WOMEN'S REFUGEE COMMISSION

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

Women's Refugee Commission

Emergency Shelter

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 Inter-Agency 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 emergency shelter sector.***

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Shelter actors are typically responsible for overseeing the camp site selection and planning process, and for ensuring that shelter materials—usually wood poles, tarps and rope—are provided to beneficiaries when camps are being established. In many regions, they also coordinate the composition and distribution of "non-food items," such as cooking pots and buckets for carrying water.

The Problem

In emergency settings, firewood is often in direct competition with materials needed for shelter construction, such as timber. Without proper assessment by shelter workers of the wood resources available in and around a camp site, the construction of the camp itself can actually deplete much of the surrounding area's firewood supply, forcing women to travel farther and farther away from the relative safety of the camp to find cooking fuel. This issue is compounded as local governments, with an eye to controlling their dwindling resources and in an effort to reduce or prevent deforestation, may limit or ban refugees from accessing forests.

Refugee camps are also often extremely crowded—it is not uncommon to find camps meant for 25,000 residents housing four times that many. When shelters are so close together, open fires used for cooking are a huge risk factor

for house fires. A single house fire can have devastating effects in camps that are constructed primarily of wood, thatch and plastic. In March 2008, for example, a fire quickly destroyed 95 percent of the structures in the Goldhap refugee camp in eastern Nepal before it could be extinguished, forcing almost 1,300 families to sleep out in the open. The fire spread quickly because of the proximity of family shelters built over 17 years of population growth. The makeshift tents made of plastic and bamboo that were used following the fire left refugees, especially children, vulnerable to the elements and therefore to illness and disease.

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In colder climates, or in the evenings during the winter season in even usually hot regions such as Chad, refugees living in flimsy shelters, without blankets or warm clothing, may resort to keeping a fire going inside their houses in order to keep warm. Many such shelters do not have proper ventilation, and the smoke from cooking or heating fires can cause severe respiratory infections, such as pneumonia, especially in young children. (See sector sheet #6: Health.)

The Solution

It is critical that shelter actors take into account the cooking fuel needs of camp residents during the site selection, planning and construction phases. When selecting a site, shelter actors should assess the wood resources that are available—for both timber and firewood—and the potential demand for these resources to avoid depleting them. In situations where wood resources are scarce, shelter actors should develop and promote the use of alternative, woodless shelter construction technologies, such as (unfired) stabilized soil blocks, which can be as strong as fired mud bricks, but require neither timber nor wood for a kiln. Such non-wood construction alternatives should also be considered for building schools, health care facilities, warehouses and other large, institutional structures.

Proper design of cooking areas—including planning for appropriate cooking spaces separate from the home, for example—can both reduce the risk of camp fires as well as the negative health consequences caused by indoor cooking smoke. Distribution of fuel-saving non-food items, such as tight-fitting lids to make cooking more efficient, as well as blankets and warm clothing or resource-saving heating devices, where needed, can also significantly reduce fuel use: the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, for example, reported in its 2002 *Domestic Energy Handbook* that a tight-fitting lid can save up to 20 percent of cooking fuel.

Following these guidelines can help shelter workers play a critical role in promoting the protection, health and safety of millions of displaced families.