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THE IMPACT OF REFUGEES ON THE ENVIRONMENT: THE CASE OF AFRICA

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Abstract

The continent of Africa has had its fair share of the refugee problem over the years. Currently it has many refugees scattered all over the world. The causes of the refugee problem in Africa are many and varied but unending wars usually fuelled by repressive regimes seem the major cause, followed by natural disasters. Refugees, searching for safe havens can burden the ecosystem in their country of asylum and complicate environmental decision-making. This paper, therefore, will argue that the refugee problem in Africa certainly has a negative impact on the environment. The paper is divided into four parts. The first part conceptualises refugees. The second part provides statistics on the number of refugees worldwide and in Africa. The third part discusses the impact of refugees on the environment especially in Africa. The last part provides possible solutions to the environmental problems.

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of refugees has been a part of humankind since time immemorial. However, the numbers of refugees and the seriousness of their predicament have grown significantly over the past few decades because of a variety of reasons. With the rising frequency of civil and regional conflict in many parts of the world many innocent people have been displaced from their homes and sources of livelihood. Struggles for political and economic power between different factions, ethnic and national groups, especially in Africa, are the single most important cause of displacement

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and they are, unfortunately, the most difficult to manage. The brutal ambition of a few for power and the poverty of many have also fuelled the refugee crisis in Africa. For instance, the current conflicts in Darfur in Sudan, Somalia and Cote d'Ivoire, and the general instability in the Great Lakes Region are a major cause of the refugee problem in Africa. Zimbabwe's current problems have also resulted in a large number of its population becoming refugees in other African countries, Europe, North America, Australia and even New Zealand.

In addition, natural and human-caused disasters, climatic adversity and crop failures have also exacerbated the refugee problem in Africa. For example, recent floods in Mozambique have led to the displacement of some people. Mangwiro (2007) reports that some 500,000 people in Mozambique, mainly in the provinces of Zambezia and Sofala are at risk from flooding that has killed 29 people and damaged thousands of homes and schools. Some 24000 people have been taken to transit and accommodation centres as rains in the neighbouring Zimbabwe, Zambia and Malawi poured into the overflowing Cabora Bassa Dam.

Unfortunately, the increase in the number of refugees has not been matched by commensurately effective response. Indeed, as the number of refugees has grown, international refugee organisations have been overwhelmed, attempts to organise relief have become more haphazard and public opinion has become increasingly indifferent. Media images of refugees no longer appear to elicit the same degree of sympathy and financial support as before. In most countries, attitudes towards refugees have hardened and attempts to prevent refugees from entering and seeking asylum have become more common. For example, Somali and Zimbabwean refugees have been killed in South Africa because of the rising xenophobic tendencies in that country. They are normally accused by the locals of committing violent crimes, taking away jobs as well as a drain on the limited social services. Some African refugees in Europe have also been victims of racist attacks. From these examples, it can be seen that refugees are not always safe in the countries they seek asylum. Police or security forces can turn a blind eye even where they see that legitimate refugees are being abused by the locals. In some instances, they also abuse the refugees themselves.

On another note, refugees searching for safe havens can burden the ecosystem in their country of asylum and complicate environmental

decision making. As the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) rightly notes, the spontaneous movement and displacement of large numbers of people may have significant impacts on the environment, mostly negative (UNHCR 2007). At the individual level, it is very traumatic to be a refugee and a lot of physical, emotional as well as psychological pain is often experienced by refugees. Usually, it takes very long for them to recover from this traumatic experience. This paper, therefore, will argue that the refugee problem in Africa certainly has a negative impact on the environment of the host nation. The paper is divided into four parts. The first part conceptualises refugees. The second part provides statistics on the number of refugees worldwide and in Africa. The third part discusses the impact of refugees on the environment especially in Africa. The last part provides possible solutions to the environmental problems.

