

Resolving resource conflicts around Sherkolle Refugee Camp

Alemayehu Abebe, Solomon Hussien,
Assegid Tesemma and Jan Gerrit van Uffelen

At the present time population movements have taken on unprecedented proportions. The total number of refugees alone has reached over 20 million. The majority of refugees tend to find themselves in places that are environmentally fragile, and where resources are limited. Displaced populations, like other marginalised groups, are forced to rely directly on local natural resources to sustain themselves in the short term. Poverty, the struggle to build sustainable livelihoods and lack of control over resources characterise their experience. Their daily struggle to make ends meet does not promote sustainable management. This situation often brings refugees into conflict with local populations over essential resources.

A major problem for the many refugee women living in camps all over the world is access to fuelwood. Options to ease this burden seem very limited, yet fuel is a primary household need and lack of access directly affects a household's poverty status and food security.

different ethnic tribes such as Mabaan, Funj, and Uduk who have fled fighting and insecurity in the Blue Nile province of the Sudan. The camp is located in a sparsely populated area in western Ethiopia around 50 km from the Ethiopian-Sudanese border. The area is hilly and covered with patches of deciduous and bamboo forests. The local inhabitants are the Berta communities who depend mainly on agriculture and a little trade. Berta cattle have been decimated by the tsetse fly and as a result they can no longer rely on animal traction, which has a serious impact on their agriculture.

The Sherkolle camp operates under the concept of partial self-sufficiency, meaning that 75 percent of the food needs of the refugees are covered by the World Food Programme. The refugees are expected to make up the remaining 25 percent by engaging in backyard farming on small 20 by 20 metre plots within the camp boundaries, and by engaging in a variety of income generating activities.

In 2001, ZOA Refugee Care undertook an assessment into access and control over natural resources and found high levels of potential conflict between refugees and locals in accessing fuelwood. Actual and potential levels of conflict between refugees and hosts differed from one fuelwood collection area to another, depending on the distance from the area to the nearest Berta village. High levels of conflicting interest were found in the area directly bordering the refugee camp, as the camp is set amidst local villages and the Berta did not like to see the refugees collecting fuelwood in the forests around their villages.

Sherkolle camp is organised in six zones with a different ethnic group living in each zone. A resource map drawn by the refugees in February 2001 indicated that each zone in the camp had its own fuelwood collection area. The study showed that it took the different tribes between four to eight hours for a round trip to collect fuelwood, a four-fold increase since the camp was established in 1997.

Refugees, especially older women, negotiated access to fuelwood resources in the direct vicinity of the camp by working for locals or by collecting fuelwood for them. Collecting fuelwood in areas further away from Berta villages met with lower resistance from the Berta. As travel times to these areas were much longer and the trips more demanding, they were mainly undertaken by younger refugee women. Forest guards, local Berta men employed by the local government and funded by the UNHCR to control the fuelwood collection, imposed major restrictions in these areas. Refugees were not allowed to use axes and were to collect dry wood only. If axe marks were found on the wood it would be confiscated. Paying small amounts of money to the guards or, in some instances, giving in to their demands for sexual favours would allow the women to return to the camp with their fuelwood.

The problems of unequal access to and control over fuelwood resources, as reflected in the statements made by refugee and local women, is presented in Table 1.

