

Managing environmental issues: a case for substantive reform

by Andrew Morton and David Jensen

Over the last two years, UNEP, Care International and various other partners have been assessing the status of environmental concerns in humanitarian response and advocating the need for change. Given that present practices within the international humanitarian community are often both environmentally unsustainable and resistant to change, we face a formidable challenge.

Not only is environment considered a cross-cutting priority issue for the IASC Cluster Approach but 'improved integration of environmental issues' is formally identified as a goal of reform in the Appeal for Building Global Humanitarian Response Capacity.¹

In the case of fuelwood, the answer is not yet. While the need for energy is as fundamental as the need for food, water and shelter, it continues to fall through the cracks of the humanitarian response system. Despite the reforms, the issue of energy provision appears to be

which are located near the boundary of Virunga National Park (one of the last two places on earth where mountain gorillas still live), require 600 tonnes of fuelwood per week. As these needs are not being met by the humanitarian agencies, WWF is providing emergency supplies of fuelwood from local areas of privately owned woodland to prevent the park from becoming the major source of supply, as it did during the influx of two million refugees in 1994. This interim measure cannot be sustained, however, and UNHCR needs to consider more durable solutions as part of its camp planning and management process.

Bolengo IDP camp in DRC is located only 700m from Virunga National Park. Its population of 10,000 requires 600 tonnes of fuelwood per week.

The humanitarian community is faced with several linked environmental and social challenges. Key issues include: 1) the impact of land degradation and climate change as a contributing cause to humanitarian crises; 2) the provision of sustainable fuelwood and shelter materials; 3) the management of aid-generated waste; 4) the sustainable management of ground and surface water; and 5) the environmental impact of refugee returns

and the development of sustainable livelihoods. Addressing these challenges will require more than guidelines and ad hoc activities: it will entail a wholesale cultural and institutional change across the humanitarian community. Rather than being addressed in a fragmented and peripheral manner, environmental issues should be a core consideration of how response is delivered, so as to comply with the overarching principle of 'do no harm'. Such a change was at the heart of the IASC Cluster Approach – but is it actually happening on the ground?



essentially ignored in the great majority of humanitarian operations, which focus almost exclusively on the provision of food, shelter, water and medical care. Finding wood to meet energy needs is often left to the displaced people themselves, based on the optimistic assumption that such resources are infinite, free and self-regenerating.

During the month of September 2007 alone, four new IDP camps were established near the city of Goma, in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). WWF has estimated that the four camps,

A similar situation has unfolded in Darfur, where massive internal displacement has led to severe deforestation around the larger camps as inhabitants are forced to collect timber and fuelwood in the surrounding areas for energy as well as livelihood strategies like brick-making. The scale of displacement and the particular vulnerability of the dry northern Sudanese environment could make Darfur the most

significant case of its type worldwide.

Failure to consider longer-term environmental impacts is becoming increasingly untenable for relief operations in many regions, particularly for operations based in arid and/or environmentally degraded regions in Africa and the Middle East. Short-term interventions lead to longer-term environmental problems that threaten livelihoods, increase vulnerability to disasters and can contribute to renewed humanitarian crises. In short, the ideals of 'do no harm' and 'build back better' cannot

be achieved if environmental issues are not integrated into the overall humanitarian response. At the same time, the unsustainable use of natural resources to meet humanitarian needs can lead to conflict with local communities over access to resources, damages and compensation.

While numerous technical guidelines and case studies have been published on these issues, progress overall has been very limited. In UNEP's opinion, the adequate and permanent resolution of these issues requires a multi-faceted approach, including:

- **Cultural and institutional change:** In the first instance, the international community must acknowledge these environmental issues and tackle them in a systematic way. In institutional terms, this entails developing standards and guidelines, and – more importantly – allocating funds, senior management time and staff resources. The recent establishment of the IASC Taskforce on Safe Access to Firewood and Alternative Energy in Humanitarian Settings² is a positive step but monitoring change at field level will be critical. The revision of the Sphere guidelines also provides an important opportunity to address environmental standards.
- **Incident-specific energy response strategies:** The response strategy for each medium to large humanitarian incident should include a component on energy provision; the overall responsibility for this element should be allocated and embedded into the Cluster Approach.
- **Energy efficiency improvements:** Technical and organisational responses to improve the efficiency of fuelwood utilisation (e.g. via fuel-efficient stoves or solar cookers) can provide significant benefits and are an obvious quick win.
- **Local fuelwood resource management:** In acknowledgement of the fact that the impact



Camp residents in Western Darfur cut wood chippings from a fallen tree for cooking fuel.

of the humanitarian response extends well beyond camp boundaries, agencies need to intervene in local fuelwood resource management. To be effective, this requires both technical expertise and a participatory approach.

- **Imported energy supplies:** In cases where local fuelwood supplies are inadequate, or the use of local resources is illegal and/or untenable (e.g. for camps in or near national parks or desert oases), the only real alternative is to import energy supplies, generally from other parts of the country on a commercial basis.

Together with its partners, UNEP continues to work to integrate environmental concerns into the humanitarian reform process, identifying gaps at policy level and providing guidance to humanitarian actors in the field.³

In addition, UNEP is seeking to effect change and improve the situation on the ground. For example, in Darfur – where the deforestation problem is so severe that displaced populations resort to digging under the earth for roots to burn for fuel – a two-year project has just been initiated in cooperation with the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) to assist displaced populations and conflict-affected communities to obtain and use fuelwood in a sustainable manner. As a first step, the project aims to expand the use

of fuel-efficient stoves in IDP camps. Made from a combination of water, mud and either donkey dung or grass, these stoves require much less fuel than traditional three-stone stoves. In the longer term, UNEP/FAO will work to establish community forests around IDP camps and other areas in Darfur, as a means of providing a local supply of wood for fuel, fodder and construction. The project will also explore the possibility of introducing alternative energy techniques, such as solar, wind and natural gas.

To make significant progress on the integration of environmental concerns in humanitarian action, however, it will be necessary to create a broader 'coalition of the willing' by re-engaging donors, major UN agencies and other NGOs on these issues.

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1. <http://ochaonline.un.org/cap2005/webpage.asp?Page=1566>

2. www.humanitarianinfo.org/iasc/content/subsidi/tf_SAFE/

3. See the newly released UNEP-OCHA brochure on 'Humanitarian Action and the Environment', available at http://postconflict.unep.ch/publications/IASC_leaflet.pdf