CONCEPTUALISING REFUGEES

The concept of the refugee has its historical roots in the religious persecutions of dissident groups several centuries ago. In more recent times, this category has specifically included the victims of harsh treatment for political reasons, usually by those in power, although early concern focused on persecuted minorities in Europe who were singled out for their ethnic, political or religious origin. However, there is a view that refugees, as the term is used today, are a 20th century phenomenon (Mupedziswa 1993:3). Refugee was defined as a legal group in response to the large numbers of people fleeing Eastern Europe following World War II. According to Clover (2002) technically the term "refugees" refers to those who have been displaced across the border of their home states, while "Internally Displaced Persons" (IDPs) refers to those who have been displaced within their country of origin. The IDPs endure similar circumstances but lack legal protection.

Under International Law, a refugee is a person who is outside his/her country of nationality or habitual residence, has a well founded fear of persecution because of his/her race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, and is unable or unwilling to avail himself/herself of the protection of that country, or to return there, for fear of persecution. They are sub-group of the broader category of displaced persons. So, by definition, refugees cannot benefit from the protection of their own government. Clover (2002) notes that a person is a refugee whether or not a legal eligibility procedure has already recognised that status. She

goes on to say that in its "Handbook on Procedures and Criteria for Determining Refugee Status" the UNHCR outlines policy guidelines for the determination of refugee status.

The UNHCR's founding mandate also defines refugees as people who are outside their country and cannot return owing to a well founded fear of persecution because of their race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership of a particular social group. Regional instruments, such as the 1969 Organisation of African Unity Refugee Convention and the 1994 Cartagena Declaration in Latin America expanded that mandate to include people who fled because of war or civil conflict. A total of 146 countries have signed the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention and/or its 1967 Protocol and recognise people as refugees based on the definitions contained in these regional instruments. The broadening or expansion of the refugee definition is an indication that the problem of refugees is escalating and becoming increasingly intractable. Over the past few years, there has also been a new phenomenon of economic refugees. These are refugees who are leaving their countries of origin in search of better economic prospects in other countries. Many people on the African continent are migrating to South Africa because of its perceived strong economy. Much more are leaving the continent altogether heading for Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand with the sometimes mistaken belief that their lives will automatically change for the better once they arrive in those countries.

OFFICE OF THE UNHCR

The lead international agency coordinating refugee protection is the Office of the UNHCR. Headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland, the UNHCR (established on December 14, 1950) protects and supports refugees at the request of a government or the United Nations and assists in their return or settlement. All refugees in the world are under the UNHCR mandate.

The UNHCR provides protection and assistance not only to refugees, but also to other categories of displaced or needy people. These include asylum seekers, refugees who have returned home but still need help in rebuilding their lives, local communities directly affected by the movements of refugees, stateless people and the so-called IDP.

So, in a nutshell, the agency is mandated to lead and coordinate international action to protect refugees and resolve refugee problems worldwide. Its primary purpose is to safe-guard the rights and well-being of refugees. It strives to ensure that everyone can exercise the right to seek asylum and find safe refuge in another State, with the option to return home voluntarily, integrate locally, or to resettle in a third country.

STATISTICS OF THE REFUGEE POPULATION IN THE WORLD

No one really knows the actual number of refugees in the world today. Kibreab (1987) argues that in appeals for short and long term assistance, both host governments and UNHCR find it necessary to produce statistics on the number of refugees, and as a result educated guesses are made. He contends that refugee statistics are by nature highly controversial and rarely neutral. States offering asylum are often accused by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) of deliberately exaggerating the numbers of refugees in their territories, to maximise external assistance, while the asylum states accuse the NGOs of deliberate underestimation to minimise costs to themselves. Nevertheless, it is clear that refugees are indeed a reality in the world today. For the purposes of this paper, the statistics given by the UNHCR will be adopted since it is the sole organisation mandated by the United Nations to coordinate the issues of refugees worldwide.

