

# SAFE: Protecting Women and the Environment in the Great Lakes Region of Africa

## Introduction

In humanitarian settings, basics like food, water and shelter are typically provided, yet communities often have poor access to fuel and energy to cook the food, boil the water, and heat and light the shelters.

The vast majority of people displaced by conflict or crisis in the Great Lakes region of Africa depend on traditional biomass for their household energy needs; firewood is the primary resource, but charcoal, animal dung, and agricultural waste are also used.

Obtaining these resources poses enormous risks to the safety and well-being of displaced people, particularly women and girls, who are often attacked, raped or sometimes murdered when they leave the camps to collect firewood. Depending on location, they collect firewood anywhere from once a day to once a week, spending between three and 8.5 hours per collection trip.

In addition, harvesting natural resources increases rates of deforestation and environmental degradation, causing tension between host and displaced communities, which often results in the targeting of displaced women.

Complex emergencies and protracted crises, particularly those throughout the Great Lakes region, make this precarious situation worse.

In 2012, with the support of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Women's Refugee Commission embarked on a three-year project, *Protecting women and the environment of the Great Lakes Region of Africa: Turning policy into practice to develop a scalable and sustainable cooking fuel strategy.*

## Project Overview

The overarching goal of the project was to reduce the incidence of violence and exploitation experienced by displaced women in the Great Lakes region of Africa by ensuring safe access to appropriate, sustainable cooking fuel.

The objectives were to improve the physical protection of women and girls by reducing reliance on the unsustainable cooking fuels that cause environmental degradation, and to develop locally appropriate, coordinated and cross-cutting SAFE strategies in the targeted locations of the Great Lakes region.



IDP woman sitting on firewood in Shasha displacement site, North Kivu, DRC. © Megan Gerrard/WRC

## The Problem

- In acute emergencies, such as in eastern Congo, where food is provided, it must be cooked to be eaten. Yet firewood is often not provided.
- Displaced women and girls throughout the Great Lakes region consistently reported that firewood collection is the top security risk they face in their daily lives. Wherever they gather firewood, they fear rape and assault by rebels, soldiers, rangers and/or host community members.
- When refugee communities compete for resources with the host community, the stresses increase violence against women.
- There are reports of women in the camps offering sex in exchange for food because they do not have enough food and/or enough fuel to cook what they have.
- Currently, displaced women are passive beneficiaries of stove and fuel interventions, which undermines their buy-in and the long-term sustainability of such interventions.



Women and girls collecting dead wood alongside woodlots after they are burned in Ruzizi Plains, DRC

© Nadia Tabaro/WRC

## Key Findings

- Displaced communities in every assessment location reported a major need for income-generating opportunities. This is a missed opportunity to include displaced people in the production and sale of stoves and alternative fuels.
- SAFE-related activities have been implemented piece-meal instead of as a holistic package of interventions. Community-driven and participatory approaches have not been prioritized.

### *Site-specific Issues*

- When fuel-efficient stoves were distributed in Nzulo and Shasha in eastern DRC, women spent less time collecting fuelwood. As a result, exposure to the risk of sexual violence decreased, women spent less money on buying firewood and had more time for other activities.
- Refugees in Nakivale, Uganda, and Nyarugusu, Tanzania, have received stoves from UNHCR and/or local NGOs, but that addresses only part of the problem as they still struggle with access to fuel.
- Biomass briquette projects have been implemented by numerous humanitarian actors in North Kivu, DRC, since 2008. These have reduced acute energy crises in IDP camps and reduced environmental pressure on natural parks; however, no project has reached economic viability or been set up as a self-sustaining mechanism.
- The camps in Burundi, which refugees are not allowed to leave, were the only locations where refugees were provided with both community cookstoves and briquettes. However, the majority of the cookstoves are not compatible with the briquettes, and the briquettes produce unhealthy smoke.



## Recommendations

Both displaced communities and humanitarians in the Great Lakes region are ready for large-scale implementation of Safe Access to Fuel and Energy (SAFE) programs. SAFE working groups are now established in four locations. Governments in the Great Lakes region are acutely aware of SAFE-related needs, which if not adequately addressed with sustainable solutions, will continue to negatively affect their countries and the people living within them.

### *Next Steps for Practitioners*

- Displacement is an opportunity to engage women and allow them to contribute to the design of the communities they must build in exile, including the development of alternatives to firewood and charcoal.
- The distribution of fuel-efficient stoves and cooking fuel must be considered essential in acute emergencies on par with food distribution, because the food provided is useless without them and this situation increases the risk of ongoing violence directed at women.
- Distribution does not, alone, solve the protection issues of displaced women. Monitoring must be part of the process to determine ongoing needs and assess impact.
- Emphasis must be on developing and promoting sustainable cookstove and alternative fuel solutions, the production of which provides livelihood opportunities for women.
- A comprehensive approach lowers the risk of violence and exploitation experienced by refugee women. For example, promoting reforestation and decreasing resource consumption will reduce tensions between host and refugee communities. Production of alternative energy sources provides women with means to support their families and lessens the stress of poverty.



A woman using the fuel-efficient stove she received in Nzulo camp, North-Kivu, DRC © Nadia Tabaro/WRC

### *Next Steps for Donors and Policymakers*

- Support SAFE initiatives in all gender-based violence (GBV) prevention strategies and frameworks.
- Meet the demand for SAFE training and technical assistance at the field level by supporting capacity building of women's groups and the humanitarian community.
- Support local SAFE working groups in the Great Lakes Region to implement their new, context-specific SAFE strategies.
- Support research to demonstrate the impact of SAFE programming on the prevention of GBV.
- Prioritize and provide funding for large-scale, comprehensive SAFE initiatives.

## Project Activities

The WRC conducted assessments of access to, and use of, cooking fuel in displacement sites in DRC, Burundi, Uganda and Tanzania.

In partnership with the International Rescue Committee and with the support of the UK Department for International Development, WRC distributed 2,500 fuel-efficient stoves to newly displaced communities in Nzulo and Shasha displacement sites in North Kivu, eastern DRC, and conducted follow-up assessments to measure the impact on women's safety and well-being in an acute emergency setting.

With the support of the Dutch government, WRC undertook a technical study of household stoves and cooking fuels available in North Kivu, DRC.

WRC established SAFE working groups in Kinshasa, Goma and Bukavu, DRC with the participation and support of the DRC government, and in Bujumbura, Burundi. Each group, with participants from the protection, food security and environment sectors, developed a terms of reference and multisectoral strategy.

In DRC, Uganda and Rwanda, WRC trained more than 150 practitioners from 15 countries on core SAFE concepts and technical information.

**The outputs from the project are available at [http://wrc.ms/SAFE\\_resources](http://wrc.ms/SAFE_resources)**

## Acknowledgments

We thank our funders, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation ([www.macfound.org](http://www.macfound.org)), the UK Department for International Development, the Government of the Netherlands, and the Global Alliance for Clean Cookstoves, without whose support this work would not have been possible.

We also thank our partners, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the International Rescue Committee/Women's Protection and Empowerment team, as well as the hundreds of displaced women, girls and men with whom we met.



Woman using the project stove with briquettes in Kinama refugee camp in Muyinga, Burundi.

© Nadia Tabaro/WRC

122 East 42nd Street  
New York, NY 10168-1289  
212.551.3115

[info@wrccommission.org](mailto:info@wrccommission.org)

[womensrefugeecommission.org](http://womensrefugeecommission.org)



**WOMEN'S  
REFUGEE  
COMMISSION**