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The impact of environmental degradation on refugee-host relations: a case study from Tanzania

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Introduction

While the majority of literature in the field of refugee studies centres on refugees specifically, recent years have seen an increasing amount of research that looks beyond the refugee communities to the other groups and individuals also affected by refugee emergencies. In particular, these studies look at how the host communities – the communities living in the areas where refugees eventually settle, either formally or informally – are impacted by a rapid and often unexpected influx of refugees.

Sometimes refugees bring positive changes to host communities, such as economic growth or the funding of various development projects by international aid organizations that have come to the area in response to the refugee emergency. However, the influx and presence of refugees has also been shown at times to have negative impacts on individuals within a hosting community, or even on the community as a whole. In light of this, it is important to not only investigate the impact of the presence of refugees on the hosting communities, but also to consider how these impacts have then influenced the overall relationship between the two groups. In particular, it is important to determine what might contribute to a contentious or even conflictual relationship. A better understanding of this can ultimately assist those working with refugees in other situations, to plan and implement projects that may lessen the likelihood of such conflict.

One of the most frequently cited negative impacts in recent years, emphasized in particular by the host country governments, is environmental degradation and natural resource depletion. However, it is not only the host governments that claim that refugee camps cause environmental degradation: over the past several decades, there has also been a growing acceptance by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other organizations working with refugees, as well as by independent researchers, that the presence of refugees often leads to environmental degradation and natural resource depletion both within and around the refugee settlements. As written in the UNHCR manual entitled *Key Principles for Decision Making*: “Evidence shows that large-scale dislocation of people, characteristic of many recent refugee crises, can create adverse environmental impacts. The scale and suddenness of refugee flows can rapidly change a situation of relative abundance of local resources to one of acute scarcity” (Engineering, 2005: 3).

Environmental degradation and the associated resource depletion have been shown to sometimes create or exacerbate conflict between groups competing for these increasingly scarce resources (Homer Dixon, 2000; Schwartz, et al. 2001; Kahl, 1999). Although this type of conflict is not inevitable, it is still important to investigate whether the environmental degradation associated with the presence of refugee camps has influenced the overall relationship between the refugees and the host communities and in what ways.

Environmental impacts are only one of many factors that will influence and shape the relationship between the refugees and hosts: the combination of factors differs greatly in each refugee situation. Recognizing this, I chose to pursue an in-depth case study on the effects of environmental degradation on the refugee-host relationship in Northwestern Tanzania, and do not argue that all refugee-host relationships develop in

the same manner. However, my research findings may still prove useful for researchers, governments and refugee practitioners, as they can compare and contrast the situation in Tanzania to other refugee situations and may take some lessons from my research.

I selected Northwestern Tanzania to pursue my research for several reasons. First, at the end of 2005, Tanzania was home to the fourth largest refugee population in the world, at 602,088 refugees (403,854 receiving assistance from UN High Commissioner for Refugees-UNHCR) (UNHCR "2005," 2006). Second, the majority of refugees in Tanzania live in UNHCR managed camps. Therefore, unlike in some parts of the world where refugees live among and have integrated with the local communities, in Tanzania there is a clear distinction between the refugee and host populations. In other words, people that define themselves as refugees do not also define themselves as part of the local community, and members of the local communities draw a clear distinction between the local Tanzanians and the mainly Burundian and Congolese refugees (Veney, 2003: 141). Third, several recent publications from various sources – academic and professional – have reported widespread environmental degradation and resource depletion in Northwestern Tanzania. In addition, the Government of Tanzania openly and frequently blames the refugees and the presence of the camps for all environmental problems in the Northwestern Tanzania region (Rutinwa, 2007: 4).

In sum, I selected to do my research in Tanzania because of the large refugee population, clear distinction between the refugee and host communities and the numerous reports on the existence of environmental degradation. Thus, the conditions in Tanzania are such that environment-related conflict is likely (Martin, 2005: 3). The questions that I sought to answer during my research and which I discuss in this paper are as follows: Is conflict relating to the environment present between the refugee and host communities in Northwestern Tanzania? If so, what is the nature of this conflict? What factors are present that either exacerbate or mitigate such conflict? And finally, what else might be done, both in Tanzania and other refugee-affected parts of the world, to ensure that such conflict is mitigated or prevented entirely?

The first section of the paper outlines my methodology, particularly the methods I used when doing my field research in Northwestern Tanzania. The second section of this paper focuses on the background to the refugee situation in Northwestern Tanzania. Specific issues discussed include the refugees' identities and the background to the conflict that led to the refugee emergency. In addition, I will describe the camps in Kibondo District in Northwestern Tanzania and various changes to Tanzania's refugee laws since the refugees first settled in the country.

This is followed by a description of Northwestern Tanzania's natural environment, with a focus on the changes that have occurred over the years, particularly following the coming of the refugees. In addition, this section will discuss the environmental problems present in the region, both within the refugee camps and in the surrounding villages and rural areas. Similarly, I will discuss how these changes and problems have affected the host communities.

The following section of the paper reviews other literature on refugee-host relationships, both generally and in Northwestern Tanzania specifically. While the amount of literature on refugee-host relationships is still relatively small, a number of

researchers and scholars have written substantial and useful articles on the subject. Particularly relevant and useful for my research is the work by several scholars who have researched the impact of the presence of refugees on the host communities in Northwestern Tanzania. While the environment is alluded to, or briefly mentioned in this research, there is no in-depth study on the role of the environment in shaping the relationship.

