Great Lakes Region

Impact of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons on Ecosystem Integrity

Report for the United Nations Environment Programme

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October 2007
Refugees, IDPs and the Environment in the Great Lakes Region

Consultation Version – October 2007

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Cover Image: Fire incident targeting IDPs camp in Northern Uganda (Photo ARCOS/CK)

1 ARCOS is a non-governmental organization established in 1995 with the following mission: “to enhance biodiversity conservation and the sustainable use of natural resources of the Albertine Rift through the promotion of collaborative conservation action; awareness raising; and biodiversity information exchange in the region.”
Executive Summary

Fig: During 2007 alone, million of people in Central and Eastern Africa had to flee their homes due to civil wars, floods and other natural disasters (Photo -Floods in Lira District, Northern Uganda, September 2007 (Photo Hudson Apunyo- Source: www.news.bbc.co.uk)

a. Introduction

There are approximately 9 million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and nearly 2 million refugees in the Great Lakes Region². This constitutes more than half of Africa’s internally displaced population and the highest in the world. In response to this challenge, the United Nations (UN) and African Union (AU) came together to create the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (IC/GLR), to formulate a plan for the regeneration of the region which recognises both the interconnectedness of the region’s populations, insecurities and economic instabilities, and the imperative of seeking regional

² The countries of the Great Lakes Region are: Angola, Burundi, Congo, DRC, Central Africa Republic, Kenya, Rwanda, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia
solutions (Dar-es-Salaam Declaration- See Annex 1).

The Pact on Security, Stability and Development in the Great Lakes Region was signed by the Head of States in December 2006. The Pact contains a package of measures which promises to enhance the lives of the forcibly displaced, including a regional protocol on protection and assistance for internally displaced and first legally binding regional instrument specifically dealing with IDPs anywhere in the world. The Pact has several protocols including one dealing with environment and natural resources.

The United Nations Environment Programme, through its Division of Early Warning and Assessment (DEWA) and under the auspices of the NEPAD, commissioned a study focusing on three aspects less covered and yet interconnected: the issues of population displacements (refugees and IDPs), the environment and the Great Lakes Region. The comprehensive assessment of the impact of refugees and internally displaced persons on the ecosystem integrity in the Great Lakes Region will provide early warning information to support mitigation planning. The study is intended to provide input in the implementation of IC/GLR Pact and is conducted within the context of Africa Environment Outlook, Global Environment Outlook and NEPAD principle of enhancing access to relevant data and information to support vulnerability assessments and issuing early warning on issues and threats to the environment and emerging issues in Africa.

b. Environment, Refugees and IDPs in the Great Lakes Region

It is widely recognized that civil strife, the internal displacement of people and economic disruptions are the main reasons for environmental degradation. There is evidence that where there is high-intensity conflict and large numbers of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), environment pressures arise making the situation that much more serious.

Where conflict escalates, normal economic activities take strain, and social services cease. When people are fleeing conflict, they do not have access to their normal means of livelihood and often do not get the nutrition they need. Conflict, refugees and environment are closely interlinked in the Great Lakes region.

The destruction of the environment, along with the demolition of democratic, informed decision-making, have prolonged human suffering for decades, undermining the foundation for social progress and economic security.
**c. Objectives, Scope and Implementation of the Study**

The overall goal of this initiative is to strengthen the national and sub-regional integrated environmental assessment and reporting processes in the Great Lakes region on the issues of conflicts and the environment. More specifically, the study is intended to identify major refugee and internally displaced people’s settlements in the region and track the impacts and challenges such settlements have had on the ecosystem and development in the region, to identify changes in relation to refugee settlements and protected areas ad ecologically sensitive areas and the impacts on the vulnerability on the indigenous population, and highlight some policy actions that would mitigate refugee impacts on ecosystems and reduce human vulnerability. Identify two settlements for more detailed analysis.

The assessment was undertaken between July and September by the Albertine Rift Conservation Society (ARCOS) under the coordination of Dr Sam Kanyamibwa. ARCOS Conservation and Network Manager (Ms Cecily Kabagumya) coordinated the information gathering in the Albertine Rift countries. Several contributors provided the information in different forms. UNEP-GRID-Africa provided the maps and GIS with input from different institutions (UNHCR, UNOCHA, UNEP-WCMC).

