

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

## Women's Refugee Commission

Almost 40 million people worldwide are currently displaced by armed conflict and an additional 40 million uprooted by natural disasters. Forced to leave their homes and seek refuge in camps, with host families or in urban areas, displaced people face a series of obstacles as they try to cook food for their families. Despite the fact that the food distributed by humanitarian agencies must be cooked before it can be eaten, cooking fuel\* is rarely provided. Women and children, especially girls, are typically responsible for cooking family meals, and their health and safety are threatened every day as they search for the fuel they need to cook their food. The fuel they use most often is firewood, and they may have to travel up to 10-20 kilometers into the bush to find it.

Through its Fuel and Firewood Initiative, the Women's Refugee Commission aims to reduce the vulnerability of displaced women and children to the many harmful consequences associated with cooking fuel collection and use—including gender-based violence (GBV), environmental degradation and respiratory illnesses caused by burning solid fuels like firewood indoors—and ensure that displaced women, children and families have safe access to appropriate cooking fuel.

The Women's Refugee Commission has been working successfully since 2005 to put cooking fuel—a particularly complex issue in humanitarian settings—on the humanitarian agenda. The challenges associated with the collection, supply and use of cooking fuel span several sectors of humanitarian response and rarely fit neatly into

the existing mandates of the United Nations (UN) agencies and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) working on the ground. Humanitarian workers tend to work on just one sector, such as protection or food; however, the Women's Refugee Commission has found that a *comprehensive* approach to cooking fuel needs is necessary.

### HOW SECTORS CAN WORK TOGETHER: ONE EXAMPLE

Humanitarian workers in the shelter sector may not always be aware of the harmful health effects of burning firewood in poorly ventilated shelters as they set out to construct a new refugee camp. Health sector workers, however, may have a clearer understanding of the links between indoor air pollution and respiratory infections, and of solutions to these problems. If the shelter and health sectors work together from the earliest stages of emergency response, they can ensure that families are safer and healthier by building shelters with proper chimneys, or allotting sufficient space during the site planning process for outdoor cooking shelters.

Driven by the clear need for a cross-sectoral approach to addressing cooking fuel needs and challenges in diverse humanitarian settings, the Women's Refugee Commission spearheaded the creation of the InterAgency Standing Committee Task Force on Safe Access to Firewood and alternative Energy in Humanitarian Settings (SAFE

\* As used here, the term "cooking fuel" includes fuels, such as firewood and kerosene, as well as cooking devices, such as fuel-efficient stoves or solar cookers. These fuels and devices are also known as "household energy," though household energy also typically includes domestic lighting and heating.

task force). The SAFE task force brought together representatives from a variety of UN agencies and NGOs across the humanitarian response spectrum—including protection, health and environmental organizations—and was charged with developing a framework for the humanitarian community to effectively respond to cooking fuel needs in humanitarian settings. The framework developed by the SAFE task force focuses on eight sectors: camp coordination & camp management; emergency shelter; environment & natural resource management; food & nutrition; health; information, education & communication; livelihoods, development & food security; and protection. Each of these sectors and their relationship with cooking fuel, including the key challenges and some proposed solutions, are discussed in more detail in the following eight “sector sheets.”

The SAFE task force created two critical tools for the humanitarian system aimed at ensuring the predictable development of holistic cooking fuel strategies in diverse regions around the world.

- A **Matrix** on Agency Roles and Responsibilities for ensuring a Coordinated, Multi-Sectoral Fuel Response in Humanitarian Settings, which defines the key fuel-related activities that must be implemented in order to achieve an effective fuel response in new and ongoing humanitarian crises.
- The **Decision Tree Diagrams** on Factors Affecting the Choice of Fuel Strategy in Humanitarian Settings, which address the different types of cooking fuel options that will be most appropriate in each specific emergency setting (the type of stove that would be most appropriate for Burmese refugees in Thailand to use for cooking rice is not necessarily the same type of stove that would be best-suited for displaced women stirring *assida* [porridge made from millet] in the Darfur region of Sudan, for example).

Both tools reflect the need for humanitarian actors to coordinate their fuel-related activities across all eight traditional response sectors. By doing so, each



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sector can play its part to ensure that displaced women and girls have safe access to one of their most basic needs—cooking fuel—from the start of every emergency. The sheets in this package contain information on each sector, outlining the problems related to cooking fuel within that sector, specific issues and examples, and some proposed solutions.

For further resources on cooking fuel in humanitarian settings, please visit [www.fuelnetwork.org](http://www.fuelnetwork.org).

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**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, including those seeking asylum—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.