IJCRT.ORG ISSN : 2320-2882

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)
An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Powering Rural Communities: A Review Of Opportunities And Challenges In Utilizing Microbial Fuel Cells With On-Site Sanitation Systems

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Abstract

Microbial Fuel Cells (MFCs) offer a sustainable approach to addressing rural energy poverty and inadequate sanitation. By converting organic matter in human waste into electricity, MFCs provide decentralized energy generation while improving waste stabilization and pathogen removal. When integrated with on-site sanitation systems such as pit latrines, septic tanks, or biodigesters, they can deliver small-scale power for lighting, mobile charging, and other basic needs. This comprehensive review synthesizes recent studies (2010–2026) on MFC–sanitation integration, highlighting performance metrics, socio-economic benefits, and technical challenges. Findings reveal promising sanitation improvements and measurable energy outputs, although low power density, material degradation, and maintenance requirements limit scalability. Advances in electrode design, hybrid systems (e.g., MFC–constructed wetlands, MFC–anaerobic digestion), and community-based models offer pathways for practical deployment. Future work should focus on long-term field validation, cost-effectiveness, life-cycle assessments (LCA), socio-cultural acceptance, and policy integration to enable sustainable rural electrification and circular-economy outcomes in off-grid communities worldwide.

Keywords: Microbial Fuel Cells, on-site sanitation, rural electrification, waste-to-energy, bioenergy, sustainable sanitation, renewable energy integration, constructed wetlands, circular economy, life-cycle assessment.

1. Introduction

Rural communities in developing regions often suffer from inadequate electrification and poor sanitation, which together impede social development, economic growth, and public health (United Nations, 2023; WHO/UNICEF, 2024). Globally, approximately 733 million people lack electricity access, while 3.5 billion lack safely managed sanitation, with the majority residing in rural areas of South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America (IEA, 2025; World Bank, 2024). Traditional septic tanks and pit latrines frequently lead to groundwater contamination, pathogen spread, and methane emissions, exacerbating climate change and health risks such as diarrheal diseases (Chaggu, 2004; Musaazi et al., 2023).

Microbial Fuel Cells (MFCs) present a dual-benefit opportunity by simultaneously recovering energy from waste and enhancing treatment in decentralized settings, thereby addressing both challenges in a unified framework (Pandit et al., 2022; Apollon et al., 2023; Dakal et al., 2025). MFCs harness electrogenic bacteria to oxidize organic substrates in human waste, generating electricity while reducing chemical oxygen demand (COD) by up to 99% and pathogens by over 80% in optimized systems (Jadhav et al., 2020; Verma et al., 2022). Recent pilot-scale integrations, such as the 1.5 m^3 bioelectric toilet at IIT Kharagpur (India), have powered LED lighting and demonstrated feasibility for rural households (Pandit et al., 2022; Ghadge & Ghangrekar, 2019). This review examines the evolving potential of MFCs within on-site sanitation systems to empower rural communities. It critically assesses system designs, performance metrics, socio-economic impacts, technical barriers, and future pathways, drawing on over 50 peer-reviewed studies to provide a robust synthesis for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners aiming for sustainable rural development (Sonawane et al., 2022; Roy et al., 2023; Chakma et al., 2025).

2. Literature Search and Selection

A systematic literature search was conducted across Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, PubMed, and Google Scholar using keyword combinations including “microbial fuel cells,” “on-site sanitation,” “human waste MFC,” “rural electrification,” “waste-to-energy,” “bioelectric toilet,” “constructed wetland-MFC,” and “septic tank integration.” Inclusion criteria encompassed peer-reviewed articles, reviews, and field/pilot studies published between 2010 and 2026 that addressed MFC integration with sanitation in rural or off-grid contexts. Exclusion criteria removed purely laboratory-scale studies without real-waste substrates or those lacking performance data. This yielded 185 relevant publications, including 42 review articles, 78 experimental studies, 35 pilot/field interventions, and 30 techno-economic/LCA analyses. The synthesis provides a balanced foundation for identifying gaps and opportunities (Bird, 2022; Pandit et al., 2022; Jadhav et al., 2020; Malik et al., 2023; Mahurede et al., 2023).