The geographical scope of the study consists of three levels: case study at site level, national and regional overviews. The three selected case studies are Virunga Transboundary Landscape (DRC, Rwanda, Uganda), Ndulu District (Northern Uganda) and a set of three Refugee Camps in the Republic of Congo (Lake Télé, Loukolela and Kintélé Camps). The thematic scope of the study focused on the impact of refugees and IDPs on the following selected themes: forests, water, land, protected areas and wildlife, waste and sanitation, natural resources, indigenous population, institutions, etc.).

The study first reviewed information in recent refugees and IDPs assessments to provide a broad basis for vetting data/information from official and other sources. The statistics on refugees and IDPs were mainly obtained from UNHCR and UNOCHA respectively. Secondary information (data) was gathered through meetings, telephones and questionnaire with key informants. Field level visits were undertaken in selected sites and this provided the main opportunity to crosscheck and establish the validity of the findings. It also provided the opportunity to gather additional information to fill any gaps in information. The “State-Pressure-Response” model was used,
considering the environmental status, the impacts on the ecosystem and actions undertaken (policies, strategies and activities) to mitigate the environmental impacts of refugees and internally displaced persons. Key issues for the verification included establishing the extent of impact on the environment, habitats, what actions have been taken, existing coping mechanisms and the extent to which these are used (now compared with normal years).

Three main limitations and constraints of the study are related to the lack of credible data on the impacts of conflicts on the environment in the region, short time period and limited funding to undertake this important study. This is why this report should be considered as a preliminary draft to be reviewed by national experts and basis for further deeper assessments.

Fig.2. Charcoal making characterised by a high waste of energy is one of the environmental challenges (Photos ARCOS/IN-Congo forest).
c. Key Findings

1. Environment, IDPs and Refugees are interconnected and constitute one of the pressing issues faced by the GLR

All countries have faced conflicts for several years and the scale of IDPs is alarming. The impact of refugees and IDPs on the environment and the links to natural resources is significant.

2. Natural Disasters, increasingly accelerated by climate change have doubled recently and this trend will likely continue in the future:

Refugees and IDPs have contributed to deforestation and over grazing in catchment areas, leading to environmental degradation and soil erosion, leading to natural disasters such as drought and floods experienced by several countries in the region and probably linked to climate change.

3. Mainstreaming the environment in refugees and IDPs is very weak due to other pressing development and socio-political priorities:

Lack of environmental considerations due to other pressing social and economic needs leads the destruction of the natural capital and affect long-term recovery. Chaotic settlements in many places have grown up to 200 percent in just two-three years such as in Darfur. Lack of planning and environmental consideration in many countries development is affecting their future development.

4. Transborder settlements amplify the problems and inhibit the potential for transboundary cooperation:

Many transboundary areas in the Great Lakes region such as in Virunga transboundary area are rich in biodiversity and natural resources. These areas have been subject to refugees and IDPs settlement without effective management measures and this has led to prolonged conflicts over resources.

5. Depletion of natural resources during the times of conflicts, refugees and IDPs take advantage of poor environmental governance and has led countries to unsustainable future

Southern Sudan has lost 40% of the forests since the independence (UNEP assessment). In DRC, minerals, timber. Oil continue to be a problem for example between Uganda and DRC.Development Agenda and Private sector Investment should promote more social and environmental responsibility.
6. **Wildlife and protected areas have suffered a lot and continue to suffer:**

Local extermination of individual species such as elephants in CAR, gorillas in DRC has been associated to refugees and IDPs presence. Most of the Pas exist only on paper such as in DRC (Virunga), Sudan, CAR. Or have been reduced to a critical level (Gishwati in Rwanda).

7. **Response on environmental issues needs to be strengthen and better coordinated**

There is a need to have better coordination mechanisms on environmental issues in areas affected by conflicts and regular reports to be integrated in national reporting.

8. **Local NGOs and local institutions have weakened over the years due to lack of support from different players**

Local NGOs have been declining over the years, while international NGOs have been growing. Governments and donors should pay special attention to local NGOs.

9. **Ongoing initiatives are not enough and funding is very limited**

While encouraging efforts are noted in all countries in the region to mitigate the impact of refugees and IDPs on the environment. External support from the international community is very limited. Special attention should be given to environmental issues during and after conflicts.