The next section describes my own research on this subject, which took place in Kibondo, Northwestern Tanzania, over a period of approximately four and a half months. In this section I will describe and analyze the discussions, focus group meetings and interviews I held with individuals living in the area, in order to determine whether the environmental change described in the earlier section of my paper has in fact shaped or influenced the refugee-host relationship, and if so, in what ways.

The final section of the paper offers some conclusions from my research and some recommendations, which may be useful for other scholars researching refugee-host relations or for those individuals and organizations working directly with refugees and other displaced populations.

Methodology

In order to make the greatest possible contribution to the field of refugee studies and refugee-host literature in particular, I chose to pursue a qualitative, single case study method for my research. The various methods I used included focus group meetings, individual interviews and general observations of the situation in Northwestern Tanzania made by spending time with various NGOs and individuals working with refugees and the host communities, particularly on environment-related projects. In addition, I collected data on the physical environment and environmental change in the region, on demographic change and on the presence, implementation, and impact of environmental management projects.

The focus group meetings were held in four villages, next to each of the four refugee camps that were operational in Kibondo District during my time there. Focus group participants included both men and women from a variety of age groups. The Village Leader was always present during these meetings, as were several members of the Village Environmental Committees. With the help of a Swahili-speaking translator, I asked the same questions in each focus group meeting to ensure that the same topics were covered. The meetings were informal and the questions, whilst uniform, were open-ended to allow for discussion on topics which I had not previously considered but which the focus group participants saw as relevant. Topics discussed during the focus group meetings included the overall relationship between the refugees and host communities, changes in this relationship over time and environmental change and environmental problems in the area.

As with the focus groups, during the individual interviews I asked questions relating to the overall relationship between the refugees and host communities, changes in this relationship over time and environmental change and related problems in the area. Individuals interviewed included: UNHCR staff, NGO staff, local and regional government officials and refugee camp staff. Again, the questions were uniform but

also open-ended. I opted to keep all participants from the focus groups and individual interviews anonymous in order to allow for discussion on potentially sensitive issues. Therefore, no names or detailed descriptions of participants are included in this report.

To determine the nature of the physical environment and, more importantly, environmental change over time, I looked at a number of secondary and some primary sources. Interviews and focus group comments on environmental change show the participants' perceptions of environmental change over time, but these other resources are needed to determine the recorded or measured change over time. Perhaps because of the remote nature of the area, I was unable to find information describing the natural environment or photos displaying the area from much earlier than several decades ago. However, following the most recent influx of refugees in the early 1990s, a number of reports on this subject have been published, thus providing me with useful information regarding the change that has occurred since the establishment of the refugee camps.

In addition, in recognition of the negative impact of the Tanzanian refugee camps on the environment, UNHCR has funded a number of environmental management projects over the past several years, many of which have been closely monitored by NGOs responsible for implementing them. I collected information on the projects implemented within the camps as well as in the surrounding villages to get a better idea of how the natural environment has changed over time, and whether some of these management projects have successfully mitigated environmental damage and degradation. Knowledge of what has been done to prevent environmental degradation or to mitigate already damaged areas may also be useful in understanding what factors may help to mitigate conflict between the two groups in refugee affected areas. On the other hand, if these projects have been ineffective, we can use this information to design better environmental management projects in the future.

Background to the refugee situation

While the statistics are continuously changing as refugee emergencies wax and wane in different parts of the world, UNHCR reports that in the beginning of 2006, Tanzania hosted the fourth largest refugee population in the world, coming after only Pakistan, Iran and Germany (UNHCR, 2007:6). The number of refugees who are living in UNHCR camps has reportedly now dropped below 300,000, as a result of UNHCR-assisted repatriation of the Congolese and Burundians, but the overall refugee population in the country has been around 600,000 since 1999 (UNHCR "2005," 2006). The current estimate of 300,000, if accurate, is the smallest population of refugees Tanzania has seen for over a decade (UNHCR "Refugee Population," 2007). In other words, Tanzania has been host to a substantial refugee population for the past several decades, and the great majority of the refugees have resided in the western part of the country.

The majority of the refugees living in Kibondo District are Burundian, although there are significant numbers of Congolese refugees from the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in the district as well. The majority of the Congolese refugees in Tanzania, however, are in Kigoma District, as they reach Kigoma by crossing Lake Tanganyika (UNHCR "Briefing Notes," 2006).

The first Burundian refugees arrived in Kibondo District in 1993, and one year later the UNHCR refugee mission was established (UNHCR "Briefing Notes," 2006:2). Since gaining independence in 1962, Burundi has experienced intermittent but frequent outbreaks of violence. Large-scale violence occurred in the country in 1965, 1972, 1988 and 1993, and despite the recent peace agreement signed between the Government of Burundi and the major rebel groups in the country, occasional bouts of violence continue (International 2006). As a peaceful and stable neighbour, Tanzania is both an attractive and logical place of refuge for Burundians fleeing the violence, particular those from Ruyigi and Cankuzo provinces which border with Tanzania (UNHCR "Briefing Notes," 2006: 3). While the origins of and motivations behind the ongoing conflict are complex, they are often described as ethnic conflicts between the Hutu majority and the Tutsi minority (Ndayizigiye, 2005: 6).

Almost immediately after Burundi gained formal independence in 1962, the Tutsi minority consolidated power in the government and the military, despite a 1965 Hutu victory in the elections. The Tutsi king refused to appoint a Hutu Prime Minister, and thus the first widespread outbreak of violence in the country occurred soon after these elections. A struggle for control over the government ensued, and while over the next several decades there were multiple attempts to establish a power-sharing government, these all ultimately failed and bouts of violence continued throughout the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s (International, 2006).

