



# FUEL AND FIREWOOD INITIATIVE



**WOMEN'S  
REFUGEE  
COMMISSION**

# FUEL AND FIREWOOD

## AT A GLANCE



### ||| The Issue

- Food distributed to displaced people by humanitarian agencies must be cooked before it can be eaten – but cooking fuel is generally not provided.
- When women and girls leave camps to search for firewood, they risk being raped, beaten, even killed.
- Firewood collection exacerbates environmental degradation and burning wood indoors releases toxic smoke, causing respiratory infections that kill more people every year—especially babies and young children—than malaria.

### ||| Our Response

- Published landmark report, *Beyond Firewood: Fuel Alternatives and Protection Strategies for Displaced Women and Girls*.
- Led global efforts that resulted in the first-ever UN guidelines ensuring safe access to cooking fuel in humanitarian settings.
- Created the International Network on Household Energy in Humanitarian Settings for individuals and organizations interested in developing innovative solutions to cooking fuel needs.
- Brought together inventors and humanitarian workers at the first international research conference on alternatives to firewood.

### ||| Next Steps

- Disseminate UN guidelines on fuel strategies and on agency roles and responsibilities to humanitarian workers and provide training and technical assistance.
- Encourage field-testing of promising alternative fuels and energy technologies.
- Seek funding to increase technical capacity and research to develop new fuels suitable for the humanitarian settings where they are needed most.

# Leading the international effort to ensure that refugees have safe access to cooking fuel



## Background

Almost 45 million people are currently displaced by armed conflict and human rights abuses, forced to leave their homes and seek safety in refugee camps, in urban areas and with extended family. Those who have crossed an international border are refugees; those who stay within their own country are internally displaced people.

Displaced people living in camps are provided with the bare essentials for survival—basic shelter, food and water. The food distributed by humanitarian agencies, typically dried beans, rice or whole grains, must be cooked before it can be eaten. But cooking fuel is generally not provided.

As a result, displaced women and girls must regularly find firewood to cook food for their families, or to sell to make a meager income. Each time they leave the relative safety of the camp to search for firewood, they risk being raped, beaten, even killed. The longer a camp exists—the average long-term refugee situation lasts 17 years—the farther they must travel to gather wood, increasing the risk of attack.

Firewood collection also exacerbates environmental degradation and burning wood indoors releases toxic smoke, causing respiratory infections that kill more people every year—especially babies and young children—than malaria.

## Leading the International Effort for Safe Access to Cooking Fuel

The Women's Refugee Commission launched its landmark Fuel and Firewood Initiative in 2005. Our 2006 report, *Beyond Firewood: Fuel Alternatives and Protection Strategies for Displaced Women and Girls*, helped place this crucial health, environmental and security issue on the humanitarian agenda.

In settings of displacement, United Nations (UN) and nongovernmental humanitarian agencies are responsible for different areas of assistance, including protection (ensuring the safety and legal rights of refugees), environment, health and camp management. Our *Beyond Firewood* report made clear that the issue of cooking fuel requires the expertise and coordination of a variety of agencies across these different areas.



Since 2005, we have led a groundbreaking effort to change the way the humanitarian system addresses the issue of cooking fuel. Our focus has been on the critical need to:

- develop guidelines that address the need for safe access to cooking fuel in humanitarian crises, specifying who needs to do what and when;
- disseminate the guidelines to humanitarian workers around the world and provide training and technical assistance on their use;
- identify and encourage rigorous field-testing of the most promising alternative fuels and energy technologies for use in humanitarian settings; and
- solicit funding to increase technical expertise of humanitarian workers, to research and develop new fuels and energy technologies, and to supply those fuels and technologies to the humanitarian settings where they are needed most.



**“Cooking fuel is much more than just the means to cook food. It lies at the heart of effective protection and assistance efforts.”**

Erin Patrick, Senior Program Officer, Fuel & Firewood Initiative, Women’s Refugee Commission



### **Developing Policy to Save Lives**

We believe that a comprehensive policy framework addressing all aspects of cooking fuel in humanitarian settings is essential—whether the goal is improving safety and health or safeguarding the environment. We worked with key partners throughout the humanitarian

system to create the InterAgency Standing Committee Task Force on Safe Access to Firewood and alternative Energy in Humanitarian Settings (IASC Task Force SAFE). The IASC is the primary mechanism for inter-agency coordination of humanitarian assistance; it is a unique forum involving the key UN and nongovernmental humanitarian partners. The Women’s Refugee Commission co-chaired the task force, along with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the World Food Programme.

The 25-member task force, which represented key UN agencies and nongovernmental organizations, produced guidelines that address—for the first time ever—the need for safe access to appropriate fuel in humanitarian settings. These guidelines are:

- A matrix that defines agency roles and responsibilities for developing a coordinated fuel strategy in new and ongoing humanitarian crises.
- Decision tree diagrams to help humanitarian workers choose the most appropriate fuel strategies for their particular setting, such as providing fuel directly or organizing patrols to protect women as they search for firewood.

We are now disseminating these guidelines worldwide to ensure that they are used by humanitarian agencies so that displaced women and girls can cook without risking rape and respiratory infections—and without damaging the environment.



### On the Cutting Edge

The Women's Refugee Commission is constantly searching for new ideas and new products that can be used in or adapted to humanitarian settings.

- In 2008, we convened the first major international research conference on alternatives to firewood in humanitarian settings. It brought together more than 100 engineers, scientists, local and international nongovernmental organizations, UN agencies and academics.
- We are now working to promote the testing of innovations shared at the conference in humanitarian settings, with plans to link successful products and projects with much-needed financial support.
- We created an online network—the International Network on Household Energy in Humanitarian Settings—for individuals and organizations interested in addressing cooking fuel needs. Members of the Network—more than 200 and growing—are experts from humanitarian agencies, the corporate or private sector, academia and development organizations.

Go to: [www.fuelnetwork.org](http://www.fuelnetwork.org) to learn more about the network.

Learn more about our fuel and firewood initiative and download reports and guidelines (matrix and decision tree diagrams) at: [womensrefugeecommission.org/programs/rh/beyond](http://womensrefugeecommission.org/programs/rh/beyond)

“ If women go outside [the camps to gather firewood], they are raped. If youth go outside they are killed. People are afraid. ”

25-year-old volunteer English teacher in Kalma camp, Darfur, quoted in *Sudan Tribune*, November 15, 2008



**OUR MISSION:** Since 1989, the Women's Refugee Commission has advocated vigorously for laws, policies and programs to improve the lives and protect the rights of refugee and displaced women, children and young people—bringing about lasting, measurable change.

**OUR VISION:** We envision a world in which refugee, internally displaced, returnee and asylum-seeking women, children and young people are safe, healthy and self-reliant, participating in the decisions that affect their lives.

**HOW WE WORK:** Through research and fact-finding field missions, we assess and identify best practices and find solutions on critical issues that include lifesaving reproductive health care, dignified livelihoods for refugees and, in the U.S., fair treatment of women, children and families seeking asylum. On Capitol Hill, at the United Nations and with humanitarian organizations and governments, we push for improvements in refugee policy and practice until measurable, long-term change is realized.

**GET INVOLVED:** Learn about the ways you can help ensure that our far-reaching, life-saving advocacy for women, children and young people continues. To sign up for our action alerts and to make a tax-deductible donation, please go to:

[womensrefugeecommission.org](http://womensrefugeecommission.org)  
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