

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 camp coordination and camp management sector.

The camp coordination and camp management

(CCCM) sector is meant to improve living conditions for refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs) living in camps. It aims to ensure that they are provided with assistance and protection and that any gaps in services are identified and addressed. Camp managers are also responsible for working with refugee leaders, host governments and local communities to mitigate potential concerns or incidents regarding access to land and natural resources.

The Problem

Cooking fuel—or the lack thereof—impacts several areas within CCCM. Struggles over limited natural resources such as firewood can cause tensions between host governments and camp residents, as well as between refugees and local communities, since both groups are often dependent on the same scarce resources either for their own consumption or as a means of earning income. In Darfur, for example, displaced women often have few means of making money besides collecting the increasingly scarce firewood and selling it to local villagers or businesses like restaurants and bakeries. On the other hand, in Kakuma camp in Kenya, a key income source for the local Turkana population is collecting firewood and selling it to refugees living in the camp—or giving it to them in exchange for some of their food rations.

A 2006 UN High Commissioner for Refugees/World Food Programme (UNHCR/WFP) assessment mission in Rwanda found a glaring lack of access to cooking fuel in several camps hosting Congolese and Burundian



refugees. The report indicated, for example, that only eight percent of refugees' need for firewood was being filled in the Gihembe camp. As a result of the insufficient firewood distribution, women and children were often forced to collect firewood illegally in surrounding private forests, where they were at risk of violence if caught. In another case, UNHCR reported that in the Bhutanese refugee camps in eastern Nepal "tensions between the refugees and the local communities have been increasing for various reasons, including the fact that refugees are collecting fallen trees, dried leaves and twigs from the local forests. When there is a delay in the delivery of kerosene,¹ the refugees—mostly women and children—have no option but to go to the nearby forests to gather firewood for cooking at the risk of being attacked, including possible sexual assault."²

Environmental degradation resulting from unsustainable firewood harvesting can also negatively affect the relationship between those living in the camps and the local community and can cause or exacerbate food insecurity.

Open cooking fires in crowded camps also pose a huge health and safety risk, as one spark or untended fire can quickly spread across hundreds of densely packed shelters.

The Solution

Undertaking critical assessments of cooking fuel needs and existing natural resources at the initial stages of humanitarian planning can both lessen the likelihood of resource-based tensions arising between the displaced and their hosts and protect the overall well-being of both refugee and host communities. Camp managers should work with beneficiaries to establish a cooking fuel strategy that respects cultural customs and habits to decrease the potential for tensions both within and outside camps. If disputes do erupt over resources, camp managers should work with local authorities to mediate these disputes. In situations



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where host communities suffer from many of the same problems as the displaced, providing support to hosts and engaging them in confidence-building activities can help create a more protective environment for the displaced when they leave the camps. In eastern Nepal, for example, UNHCR works with the Nepalese government on small-scale but impactful activities, such as forest rehabilitation and road construction, to help alleviate some of the stresses caused by refugees on local communities and the environment, reducing the likelihood of tensions erupting between the two groups.³

When firewood is scarce, camp managers should ensure that a sufficient amount of cooking fuel is provided to beneficiaries (and in some cases, to host communities as well) to lessen tensions and reduce the vulnerability of both communities. Safer fuel-efficient stoves should also be promoted, both as a means of reducing firewood consumption and also to mitigate the risk of potentially devastating camp fires.

Following these guidelines can help camp managers meet the needs of both displaced and host communities.

¹ UNHCR distributed kerosene to refugees in Nepal from 1992-2006, but stopped the program in 2006 for financial reasons.

² "UNHCR acts to ease tensions between locals and refugees in Nepal," UNHCR-Damak, July 18, 2005.

³ Ibid.