Throughout these decades, Burundian civilians were forced to flee their homes and many sought refuge in the neighbouring countries of DR Congo, Rwanda and Tanzania. As already noted, UNHCR did not establish a presence in Tanzania until 1994, but Burundian refugees had been fleeing to, and settling in, Tanzania for the previous few decades, migrating to already established villages and cities where they integrated with the local societies. The most recent outbreak of violence in the country followed the October 1993 assassination of the first democratically elected Hutu President of Burundi, Melchior Ndadaye. The ultimate result of the assassination was a civil war, as Hutu civilians responded by massacring Tutsis, and the Tutsi army thus responded by massacring Hutus. Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, civil war plagued much of the country, and hundreds of thousands of Burundians fled their homes for neighbouring countries such as Tanzania (Ndayizigiye, 2005: 5).

The 1994 genocide in Rwanda resulted in a similarly substantial influx of refugees into Ngara District, which is adjacent to and directly north of Kibondo District. In April 1994, over 170,000 Rwandan refugees crossed the border into Tanzania and by early 1995, Northwestern Tanzania was home to approximately 600,000 Rwandans (Whitaker, 2003: 147). In response to the massive and rapid influx of refugees from Burundi, Rwanda and DRC, the Government of Tanzania revised the country's refugee laws on the basis that the new refugee populations posed security, economic and environmental threats to the country (Rutinwa, 2003). Prior to this, the Government of Tanzania had supported an "open-door" refugee policy, which allowed refugees to move throughout the country without restrictions and to integrate into the hosting communities (Felleson, 2003: 61; Chaulia, 2003: 158). Replacing the 1965 Refugee Control Act, the 1998 Refugees Act states that refugees are no longer free to leave the designated UNHCR camps without government issued permits, and therefore have very few opportunities to interact with the host communities (Human

Rights Watch, 1999). Thus, the majority of refugees currently living in western Tanzania live in closed, UNHCR-run camps.

In 2000, under international pressure and also with international assistance, the Government of Burundi and the various Hutu rebel groups negotiated a peace agreement which called for power-sharing within the army and government. Over the next several years, individual rebel groups laid down arms against government forces. However, it was not until 2006 that the last remaining rebel group, the National Liberation Forces (FLN), would sign a formal ceasefire with the government, marking an official end to the protracted conflict (Economist, 2006). The Government of Tanzania responded by officially stating that all Burundian refugees in Tanzania should return to Burundi. As UNHCR manages the camps where the majority of Burundian refugees in Tanzania are currently living, it is the primary organization responsible for assisting in voluntary repatriation of the refugees to Burundi (Reuters 2007). Those refugees, who for various reasons cannot return to Burundi, can apply to be resettled in an entirely different country, such as the United States, Australia or Canada.

In June 2006, when I first arrived in Kibondo, UNHCR was still managing ten refugee camps along Tanzania's western border. Four of these camps were situated in Kibondo District, the region in which I collected the majority of my data, although two of the camps have since been shut down due to repatriation of the refugees and camp consolidation. Prior to the closing of these two camps, in September 2006, UNHCR reported a refugee population of 62,225 in Kibondo, of whom 95 per cent were Burundian (UNHCR "Briefing," 2006). While the number of refugees was slightly lower in 2006 than in earlier years, it is still relevant that in 1998, 35 per cent of people in Kibondo District were refugees (Veney, 2007:137). In other words, throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s, a large proportion of people living in Kibondo district were refugees.

The natural environment and change over time

Kibondo District is almost entirely composed of Miombo woodland forests, as is a large part of the surrounding districts and regions (Western, 1997). Miombo forests are dry, deciduous forests comprised of a number of valuable tree species, including *Pterocarpus angolensis*, *Dalbergia melanoxylon*, and *Combretum fragrans* (Relief, 2003: 6; Banda, 2006: 180). The greater Kigoma region (which includes Kibondo District) harbours two National Parks, one Game Reserve and ten Forest Reserves covering an area of approximately 8,427 square kilometres (Western, 1997: 7). Tanzania's National Forest Policy, revised in 1998, established a decentralized system of natural resource management whereby the district councils are now mandated to manage these forest reserves for the central government. Unlike in National Parks, where any kind of resource extraction is illegal, the forest reserves are legally protected and officially designated for certain types of use. In fact, some of the forest reserves have been established specifically for wood production and extraction, but only in certain designated areas (Western, 1997: 4).

The 2005 UNHCR Environmental Guidelines state that "uninformed decisions concerning the siting of a refugee camp in, or near, a fragile or internationally protected area could result in irreversible – local and distant – impacts on the

environment. Likewise, it is not advisable to establish a camp or settlement close to a village forest reserve or similarly important natural resources” (UNHCR, 2005:16). It is true that this report was published almost a decade after the Kibondo camps were first built, but an earlier 1996 version of the Environmental Guidelines made similar recommendations. Nonetheless, at the time of my research, three of the four camps in Kibondo District were located within 15 km of a forest reserve: two had boundaries less than 500 meters from a forest reserve boundary (Relief, 2003: 5).¹

According to three detailed reports written on environmental degradation in the refugee affected areas in Tanzania, the close proximity of the camps to the forest reserves has been a key contributing factor to environmental degradation. These studies show that both refugees and locals continue to encroach upon the forest reserves, primarily to collect firewood or wood for construction, or to clear areas for cultivation (UNEP, 2005; Relief, 2003; Western, 1997). A 1998 CARE International document reported 16 cultivated areas, of approximately 20 acres, right next to Mtendeli camp in Kibondo District. Although the Kibondo District Natural Resources Office (DNRO) is responsible for monitoring the forest reserves in Kibondo District, this is limited due to a lack of financial resources (Relief, 2003: 42).

