



WOMEN'S  
REFUGEE  
COMMISSION

# Fuel and Firewood Initiative

Leading international efforts to provide safe cooking fuel for refugees

## Background

Every day, millions of refugee women and girls around the world risk being raped, beaten, even killed, as they search for the firewood they need to cook food for their families.

In addition, firewood collection increases environmental degradation, much of which may be permanent. And burning wood indoors releases toxic smoke, causing respiratory infections that kill more people every year than does malaria.

The humanitarian community has long ignored the issue of cooking fuel, despite the fact that the food distributed by relief agencies, typically dried beans, rice and whole grains, needs to be cooked before it can be eaten.

## Leading the Search for Safe, Sustainable Alternatives to Firewood

The Women's Refugee Commission's Fuel and Firewood Initiative focuses on the dilemma faced by women and girls in refugee settings who need to collect firewood to use for cooking and to sell for a meager income. Our 2006 landmark report, *Beyond Firewood: Fuel Alternatives and Protection Strategies for Displaced Women and Girls*, helped place this crucial health, environmental and security issue at the forefront of the humanitarian agenda.

The report made clear that the issue of cooking fuel requires the expertise and coordination of a variety of agencies focused on different sectors of humanitarian response, including protection, environment, health and camp management.

The Women's Refugee Commission has been leading a groundbreaking effort to change the way the humanitarian system addresses the issue of cooking fuel. Our focus has been on three critical needs:

1. Developing a **policy framework** that addresses cooking fuel in humanitarian response (for example, who needs to do what and when?);
2. Brainstorming and **sharing information** on alternative fuels and energy technologies for use in humanitarian settings; and
3. Soliciting **funding** to increase technical know-how of humanitarian staff, to research and develop new fuels and energy technologies, and to supply those fuels and technologies to the settings where they are needed most.

## Developing International Policy to Address the Issue

The Women's Refugee Commission believes that a comprehensive policy framework addressing all aspects of cooking fuel in humanitarian settings is essential—whether the goal is safety, health or safeguarding the environment. We worked with key partners throughout the humanitarian system to create the Inter-Agency Standing Committee Task Force on Safe Access to Firewood and alternative Energy in Humanitar-

ian Settings (IASC Task Force SAFE). The Women's Refugee Commission, on behalf of InterAction (a consortium of U.S.-based nongovernmental organizations), co-chaired this high-level body, along with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the World Food Program.

The Task Force's work was endorsed by the IASC Working Group in late 2008. The Task Force has produced tools that address, for the first time ever, the safe provision of fuel in refugee settings:

- A **Matrix** that defines agency roles and responsibilities for developing a coordinated fuel strategy, and essential activities that agencies must undertake to achieve an effective response in new and ongoing humanitarian crises.
- **Decision Tree Diagrams** to help humanitarian workers choose the most appropriate fuel strategies for their particular refugee setting, recognizing, for example, differences in staple foods and cooking habits.

The Women's Refugee Commission is now working to disseminate these tools in humanitarian settings throughout the world, and ensure that they are used, so that refugee women and girls can cook their food without risking rape and respiratory infections, and without damaging the environment.

### **Seeking Alternatives to Firewood**

We are constantly searching for new ideas and new products that can be used in or adapted to humanitarian settings. To this end, we created an online network for individuals and agencies interested in addressing cooking fuel needs. Members of the network come from the humanitarian sphere, the corporate or private sector, academia, development organizations and elsewhere. This network, the International Network on Household Energy in Humanitarian Settings, has more than 200 members and is growing every day. It can be accessed at [www.fuelnetwork.org](http://www.fuelnetwork.org).

In December 2008, the Women's Refugee Commission held the first major international research conference on this issue. The conference brought together developers, practitioners and users of alternative fuels and energy technologies, and humanitarian workers who develop and implement strategies to protect refugees. We are now working to test innovations shared at the conference in refugee settings, and eventually plan to link successful products and projects with much-needed financial support. With this support, we will improve the quality of life of millions of women and children around the world while protecting our fragile environment.

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### **The Women's Refugee Commission**

Since 1989, the Women's Refugee Commission has been advocating vigorously for laws, policies and programs to improve the lives and protect the rights of refugee and displaced women, children and young people—bringing about lasting, measurable change.

We do this through field-based research, fact-finding missions and through our role as an expert resource, advocate and technical advisor. Through the dissemination of our reports to policy makers, donors, service agencies and nongovernmental organizations, as well as education of the public and targeted advocacy, the Women's Refugee Commission has had a significant impact both on policy developed by legislators and governments and the implementation of better practices in the field.

Read more at [www.womensrefugeecommission.org/programs/rh/beyond](http://www.womensrefugeecommission.org/programs/rh/beyond).