



WOMEN'S
REFUGEE
COMMISSION

COOKING FUEL AND THE HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE IN HAITI

KEY MESSAGES AND GUIDANCE FOR ACTION

Women's Refugee Commission

Even before the January 12 earthquake, cooking fuel was a major concern in Haiti—especially for the poorest segments of the population, and for women, who are largely responsible for cooking for their families or selling cooked foods to earn a meager income.

According to the World Bank, before the earthquake, 70% of the Haitian population was dependent on woodfuel resources (mostly firewood and charcoal) as its primary source of cooking fuel.¹ However, the supply of woodfuel was tenuous at best, with large swathes of the Haitian hillsides completely deforested. Moreover, burning solid fuels such as firewood and charcoal inside shelters causes indoor air pollution, resulting in increased vulnerability to respiratory infections. Haiti has one of the highest rates of tuberculosis in the world at 306 cases per 100,000 population.²

Emergency response

The World Food Program (WFP) and its implementing partners are now distributing rice, hoping to reach up to two million people. Rice, however, must be cooked in order to be eaten; the ability to cook this food is as important for health and survival as the food itself. Yet, in emergencies, cooking fuel is typically relegated to the sidelines. Haitian women are resorting to burning trash, furniture or scraps of organic materials scrounged from the rubble—just to be able to cook for their families, posing significant health and safety risks.

The Inter-Agency Steering Committee Task Force on Safe Access to Firewood and alternative Energy in Humanitarian Settings (IASC Task Force SAFE) has developed guidance for the humanitarian community on how to respond to fuel needs in emergencies.³ These guidelines can be found in English and French at www.fuelnetwork.org. Some of the most relevant points for the Haiti response are:

Camp Coordination and Camp Management (CCCM) (lead agency: International Organization for Migration)

- Incorporate fuel needs into the planning process for temporary settlements; ensure that fuel supply is defined and implemented as a priority within the response strategy.
- Conduct a fuel-related needs assessment; establish a fuel strategy for the emergency context.
- Undertake short-term direct provision of fuel to meet immediate needs.

Emergency Shelter (lead agency: International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies)

- Distribute fuel-saving items (e.g., tight-fitting lids).
- Ensure proper design of cooking areas to reduce fire risk.
- Promote re-use of timber from rubble in reconstruction to avoid competition over woodfuel resources for shelter or cooking purposes.

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Environment and natural resource management

- Mandate the undertaking of Rapid Environmental Impact Assessments during the site selection process for temporary settlement locations.
- Determine cooking fuel needs via immediate assessments; investigate alternative fuel options (preferably locally-available or producible; imported if necessary in the immediate term).

Food and Nutrition (lead agencies: WFP, UNICEF)

- Include fuel needs and available sources in emergency food assessments.
- Provide pre-cooked food (such as biscuits) as part of rations in the immediate term; supply quick-cooking/easy-to-cook foods wherever possible.
- Work with camp managers to promote fuel-efficient cooking practices.
- Require the use of fuel-efficient stoves in therapeutic/school feeding programs.

Health (lead agency: World Health Organization)

- Provide technical advice on development and use of cleaner fuels and energy technologies for reducing health risks from fuel collection and use.
- Ensure clinical care is available at health facilities for survivors of sexual assault.

Information, Education and Communication (IEC)

- Disseminate information on fuel-related issues and programming across all relevant sectors to inform emergency response, including information on fuel and energy technology options available for use in Haiti.
- Support relevant partners to use formal, non-formal and alternative learning environments, school feeding programs, food distributions and other venues to ensure that environmentally sustainable, fuel-efficient cooking practices and shelter construction techniques are used throughout the humanitarian system.

Livelihoods, Development and Food Security (lead agency: UN Development Program)

- Include fuel needs/available fuel sources in emergency food security assessments.
- Assess local options for non-woodfuel-intensive livelihoods programs (e.g., non-wood forest products, farming/fishing/agro-forestry, kitchen gardening), including through subsidisation if needed.

Protection (lead agency: UN High Commissioner for Human Rights)

- Include food and cooking fuel needs and available sources in emergency protection assessments.
- Conduct participatory assessments on fuel-related protection risks and preferred fuel options.
- Undertake awareness-raising campaigns on protection risks associated with fuel collection, supply and use; encourage discussion of alternatives.

Medium- to long-term response

Immediate response is critical, but it is only part of the story. As the humanitarian community works with Haitians and their government to “build back better,” the Women’s Refugee Commission strongly recommends that ensuring safe access to appropriate household energy should be a key component of the medium- and long-term reconstruction strategy. This strategy should be based on the guidance created by the IASC Task Force SAFE for all humanitarian response clusters and agencies, recognizing their specific areas of expertise.

Notes

1 World Bank ESMAP technical paper 112/07, “Haiti: Strategy to Alleviate the Pressure of Fuel Demand on National Woodfuel Resources,” April 2007.

2 USAID, “Infection Diseases.” www.usaid.gov/our_work/global_health/id/tuberculosis/countries/lac/haiti_profile.html.

3 The guidance comprises a “Matrix on Agency Roles and Responsibilities for Ensuring a Coordinated, Multi-Sectoral Fuel Strategy in Humanitarian Settings” and a “Decision Tree Diagram on Factors Affecting the Choice of Fuel Strategy in Humanitarian Settings” (click to see guidance).