There are also a number of village forest reserves in the district, which are similar to the national reserves, except that they are administered by the individual villages. Village Environmental Committees, usually composed of about 15 people, patrol and protect the forest reserves from encroachment. However, like the DNRO, they are also constrained by insufficient finances. Additionally, some Environmental Committee members reported that they were afraid to patrol the reserves, as they felt they may be threatened or hurt by refugees caught trespassing. As a result, the villagers reported that refugees often trespass into the village and national forest reserves to collect dead wood or cut down trees and to establish small plots for farming.

Deforestation and depletion of forest resources is the most oft-cited environmental problem in Western Tanzania: the rate of deforestation is reportedly higher than the national average (Relief, 2003: 11). Refugees and locals must travel much greater distances to find firewood and wood for construction than was necessary 10 years ago. However, rather than travel these far distances to find dead wood, some people have chosen to illegally cut down living trees, thus further contributing to the degradation (UNEP, 2005: 33). The deforestation was most apparent when the areas outside of the refugee camps were contrasted with those within the camp boundaries, because unlike the village and forestlands, the lands within the camp boundaries are fairly well patrolled, primarily by the camp police, or *Sungusungu*. Although their primary task is to ensure that the camps are secure, the presence of the *Sungusungu* and other camp staff deters people from cutting down trees within the camps, as this is against camp rules. In addition, because the camps are fairly densely populated, it would be difficult to cut down trees within the camp boundaries without being seen by other refugees living in the camps who might report the illegal activity.

The increased felling of trees has also led to wind and water induced soil erosion and the depletion and pollution of water resources. Finally, widespread poaching of wild

¹ It should be noted that the Government of Tanzania, the host government, is responsible for designating the land to be used for refugee camps.

animals has led to a decrease in their overall presence. Whilst the poaching is mostly done by the locals, it has been said that much of the bush meat is sold to refugees, who are often unable to find meat to include in their diet (TRAFFIC, 2006). In general, even in acknowledging that the local communities contribute to environmental degradation, reports on the subject emphasize the significant role that the refugees' presence has had on creating new, and exacerbating existing, environmental problems. During the focus groups meetings, villagers were asked to describe any environmental problems affecting them or their village. No reference was made in this question to refugees, yet many of the participants referred to refugees as being the cause for degradation.

Environmental problems noted by participants in each of the four villages included bush fires, the overuse and subsequent scarcity of water resources and illegal harvesting of trees and forest resources. The scarcity of water resources and illegal tree harvesting is attributed to the growing population in the area, of both the refugees and Tanzanians. However, in some instances, the participants argued that even though the villagers are participating in the environmentally harmful activities, they only started doing so after the coming of the refugees: the refugees are seen as the primary cause. Unmarked village and forest reserve boundaries were noted as being problematic, as the focus group participants claimed that refugees and neighbouring villagers would unknowingly trespass onto these lands to cultivate or collect fuel wood. Several participants noted that since the coming of the refugees, the wild animals in the area have disappeared. According to one participant from Kasanda Village near Mtendeli camp, the area used to be home to many animals, but now the complete absence of wild animals from the area means that most villagers are unable to include meat in their diet. The participant also lamented that the children have never seen these animals that had once populated much of the area.

It is important to note here that although there is a general agreement amongst international organization and NGO representatives, local communities and the Government of Tanzania that the refugees and the refugee camps are contributing to the environmental degradation in the region, there is not enough data to show just how much is directly related to the refugee population, and how much is in fact a result of the local communities' agricultural and land use practices. One NGO employee who has worked in Kibondo District since the mid-1990s argues that the deforestation and overuse of water resources is actually caused by the growing population of villagers and their unsustainable farming and tree harvesting practices.

Nevertheless, and what is most relevant for my research, is that the Government of Tanzania is on record as saying that the refugees have caused incalculable environmental damage to the country, destroying water sources and natural vegetation within and around the camps. A number of independent (non-government affiliated) reports confirm this claim, as does the local and national media in Tanzania. From my own personal experience, when I travelled in other parts of the country and mentioned that I was working with the refugees, the issue of refugees causing damage to the environment almost always came up. *This Day*, a Tanzanian national newspaper, printed an article on the subject on refugees and the environment, reporting that:

"Not a single day passes in the three districts of Kigoma, Kasulu, and Kibondo in Northwestern Tanzania without their residents telling chilling stories on how the tens of

thousands of refugees based in the region are doing harm to the environment. A birds eye view of the region tells it all: serious environmental degradation caused by the presence of the refugees from neighbouring Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and formerly Rwanda" (Liganga, 2006).

Another national newspaper, the *Daily News*, similarly wrote that, "many Tanzanians hold a view that immigrants and refugees are environmental pollutants, bandits and imperialists," (Daily News, 2006).

Despite the clearly biased and likely exaggerated comments of the authors of these articles, the majority of Tanzanians in the region, as well as many I spoke with living in regions as far as Dar es Salaam and Zanzibar, agreed with the general premise of these articles: the refugees are the primary (if not only) cause of the visible environmental degradation and resource depletion in the refugee affected regions. In fact, this problem had become so widely reported by the Tanzanian media, Government of Tanzania, as well as researchers, NGOs and international organization employees, that during my time with UNHCR in Tanzania, two groups of international visitors came to Kibondo District with the intention of supporting environmental restoration projects.