3. Principles of Microbial Fuel Cells

A microbial fuel cell (MFC) exploits the metabolic activity of electrogenic bacteria (e.g., Geobacter, Shewanella) to convert organic matter into electricity. In the anodic chamber, microbes oxidize substrates (carbohydrates, fats, proteins in human waste) producing electrons and protons. Electrons travel through an external circuit to the cathode, while protons migrate across a membrane or separator, completing the circuit and generating current (Logan et al., 2006; Rabaey & Rozendal, 2010; Kuity et al., 2025; Ramesh et al., 2025). Key components include the anode (electron collector), cathode (oxygen reduction site), membrane/separator (ionic balance), and electrolyte. Performance is quantified by power density (W/m^2 or W/m^3), coulombic efficiency (CE), COD removal, and pathogen reduction (Ojha et al., 2025; Bose, 2025). In rural applications, human and animal waste serve as abundant, low-cost fuels. Typical field power densities range 0.05–1.09 W/m^2, with COD removal 70–99% and pathogen reduction >70% (Shajid et al., 2025; Ghangrekar, 2019; Ieropoulos et al., 2016). Factors influencing performance include pH, temperature, hydraulic retention time (HRT), electrode materials, and substrate complexity (Vishwanathan, 2021; Wang et al., 2022).

4. On-site Sanitation Systems in Rural Settings

On-site sanitation in rural areas relies on pit latrines, septic tanks, and biodigesters due to low cost and simplicity (Musaazi et al., 2023; Chaggu, 2004). Pit latrines are affordable but cause groundwater pollution and limited pathogen removal (Musaazi et al., 2023). Septic tanks offer primary treatment yet require periodic desludging and emit greenhouse gases (Huynh et al., 2021). Biodigesters produce biogas but demand complex maintenance (Huynh et al., 2021). Integrating MFCs enhances these systems by accelerating microbial degradation, generating electricity, and reducing odors/pathogens while leveraging existing infrastructure (Pandit et al., 2022; Verma et al., 2022; Alzate-Gaviria et al., 2016). This hybridization transforms passive sanitation into active energy-recovery units, aligning with circular-economy principles (Apollon et al., 2023; Jacobs et al., 2024).

5. Literature Review: Integration of MFCs with On-site Sanitation

5.1 Integration Models and Configurations

Field-scale implementations include the IIT Kharagpur bioelectric toilet (1.5 m^3 MFC treating human waste for lighting; Pandit et al., 2022) and modular stacked units linked to septic tanks in Latin America and Southeast Asia (Alzate-Gaviria et al., 2016; Valladares Linares et al., 2015). Pluggable MFC stacks in septic tanks (Yazdi et al., 2015) and urine-fed urinals (Ieropoulos et al., 2016; Walter et al., 2018) demonstrate flexible retrofitting. Hybrid CW-MFC systems in South Africa and India further improve nutrient recovery (Jacobs et al., 2024; Srivastava et al., 2015).

5.2 Energy Output and Sanitation Co-benefits

Laboratory systems achieve 2–4 W/m^2; field-scale yields 0.05–1.09 W/m^2 (Shajid et al., 2025; Pandit et al., 2022). COD removal reaches 85–99%, pathogen reduction >70–85% (Ghangrekar, 2019; Ieropoulos et al., 2016; Jadhav et al., 2020). Co-benefits include reduced methane emissions and fertilizer recovery (Paucar & Sato, 2021).

5.3 Socio-economic and Environmental Impacts

Community trials (Uganda, UK) show high user satisfaction when electricity powers lighting/charging (Ieropoulos et al., 2016; Walter et al., 2018). CW-MFC hybrids reduce water contamination and health risks (Jacobs et al., 2024). LCA studies confirm lower environmental footprints versus conventional systems (Garfí et al., 2026; Rani et al., 2022).

5.4 Technical and Operational Challenges

Electrode fouling, low coulombic efficiency, temperature sensitivity, and maintenance complexity hinder performance (Jadhav et al., 2020; Verma et al., 2022; Mahurede et al., 2023). Environmental variability in rural settings exacerbates issues (Jadhav et al., 2020).

