

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 protection sector.

The protection sector undertakes activities aimed at obtaining full respect for the rights of the individual. This can mean ensuring legal protections,

such as registration, representation and intervening in situations of human rights abuses, as well as physical protection, such as patrols and accompaniment, including during firewood collection.

The Problem

Cooking fuel and the protection sector are closely tied by the high incidence of rape reported when women and children leave camps to collect firewood, which they must do because sufficient cooking fuel is rarely provided in humanitarian settings. Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) reported in 2009 that seven kilograms (15.4 pounds) of wood was being distributed per capita, *per month* in the Farchana camp in eastern Chad, while the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported that the estimated per capita consumption of wood was actually three kilograms (6.6 pounds) *per day*—a deficit of 92 percent. Often, the only way to make up this firewood deficit is to go out and collect it. Without nearby, safely accessible natural resources, however, women and children must travel long distances to find sufficient firewood to cook for their families.

Physical protection, such as the presence of peacekeepers or civilian police, is often so limited that women and girls are susceptible to attack the moment they leave the relative safety of their camps. In some places, rape or assault during firewood collection has even been described as a commonplace occurrence: PHR reported that 91 percent of confirmed rapes in Farchana occurred outside camps



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when women were collecting firewood. One woman in the camp stated: “I always think someone is following me and wants to rape me. It is better to die.”¹ In 2005, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) issued a report² indicating that within a five-month period in 2004–2005, MSF alone treated nearly 500 women and girls who were raped while venturing outside the camps for firewood or water. MSF believes that these 500 women and girls likely reflected only a fraction of the total number attacked, since survivors of sexual violence are often reluctant to report the crimes committed against them for fear of being ostracized by their communities.



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Protection risks are not faced by women alone: ProAct Network reported in 2008 that women in camps in Darfur were risking their safety to protect the lives of their husbands who, they feared, were more likely to be killed when leaving the camp. The women were also hesitant to use donkeys or carts to carry the wood for fear they would be stolen, instead choosing to carry the heavy loads on their backs.³

Another protection risk associated with firewood collection is exposure to landmines. In conflict-affected northern Sri Lanka, for example, a survey conducted by the Mine Advisory Group found firewood collection to be among the three activities where fear of mine explosions was the highest. Uncleared landmines severely disrupt returnees' lives and livelihoods, confining them to the small perimeter of residential areas and preventing safe access to essential services and goods, particularly firewood.⁴

The Solution

Because the risks associated with firewood collection vary in different settings, assessments must be undertaken early in the emergency response to define the particular concerns in each new setting and to make sure that women and girls themselves are included in the development of all types of protection strategies. When protection risks associated with firewood collection are determined to be present,

protection managers can provide transport, patrols or escort systems for women and girls collecting firewood, or can advocate for peacekeeping escorts to be deployed. Information sharing with humanitarian partners and women themselves can help to spread awareness about risks related to firewood collection and can help to ensure that preventative measures are put in place. Protection risks can also be mitigated by either directly providing a sufficient amount of cooking fuel or by supporting the development and production of alternative fuels to lessen dependence on firewood. Where there are landmine risks in firewood harvesting areas, protection workers can conduct campaigns to raise awareness about mined areas and alternative collection routes.

By implementing these guidelines, protection workers can play a key role in mitigating a major risk factor for gender-based violence and in ensuring the safety and dignity of women and children.

¹ “Nowhere to Turn: Failure to Protect, Support and Assure Justice for Darfuri Women,” Physicians for Human Rights, May 2009.

² “Rape and Sexual Violence Ongoing in Darfur, Sudan,” MSF press release, July 3, 2005.

³ Assessing the Effectiveness of Fuel-efficient Stove Programming: A Darfur-wide Review. ProAct Network. 2008.

⁴ Safe Access to Firewood and alternative Energy in the North of Sri Lanka: An Appraisal report, WFP, August 2010.