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.

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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.

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