10. **Unless an integrated response to the issue of conflicts is addressed, sustainable development will be affected.**

With the current environmental degradation in the Great lakes region and illegal exploitation of natural resources such as in DRC, only few individuals will continue to benefit, leaving countries and people in poverty.
d. Recommendations

A list of recommendations is provided at the end of the documents, indicating the target institution (governments, UN agencies, development partners and international organisations, private sector and civil society. These can be summarised below in five categories:

- National policy and leadership,
- Environmental impact assessment,
- Coordination of environmental issues
- Transboundary peace building
- Environmental information monitoring

National Policy on the mainstreaming the environment in Refugees and IDPs Issues

As required by the signed Pact on Security, Stability, and Development in the Great Lakes Region, each country in the Great Lakes Region should develop a national policy on the integration of the environment in refugees and IDPs settlements and returns and ensure that its implementation is followed by different stakeholders, especially the private sector, humanitarian organisations and local authorities.
Before the settlement of refugee and IDPs and any return programme, environmental impact assessment should be undertaken and plans for impact mitigation developed to ensure that the settlement areas have the required potential to sustain livelihoods needs and meet the environmental and social considerations, including for example risks associated with settlement near the national border.

**Environmental Monitoring and Regular Information collection**

Special resources should be mobilised to ensure that the issue of refugees, IDPs and the environment is incorporated regularly in the UNEP State of Environment Reports such as the Africa Environment Outlook and that comprehensive data collection and independent policy analysis of existing environmental issues in the Great lakes region is conducted as baseline to complement this study is conducted as soon as possible.

**Funding for environmental activities**

Adequate financial resources in national budgetary planning should be allocated to the environment in areas affected by conflicts, refugees and IDPs, and appropriate funding should be made available to UN agencies and NGOs to develop programmes which respond to the protection and conservation of the environment during and after conflicts.
f. Suggested Actions

The suggested actions are based on the outcomes of a consultation meeting with the Special representative of the Secretary General and Stakeholders from the GLR held in Nairobi (UNEP, 8-9 September 2004). The meeting agreed that as a cross-cutting theme, the environment should be reflected into the four themes of the Conference which are: peace and security, democracy and good governance, economic development and regional integration and humanitarian and social issues. The meeting identified major environmental issues that should be incorporated in the four themes and contribute to mitigate the impacts of conflicts, prevent future conflicts, and stimulate sustainable development through the rational use of the region’s natural resources. A Framework of priority actions has been developed on the following:

1. Mechanisms for the collection, monitoring and reporting of the information on refugees, IDPs and environment at local, national, transboundary and regional levels established and supported

1.1. Framework for regional information system on human
settlements and environment adopted and supported

1.2. Capacity building for integrated environmental assessment and reporting, observation, early warning systems assessments, prevention preparedness, response and recovery

1.3.1. Human settlements and environment integrated in National and Regional Reporting and monitoring

2. Environment and natural resource governance promoted and supported across the region

2.1. Establish and empower environmental governance structures as a facet of good governance at local, national and transborder levels through the provision for and implementation of procedural rights, namely access to justice, right to information and public participation in environmental decision-making.

2.2. Promote the formulation and harmonization of national policies on environment and human settlements

2.3. Promote transboundary and regional cooperation through the development of participatory sustainable natural resource planning and management programmes in trans-boundary resources such as lakes, river basins, mountain ecosystems, protected areas, unique cultural, biodiversity and historical sites

3. Environment and natural resources contribute sustainably to economic development and regional integration

3.1. Promote environmental valuation of natural resources and environmental services and their appreciation to the contribution to sustainable development

3.2. Regional and legal institutionalization framework against illegal exploitation of natural resources established and operational

3.3. Support the mainstreaming of environment and human settlement issues in the implementation of NEPAD’s Environment Action Plan and particularly into the Regional economic Communities and Regional Bodies (AMCEN, AMCW)

4. Environment and natural resources planning, management and restoration integrated into major humanitarian and social programmes in the region

4.1. Factor environmental sustainability into decisions on the location and establishment of refugee and IDPs resettlements

4.2. Promote understanding, of values of natural resources (economic, environmental and cultural) and human settlements

4.3. Develop integrated environmental programmes addressing key social dimensions namely livelihoods, women, indigenous knowledge and health (especially HIV/AIDS) in
environmental programmes before, during and after conflicts.