

In Niger, Gas to support refugees and to rescue trees

Abala, Niger, April 2014 (UNHCR) - 300 FCFA (0, 63 USD). This is the amount spent daily by Alkaounatou, Malian refugee, single mother with three children, to buy firewood. For Alkaounatou, when you're living on less than a dollar a day, that's a lot.

3 hours. This is the time spent daily by Maimouna, another refugee and single mother with her four children, to find firewood in the neighborhood of the Abala refugee camp. Kilometers to get less and less quantity of wood...

A green environment. That's the memory Akiyou, chairman of refugees, has on arriving in Abala.

Environment in agony, longer and longer distance to cover, firewood always more expensive, over the months these are the direct consequences of difficult access to domestic energy for refugees.

Their self-resilience is dashing away. It's once again time for survival strategies: reducing daily meals to sell part of the diet and buy firewood. The success of interventions against malnutrition is being reduced to ashes for a few pieces of firewood.

In Niger and Mali, few households use gas for domestic purposes. Behind this matter of fact are habits in food preparation but also a huge problem of physical and financial access. Gas is only available in cities and the initial cost of the consigned bottle and the stove is 23,000 FCFA (48 USD). This is obviously a large sum for the context, but often less than the monthly expense refugee households make to procure wood. It is an irrational situation with disastrous consequences to which UNHCR Niger has decided to remedy through the Gas Project.

A win-win partnership with the private sector was key to the success of the project. A contract was signed with a Niger company supplying gas to install at its own expense in the middle of sand a storage center for distribution and bottling. In return, UNHCR procured bottles, stoves and refills to meet the needs of more than 2,600 refugee households in Abala for 4 months.

It then only took a few weeks to reap the first benefits of the project.

1000 FCFA (2,11 USD). That is the amount Alkaounatou earns every day through her business. *"Before the gas reached us, I was forced to sell part of our food ration to buy firewood. But with the Gas Project, I could save some money, buy merchandise and open my own business. Now I do not depend only on assistance to feed my children",* Alkaounatou said.

3 hours. It is the time necessary for Maimouna to carry her business of selling pancakes every morning: *"gas has much relieved me. At time I used to fetch wood, I was not able to undertake any other activity. Today, I get up, prepare my pasta and roast my pancakes with gas and I sell them."*

Words of wisdom. These are the words coming from Akiyou when asked about the benefits of the Gas Project *"you should have asked your question to the trees. The gas came to the rescue of the trees. And when there is no tree, there is no life on earth."*



Maimouna. ©UNHCR/B.Moreno

Gas is now a pattern in everyday refugees' lives. Some are willing to get their refills on their own, 1800 FCFA for an average of 20 days, the cost of wood for only 6 days. Gas also became available for the local population in Abala, which was unthinkable not so long ago, but a logic reward for people who welcomed refugee populations.

UNHCR's Gas Project is the first of its kind to see the day in Niger, a new oil producer, which has just launched a major national campaign on gas promotion.

Supported in 2013 by the Embassy of France and ECHO, UNHCR Niger continues to mobilize its partners in order to extend the use of gas to other camps.