoption and continued use in rural poor households. Thus, 750 million Indians primarily use solid cooking fuels — wood, dung, agricultural residues, coal, and charcoal — every day. Solid cooking fuels are associated with innumerable health hazards and socio-economic and environmental impacts.

## Has the govt. pushed LPG use?

The Indian government has often placed a premium on the cooking fuels in rural households transitioning to LPG. The Rajiv Gandhi Gramin LPG Vitruk scheme was launched in 2009 to increase LPG distribution in remote areas; nearly 45 million new LPG connections were thus established between 2010 and 2013. Direct benefit transfers for LPG under the 'PAHAL' scheme were initiated in 2015. In 2016, direct home-refill deliveries were implemented and the 'Give it Up' program enrolled around 10 million LPG consumers to voluntarily discontinue subsidies and transfer their accounts to below-poverty-line households. The Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY) followed, to install LPG connections in 80 million below-poverty-line households by 2020. The scheme also provides a subsidy of ₹200 for every 14.2-kg cylinder, which increased to ₹300 in October 2023.

Fast forward to 2022: of the 54 countries whose LPG prices were available, those in India were reportedly the highest, around ₹300/litre.

In 2023, a study done by the author and Amir Kumar Chhetri showed how local communities of the Jalpaiguri district in West Bengal depend on the forests for fuelwood. The landscape has highly degraded forest remnants in a mosaic of tea estates, human settlements, and agricultural land, thanks to a history of forest conversion and fragmentation. Based on 40 focal group discussions in tea-estate labour colonies and in forest and revenue villages, the study found that residents in the area depend mainly on forests for fuelwood, for both household consumption and to sell. Roughly half of the 214 local shops in 10 markets used fuelwood; the shop-workers reported the cost of a commercial cylinder, ₹1,900, to be exorbitant. Around 38.5% of Jalpaiguri's population is below the poverty line and most of them work in tea estates with a daily wage of ₹250. Against this backdrop, the persistent use of fuelwood as cooking fuel is unsurprising.

## What are suitable alternatives?

While the act of collecting fuelwood gives the people cooking fuel, it also degrades the forest and forces people to risk adverse encounters with wild animals. Due to various government schemes, most households in Jalpaiguri have LPG connections but few refill the cylinder even twice a year. On introduction of the PMUY scheme, many households quickly switched to LPG from fuelwood, and reported that their cooking activities became fast and smokeless, they could forgo the need to rise early and the time and effort spent in collecting fuelwood. But the hike in the price of LPG rendered these advantages short-lived.

Devising locally acceptable, suitable, and sustainable alternatives to fuelwood is important to secure the forests, wildlife and locals' livelihoods. Work is ongoing with the West Bengal Forest Department and Joint Forest Management Committees to help four villages acquire saplings of high fuelwood value on the conditions that they will be native species, prohibited from logging, unpalatable to elephants and will be maintained by locals. Alternatives like efficient cooking stoves, optimised shade tree density in tea plantations, and multi-stakeholder meetings for resource governance are also in the works.

## What next?

Our findings suggest that the LPG price rise, especially over the last decade, could cause socio-ecological crises in places where there are no viable alternatives to fuelwood and socio-economic deprivation is common. Future governments must focus on making, and keeping, LPG affordable. At the same time, they also need to endeavour to free solid cooking fuels from socio-ecological endangerment, like, say, with a national policy on introducing smokeless cooking stoves that consume less fuelwood.

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