

Cooking Fuel Saves Lives: A Holistic Approach to Cooking in Humanitarian Settings

Women's Refugee Commission

Background

In complex emergencies, the humanitarian system tends to address issues of concern by focusing on individual sectors, such as health or food. However, the Women's Refugee Commission has found that when it comes to cooking fuel, an integrated approach is essential. Recognizing the cross-sectoral nature of cooking fuel, the Women's Refugee Commission and the InterAgency Standing Committee Task Force on Safe Access to Firewood and alternative Energy in Humanitarian Settings (SAFE task force) developed a framework outlining the key fuel-related challenges and solutions across eight sectors of humanitarian response. This comprehensive and holistic approach to all eight sectors is necessary

to ensure that displaced women and their families have safe access to appropriate cooking fuel. Below is information on the livelihoods, development and food security sector.

The term “livelihoods” refers to the capabilities, assets and strategies that people use to make a living. Livelihoods actors work with beneficiaries to enhance self-reliance through vocational training or income-generation activities (IGAs), for example. Particularly when people are displaced for long periods, livelihood activities also focus on ensuring food security through food-for-work, animal husbandry or agricultural programs. Over the long term, these types of activities are called development.

The Problem

Women and children, most often girls, spend a significant amount of time and labor to secure cooking fuel—often they travel for hours at a time, several days a week, to find enough firewood to cook for their families. The sheer amount of time spent on such an arduous task limits their ability to engage in safer, more productive activities—including earning an income or attending school.

Moreover, since refugees are often not allowed to work legally, women are frequently dependent on the collection and sale of firewood as one of their only means of earning money. A Somali refugee woman interviewed by the Women's Refugee Commission in the Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya reported that she could earn about \$0.50 selling the bundle of wood that she carries on her back. To find this much wood, she walks 4-5 kilometers outside of the camp—a task that can take as long as five hours and during which she risks being



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attacked, bitten by snakes or succumbing to dehydration in the desert heat.

Women are more likely than men to participate in IGAs that are dependent on the use of natural resources. Common IGAs include selling firewood or charcoal, subsistence agriculture, brewing alcohol and cooking food to sell. This dependence on natural resources means that women are most heavily impacted when access to these resources is limited because of insecurity or because the resources have been depleted.



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In many situations, families may have no choice but to sell or trade some of their food rations to garner income or to pay for cooking fuel. Another woman in Dadaab said: “Sometimes men with donkey carts full of wood come into the camp, and I’ll trade some of my food rations for their wood. At least then [I can cook the food I have left so] my children will eat.” The resulting reduction in food rations not only increases the risk of malnutrition, especially in children, but can cause tensions within the family, including domestic violence stemming from disagreements over household economic priorities. During a group discussion in Dadaab, Somali refugee women told the Women’s Refugee Commission that they had to hide the fact from their husbands that they trade some of their food rations for firewood, because otherwise the men would get upset and beat them, saying it is the woman’s responsibility to find enough firewood to cook all of the food rations. The women said they would make up excuses, saying children had spilled the food or that it had been stolen at the distribution site.

When trading food for cooking fuel is not an option and collection is impossible, such as in urban settings, households must either purchase fuel or go

without eating. Buying fuel eats up huge portions of meager household incomes, however: in post-earthquake Haiti, a joint Women’s Refugee Commission/World Food Programme assessment found that families were spending upwards of 40 percent of their daily income on charcoal.

The Solution

When women have access to safer jobs that earn them a decent wage, they become less reliant on dangerous IGAs such as the collection and sale of firewood and selling food rations. Livelihood actors should work with communities to develop safer, more sustainable, market-based jobs to reduce dependence on woodfuel-related IGAs. In some settings, these new jobs can include the production of alternative fuels or energy technologies, including fuel-efficient stoves or briquettes created from household or agricultural waste, or reforestation and other environmental management activities.

Reducing dependence on unsafe, unsustainable income generation options is a critical task for livelihood workers; one that plays a key role in protecting women and children.