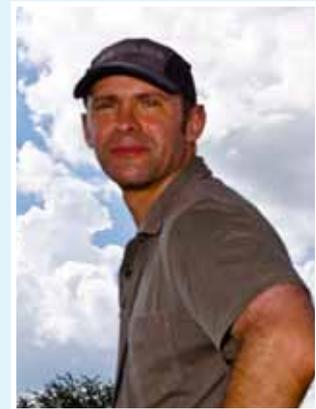


Viewpoints

Interview with Dan Wolf – International Lifeline Fund

In this Viewpoints feature we had a talk with Dan Wolf, Founder and Executive Director of the humanitarian organisation, International Lifeline Fund (Lifeline). He tells us how their fuel-efficient stove and briquetting products are enabling people across Africa and in Haiti to adapt to depleting forest resources while reducing carbon emissions.



Tell us a little bit about yourself and the International Lifeline Fund

Professionally, I am an attorney. My background includes pro bono refugee and human rights work with over 20 years of practice. During my career, I took on class action work and spearheaded a lawsuit against the government of Iraq for taking American citizens hostage during the first Gulf war, for which I recovered a very large award. I took the proceeds and started two foundations; one of them became the International Lifeline Fund (Lifeline) and the other the George Wolf Memorial Trust, named after my father.

The focus of the Lifeline was going to be humanitarian and sustainable development work that would have the highest impact for the least cost in the developing world. One of my earlier missions was to Darfur. That is where I became acquainted with the problem of open fire cooking and its relationship to deforestation and all the problems associated with using wood as a fuel source for cooking. And so, that became the first Lifeline initiative.

What is the role of the environment and natural resources in your operations?

Our fuel programme - fuel efficient stoves and to a certain extent briquetting - is an environmental focused program. In fact when I became initially involved in this, especially in Darfur with stove programmes, gender security for women who are exposed to rape and other forms

of violence was the main impetus for the international community. Of course, that was an issue for us as well, but to me the motivating force was the incredible devastation of the environment that I saw when I first came to Darfur. We had driven from one remote camp to another and during the course of doing that, we would go through an area that was completely semi-desert. Then, after 10 miles of driving, we would come to an area that was like an oasis: beautiful, lush and green. My interpreter, who was a schoolteacher in his late fifties, said that when he was a kid, the whole area used to look like this. I then came to know about the role of wood use for cooking and how that has contributed to deforestation.

Obviously, if we're going to make a dent in deforestation, we can't talk about thousands or tens of thousands or even hundreds of thousands of stoves. **We have to talk about tens of millions or hundreds of millions of stoves.** So I became very focused on the commercialisation ideas, where we would need a product that is as in demand as the cell-phone. Strangely enough the cell-phone has made its way into even remote African villages where people live on one or two dollars a day. If people can buy a cell-phone, which is very difficult for them to afford, they ought to be able to buy stoves and if we can get the price down and get the right product in, we will hopefully have a revolutionary type impact in the way that people cook.

What are the energy challenges that the communities you work with have to face and how are they worsened by the impacts of deforestation?

The main issue is getting fuel for cooking. We're talking about people living in remote environments and the only thing people use a lot of energy for is cooking. The problem is particularly worse in an environment like Darfur where you have a large number of people concentrated into a confined area. Pretty soon, what forests or trees are in that area are gone and people have to walk several miles just to get wood, and that creates a huge livelihood and security problem because they risk rape and other forms of violence when going out to collect fuel; and sometimes families will sell their food ration. Those are the kinds of issues that people face and then to a lesser extent, these problems will also exist in non-refugee environment, but in a refugee setting it's extremely dire.

For people who are cooking with charcoal, the big issue they face from a day-to-day perspective is getting the money to buy charcoal. In Port-au-Prince, Haiti for example, the average family will spend about 40% of its income on charcoal; these are families living on only a couple of dollars a day. If we can reduce the use of charcoal by say 50% we can immediately increase income savings by 20%. In Uganda, those numbers translate to more like a 10% increase in income savings but that's huge if you can do that at the very lowest income rungs of society. If you can increase incomes by that amount, you're improving livelihoods significantly at the very core.