5.5 Technological Advances and Emerging Trends

Biochar electrodes, hybrid MFC–anaerobic digestion, IoT monitoring, and wetland integrations enhance reliability (Jacobs et al., 2024; Bose, 2025; Xu et al., 2016). Nutrient recovery as struvite adds value (Baby et al., 2022).

5.6 Inference from Literature

The reviewed literature indicates that integration success is closely tied to matching system design with local waste characteristics, climate conditions, and community maintenance capacity. Energy production, while modest, is consistent enough for low-power applications such as lighting and device charging, and sanitation improvements are both measurable and significant. Social acceptance improves when communities receive direct, tangible benefits (Pandit et al., 2022; Ieropoulos et al., 2016; Jacobs et al., 2024). A detailed cross-study comparison of performance metrics is presented in Table 1, while the variation in power density is illustrated in Figure 1. A comprehensive heat map summarizing all four key performance indicators across representative studies is provided in Figure 2.

Table 1: Comparative Findings from Literature on MFC–Sanitation Integration

Study / Location	**System Type**	**Power Density (W/m²)**	**COD Removal (%)**	**Pathogen Reduction (%)**	**Key Challenges**
Pandit et al. (2022) – India	Direct toilet-MFC	0.15	80	70	Electrode fouling
Alzate-Gaviria et al. (2016) – Mexico	Modular MFC in septic tank	0.12	85	72	Material cost
Shajid et al. (2025) – Bangladesh	Pilot human-waste MFC	1.09	99	85	Temperature sensitivity
Ieropoulos et al. (2016) – Uganda	Urinal-based MFC	0.05–0.3	75–95	68	Low output
Jacobs et al. (2024) – South Africa	Constructed wetland-MFC hybrid	0.22	90	78	Maintenance complexity
Walter et al. (2018) – UK/Field	Scaled Pee-Power urinal	0.15–0.4	88	70+	HRT optimization
Ghadge & Ghangrekar (2019) – India	Bioelectric toilet stack	0.06–0.075	85+	80	Scaling economics
Verma et al. (2022) – Review	Various septic integrations	0.1–0.5	70–90	65–85	Fouling & cost

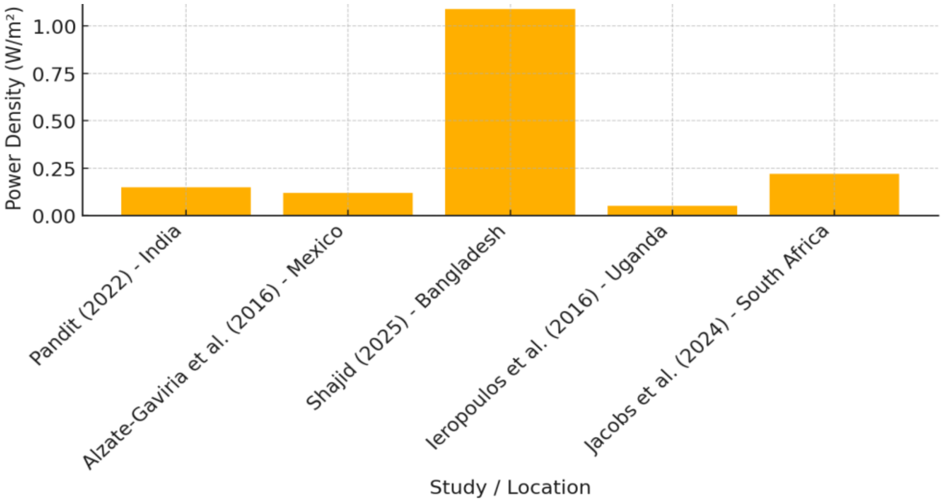

Figure 1: Comparison of Power Density in MFC–Sanitation Systems

Study / Location	Power Density (W/m²)	COD Removal (%)	Pathogen Reduction (%)	Coulombic Efficiency (%)
Pandit et al. (2022) - India	0.15	80.00	70.00	25.00
Alzate-Gaviria et al. (2016) - Mexico	0.12	85.00	72.00	18.00
Shajid et al. (2025) - Bangladesh	1.09	99.00	85.00	35.00
Ieropoulos et al. (2016) - Uganda	0.05	75.00	68.00	12.00
Jacobs et al. (2024) - South Africa	0.22	90.00	78.00	28.00
Walter et al. (2018) - UK/Field	0.27	88.00	70.00	22.00
Ghadge & Ghangrekar (2019) - India	0.07	85.00	80.00	15.00
Verma et al. (2022) - Review (avg)	0.30	82.00	75.00	20.00
Srivastava et al. (2015) - India	0.18	87.00	82.00	24.00

