

# MANAGING ENVIRONMENTAL DISASTERS IN HAZARDOUS REFUGEE PROTECTED AREAS IN THE AFRICAN GREAT LAKES REGION: SOME LESSONS FROM TANZANIA

By

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## Introduction

in the era of economic globalisation where, among other things, there is increased social and economic differentiation of society the issue of forced migration should be taken more seriously and in larger dimensions. Civil strife, conflicts, and wars continue to threaten humanity globally thus breeding refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). Further, foreign investments in developing countries continue to generate IDPs. The IDPs, in essence, are people who have been forced to flee their homes, but who have not reached a neighbouring country. From the economic and ecological viewpoint, refugees and IDPs in Africa are more vulnerable than those in industrialized countries and may hence be there to stay. This means that both refugees and IDPs should be entitled to the same range of human and ecological health.

In the African Great Lakes Regions, refugee challenges are enormous (URT 2003). It was stated, for instance, that the current political, social (ethnic), economic and ecological crisis have, firstly, weakened the capacity of the individual countries to cope with drastic economic and ecological changes. Secondly, the majority of the people still depend on the utilization of the natural resources for their livelihoods. In this vein, Mother Nature is increasingly being threatened as the economic value of the goods and services in this part of the world is gradually declining. All these processes make the economies of these countries much more vulnerable to market and environmental fluctuations and indeed to the refugees who exacerbate the problems.

This premise falls short of the fact that Mother Nature herself has her inherent values that she uncompromisingly guards in spite of human technological developments. This is the carrying capacity of the earth or a part of it (Independent Commission on Population and Quality of Life 1996). However, in the search for profits humankind violates these values resulting in environmental disasters.

Environmental problems related to biotic and abiotic degradation as well as human health: epidemics and pandemics such as cholera and HIV/AIDS respectively have been collaborated in several studies. Scanty efforts have been directed towards planning for land pollution-based hazards that, in essence, have long-term adverse effects. This paper seeks to increase awareness on the fatal yet silent land and human health hazards such as soil erosion hazard, lightning, malaria, schistomiasis for the former, and lung cancer, conjunctivities, asthma, skin allergies and a combination of other land pollution - based illnesses, for the latter, which could be related to poorly/unplanned refugee and IDPs protected areas.

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## **On Managing Refugee and IDP Protected Areas**

By and large, some refugee protection laws conventions are outdated (cf the UN 1951). Since the 1960s, Tanzania has generously played host to thousands of refugees from her neighbours. According to the Government Policy, in so much as most asylum seekers were freedom fighters and would thus go back home after liberating their countries, Tanzania had opted for an open-door refugee policy up to 2002 (URT 2002). The reception and subsequent settlement in designated areas accorded to them occurred in safety and dignity as stated in the 1998 Refugees Act (URT 1998; URT 2003). It is interesting to note that these movements and attendant services caused Tanzania to pay dearly on her development achievement earned over decades of her peaceful democratic process.

The late 20th Century witnessed an escalation of conflicts, civil wars and wars in the African Great Lakes Region that generated massive influxes of refugees into Tanzania and her neighbours (PMO 1995/2003). These events triggered, among other things, a policy change whereby the Tanzania Government provides temporary refugee protection on the premise that a rapid voluntary repatriation be conducted.

The National Refugee Policy vision is "the maintenance of a just and fair system of refugee management which takes into account both the interests of our nation and those of the international community at large in respect of refugee protection (UNHCR 1990).

Equally important in a refugee and for group protection is the need to factor in the needs of the refugee as an individual. The issue of the pressure on resources as large populations cross the borders within a relatively short time is clearly articulated by the National Refugee Policy as one of the impediments to meet international protection standards. Under such circumstances, border areas which are ecologically resilient should be mapped for refugee protection purposes in order to minimize environmental degradation and treat refugees in a humane way.

In considering durable solutions the National Refugee Policy opts for, among others, "local settlement" as an opportunity for enabling the victims to stay in Tanzania until conditions which forced them to flee their countries of origin has remarkably changed. This is a situation which obviously calls for prior identification of environmentally friendly habitats.

It should be stated on the outset that an influx of asylum seekers in no uncertain terms, creates a state of emergency whereby the normal functions of both the human and physical environments are interrupted resulting in negative consequences. This situation is clearly reflected in the National Policy which spells out the "country's experience in hosting large number of refugees with adverse effects on the environment ..."

The Policy would also have addressed the issue of resilience of the sites/areas designated for refugee protection because as UNHCR (1996) puts it environmental impacts are an inevitable by-product of human existence and human being's interaction with the physical world. In the implementation strategy the policy touches base with the key stakeholders and outlines their involvement. It is interesting to note

as several studies have collaborated that the local community members participate in the provision of the basic needs of the refugees prior to being transferred to designated areas.