Figure 1: “Bosses” which is what the production team members are called in Haiti, building Lifeline’s fuel saving “Recho Plop Plop” stoves (Source: Deborah Terry)



How do your fuel-efficient stoves help adapt and build resilience to the changing environment?

I can pretty much quantify that for you because we had applied for carbon financing in Uganda and very recently obtained it from the UN Executive Board. The verifiers/auditors had a look at our stoves and found that each charcoal stove reduces CO₂ emissions by 3.6 tonnes. Our goal is to increase from our current production of 15,000 stoves a year to 50,000. If you do the math, 50,000 times 3.6 tonnes is 180,000 tonnes of carbon emissions reduced.

One of the unique features of our stoves is that they’re all manufactured locally with local parts and labour, so they can be easily repaired through our local repair system. Our stoves are extremely durable, both in their make up and ability to be repaired, having a lifespan of at least three years. **So the fuel-efficient cookstoves get savings year after year on carbon impact and each charcoal-burning stove also saves about 20 trees a year. For the wood-burning stoves, the savings are about one tonne of carbon saved per cookstove and about 5 medium sized trees saved.**

How are your stoves developed and distributed to communities?

There are many general challenges involved, but you’ve put your finger on what is perhaps the most difficult of them. We focus on two distribution methods with respect to our commercialisation programme. We establish vendor networks, predominately female vendors, strategically located in various neighbourhoods and we support that network through a concerted marketing campaign. That is one mechanism.

To reach further and wider, we also tap into existing distribution networks with other organisations, particularly organisations that market and distribute environmental based products.

We work with independent organisations that buy large orders of stoves and take on the responsibility of distribution. We also have one or two locations from which we do direct sales, but generally that is not something we do.

We try and involve those in refugee camps in the production so they have some ownership in their stoves through training and so forth. For the most part, we can’t sell stoves in a camp, as the residents are not in a circumstance to buy them and are used to receiving them for free. It is very hard to sell wood-burning stoves, particularly if people aren’t buying wood, they wouldn’t spend the US\$ 8 or US\$ 10 it takes to buy stoves.

The main markets are for charcoal, which are urban and semi-urban towns in the areas we operate. These areas include, in Uganda mainly the North but the stoves we manufacture in the North are also sold in the Eastern part of the country. We have recently established a production facility in Kampala so we’re going to be targeting the low-income neighbourhoods there. In Haiti, we’re concentrating on Port-au-Prince and the surrounding sub-urban areas.

Are your stoves sold at commercial or subsidised rates to these markets?

If we took into account the inputs in terms of direct labour and materials and add on to that advertising costs, operational expenses, overhead and so forth, we couldn’t possibly sell stoves at a price that would cover those costs. So we do subsidise the stoves and take a loss on each one but that loss will be more than offset by carbon finance. For example, in Uganda we’re able to make stoves very cheap; excluding the overhead

and advertising, direct inputs into each small stove per unit is about US\$ 6.50 - 7. We can sell them to the vendors for that price and they sell them to the consumers for maybe US\$ 8. In Haiti, it’s more challenging, as you can’t really make stoves for less than US\$ 10, so even direct costs are not counterbalanced by the price.

How do these stoves get to those in refugee camps?

Here, it is a different model. What we try and do in these situations, in Uganda and Darfur for instance, is establish a training system and bring the refugees to our training centre. They make their own clay stoves. In the Dadaab camps in Kenya, we have local staff making the stoves but individual beneficiaries don’t do that – they’re taught how to use and maintain them properly – as it’s not realistic for them to make their own given the kind of costs, materials and labour involved. So the stoves are made with the assistance of Lifeline, but the actual producers are the refugees that we engage with and are compensated.

Of your charcoal and wood burning fuel-efficient stoves, which is your main product?