In the light of these mostly negative environmental changes affecting the region of western Tanzania, we can easily assume that the lives of people in host communities have been impacted by these changes. A following section of the paper seeks to describe how these communities have actually been affected, as reported by the communities themselves. This will include social, cultural and economic impacts, all of which are a result of the environmental changes in the region. To ensure that this section accurately reflects the opinions of the people directly affected by the refugee presence, the majority of the discussion is based primarily on individual interviews and focus group meetings with stakeholders in western Tanzania. However, because environmental factors are not the only variable that will affect the lives of the host communities and their relationship with the refugees, I have first summarized some other studies that focus on other variables. By looking at existing studies, we will see that few of them focus on environmental factors as impacting the refugee-host relationship, despite the fact that there is a need to do so.

Refugee-host literature review

While few would dispute that a rapid influx of many people into an already populated area will have some kind of an influence on the original inhabitants, as already noted in this paper, the vast majority of research within the field of refugee studies focuses specifically on the refugees and refugee communities. However, over the past several decades, as scholars have started to look at the impact that the refugee presence has on the hosting communities, Robert Chambers' statement that "refugees come first; hosts second, if at all," is fortunately no longer as true as it once was (Chambers, 1986). Particularly in recent years, much of the research has sought to dispel the common perception that refugees are a burden on the hosting communities, and focuses on benefits the refugees bring to a host country. Scholars have also begun to look at the different ways in which various groups or sectors within the hosting community either

benefit from or are harmed by the refugee presence, emphasizing that not all individuals will benefit or suffer equally (Landau, 2003; Whitaker, 2002; Felleson, 2003; Chambers, 1986). Some of the variables that have been shown to shape the overall impact of the refugee presence on the host community include: the size and type of the refugee settlement; international aid and support to the host communities; the history of interaction between the two groups; pre-refugee economic states of affairs in the hosting areas; and cultural similarities or differences among the different communities (Felleson 2003; Veney 2007; Whitaker 2003; Landau 2003; Chambers 1986; Black 1998; Schmidt 2000).

In other words, it is difficult to make any all-encompassing statements about refugee-host relationships because of the many variables that shape this relationship. Nevertheless, some patterns do emerge and are important as they can assist governments and others working with refugees to decide, amongst other things, how and where to place a camp, what projects to implement and how much money to allocate to various programs. In addition, as scholars continue to pursue empirical research in the field of refugee-host studies, more distinct patterns may emerge.

Although, as already noted, the amount of research done on this subject is still relatively small, there are a number of studies that focus specifically on various aspects of the refugee-host relationship in Northwestern Tanzania. Perhaps this is because the refugees have been present and living in UNHCR settlements for such an extended period of time and have, therefore, had a significant impact on the region and host communities. Whatever the reason, it is useful to review these studies which, although similar to mine, differ in that they do not look closely at the role that the environment, environmental degradation and resource depletion has on this relationship. They do, however, look at other factors that I do not look at in great depth.

The published work of Beth Whitaker, a researcher who spent several years travelling back and forth to Western Tanzania, describes the primarily economic impacts that the refugee presence had on the local population. Whitaker's research shows that the costs and benefits of having the refugee camps in the area were not distributed evenly among the host population. In other words, while some members of the host communities did benefit from having the refugees there, others did not benefit and some were negatively impacted by the refugee presence. Whitaker focuses primarily on economic benefits and costs, particularly labour and consumer markets and international aid, and asks why only certain groups of people benefit economically. (Whitaker, 2002).

A number of conclusions drawn from this research are particularly relevant and useful with regards to my own research. First, agricultural production and economic activity greatly increased following the coming of the refugees, because refugees provide both a consumer market and a source of cheap labour. Second, those in the host communities who were well educated and economically better off ultimately fared better than the uneducated and poorest members of the host communities. In fact, this pattern was also seen at the district level, as those districts where economic development was already present before the refugee influx adapted better and benefited far more than the least developed districts (Whitaker, 2002: 356).

Briefly, in a number of places in her article, Whitaker makes reference to the environmental degradation commonly associated with the presence of the refugees, acknowledging that this has a negative impact. However, she does not go into depth or look at how the environmental changes, in combination with economic and social changes, have affected the refugee-host relationship.

Cassandra Veney, another scholar who undertook research in Tanzania, similarly touches on the environmental impacts of the refugees on the host communities, without looking into how these impacts shaped the relationship between the two groups. Veney's research is in fact much broader, but she devotes a small section of her book to the responses of the Tanzanian host communities to the refugees' presence, and the impact of this presence on these communities. Veney emphasizes that, unlike in other refugee situations where the refugee and host population have no history of interaction, Burundian and Rwandan refugees had historical, economic and social ties to the local communities in Western Tanzania. Veney, along with other scholars, argues that these past linkages and a shared identity make an amicable relationship likely (Jacobsen, 2002). However, Veney also notes the negative impacts on the host communities, including environmental degradation associated with the presence of the refugees and camps (Veney, 2007: 219). So, while there are historically good relations between the two groups, changing circumstances mean that other factors must be considered when understanding the overall relationship.

