

# 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 food and nutrition sector.***

The UN World Food Programme (WFP) and its implementing partners provide food assistance and fight hunger and malnutrition in humanitarian settings, whether through direct distribution or in exchange for work (“food for work”).

### The Problem

The food distributed in humanitarian settings—typically items like dried beans, grains or flour—must be cooked in order to be eaten (when flour or hard beans are eaten raw, not only do they cause digestive difficulties, but their nutritional value is greatly reduced). However, the fuel needed to cook this food is almost never provided, and the burden of finding cooking fuel rests on the beneficiaries themselves—most commonly women and children. If sufficient fuel cannot be found, or there is not enough money to purchase it, women may resort to undercooking their meals—increasing their risk of foodborne illness—or they may be forced to skip meals altogether, which can cause malnutrition, especially in young children.

In many instances, families may have to trade or sell some of their food rations in order to purchase cooking fuel, which leaves them with less food than they need to survive. A Somali refugee interviewed by the Women's Refugee Commission in Dadaab camp in eastern Kenya, struggling to find ways to cook food rations for her family, summed up this issue clearly: “Even 100 bags of food is useless without firewood.”



In Menik Farm internally displaced persons (IDP) camp in northern Sri Lanka—which at its peak in 2009 had a population of 290,000 people—women like Yogeswary had to collect wood every day in order to cook rice rations for her family: “Much of my day is spent in collecting firewood. There are just so many of us. It is getting harder to find.”<sup>1</sup> A refugee woman in Dadaab echoed Yogeswary’s concern: “Going so far into the bush is dangerous. When I leave in the morning to collect wood, I never know if I’ll come home safely. But I have no choice. My children need to eat.”

In part because of difficulties in securing sufficient cooking fuel, or because of the need to trade food rations for fuel, malnutrition rates among displaced populations are often higher than among their non-displaced counterparts. IDPs in Somalia, for example, were reported to have malnutrition rates of 25 percent, compared to the global malnutrition rate in Somalia of 17 percent.<sup>2</sup>

## The Solution

Food and nutrition officers have several options for reducing illnesses and malnutrition caused by eating raw or undercooked foods. During the very earliest stages of emergency response, for example, when nearby firewood is scarce or there is pervasive insecurity, precooked or quick-cooking foods should be provided, such as the “meals ready to eat” distributed by WFP in the immediate aftermath of the 2010 Haiti earthquake.

Fuel-efficient stoves can also reduce the amount of fuel needed to properly cook a meal, and thus reduce the burden on women who would otherwise have to find or buy large amounts of firewood. For example, to help women feed their families properly cooked meals with the highest nutrition levels possible, WFP has provided over 13,000 families in Sri Lanka with fuel-efficient stoves as part of its SAFE initiative in that country. These *anagi* stoves were designed to be familiar to Sri Lankan women and to cook their food in the way that they know how and prefer to cook it—



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ensuring that the stoves will actually be used over the long term. Food and nutrition officers should try to provide familiar foods and clear cooking instructions, so that proper cooking times are observed, as well as training on fuel-efficient cooking techniques—like pre-soaking beans, using tight-fitting lids and sheltering cooking fires from the wind—so that cooking fuel is not wasted. Any institutional feeding programs, such as those in schools or hospitals, should be encouraged to use fuel-efficient stoves when they cook for hundreds of people at a time.

Implementing these guidelines can help food officers play an important role in enhancing the protection and improving the health and nutrition of women and families.

<sup>1</sup> WFP Annual Report, Sri Lanka 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), *Somalia: Window of Opportunity for Addressing One of the World’s Worst Internal Displacement Crises*, October 2, 2006.