

Fuelwood: getting it right

Recent years have seen the introduction of new initiatives to promote safe access to appropriate cooking fuel in humanitarian settings. Congolese NGOs are active in promoting these initiatives and urging greater international focus on the issues at stake.

Cooking fuel is a critical issue that touches on nearly every facet of the daily life of millions of families. Because they spend the most time near fires while cooking, women and their children are particularly vulnerable to a range of health problems, including lung and eye diseases. Women and girls displaced by conflict or natural disaster also risk rape and sexual assault when they leave the relative safety of camps to gather wood to cook the food that is provided by humanitarian agencies, or to sell. As trees and other vegetation are harvested, women and girls must walk further and further to collect wood, increasing their vulnerability. In addition, girls may miss out on education opportunities as they spend hours each day foraging for cooking fuel or stay at home to watch younger siblings as their mothers collect firewood. Young girls are also the most common victims of burns and scalds from improperly tended open fires.

These consequences span traditional humanitarian response sectors and rarely fit neatly into the existing mandates of operational NGOs and UN agencies – or indeed into the cluster system. As a result, household energy-related initiatives are often ad hoc and do not take into account the lessons learned in other sectors or regions.

Since 2007, the international community, led by the Women's Refugee Commission and supported by USAID, has been developing global guidance documents to focus on the need to ensure safe access to appropriate cooking fuel in humanitarian settings from the start of every emergency. Created by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee Task Force on Safe Access to Firewood and alternative Energy in Humanitarian Settings (IASC Task Force SAFE) and endorsed by the IASC Working Group, these documents include

a) a 'matrix' of agency roles and responsibilities for developing a coordinated fuel strategy which defines the key activities that must occur in order to achieve an effective fuel response in new and ongoing humanitarian crises, and b) 'decision tree' diagrams illustrating various factors that can affect the choice of fuel strategy, such as different staple foods or cooking habits.

Information extracted from the Women's Refugee Commission's website. See <http://womensrefugeecommission.org/programs/firewood> to access these and other related documents. See also the International Network on Household Energy in Humanitarian Settings at <http://www.fuelnetwork.org/> (includes all SAFE workshop and training materials).



Adrien Arbib www.arbib.org

Cooking fuel, fuelling a crisis

Jean Claude Mizaba Bampa

Humanitarians do not deal sufficiently or firmly enough with the question of fuel, and often get it wrong, since each population brings its cultural habits and daily realities to how they use fuel in their changed circumstances.

In DRC, as in Africa more generally, cooking is women's business so women must find wood so that they can cook for the family. Our culture tells people that for their nourishment they need to cook on a fire. To make this fire the women go out into the forest to find dry wood – this is their way; unlike nowadays, the forest used to be common property for all to use. But now where the available wood grows they can be attacked by militia who want to stop women getting cooking fuel or who commit inhuman acts against them.

Humanitarian agencies need to see the role of cooking fuel as crucial – for both displaced people and the host population. When there is no available fuelwood, or when taking it can cause conflict with local people, humanitarians sometimes

provide 'improved stoves'. Recently a new form of charcoal briquette made of sawdust and paper has been provided for use with portable stoves, specially made for displaced families.

In humanitarian crises there have never been adequate solutions. At a workshop held by the Women's Refugee Commission in Goma the reality was dealt with – that when people are displaced they still need to cook in the way they are used to doing, they need to warm their bodies and they need to protect themselves from the cold of the night. Our organisation thinks that it will be valuable to gather together the experiences of fuelwood in crises in many different countries to improve humanitarian responses.

Jean Claude Mizaba Bampa (rdcasdisuniv@yahoo.fr) is Resident Representative of the Association pour la Solidarité, le Développement et l'Intégration Sociale (ASDIS-Universelle) based in Goma.



SAFE workshops in DRC

Josué Sefu Aruna

In 2010, in Bukavu and Kamituga, South Kivu, we have run two training workshops on Safe Access to Firewood and alternative Energy in Humanitarian Settings (SAFE) for local organisations like ourselves who are committed to working towards stability and sustainability in DRC.

We had previously attended a two-day workshop run in Goma in February 2010 by the Women's Refugee Commission where we met with other representatives from local NGOs as well as representatives from agencies such as UNHCR, WFP, CARE, World Vision and Mercy Corps. The first day was the general workshop on the SAFE guidance and how, when and why to implement it, and the second day was a 'Training of Trainers' session to help participants gain the skills needed to undertake their own workshops, either for additional staff within their own agencies, or for other agencies, beneficiaries or local government.

In our own workshops participants learned about the multisectoral nature

of fuelwood issues, that there is no agency or cluster uniquely mandated to work in these areas, and that fuelwood relates not only to the environment but also to protection, health, nutrition and shelter. We discussed roles and responsibilities, and how to develop coordinated fuelwood strategies within both emergency and prolonged displacement situations.

Our first workshop in Bukavu allowed us and our partners to come together for the first time as a group, to exchange experiences and information to improve activities relating to the provision of fuelwood in the humanitarian context. Working in such a geographically vast area, however, offers huge logistical difficulties in ensuring follow-up to training, and we need to continue working with the international community to meet these challenges.

Josué Sefu Aruna (arunasefu@yahoo.fr) is Coordinator of the Association des Agriculteurs Sans Frontières (AASF) in Bukavu.



Participants at the end of the SAFE workshop in Goma, February 2010