According to the UNHCR (2007), by the start of 2006, the global refugee population had dropped from 95 million to 84 million – the lowest since 1980 – largely as a result of more than 6 million refugees (two-thirds of them Afghans) returning home over the past four years. In addition to the continuing return of Afghans, 2005 saw other major repatriations to Liberia, Burundi, Iraq and Angola (all of which welcomed back more than 50,000 returnees during the course of the year). Mass movements of new refugees into neighbouring countries totalled 136,000 - the lowest number since 1976. The largest exodus took place from Togo, where 39,000 people fled their homes. The top five refugee hosting countries are Pakistan (1,085,000), Iran (716,000), Germany (700,000), Tanzania (549,000) and United States (380,000).

Table 1

Ten Largest Groups of Refugees by Countries of Origin and Asylum

As on 1 January 2006

Origin	Main Countries of Asylum	Total
Afghanistan	Pakistan/Iran/Germany/Netherlands/UK	1,908,100
Sudan	Chad/Uganda/Kenya/Ethiopia/Central African Republic	693,300
Burundi	Tanzania/DR Congo/ Rwanda/South Africa/ Zambia	438,700
DR Congo	Tanzania/Zambia/Congo/Rwanda/Uganda	430,600
Somalia	Kenya/Yemen/UK/USA/Ethiopia	394,800
Vietnam	China/Germany/USA/France/Switzerland	358,200
Palestine	Saudi Arabia/Egypt/Iraq/Libya/Algeria	349,700
Iraq	Iran/Germany/Netherlands/Syria/UK	262,100
Azerbaijan	Armenia/Germany/USA/Netherlands/France	233,700
Liberia	Sierra Leone/Guinea/Cote d'Ivoire/Ghana/ USA	231,100

This table includes estimates for nationalities in industrialised countries on the basis of recent arrivals and asylum-seeker recognition.
Source: UNHCR (2007)

It can be seen from Table 1 above that Africa contributed over 2 million refugees who are residing or seeking asylum in other countries at the end of January 2006. As of January 1, 2006, there were 20,751,900 refugees in the world - Asia (8,603,600), Africa (5,169,300), Europe (3,666,700), Latin America and Carribean (2,513,000), North America (716,800) and Oceania (82,500). In the case of Africa the number has since increased because of the on-going conflicts in some parts of the continent, notably in Somalia, Uganda and Sudan. The recent Kenyan political crisis has also added to the number of displaced people on the continent. It should also be noted that all the regions in Africa, namely East and Horn of Africa, Great Lakes, West and Central Africa, Southern Africa and North Africa have experienced refugee problems at one time or another albeit on different scales.

THE IMPACT OF REFUGEES ON THE ENVIRONMENT IN AFRICA

Environmental problems exist throughout the world, but many reach an aggravated scale where large numbers of people are forced together through a common sense of survival. In environmental terms, Africa has paid a heavy price for its accommodating attitude towards refugees. African culture usually demands that you have to welcome strangers in your home especially if they have travelled from a far away place. They have to be well fed and treated with respect. This age-old tradition has been carried forward even in the 21st century. Needless to say, however, huge numbers of refugees have impacted negatively on the environment of the host countries. Among the most significant problems associated with refugee-affected areas are deforestation, soil erosion, overgrazing, and depletion and pollution of water sources. Furthermore, changes in the social and economic welfare of local communities following the arrival, or during prolonged residency of refugees are also critical factors. These too may have impact on the environment, altering the rate and extent of local services available today and in the future. Shephered (2008) notes that refugee settlements often occur in environmentally sensitive areas. In Africa, refugees have therefore usually been settled in semi-arid, agriculturally marginal areas, or near national parks or forest reserves. Refugee camps tend to be large for both logistical and political reasons. These large camps have a more negative impact on the environment than would be the case if several considerably smaller camps, catering the same total numbers, were set up. Furthermore, refugees often have to stay in their countries of asylum for extended periods, and the impact on the environment around camps may be prolonged. In the case of unique sites, such as the Virunga National Park in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the environmental impact of refugees may be irreversible. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) also rightly observes that often refugees are settled in fragile ecosystems where they exert considerable pressure on the natural resources, as they have no other means of survival (UNEP 2002). Refugee populations also sometimes experience conflicts with neighbouring communities, through competition for resources. Tensions inevitably result, since host populations are currently made to bear many of the costs of the arrival of refugees in their area without immediate compensation.