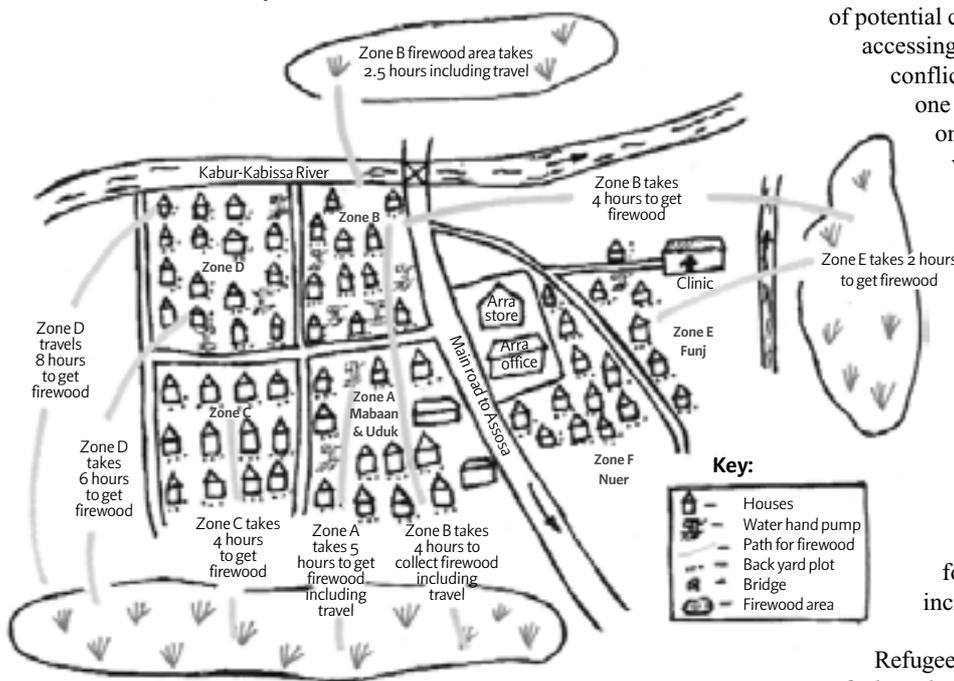


Figure 1: Resource map drafted by refugees in February 2001

So far, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and its government counterparts have paid little attention to the issue of access to and control over resources when locating refugee camps. Some NGOs however, are tackling these issues. In Sudanese refugee camps in Western Ethiopia, for example, ZOA Refugee Care, a Dutch international NGO working worldwide with refugees, internally displaced and disaster victims, has been working together with refugees and locals to jointly manage the natural resources on which they both depend. One of these camps is Sherkolle.

Sherkolle

Sherkolle is a relatively small refugee camp, established in 1997, which hosts around 16 000 Sudanese refugees from

Table 1: Complaints of refugee and local fuel wood collectors

	Refugee (%) (n=80)	Host (%) (n=91)
It's demanding		
'It makes us very tired, it's heavy work, we suffer from the hot sun'	8.8	76.9
'Getting weak, makes me sick, body ache'	1.3	38.5
'Getting thirsty/hungry'	11.3	3.3
'It's far'	67.5	58.2
'It's difficult to penetrate the forest'	2.5	0
'We face a fuel wood shortage'	0	23.1
It's dangerous		
'I am hurting myself'	13.8	54.9
'Since we are forbidden to use an axe we have to use our hands, stones or sticks'	13.8	0
'We are afraid of the wild/dangerous animals in the forest like lions and snakes'	61.3	29.7
The system works against us		
'My axe is or will be confiscated by forest guards or the local people'	51.3	0
'I am forbidden to collect fresh fuel wood'	2.5	0
'We are caught up by the fire set by the locals'	3.8	0
'We are being checked, or send away, by the forest guards – wood at times is confiscated'	25.0	0
'I risk getting punished by the forest guards or locals, put in prison or being beaten'	2.5	0
'Fight with the locals or guards, chased out, threatened by guns'	42.5	0
'Locals ask us why we don't return to our homeland, they insult us, quarrel with us'	28.8	0
'We are being asked for money, work for locals, share our wood, being used as slaves'	27.5	0
'Being raped, asked to be their wife, have sex with men in the forest'	5.0	0

Fuelwood collection is seen as a very demanding activity by both refugee and local women. In 2001, refugee women spent an average of 28 hours a week gathering fuelwood and local women a surprising 27 hours a week, though the latter group combined it with some agricultural activities. Since the arrival of the refugees, Berta women say they find it harder to collect fuelwood. A quarter of them said they were experiencing a fuelwood shortage. Refugees consider fuelwood collection to be a dangerous business. They have to use their hands, stones and sticks to break off and split wood. Berta women complained they found it difficult to use their axes. Many of these had been acquired recently after being confiscated from refugees. Refugee women collect in far-away areas and face wild animals more often than the local women. They feel very strongly that 'the system' is against them. Restrictions are imposed by forest guards, local people (mainly men) or both.