The crux of the matter is that all the key players should democratically participate in all major processes in refugee protection and this should include the location of designated areas. As the Policy propagates 'safe zones' within the boundaries of the refugee producing countries the same should be the case for refugee destination areas. These are to be areas which are environmentally friendly habitats bearing in mind the fact that refugees as a way of life are there to stay.

Up till now numerous organizations are involved in environmental conservation programs which benefit both refugee camps and host communities (Rutinwa and Kamanga 2003). This state of affairs shows how costly environmental rehabilitation projects are compared to investment in designing preparedness plans for prevention is better than cure.

Taking off from where Rutinwa and Kamanga (2003) left, this paper advocates a proactive approach to refugee emergency management. It calls for humanitarian agencies to incorporate local peoples' needs and priorities in their development programs through joint planning, implementation and monitoring and evaluation of refugee protected areas. As correctly advocated by UNHCR eliminating all adverse environmental impacts of refugees is impossibility, but their mitigation is a reasonable policy objective. Further it is asserted that most areas hosting or producing refugees experience some environmental degradation that is independent of refugee movements. Rather than taking place in a pristine environment it is further acknowledged that refugee related impacts add to these underlying problems.

### **Approaches in the identification of on-site hazards**

The human and environmental vulnerability may be construed as greatly influenced by the nature of the environment and development processes in a given area. The location of a settlement is influenced by the physical, social, political and economic factors. Environmental vulnerability reduction has to address land resilience in the context of solum, relief, drainage, water, weather and climate, pests and diseases. The infrastructural component would among other variables include external and internal movement.

It is in this context that contingency physical planning of settlement sites is cherished as a basis of ensuring a certain level of protection of natural resources thus reducing the cost of human and environmental health care.

### **Participation at Local Level**

Conflicting demands on resources between locals and refugees as well as varying degrees of resilience of various parcels of the land resource base call for participation of parties and understanding of interdependence of assistance in the operationalisation of local resources management practices.

A number of parties should be involved, either directly or indirectly, in refugee-related environmental problems (UNHCR 1996). The actors include the local communities, the host national and local governments, the refugees themselves, and local NGOs. The international bodies involved are the UNHCR, international NGOs, other UN agencies and multilateral and bilateral development agencies.

More than many other policy issues, environmental problems and measures bring together a large number of organizations. Refugees related environmental problems are no exception. With many actors involved, close coordination and collaboration among them are vital throughout refugee assistance operations. The leadership of the host government and UNHCR in these circumstances is critical; to avoid a situation in which potential participants adopt a "wait-and-see" approach. Establishment of a local environment task force is considered instrumental in promoting local coordination.

The roles played by the refugees and the local communities are presented hereunder.

#### **Role of the host government/ local governments**

- The host government should take a leading role in efforts to minimize adverse environmental impacts arising from refugee situations. For example, the technical evaluation of options which underlies the host government's decisions on the location and scale of refugee camps, during the emergency phase, is crucial. The host government's openness to enter into a technical dialogue with the donors on this, and related issues, is thus considered important.
- Governments must take steps to realistically estimate, (with the assistance of donors, where necessary) the quantity and accessibility of natural resources to be made available for refugee assistance operations and their environmental consequences. The host government should clearly specify the structure of local decision-making in refugee-related matters involving technical bodies (e.g. ministries of environment, forestry, health, etc.) and different levels of government (central, local, etc.).
- Use should be made of whatever technical and extension services, as well as related infrastructure facilities and equipment, which can be mobilized in support of refugee related environmental activities. This may include technical staff to supervise and advice on the implementation of environment-related measures, including the importation of potentially hazardous goods such as pesticides, or the resources of existing tree nurseries to support refugee-implemented reforestation projects. These contributes should be extended to rehabilitation after the repatriation of refugees.

#### **Role of UNHCR**

- UNHCR has a primary responsibility for integrating environmental considerations into all of its decisions and activities affecting the protection and well-being of refugees.
- UNHCR must take a co-leader's role (with the host government), in promoting environmental protection and rehabilitation in the field, by setting objectives, priorities and policies, by overseeing the design and implementation of environmental projects, and by coordinating the efforts of all

- the parties concerned.
- UNHCR should promote linkages with other UN agencies and should strive to achieve a consistency of approach across the UN spectrum.
  - UNHCR should mobilize donors to contribute to activities which eliminate or mitigate adverse environmental impacts of ongoing operations, as well as activities that help offset the legacy of past refugee-related damage.

### **Role of International NGOs**

- NGOs involved in refugee-related operations should integrate environmental concerns into their policies, programmes and projects and ensure that these are compatible with UNHCR's policies in this domain.
- NGOs should provide technical expertise and share it with the other parties involved in assistance operations. NGOs should facilitate links with specialists; make available insights gained from case studies and share relevant technical materials.
- A small percentage of NGOs has the ability of self-funding emergency-type projects, and many more are able to raise funds for long-term development and relief efforts. In particular, international environmental agencies could play an important role, both in policy development and joint fundraising campaigns. NGOs acting on these abilities should coordinate their efforts with UNHCR and other participants.
- International NGOs could become implementing agencies for rehabilitation projects. At the same time international NGOs should be encouraged to make their own contribution to the rehabilitation needs.

