Humanitarian Crises Can Easily Become Environmental Crises:

Lessons from the Horn of Africa

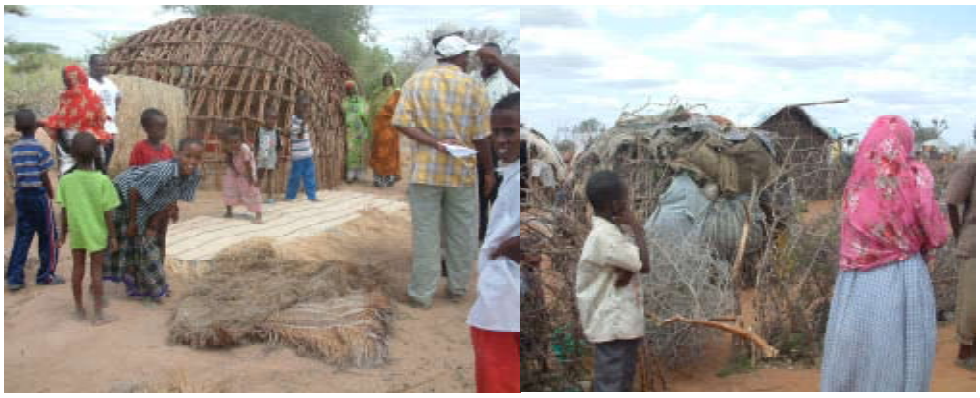
Investing in environmental management is not only an environmental imperative, it is key to enhancing refugee well-being and improved living conditions.

In Refugee Situations Ignore the Environment at Your Peril: Sound environmental management is central to refugee security and well being. Managed sustainably, the environment can supply much needed goods and services for refugees and Internally Displaced Peoples (IDP's) – such as fuelwood and building timber, shade and foods. Not managed or managed badly, such refugee situations can create environmental disasters and environmental refugees.

Livelihoods and Landscapes Strategy (LLS)

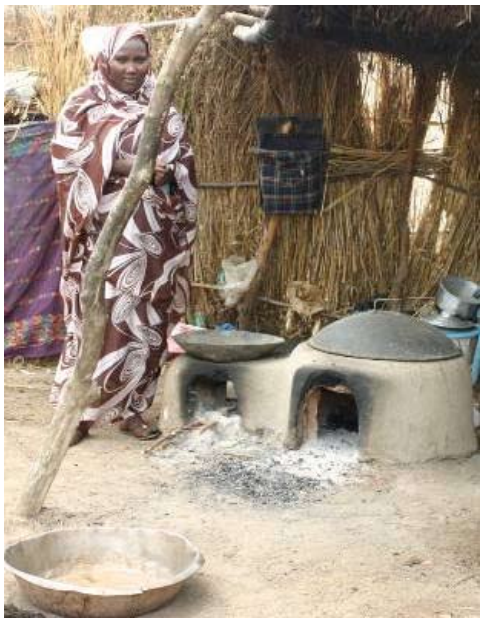
For over 40 years there has been conflict in the Horn of Africa, resulting in large numbers of refugees and IDPs, most of whom are located in environments that are fragile, dry and hot. The impact of both refugees and hosting populations on the environment is often dramatic and grave, as they all rely on the environment for fuel wood, shelter, food, livestock fodder and other sources of income and welfare. In eastern Sudan there have been over a million refugees for nearly 40 years, while the Dadaab refugee camps (Kenya) have the dubious distinction of being the world's largest refugee camp with over 400,000 refugees – and more arrive every day from war-torn Somalia.

Cost of Shelter and Energy: Dadaab refugee hosting area of north-eastern Kenya has a huge impact on the surrounding environment. Building and fencing materials, and fuelwood are collected from the surrounding landscapes. Each refugee homestead uses 85 poles and 1400 pieces of smaller sticks, which is equivalent to a value of Kshs 30,250/= (or $450 per house). For 10,000 refugee houses this is equivalent to $4.5 million – and all this material comes from the surrounding environment, and these houses have to be replaced every 5 years.



Each refugee on average requires 0.7kg of firewood per day, which represents 70 tons per 100,000 refugees per day! This has a value of about $9,000 per day (or $3.3 million per annum for 100,000 refugees). In Dadaab there are over 400, 000 refugees. This means a fuelwood requirement of approximately 100,000 tons of fuelwood per annum from the surrounding dry and fragile landscapes.

Feeling the heat: Tenadba is a local Sudanese village of 350 families, including former refugees, as this used to be one of the refugee camps in eastern Sudan. People live from rain-fed sorghum farming and livestock in this very hot and arid landscape. No trees can be seen around the village, except for some planted around the homes, and there is a small forest reserve along the river. *"There were many trees in this area before the refugees came, but now you cannot see a single one on the horizon" said the village chief. "As a result the climate is unbearable,"* he adds.



Margaret Mohammed lives with her family of 10 in Tenedba village and is fortunate. She has a fuel efficient stove to cook her flat bread, and a gas stove purchased from a revolving loan scheme. Because of the plentiful supply of gas in Sudan, the supply of stoves is heavily subsidized. The gas stove, Margaret says, is excellent. *"It does not produce any smoke, nor sparks, I can cook faster and it is cheaper than using fuel wood – I cannot imagine life without it."*

The combination of using the fuel-efficient and gas stoves has greatly improved the quality of life for Margaret and her family. Margaret no longer spends hours each day searching for fuel wood, and has more quality time to spend with her family. The use of the gas stove has reduced fuelwood consumption by 40%. (based on 2kg of fuelwood per family per day). This is a saving of over 700Kg per year per family or a saving of about $700 per year.

The Response: Sustainable management of natural resources is critical for both the livelihoods of people (refugees and hosting communities) and for the environment, and helps mitigate conflicts brought about by competition over resources. Many humanitarian agencies have mainstreamed the environment and have good policies to support this. But until sound environmental management is part of an organization's performance, it is less likely to have the institutional commitment needed to tackle the enormity of the issue. So while good environmental work may be done, it may not be commensurate with the needs.

UNHCR and its implementing partners have invested in environmental restoration and Community Environmental Action Plans (CEAPs) in refugee hosting areas throughout the Horn of Africa. This work is beginning to bear fruit. For example UNHCR provided support to the Forest National Corporation in Eastern Sudan and to date over 7,000Ha of forest and woodlands have been restored. But this is only part of the story, as refugee and IDP impacts on the environment are far wider than fuel. This calls for more integrated local level management planning and action.

Through the CEAP type process, environmental restoration and management activities are being implemented in a number of locations in Sudan, Uganda, Ethiopia and Kenya. Sustainable natural resource management is realistic in a refugee context, but this requires institutional commitment and funding for the support of refugee well-being and security, and for the sustainable management of the environment, including restoration where necessary. Nearly 40% of UNHCR's contributions in 2009 came from European Union Member States, and the Netherlands Government contribution is nearly 5.8% of the total UNHCR contributions of $1,273 million.

Buitenlandse Zaken
Ontwikkelings samenwerking

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***ArborVitae,* IUCN's Forest Conservation newsletter:** www.iucn.org/forest/av