The findings of the assessment highlighted that the system of access to and control over resources has resulted in increasing frustration and tension. The local Berta were becoming increasingly concerned about the loss of forest cover in their area. Not only was fuelwood collection becoming more difficult but their livelihoods were becoming less secure. Normally their grain supplies are sufficient to cover a six to nine month period only. After these supplies are used up they depend heavily on the wild foods they find in the forests.

The refugees for their part were frustrated and agitated by what they saw as an unfair system of resource control. It seemed just a matter of time before serious conflict would erupt. The refugees knew that this might threaten their stay at the camp and they did not look forward to returning to insecurity at home. The UNHCR and the Ethiopian government agency responsible for managing the camp only discussed issues related to the camp and its inhabitants at a regional level. Access to and control over resources was not very high on their agenda.

Only a comprehensive, community-based approach involving host and refugee community representatives, including women, could ease the tension. Fundamental for the success of such an approach would be the creation of a forum that offered a non-threatening environment, where refugees and local leaders and

representatives could share and discuss their problems and start thinking about ways to encourage positive change.

A programme for change

In consultation with the local and refugee communities, ZOA Refugee Care designed the Agri-Environmental Education and Protection programme. Assessments taking into account the perspectives of the refugees and the Berta, the local and regional government as well as the perspective of UNHCR and its government counterpart have created the basis for change. The programme is made up of the following four interrelated components:

Awareness

First, the programme makes refugees aware that the agroecology of the Sherkolle camp is different to that of their home areas. The fact that the camp is located amongst Berta villages creates an extra challenge as far as maintaining the natural resource base is concerned. Local people are made aware that indigenous and context-specific knowledge and expertise in managing natural resources is being permanently lost. For example, the Berta use fire to clear their lands. A generation ago the use of fire was subject to a complex set of rules, regulations and sanctions. Now fires often burn out of control for weeks during the dry season. Not only do these fires expose hillsides to erosion because fragile vegetation is burned, they also result in a gradual loss of biodiversity reducing both the variety and availability of wild food plants. The Berta have noticed this because wild foods form an important part of their livelihood security.

The programme provides context-specific agri-environmental education, developed in consultation with the communities. It does so via a number of avenues, including community meetings and seminars, group discussions, field 'studies', cultural awareness programmes, environmental education at primary and secondary schools and setting up school and debating clubs. Well-respected Berta and refugees are trained as facilitators to guide the dialogue on environmental and livelihood issues within their communities. Refugee and local facilitators meet once a week and they receive a one-week refresher course every three months. They do not usually work together although sometimes they go together on visits to familiarise themselves with each other's situation.

Establishing structures

A key element of the project has been the establishment of Environmental Working Groups (EWGs). The aim of the EWGs is to enable refugee and host communities to develop rules and regulations for access to natural resources, to work out natural resource management plans, and to empower community members who have the skills and interest to further develop the resources available in the area. Harmonising their different perspectives has resulted in a set of regulations that are, generally speaking, well observed by both the local Berta and the different refugee groups. Part of the work of the EWG is to make sure that people adhere to these rules and that the sanctions agreed upon are applied. The EWGs are also responsible for the progress of the natural resource management plan in their area.

Demonstrating appropriate practises

Small farmer field schools have been established and leading farmers selected and trained to demonstrate a range of appropriate sustainable resource management practises. They address the demand as well as the supply side of the fuelwood including issues such as fuel-efficient stoves, stove and fire management, mud block construction, community-managed nurseries, multi-purpose live fences, and small-scale fuel and construction wood plantations. A joint irrigation scheme has also been set-up and refugee and host farmers learn to work together to produce vegetables year round. The farmer field schools and the irrigation scheme are the responsibility of the EWGs, while ZOA provides technical expertise and some inputs.

