

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 environment and natural resource management sector.

Camps for displaced people are often located in environmentally fragile areas, which can be par-

ticularly negatively impacted by a sudden influx of new residents. The environment and natural resource management sector works to ensure that these potential impacts are mitigated as much as possible from the earliest stages of response, including during the site selection process before the camp is even established. Environment workers also oversee environmental management and rehabilitation projects, such as forest conservation, tree planting and the establishment of green belts and woodlots in areas surrounding camps.

The Problem

Environmental degradation can be exacerbated in humanitarian settings for a variety of reasons. The marginal, semi-arid lands where so many displaced persons' camps are located may have been able to effectively support their small, dispersed resident populations in the past. However, sudden large concentrations of people living in the crowded camps that emerge during war or after natural disasters can rapidly deplete the land's carrying capacity and diminish regeneration possibilities.

Countries such as Tanzania, for example, have seen permanent deforestation resulting from the estimated 1,200 tons of firewood being used each day following an influx of refugees in the late 90s.¹

The destruction of towns and villages during conflict or disasters also necessitates—whether immediately or after refugees return home—the reconstruction of houses, buildings, fences and other structures that are often made of either timber or mud bricks that must be fired in wood-burning kilns. Thus the damage caused to the surrounding



© UNHCR/H. Caux

environment is two-fold: not only are thousands or even millions of trees cut down for the initial camp construction and to supply cooking fuel for the displaced, but a second wave of cutting is then needed to rebuild when refugees go home. In the Darfur region of Sudan, for example, the UN Environmental Program has estimated that 30–40 trees are needed to rebuild a single family compound. With 2.6 million people displaced, 15–20 million trees will be needed to rebuild just the houses.²

Cooking fuel is not provided on any measurable scale in Darfur, and thus women and children are forced to forage for firewood on their own. Years of firewood and shelter material collection (timber and thatch) by both displaced and host communities in Darfur have taken a visible toll on the environment, with few or no trees remaining in vast swaths of the region. To find firewood, women and children are forced to travel ever-greater distances—as far as 15 or more kilometers outside of their camps—which puts them at high risk of attack. The environmental *and* protection situations are in fact so dire in Darfur that in many cases women have resorted to digging holes in areas where trees used to be, in the hope of being able to pull up a root they can burn for fuel. In addition to the physical toll of such hard labor, this complete stripping of natural resources hinders the possibility for reforestation, even in the long run.

The Solution

In the initial stages of emergency response, environment workers should support the direct provision of cooking fuel—including sustainably harvested firewood where necessary—to help decrease the unsustainable and often unsafe collection of firewood. Non-wood shelter construction materials, such as unfired soil blocks, should also be promoted whenever feasible.

As the initial emergency response gives way to longer-term approaches, however, environment actors



© GAIA

should play a lead role in developing and promoting both fuel-saving devices, such as cookstoves, and alternatives to firewood, such as briquettes, ethanol or gas-based fuels. When firewood must be collected, environment workers should ensure that collection is undertaken in the most sustainable way possible, by teaching sustainable harvesting techniques and introducing controls on the frequency or location of firewood collection, for example. They can also develop and promote environmental protection and conservation activities, such as planting woodlots and undertaking reforestation programs, in tandem with local governments and environmental authorities. The safety and economic benefits of fuel-saving activities should also be promoted to refugees who may at first be reluctant to try unfamiliar cooking fuels or devices such as fuel-efficient stoves or gas-based fuels.

Undertaking these and other activities can help environment workers play an important role in protecting women and children *and* the environment in which they live.

¹ UNHCR. “The Environment - A Critical Time,” *Refugees Magazine*, July 2, 2002.

² Adapted from “Darfur: Relief in a vulnerable environment.” Tear-Fund, 2007.