The commercial stoves are principally ones that use charcoal and in refugee settings they are primarily woodstoves, although in Haiti we did provide charcoal stoves in some instances.



Figure 2: Young woman holding Lifeline's fuel saving Okelo Kuc stove in Uganda (Source: Deborah Terry)

What's the reason for this difference?

Refugees in camps where we have operated generally cook with wood because charcoal is extremely expensive. From an environmental perspective, I also would prefer the use of wood to charcoal. However, if we're going to be actually selling stoves, the markets that are available are people who are purchasing charcoal, so we concentrate on charcoal stoves for commercial markets.

The reason we prefer to sell wood-burning stoves is because the amount of wood needed to create charcoal is a lot. For every four parts wood, you get essentially one part charcoal. So a lot of damage is done just in the process of making charcoal. Therefore, I would rather they used wood but the reality is, if someone lives in an urban area, they're going to cook with charcoal.

Are your energy products branded?

It's something that we're in the process of doing. In Uganda, the beneficiary population came up with a name for our stove by themselves. They call it the 'Okelo Kuc', which means 'Bringer of Peace' in Luo. We may have to change the name for other parts of Uganda, but that is what it is called in the North. It has become a very widely known name; in fact, people use Okelo Kuc as a synonym for fuel efficient stoves here. If you ask someone, 'do you have Okelo Kuc', they may show you a different stove model, and if you said 'that's not the Okelo Kuc', they would insist that it was.

It's great to have a name like Kleenex or Xerox that is associated with your product. But you also have to do even greater branding and advertising efforts so that people can understand that there is a one and only original 'Okelo Kuc' and we've engaged in that process. We've also registered the name and trademarked it in Uganda.

Is there any particular reason that they came up with that name?

Yes, it's because the beneficiaries felt that the stove brings peace to the home. For example, it retains heat so that if a woman is cooking and completing dinner for the family at 6 o'clock, and the husband comes home at 8 or 8:30, he can have a warm meal. I think that's one of the factors, but basically they thought it brought peace and serenity to the home. Not something I would have thought of originally but that's what they named it and we think it's endearing!

Tell us a bit about your briquetting programme?

In Haiti, we work with the organisation Prakti Design, an India-based company that manufactures stoves. As part of a programme with the World Food Programme, in the schools that they sponsor, we distribute a Prakti-made institutional stove that is fired with paper waste briquettes.

The paper is collected from the streets and from businesses. Basically what you do is take the paper waste, combine it with sawdust and compress it to come up with a briquette that burns well in stoves.

There are many benefits of using paper briquettes. Firstly, it gives a 100% saving on wood or charcoal. Secondly, it is less costly. Thirdly, for the cook, it is a much safer and more comfortable way of cooking. If you go into any of these kitchens where they are cooking with charcoal, the smoke is pretty oppressive.

Is there a role for the private sector to help with granting access to energy for the poor?

Oh absolutely! If the private sector were willing to take the risks and make the long term investments that are required, and to spend the time and energy necessary in these countries to help grow these energy

markets and to tap into the already present demand, then Lifeline wouldn't really be needed. Ultimately, I think the market is too risky, too uncertain, too long term a proposition and also too foreign really to most manufacturers, as it is targeted at people making one to five dollars a day.

Is there a message you would like to give energy practitioners out there?

It's extremely important to pay attention to what is ultimately, after all, going to be your customer base. So if you're going to create a product, you may think that it's what they need and it meets all of their particular desires and that it's workable. But you don't really know until you've actually gone out there and spoken to the people that you're trying to benefit and given them every opportunity to have as much input into the product as possible. Ultimately, it's something that they're going to have to be satisfied with. You're not going to be able to tell them what to do – you've got to listen to them. Also if we're going to be able to really make the kind of headway that we need to make and to conquer these development challenges in improving energy access, we have to be willing to be creative and to take risk and stomach failure. It's going to take quasi-revolutionary type interventions to really win this battle.

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