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Providing alternative cooking fuel to refugees amidst COVID-19

Access to sustainable energy for cooking, lighting and power remain key challenges in Rwamwanja refugee settlement amidst the Coronavirus outbreak. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) had planned to achieve sufficient energy provision and environmental sustainability in the settlement. Hillary Agwe, national UN Volunteer Livelihoods (Agriculture) Assistant with UNHCR, explains how activities needed to be adjusted with the emergence of COVID-19.

To contain the spread of COVID-19, the government of Uganda started lockdown restrictions, limiting movement and livelihood activities. Previously, the refugees sourced firewood for cooking from host communities. The majority of the refugees did not have access to any renewable energy sources and relied heavily on low-quality fuels, resulting in higher air pollution, and a greater risk of respiratory tract infections and eye diseases, among other negative implications.

The desperate search for firewood also often led to disputes with local communities and domestic violence. Working with UNHCR colleagues, we developed interventions to

enhance access to renewable sources and reduce the reliance on unclean sources of energy by the communities.

With the COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, the refugees were no longer able to walk long distances for wood fuel as was usual. Although this new reality negatively impacted livelihoods activities for the refugees, it also provided us an opportunity to enhance alternative livelihood systems while supporting the refugees in responding to COVID-19.

Together with environment and energy development partners, we quickly scaled the delivery of uncarbonized briquettes, an alternative sustainable sources of cooking fuel. The briquettes are made of readily-available waste materials, mostly from kitchen or farm waste, and provide an eco-friendly alternative to wood fuel. The manufacturing process for the briquettes adheres to the reuse, reduce and recycle tenets of environmental management, hence promote sustainable cyclic consumption patterns.

“ As part of the project interventions, we coupled the manufacturing of the uncarbonated briquettes with the production of compatible energy-saving stoves. As part of my assignment, I helped design the interventions, while keeping true to the principles of leaving no one behind and reaching the most vulnerable first. --Hillary Agwe, UN Volunteer Livelihoods (Agriculture) Assistant with UNHCR

The refugee communities were trained in groups of five, with strict observation of the COVID-19 containment measures by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Ministry of Health. The trained community members also volunteered to train neighbours to spread usage of the briquette and energy-saving technologies.

The approach has added value to agro-waste and household by-products that would otherwise end-up unused, causing local waste pollution. It has also promoted the utilization of biomass waste resources in developing and promoting more efficient and cleaner fuel substitutes. The interventions were also mainstreamed and enforced through increased awareness and education.

Given the close link between nutritional outcomes and access to energy, health and hygiene promoters were trained on energy-efficient cooking practices and sustainable access to energy, which reduced the quest for firewood. The result was an accelerated adoption of sustainable energy sources.

My role as environment and energy focal person is to ensure we deliver quality results and impact as per UNHCR strategic direction. I also work closely with my UNHCR colleagues, development partners at government and community level and fellow UN Volunteers for

the effective implementation of environmental protection and energy conservation.

“ Throughout this COVID-19 response period, I have learnt that UN Volunteers play an invaluable role in protecting vulnerable members of our societies, enabling all people to contribute to development. They also help link institutional and national initiatives with community action and with the people on the ground. I am proud that my work raised awareness and increased community-level volunteering amongst refugees and their host communities to advance their own development.--Hillary Agwe



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Sustainable Development Goal: [SDG 3: Good health and well-being](#) [SDG 7: Affordable and clean energy](#) [SDG 12: Responsible consumption and production](#) [SDG 17: Partnerships for the goals](#)