Indigenous resource management systems

Between 1975-1991, the former Ethiopian government disengaged and replaced local leadership and management structures by a highly bureaucratic, top-down and sectorised government system. The changes were so dramatic that indigenous forest resource management systems suffered greatly. At present, the project advocates that government policies recognise and accommodate the most important elements of these indigenous resource management systems. A positive development is that the present Ethiopian government has acknowledged the potential role of community-based organisations. The EWGs fit well within that category.

Environmental Working Groups

The EWGs form the heart of the programme. They are community-based organisations that develop natural resource management plans with limited outside facilitation and assistance. Awareness-raising about resource base degradation and the demonstration of sustainable resource management practises are central to the EWGs. The older refugees in particular supported the set-up of EWGs because they recognised the approach from their own traditional resource management practises and were well aware of the need for improved management in their present environment. They were also strongly motivated by the fact that the EWGs provided a way of improving relationships with their hosts and they knew from past experience that poor relationships could compromise their stay. The younger refugees showed keen interest in more appropriate practises because they regarded them as 'modern' and representing 'a way forward'. The Berta saw the EWGs as a vehicle through which they could make their complaints and concerns about the collection of fuelwood by refugees heard. They also saw that the EWG could help them regain control over their resources, which they had lost under the former Ethiopian government.

Communities were asked to suggest candidates for the EWGs who were well respected and trusted. Those in leadership

positions, such as sheiks, chiefs and church elders either took part in the EWGs themselves or publicly expressed support for candidates. ZOA's request to have at least two women selected for the EWGs met with surprise and lively discussion. In the end it proved much more difficult for the Berta than for the Sudanese refugees to have women selected for the EWGs.

Environmental Working Groups were established at three different levels. Each higher level has more decision-making, monitoring and sanctioning powers. EWGs at zonal level (in case of the refugees) or village level (the local Berta) consist of six members. They meet each week to discuss on-going issues and the progress of activities on agreed natural resource management plans. The refugee and Berta EWGs meet together twice a month to inform and discuss issues and activities. The EWGs at this level delegate individuals to represent them in the EWG at camp level. At this level the UNHCR, its government counterpart and aid agencies are also represented and overriding issues at the camp and its surroundings are discussed. The EWG at the third and highest level brings together representatives of the EWG at camp level, Berta EWGs established in villages further away from the camp and provincial authorities.

The way forward

So far the experience with Environmental Working Groups in and around Sherkolle refugee camp has been very encouraging. Awareness raising and the demonstration of appropriate practises and techniques have become more and more under the control and responsibility of the EWGs themselves.

New technologies that save fuelwood or develop fuelwood resources are being adopted. Concerns of women related to the collection of fuelwood are now taken seriously and are being addressed, for example by agreeing on safe access paths to fuel collection areas for refugee women. Rules and regulations have been agreed upon to prevent tree cutting and to access fuelwood, grazing lands and water sources. A situation that had the potential to escalate into serious conflict has been defused. The EWGs are maturing and are increasingly seen by the communities as important instruments in sustainable natural resource management. As a sign of their increasing confidence, the EWGs themselves have raised issues related to indigenous wild food plants, natural medicines and the fires that destroy many herbs and plants with medicinal properties, and the question of who can collect which non-wood forest products and when.

EWGs, nevertheless, still depend on outside assistance for facilitation and inputs. In order to be more sustainable, they need to concentrate on low external inputs and find ways of generating some income to finance their activities. However, the biggest challenge is now for the Berta EWGs to be recognised by the regional government as community based organisations that can play an important role in managing and developing natural resources. In trying to re-create indigenous resource management systems based on local reality they are taking into account environmental conditions as well as the social and political context. When it comes to the refugees, the challenge is not only to address current issues through the EWG, but to build up the interest and capacity that will enable refugees to set up EWGs when they return to their own areas to facilitate their rehabilitation and reintegration. ■

For more information on the AEEP project contact: **J.G. van Uffelen**, Programme Co-ordinator ZOA Refugee Care Ethiopia, PO Box 9494, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Email: ZOA.Ethiopia@telecom.net.et

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