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Sudan: Rapidly Expand the Use of Fuel-Efficient Stoves in Darfur

The present crisis in Darfur is in part the product of decades of deforestation, which has denuded the landscape of some 3,700 square miles of forest a year, quite literally altering the face of Sudan.

Deforestation results in increased competition for scarce natural resources and further impoverishes a population that barely subsists in a harsh environment. A principal cause of desertification is the dependence of a growing populace on wood and charcoal to fill its cooking needs. By reducing the need for wood and emission of smoke, a switch to simple, more fuel-efficient stoves could ease environmental stress and improve health, while reducing the time women spend collecting wood, a task that exposes them to the risk of rape and other forms of gender-based violence.

Approximately 60 percent of all households in Darfur depend on charcoal and wood in food preparation, with each such household consuming an average of twelve medium sized trees each year. The deforestation problem is so severe in North Darfur that individuals displaced by the conflict have had to resort to digging under the earth for roots. As the displaced gather in the camps for safety, the environment surrounding these areas has become increasingly depleted, forcing displaced women to venture further and further in search of firewood.

The problems with firewood gathering and violence against women at the hands of soldiers, Janjaweed militia, and armed bandits have been well documented. At the Kalma camp for internally displaced persons (IDPs) in South Darfur, women must walk about fifteen kilometers to find and carry back wood, a chore that can take about six hours or more to complete. Moreover, in order to cover the fuel needs of an average household, this task must be repeated five or six times per week. Women and older children bear the primary burden of collecting wood and they are thus most vulnerable to violence. Unwilling to expose themselves and their children to the risk of beatings and rape, a growing number of IDP women are ceasing their collection

efforts and, instead, selling a portion of their family's food ration in exchange for wood. For the average household, the price of a week's supply of wood using the traditional three-stone stove is approximately 700 to 1,000 dinars or more, depending on location and availability.

In order to reduce the amount of time that women have to spend outside of the relative safety of the camps, international agencies have promoted fuel-efficient stove ("FES") programs. These stoves, which are made from a combination of water, mud and either donkey dung or grass, require much less fuel than do the traditional three-stone stoves, which, in turn, means that much less time is required for dangerous wood foraging missions. Recognizing the important contribution that FES programs can have in reducing women's exposure to the possibility of gender-based violence (GBV), the UN issued an inter-agency report earlier this year in which it called for their promotion "on a massive scale." A number of NGOs have ramped up their FES programs and, as a result, approximately 50,000 women in Darfur have been trained on how to make fuel-efficient stoves and are using those stoves for all of their cooking needs.

The benefits of these programs to the conflict affected peoples of Darfur are clear. Apart from reducing the time women have to spend collecting wood, these benefits include:

- Slowing the desertification process that is one underlying cause of the crisis;
- Improving the quality of life for Darfurian women and their families by reducing expenditures for fuel and freeing up time for income generation and other activities;
- Dramatically reducing the amount of smoke that is emitted during the cooking process and, thereby, the incidence of acute respiratory infections and other

smoke-related diseases, which is one of the leading causes of morbidity and mortality throughout Darfur;

- ❑ Reducing the risk of injury to children, who can burn themselves when they fall into the open fire and, likewise, decreasing the risk of fire to nearby structures, a particularly serious concern in congested camp environments.

Having experienced these benefits for themselves, Darfuri women have proven highly receptive to FES training and are extolling the virtues of their new stoves. Apart from saving wood, improving health and decreasing the risk of fire and burns, these women report that the new stoves save cooking time, improve the taste of their food and, in reducing the amount of smoke, makes the “kitchen” a much cleaner and more comfortable environment in which to cook. In short, there are no insurmountable cultural barriers that would prevent FES projects from expanding to cover the entire population of Darfur.

Nor are there any insurmountable funding barriers to such an expansion. FES programs can produce stoves at a cost of about one dollar per unit, most of which goes toward training since they are made entirely from inexpensive indigenous organic materials. Moreover, with further technical adjustments to the design, it is possible to greatly improve the efficiency of the stoves that are presently being promoted and, at the same time, make them lighter and more durable.

The concentration of what hitherto had been a highly dispersed population into densely crowded camps has substantially facilitated the ability to reach that population with a large-scale FES intervention. At the same time, given the ability of such an intervention to reduce their need to search for wood and to ameliorate the economic hardship they face, the women who are its intended beneficiaries will never be more motivated to change their habits. Thus, the terrible human rights and humanitarian crisis that has displaced some two million Darfur villagers has ironically provided the international community with a unique opportunity to assist them in a way that can have a positive, permanent and profound effect on their livelihoods and the environment in which they live.

That opportunity should not be missed. Unfortunately, however, the “massive” FES intervention that the UN has called for remains a distant goal. While funding is generally available, a number of NGOs have been reluctant to get involved as they are struggling to meet other needs and priorities. Contributing to such reluctance is the tendency among some of them to view FES programs as essentially a GBV protection measure and to believe that those programs have failed to fulfill their promise in that regard because women who were

previously collecting wood for personal consumption are now doing so for income generation. That perception is inconsistent with what we heard from numerous relief officials involved with FES programs and from scores of displaced people, who confirmed that they were spending about fifty percent less time on wood collection since completing FES training. Given the enormous benefits that those programs can bring in relation to their cost, common sense dictates that the international community promote them not solely—or even principally—as a GBV protection measure, but as a vital piece of a holistic response to the urgent environmental and humanitarian issues confronting the conflict-affected peoples of Darfur.

The expansion and effectiveness of FES programs has also been hampered by the absence of overall coordination and a strategic plan for enhancing fuel efficiency throughout Darfur. As a result, stove programs have been implemented on an *ad hoc* and episodic basis by interested NGOs without sufficient attention being given to such issues as regional prioritization and the amount of coverage needed within a given region to maximize the benefits that FES programs have to offer.

REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL AND THE INTERNATIONAL LIFELINE FUND RECOMMEND:

- ❑ Consistent with its own recommendation made earlier this year, the United Nations, led by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), commence a campaign to promote FES training “on a massive scale” by encouraging NGOs to redouble their existing FES programs and to launch new programs in sites where they do not presently exist.
- ❑ In consultation with member agencies of the UN country team, the Humanitarian Coordinator designate a lead agency with the specific mandate to coordinate the response to environmental degradation in Darfur and to develop both an immediate and long-term strategic plan for addressing environmental issues, which should include FES, fuel alternative, conservation and reforestation programs.
- ❑ Donor states allocate sufficient funds to provide comprehensive FES coverage throughout Darfur and to commence a meaningful reforestation program.
- ❑ Implementing partners should take full advantage of existing technologies that will enable them to integrate into their training programs methods and materials that will make the stoves they promote more efficient and durable.

Dan Wolf of the International Lifeline Fund visited Darfur in September on an assessment mission with technical support from the Aprovecho Research Center and logistical support from Refugees International.