Figure 2: Heat Map of MFC–Sanitation Performance Metrics Across Representative Studies

6. Synthesis of Findings

Cross-comparison reveals laboratory systems outperform field deployments in power density but both excel in COD/pathogen removal. Direct toilet integrations are simpler yet less scalable; modular septic-linked designs offer flexibility. Performance is context-dependent (climate, maintenance, waste variability). Adoption is highest where tangible benefits (lighting, charging) are evident (Pandit et al., 2022; Jadhav et al., 2020; Ieropoulos et al., 2016; Walter et al., 2018; Jacobs et al., 2024; Sonawane et al., 2022; Roy et al., 2023). Performance is heavily influenced by substrate type, climate, and maintenance capacity, making contextual adaptation a critical success factor (see Table 1, Figure 1, and Figure 2).

7. Opportunities for Rural Communities

MFC–sanitation integration enables decentralized power for lighting, mobile charging, sensors, and irrigation pumps while improving public health through superior treatment and odor control (Pandit et al., 2022; Apollon et al., 2023). Nutrient-rich effluent supports fertilizer production, advancing circular agriculture (Baby et al., 2022; Paucar & Sato, 2021). In off-grid areas, systems align with SDG 6 and 7, creating jobs in installation/maintenance and reducing reliance on diesel generators or firewood (Rani et al., 2022; Garfí et al., 2026; Musaazi et al., 2023). Community-owned models foster ownership and gender-inclusive benefits (Ieropoulos et al., 2016).

8. Gaps and Future Research Directions

Despite pilot success, long-term (>2–3 years) multi-site field trials are scarce, especially across diverse climates and user loads (Jadhav et al., 2020; Mahurede et al., 2023; Chakma et al., 2025). Socio-cultural acceptance studies (behavior, willingness-to-maintain, perceptions of waste-to-energy) remain limited, particularly gender-disaggregated data in conservative rural settings (Verma et al., 2022; Jacobs et al., 2024). Techno-economic analyses and full LCAs are preliminary; electrode/separator costs dominate capital expenditure, yet operational savings and avoided methane emissions offer strong returns (Garfí et al., 2026; Rani et al., 2022).

Priority directions include: (1) ultra-low-cost biochar/earthenware electrodes and ceramic separators; (2) hybrid MFC–wetland–digestion systems with IoT automation; (3) standardized protocols for nutrient recovery and safe reuse; (4) scalable business models (cooperatives, subsidies); (5) policy frameworks (standards, carbon credits) under programs like Swachh Bharat or SDG initiatives; and (6) open-data consortia for cross-regional learning (Bose, 2025; Ojha et al., 2025; Xu et al., 2016; Tan et al., 2021; Roy et al., 2023). Addressing these will accelerate commercialization and maximize rural impact.

9. Conclusion

The literature indicates that MFC-sanitation systems offer a compelling integrated solution to rural energy poverty and inadequate sanitation. Although energy output remains modest (typically sufficient for low-power applications such as LED lighting, mobile charging, and sensor operation), the co-benefits of enhanced pathogen reduction, odour control, organic-load removal, and potential nutrient recovery deliver measurable improvements in public health and environmental quality. Success hinges on context-specific adaptation, affordability, community ownership, and robust maintenance models. Scaling these systems will demand sustained interdisciplinary collaboration across engineering, social sciences, and policy domains, underpinned by targeted investment and enabling regulatory frameworks. With continued refinement, MFC-integrated on-site sanitation can become a cornerstone of sustainable rural development, simultaneously advancing clean energy access and sanitation security in off-grid communities worldwide.

Acknowledgments

The authors are grateful to the anonymous referees for their comments, which helped to improve the quality of the manuscript. This work was supported by the All-India Council for Technical Education (AICTE), Govt. of India through AICTE Doctoral Fellowship (ADF) scheme.

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