Competition for natural resources such as fuel wood, building materials, fresh water and wild foods is an immediate concern. As

Mupedziswa (1993) rightly notes, refugees in Africa are notorious for the destruction of other elements of the environment, including wild life. In most parts of Africa, grass is a vital resource used in many projects, particularly for thatching huts and grazing animals. As a result, refugees usually collect it in large quantities. Unfortunately, in most refugee camps sickles are often in short supply, forcing refugees to use other unconventional methods of collecting it, which result in grass being pulled out complete with roots. Mupedziswa (1993) argues that when that happens, land degradation is inevitable, and subsequently soil erosion occurs, often on a large scale.

Refugees have also been known to engage themselves in large scale hunting and sometimes even poaching wildlife, to supplement the meagre rations they receive. In some cases, they have invaded rivers, and within a short period the rivers are depleted of all fish, and other forms of marine life. Where nets are used other creatures such as frogs, crabs, etc. have perished in the process. Similar is the case with the forests and wild animals. Edible wild fruits have also been targeted, either because wild trees have been wiped clean or have been cut down and used as firewood. The major problem is that uncontrolled access to these natural resources can lead to their total depletion and thereby environmental degradation, and thus disturb the ecological balance. For instance, Barclay (2008) notes that the massive flow of refugees who have sought shelter in Tanzania have caused habitat degradation and major wildlife losses in areas near the camps, where rare species such as chimpanzees are susceptible to poaching. Populations of buffalo, sable antelope, and other herbivores have also fallen off. She goes on to say that, according to the Red List of Threatened Species prepared by the World Conservation Union (UCN), many sub-Saharan wildlife species are in danger and 20 per cent are experiencing decline in their populations because of the trade of wild meat, also called “bush meat”. The demand for wild meat or bush meat is driven partly by the absence of meat in the rations provided by aid agencies which, some experts say, represents a failure of relief organisations to meet the basic needs of their charges. Many East African refugees are accustomed to regular consumption of meat as a source of protein. When refugees are kept in camps without meat protein, they tend to fend for themselves by poaching local wildlife (Barclay 2008).

While it is true that deforestation is taking place all over Africa and is being effected largely by locals, the presence of refugees has seriously compounded the problem. For instance, the land around refugee camps and

planned settlements has been stripped of vegetation, leaving extensive areas of barren sandy soil, adding to an already serious situation. Where refugees have been settled, erosion, deforestation and land degradation have become the order of the day. UNHCR (2001) notes that environmental rehabilitation of refugee camps in Africa alone could cost as much as US$150 million a year. Visible evidence of environmental degradation is most obvious in long-standing asylum countries such as Kenya and Sudan. Land surrounding the refugee camps has been stripped clean of trees and vegetation. In such situations, refugees have to walk up to 12 km. in search of water and firewood. Shephered (2008) also observes that deforestation gradually forces women and children to walk further for wood, putting women in particular in danger of physical assault. Children may have to miss school to help the parents.

At the height of the refugee crisis in Tanzania during 1994-1996, a total of 570 square kilometres of forest was affected of which 167 square kilometres was severely deforested. An environmental impact assessment carried out in Zimbabwe in 1994, when Mozambican refugees had returned to their homeland, showed a reduction of 58 per cent in the woodland cover around camps. Yet, countries like Cote d'Ivoire and the DRC experience higher levels of habitat loss each year through uncontrolled logging and clearance of land for agriculture - 2,900 and 1,800 square kilometres of forest per annum, respectively. Also in the early 1990s, an estimated 20,000 hectare of wood lands were cut each year in Malawi to provide firewood and timber for various camps hosting Mozambican refugees, while in 1994, at the height of the refugee crisis near the Virunga National Park in the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire), refugees were removing some 800 tonne of timber and grass each day from the park - an amount far in excess of a possible sustainable yield. Despite efforts to restrict the impact on the park, almost 113 square kilometres have been affected, of which more than 71 square kilometres of forest were lost within three weeks of the arrival of refugees. In December 1996, more than 600,000 refugees from Burundi and Rwanda were housed in the Kagera region in north-western Tanzania. More than 1200 tonne of firewood were consumed each day - a total of 570 square kilometres of forest were affected of which 167 square kilometres were severely deforested (UNHCR 2001).