Also writing on the refugee-host relationship using empirical research gathered in Western Tanzania, Mans Felleson notes that in planning for camps and settlements, the refugee-host relationship was considered a "secondary objective and as a natural outcome of successful economic development." This also implies that one main factor, in this case economic development, will shape the refugee-host relationship. Yet this again overlooks the other factors that will combine with economic development, such as environmental degradation. However, although not referencing environment-related factors in particular, Felleson notes the dangers in assuming the refugee-host relationship depends only on economic improvements or development, writing: "From a long-term perspective, deprioritizing social relations and cultural exchange between refugees and host communities can actually encourage competition and conflict that leads to isolation and segregation" (Felleson, 2003: 86).

In other words, social interaction can also influence this relationship. From Felleson's point of view, preventing personal interaction between the refugees and hosts by restricting refugees to camps, can lead to conflict between the two groups. Most relevant for my research is Felleson's familiar sounding comments on the negative impacts that the environmental degradation associated with the refugee presence has had on the local areas: "The immediate environs of many of the camps have been totally depleted from trees and bushes....The extensive deforestation, besides changing the landscape, has increased the risk of flooding, which in turn has increased soil erosion leading to a threatening decline in agricultural production for effected local communities," (Felleson, 2003:197).

Thus, in light of the widespread belief in Tanzania that the refugees are the cause of environmental degradation, and considering the comments and findings of the abovementioned researchers on the negative impacts of environmental degradation on the host communities, we should ask whether this has had an impact on this refugee-host relationship. What is interesting is that despite the fact that environmental

degradation is briefly mentioned in almost every such study, little existing research focuses specifically on this subject. This is particularly problematic, considering that many of the numerous reported conflicts between the refugee and host communities in a number of refugee-affected areas are directly related to the environment and environmental degradation (Veney, 2007; Whitaker, 2002 and 2003; Black, 2000).

The following section of the paper reports my findings, mainly gathered through focus group studies and interviews, which seek to answer the following questions: has environmental degradation impacted on the relationship between the refugee and host communities? If so, how? If not, why not?

Refugee-host relationships in Kibondo District

The bulk of my material comes from the focus group meetings I held at villages located near the various refugee camps in Kibondo District. Approximately 15-20 villagers participated in each meeting, and efforts were made to have all of the participants contribute to the discussion, in order to avoid having only one or a few dominant individuals speaking.

Environmental degradation in hosting areas

I first asked the groups to talk about the natural environment and mention any changes that have occurred over time. I also asked directly about environment-related problems, although I did not refer to or mention refugees or refugee camps, in order to get a better understanding of what environmental problems really do exist, and whether some of them may be unrelated to the presence of the refugees. Some of the answers were predictable, as the problems are not only plainly visible, but are also repeatedly mentioned by environmental NGOs and the District Natural Resources Office, and in media reports about the environmental degradation in the region. Answers included deforestation, soil erosion and depletion of water resources. Another problem mentioned was the presence of bush fires, which are typically set by farmers to clear and fertilize their fields, but which sometimes burn out of control and end up burning much larger areas than necessary. In addition to deforestation in general, the illegal poaching of forest resources (trees and in some cases wild animals) in reserve areas was reported as another significant problem.

Problems relating to village and forest reserve boundaries also came up. In Kifura village, which is located near Mkugwa refugee camp (in operation at the time of my research but which has since been closed), the villagers in the focus group complained that there are conflicts over the village boundaries between their village and neighbouring villages. In addition, they saw a problem in the fact that their village was situated so close to the Game Reserve, thus restricting their growth and expansion. The villagers in Kazaramihunda village reported similar problems, although they noted that the trespassing is committed by refugees rather than neighbouring villagers. During these focus group meetings, it was the refugees that were in fact blamed for much of the environmental degradation, although I had asked only whether environmental problems existed and if so, what they were.

One man remarked that even when the Tanzanians were the direct cause of the environmental problems, the refugees were still indirectly responsible, as it was the refugees who reportedly influenced the villagers. In another village, in response to the general consensus that the refugees were the cause of all environment-related problems in the area, I asked whether the refugees were the *only* party responsible for the problems. The group answered that while some Tanzanians have contributed to the degradation, the problems have gotten much worse since the coming of the refugees.

Relationships between refugees and hosts

Also during the focus group meetings, I asked the groups to describe their relationship and interactions with the refugees in general. All groups reported interacting with refugees at common markets, which are typically held in the villages, as opposed to the refugee camps. Since the Government of Tanzania passed its more restrictive refugee laws, however, the intergroup trade has dropped significantly, as the refugees are prevented from leaving the camps and Tanzanians are barred from entering the camps (Whitaker, 2002: 252). The focus group participants also mentioned marriage between the refugees and Tanzanians as being fairly common, but again, the capacity for the two communities to informally socialize has decreased in recent years as a result of the 1998 Refugees Act.

Similarly, the participants reported that Tanzanians had often employed refugees, as they are a cheap source of labour, but there was lack of consensus about whether the practice continues. This is again because refugees are restricted from leaving the camps, and it is therefore illegal for Tanzanians to hire refugees to work on farms outside of the camp boundaries. It was widely agreed upon that Tanzanians had previously hired the refugees, but while some of the participants stated that this is still the case, others denied this vehemently. This may have been because, although I was not a paid employee, I was affiliated with UNHCR and was thus seen as someone who might report any illegal activities to the local officials.

Several participants in the various focus groups meetings mentioned interaction through sharing medical services, as the medical services in the camps are available to villagers as well. Some villagers also noted that they see the refugees when they come to the villages to steal from the farms, or when they go into the forest reserves to cut down trees. Finally, it was also noted that the two groups interact during conflict resolution meetings, which are occasionally held in the camps. I will discuss the conflict resolution meetings in greater detail further on in the paper.