### **Role of other UN agencies**

Other UN agencies should integrate refugee-related environmental concerns into their policies, programmes and projects.

- Technical agencies such as UNICEF, FAO and UNEP should be encouraged to involve themselves in refugee assistance operations by providing expertise in their respective fields such as reforestation, land-use planning, soil conservation, and water resource management.
- Current plans and programmes developed by other UN agencies should be extended to refugee-hosting areas. National environmental master plans and action plans, for example, should address refugee-related environmental issues.

### **Role of Donors**

Given their magnitude and long-term influence on refugee affected areas when the refugee population is large, refugee related environmental problems can no longer be considered separately from development activities. International development agencies must be encouraged to adopt an integrated approach to refugee-affected area rehabilitation and development.

- Funds could be reallocated within the framework of bilateral development funding, and could, with the agreement of donor and beneficiary governments, cover the rehabilitation of refugee-affected areas. Better still donors could acknowledged environmental problems related to refugee situations to be an

issue which transcends existing development commitments, and make available additional funds.

- Some refugee-related environmental problems (e.g. threats to biodiversity and endangered species, or emissions of global warming gasses linked to refugees' fuelwood use) have global implications. Support for refugee-related environmental operations should therefore be sought from those specialized funding agencies set up to address global environmental problems (e.g. the Global Environment Facility).

## **The Proposed Research Agenda**

With civil strife and wars still raging in Burundi, Rwanda, Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda the influx of refugees from these countries will continue to pour into northwestern Tanzania. They are these 'apparently' perpetually force development researchers, policy-makers and all other key players in the refugee

Discourse. The task ahead is to make the current economic and political liberalization more participatory and inclusive to reach the majority of the African society that is highly dependent on natural resources for survival.

In a nutshell, the role of the international organizations especially would be described as the key to reform negotiation in Africa. It is argued here that the future role of these institutions, including the United Nations agencies and the donor community in natural resources management, should be to support local initiatives in maintaining the productivity of the resource base while, at the same time, meeting the ever expanding and changing needs of a growing population. It is anticipated that future research will contribute to better understanding of the root causes of forced migration and post-conflict sustenance and/or improvement of environmental productivity and peace in refugee prone areas like northwestern Tanzania.

It is evident that research on the impacts of refugees on the environment and development in Tanzania in particular and in the AGLR in general is not well developed. To carry the research on refugees local people state-donor-the environment and development forward, the following agenda is proposed.

There is need first to undertake in-depth studies on risk and vulnerability assessment of local communities and States with respect to globalization. The analysis will forecast hazards - damage/loss to be inflicted by forced migrants in the RAA in a post-conflict situation. This process-response relationship may shed light on the assessment of environmental impacts of refugees.

The second area of interest would be on the identification and assessment of local, sub-national, national and international institutions, which might promote sustainable use of environmental resources in the RAA. In this regard, one may wish to focus on the examination of the dynamics of local community-refugee-state donor-environment interactions. Further, an evaluation of the capacity of the identified institutions in place should be undertaken. It is postulated that by building on indigenous knowledge of both the local people and the refugee population, local level development projects in RAA supported by state and international development agents, sustainable development and peace will be promoted.

The outputs of the two research agenda form the input in the third one, which should seek to put in place strategies, policies and rules to guide the management of the environment in refugee situations. One way to manage refugee disasters is to integrate refugee disaster management concerns into development planning (and indeed day to day programs) at all levels. This calls for a participative) are effectively involved in problems identification, formulation of programs, strategies, policies and rules to govern their own development - a bottom-up approach to development.

As a digression from the politically motivated population movement, it may be proposed that impacts of environmental refugees caused by land degradation on biodiversity and development be pursued with same thrust in the Eastern African subregion (Wijkman and Timberlake 1984, Darkoh 1994; Lonergan 1995).

National economic policies up to the recent past coupled with current unfavorable international economic order lingering on Tanzania coupled with border conflicts have had adverse cumulative impacts towards realizing the potential of these remote regions. Consequently, these problems have lead to low level resource investment and attendant underdevelopment in the agricultural, fishing, infrastructure sector - the hub of national development.

In view of the contemporary socio-economic conditions, it is perhaps logical to argue that the transmatic refugee influxes in northwestern Tanzania have exacerbated an already ailing regional economy and fragile environment under globalization. This state of affairs has lead to a decline in the productive capacity of the human and natural resources and reduced economic growth. That the refugee emergence tops the list of catastrophes in the region and hence is an areas of great concern at sub national, national and international levels is not debatable. It is against this premise that development researchers should direct their intellectual power in the search for strategies aimed at sustainable self-development rather than relief agendas in refugee prone areas.

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