The removal of such large quantities of trees can be devastating to the environment. As studies on climate change reveal, as a result of the removal of the trees the absorption of incoming day-time air will be reduced,

soil structure will deteriorate, soil moisture will decrease, more solar energy will be reflected back into the troposphere from the denuded ground, and erosion of topsoil will accelerate. As atmospheric dust levels increase and are accompanied by a lengthening and intensified aridity of the dry season, rainfall will become more erratic in distribution and progressively decrease in overall amount.

Water is essential for the day-to-day survival and good health. In refugee situations water is often not available in adequate quantities, while the quality is also questionable, which potentially creates a serious health hazard. Shephered (2008) notes that low-quality water affects the health of large numbers of people in a situation where there is a high risk of infectious diseases multiplying rapidly. In some situations, water has to be transported from a long distance. From an ecological perspective, however, a major danger is the lowering of the water table as more people will be competing for limited water supplies. This must be taken into account when planning new refugee settlements. However, it is often difficult to plan refugee settlements because the numbers can unexpectedly grow out of proportion, throwing all the plans to the winds. There are many examples of refugee camps which were initially planned for a tenth or less of their subsequent populations. Tongogara refugee camp in Zimbabwe is a case in point. This camp was initially planned to hold 15,000 people, but it later accommodated over 40,000 refugees, creating a water shortage (Makanya and Mupedziswa 1988).

Finally, land is a very critical natural resource in many African countries. However, in many parts of Africa, land is generally scarce. But the situation is even worse when there is a refugee crisis. Many refugees will compete with the local residents for land especially to build their homes. If the refugees have cattle, there will also be pressure on grazing land.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS TO THE ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS

Experience has shown that the welfare of people whether refugees or local inhabitants, is closely linked with the well-being of the environment. In fact, the two cannot be separated. There is, however, no uniform approach in dealing with the refugee problem. Each refugee operation requires a distinct approach, tailored to the specific conditions and requirements of that time.

Requirements for protecting the environment therefore vary from one country to another and from one situation to another depending on the local, social, cultural and environmental conditions, as well as on opportunities and constraints. However, be that as it may, the author would like to suggest possible solutions to the environmental problems in the section below. It must also be noted from the outset that various authorities (Mupedziswa 1993; UNHCR 2001; Shephered 2008) have also suggested solutions to the refugee environmental problem.

Mupedziswa (1993) notes that in the face of massive environmental degradation, there is need to minimise ecological damage in Africa. There is, therefore, generally a need to safeguard the environment around refugee operations and to encourage management of natural resources with a view to long-term sustainability. One way to do this is to educate refugees to respect the environment. Environmental education, awareness and conservation programmes should be encouraged in areas where refugees are concentrated. Related to this point, there is need to establish environmental committees which will comprise the camp leaders, refugees and the local community members, which should meet periodically to discuss issues of the environment. If everyone participates in the discussions and is convinced of the importance of the environment, less damage will occur in the long run.

As most of the environmental problems around refugee camps emanate from the lack of fuel wood, it is vital that this be addressed urgently. Shephered (2008) notes that there are a variety of short- and longer-term solutions to the need for provision of fuel wood, which have been attended to by the agencies involved in the camps, including UNHCR, and by consultants. The most urgent need is to keep per capita consumption of fuel low, and to make fuel available from a wide area and a variety of sources so that refugees do not irreversibly damage the area immediately surrounding the camps. On the demand side, the most important single reducer of per capita consumption of fuel is the provision of food in a quick-cooking form. Maize in the form of maize-meal rather than the whole dry "popcorn" maize, for example, takes six to eight times longer to cook. It is theoretically possible to save fuel through the use of fuel-efficient stoves as well, though stove efficiency programmes have a depressingly unsuccessful history. A far simpler technology, which greatly reduces fuel-use and cooking time, is the provision of large flat saucepan lids to refugees in order to cover the vessels for boiling water and cooking food. This is very important, where high altitude

is a factor in high fuel consumption rates, as in the Rwanda refugee situation. Cooking time is longer in highland areas because it takes longer for water to reach the boiling point.