Conflicts

If this was not already brought up in the general discussion on refugee-host relations, I then asked the group whether there were ever problems or conflicts between the groups, and whether these problems have changed at all over time. The majority of the problems or conflicts mentioned were somehow related to the environment and environmental degradation, although several other problems were noted as well. Several people stated that disease has increased since the coming of the refugees, and participants at one of the meetings lamented that the refugee presence has influenced

the youth of the villages to become more like the Congolese refugees. (This camp was located near Mkugwa camp, the only camp housing Congolese and “mixed marriage” – Hutu/Tutsi – refugee families). Banditry and theft were mentioned in each of the focus group meetings, although it was also pointed out that the intensity of the problem has gone down in recent years. In addition, while some of the villagers acknowledged that the bandits were often non-refugees, the increase in crime occurred at the same time as the refugee influx (Whitaker, 2002: 344).

The causes of conflict most often cited by both the focus group participants and the individuals I interviewed separately, related to the environment and environmental degradation. Again, I would like to point out that I was very careful to avoid asking any question that might have suggested I was particularly interested in environment-related conflicts. I have already mentioned in the section on the environment and environmental change, that the villagers living near the camps blamed the refugees for many of the environmental problems present in the region.

Despite the implementation of various environmental management projects intended to prevent future degradation and rehabilitate already degraded areas, resource depletion and degradation is still a significant problem for the villagers. While most of the conflicts reported were non-violent, several resource-related conflicts did turn violent and several villagers reported that if they were to find refugees cutting down trees illegally, they would not say anything for fear of being physically hurt. Several years ago, in response to these conflicts, several NGOs in the region started holding conflict resolution meetings, which have been held in a number of the camps and are open to representatives of all stakeholder groups in the area.

Conflict resolution meetings

All of the conflict resolution meetings, also referred to as "good neighbour meetings," were held sporadically in various refugee camps between 2004 and 2006 and were similarly structured. The first part of the meetings touched on the successes or failures of past meetings, and the second part was open for discussion on new or remaining problems. Two NGOs working in the refugee camps and surrounding villages, CARE International and Relief to Development Society (REDES), administered the meetings. Attendees included village leaders and representatives, refugee leaders and representatives, UNHCR staff, camp management officials, Tanzania's Ministry of Home Affairs and District Natural Resources Offices employees and other NGO staff.

The problems most often mentioned during these meetings were similar to those raised during the focus group meetings, and included: deforestation; refugees trespassing on forest reserves and village land to collect and cut firewood and cultivate; depletion and blockage of water resources (streams); bush and forest fires; cutting and burning trees to make charcoal; and hunting of wild animals in the nearby Game Reserves. Additional conflicts or problems mentioned related to issues of security – both within and outside of the camps – such as harassment of refugees by Tanzanian government officials and other complaints or grievances directed toward UNHCR or local government officials (Minutes 2005).

What is particularly significant and useful about these meetings is that they not only allow for discussion about problems or conflicts between the refugees and local communities, but also promote working together to come up with solutions. Those groups accused of committing a crime or causing a conflict are also given the opportunity to defend themselves or explain the reasoning behind their actions. For example, when the refugees were accused of trespassing on forest reserves and village lands to collect fuel wood or cut down trees for the wood, representatives of the refugee community were given the opportunity to explain that they were not supplied with enough wood in the camps. In one of the meetings where this matter came up, it was then recommended that the Government of Tanzania allocate a specific area where refugees could legally go to collect fuel wood, in order to eliminate the need to illegally collect wood from the forest reserves and village lands (Minutes 2006).

When asked about the conflict resolution meetings – whether they were aware of them, had attended any of them and what they thought of them – the villagers who participated in my focus group meetings had mixed responses. In general, most people were aware of the meetings, although only a few had attended them: they are not open to the general public and only a few villagers are able to attend. Most respondents also thought that holding the meetings was useful, but then complained that many of the conflicts or problems brought up in the meetings were not resolved in the long term. My readings of the minutes from these meetings confirmed this, as I noticed that the same problems that were raised in the 2004 meetings were raised again in the 2006 meetings. Interestingly, while there was a consensus among the focus groups that most of the problems and conflicts brought up in the meetings remained unresolved, there was also wide feeling that the meetings are beneficial and should continue. In fact, many of the participants suggested that the meetings are not held often enough.

Other participants stated that the overall relationship between the refugees and locals has improved as a result of the conflict resolution meetings. A Tanzanian colleague of mine, who was working for REDESO at the time, was of the opinion that the meetings are important not only because they focus on resolving conflicts and addressing specific problems, but also because they are a venue for refugees and locals to come together and interact informally. This is of particular importance because as we have seen, current Tanzanian refugee law essentially prevents any kind of positive interaction between the two communities. Where previously the communities had interacted frequently through trade, common markets, friendship and marriage, this is no longer possible. Therefore, while the conflict resolution meetings may not be entirely successful in resolving the problems and conflicts raised during the meetings, they are still seen as useful, and even necessary, by many villagers, refugees and NGO staff.