On the supply side, the simplest way of reducing the impact of refugees (though it is often not politically feasible) is to set up a large number of smaller camps, rather than a tiny number of large ones, so that fuel wood collection is automatically spread over a large area. If this is not possible, then it is essential for agencies to identify natural stands of forest or plantations, and to organise the delivery of fuel wood to the camps. As time goes by, other sources of fuel may be identified as well. In Tanzania, for instance, both peat and papyrus reeds constitute such sources. At the same time, important trees around the camps (along water courses, large shade trees, etc) can be marked with white paint as not available for felling.

Shephered (2008) also observes that a further area, which requires early consideration from the environmental point of view, is the need for poles and timber. Current refugee shelters provide polythene sheeting, but without wood supports. These have to be cut from the surrounding area. Nor have the agencies themselves been blameless in damaging the environment. Implementing agencies cut down tens of thousands of poles within easy trucking distance for pit latrines, medical clinics, etc. Tents for official purposes and tent-pole provisions ought to be part of the agencies' commitment to a refugee situation.

There is also a need to plant trees in refugee camps and in surrounding villages so as to replace the ones cut down for fuel wood or other purposes. Ministries responsible for the environment and natural resources in Africa should also take the lead especially in forest protection and soil conservation projects. Mupedziswa (1993) suggests that in order to supplement the refugees' diet, nutrition gardens should be started in camps as well as giving refugees meat rations periodically. This will discourage them from poaching wild life and livestock from surrounding villages. He goes on to say that there have been a lot of incidents in Africa wherein the local communities and refugees in camps have fought running battles over theft of livestock. A case in point is that of Mazowe refugee camp in Zimbabwe where Mozambican refugees were in conflict with the local community over stock theft in the early 1990s.

To alleviate the problems of water shortages in refugee camps, there is a need to build dams in areas where refugees are concentrated. Boreholes can also be sunk in the camps as an additional source of water.

In future, more effective environmental planning in the context of refugee camps should be a primary duty of the UNHCR and host governments. However, both refugees and local populations should also be involved in environmental planning of any projects which are instituted. In relation to this, development funds should be committed where environmental damage is extensive.

Finally, all things being equal, prevention is preferable to cure, and in many contexts cheaper too, provided that environmental costs have been internalised by the UNHCR. This means giving the environment the same weight as water, health, and nutrition in mainstream programming. Operationally, it means that environment must be given a higher priority at two key phases of refugee service. During the first emergency phase, fundamental decisions such as site selection and layout should be taken with environmental considerations in mind, and the emergency team should incorporate these skills during the next "care and maintenance" phase. Environmental components should be integrated into programming and implementation, and guidance given on how this is to be effected (Shephered 2008).

CONCLUSION

This paper has conceptualised refugees. It has also provided statistics on the number of refugees worldwide as well as in Africa. Furthermore, the paper has discussed the impact of refugees on the environment drawing examples from different African countries. Possible solutions to the environmental problems have also been given. In conclusion, it is clear from the above discussion that the refugee problem is a reality in Africa and that it has negatively affected the environmental situation on the continent. There is need for concerted efforts in Africa to stop or avoid situations which lead to people becoming refugees. Wars and unnecessary conflicts, for example, should be avoided at all costs. African leaders must have the political will to resolve conflicts amicably with their supposed opponents. Nevertheless, once a refugee situation arises, the UNHCR and the host government, and international NGOs should mobilise resources to safeguard the environment.

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