Interestingly, many of the individuals I interviewed, who were working for NGOs or international organizations in the region and were not directly involved in the meetings or their administration, were unaware that the meetings were even taking place. Moreover, the general consensus among those interviewed was that the refugee-host relationships were excellent and without any conflict. Indeed, in comparison with the other conflicts in the region, such as the civil war in Burundi, the genocide in Rwanda and the ongoing violence in DRC, the conflict between the refugees and local communities seems insignificant. In addition, most of the

individuals I interviewed, and most of the NGO and international organization staff in Northwestern Tanzania in general, work with refugees and have little interaction with the local communities and villagers. However, UNHCR and other organizations that work to protect refugees rely on the support of host governments and communities.. Thus, it is important to understand the refugee-host relationship from the point of view of the host communities. My research also shows that while conflict, which is primarily a result of natural resource depletion and environmental degradation, is minimal between refugees and hosts, there are reasons for this: various conditions have helped to mitigate conflict between the two groups.

Overall perception of the refugees

During the last part of the focus group meetings, after the participants had discussed overall relations with the refugees and any problems or conflict between the two groups, I asked whether, overall, the refugee presence was good or bad. The answers to this question were mixed, both among the different villages as well as within the individual focus groups. However, while there was an overall consensus amongst participants that the refugees have caused environmental degradation which has led to conflict, many of these same participants considered the refugee presence to be a positive thing.

Some of the positive changes discussed included the presence of a cheap labour force and an increase in the level of trade, due to the growth in population. In addition, a few members of the focus group meetings noted that over the years the interaction between the refugees and locals has led to mixed marriages and the development of friendships. Most of the benefits, however, were associated with the projects funded and run by the various international organizations and NGOs working in the region, as none of these organizations were active in the area before the coming of the refugees.

Many participants mentioned the benefits stemming from significantly improved hospitals, overall better access to health care and medicine, additional schools and better roads and public transportation. Many of these projects and improvements to infrastructure were intended specifically to assist the refugees and the UNHCR and NGO staff working with the refugees; the local communities were indirect benefactors. However, over the years, UNHCR has implemented a number of refugee-hosting area (RHA) projects aimed at benefiting the local Tanzanian population specifically, with the assistance and financial support of various other donor organizations and NGOs active in the region.

Between 1995 and 2006, UNHCR spent over US\$ 36 million on RHA projects in Tanzania that were intended to mitigate the negative impact of hosting refugees, improve security in the region and ensure that the living standards for the local populations were not lower than in the refugee camps. RHA projects focus on infrastructure improvements, access to safe drinking water, education, health, security, local administration and the environment. According to figures reported by UNHCR Tanzania, the environment-related project received the greatest proportion of RHA funds in 2006. Typically, funds are distributed to partner organizations that are responsible for implementing and monitoring environmental management programs. In Kibondo District, the main agencies responsible were Relief for Development Society (REDESOS), a Tanzanian NGO, and the Tanganyika Christian Refugee

Services. Environmental management projects include tree plantings, tree seedling nurseries, rehabilitation of water sources, environmental education, promotion of energy saving (wood saving) stoves in the refugee camps and agro forestry education (UNHCR "RHA," 2006).

While this paper has drawn attention to persisting environmental degradation in Northwestern Tanzania, the problems would almost certainly be greater if not for environmental management projects. For example, between 2000-2002, the environmental NGO, REDESO, planted over 520,000 tree seedlings in Kibondo District, both within the refugee camps and in the hosting areas (Relief, 2007). UNHCR Tanzania reports that between 2002-2006, over 4,850 wood-saving mud stoves were constructed and 312 technicians from 67 villages in Kibondo District were trained on the building and maintenance of these stoves. Similarly, in 2005 alone, the REDESO administered Agro Forestry Centre trained 1,560 Tanzanian farmers on sustainable farming and agro forestry practices (UNHCR, 2006 "Refugee"). Environmental Committees have been established both in villages and within the refugee camps to disseminate information on environmental sustainability. Further, international funds have contributed to the drawing up of Village Land Use Plans which designate areas for specific uses, thus aiming to restrict environmental degradation and protect environmentally sensitive areas.

Conclusions and recommendations

My research has shown that, without doubt, the environmental degradation in the refugee-affected areas of Northwestern Tanzania has created problems between the refugees and the local communities. Although I do not contend that environmental degradation will necessarily ever be the *most* significant variable in shaping both the impact that the refugees have on the hosts and the overall refugee-host relationship, it is certainly one of a number of significant variables. Further, unlike some of the other variables, environmental degradation is present in many, if not all, refugee affected areas. Global conflicts will continue to force people to seek refuge in neighbouring countries or in other parts of their own country, which will undoubtedly affect both the natural environment and the people living in these areas. Consequently, I have drawn a number of conclusions from my research that may be used in current and future refugee emergencies, to ensure that environmental conflict between refugees and local communities is prevented, or at least mitigated.

First, when studying the impacts of refugees on host populations, we must also consider how these impacts are perceived by the local communities. Perceptions can be more important at times than the facts of the situation, when trying to understand the refugee-host relationship. For example, while the growth in the local Tanzanian population may have contributed significantly to the environmental degradation in the region, the overwhelming majority of Tanzanians, including those running the country and the media, view the refugees as the cause. Without allowing the local communities themselves to discuss the pros and cons of the refugee presence in the region, outsiders may see only the positive changes that have occurred since the coming of the refugees, such as economic growth or improved health facilities. However, my research has shown that there are negative impacts as well, and even though on the surface the refugee-host relationship is amicable and without conflict, the host communities do indeed report some problems and conflicts. So, in order to

truly understand the impacts that a refugee population will have on host communities, the host communities themselves must be given a voice.

At the same time, it is also important to investigate the reality of the situation. While the refugee communities are often blamed for the degradation and other environmental problems, we cannot ignore the fact that the local communities may also be partly responsible. While UNHCR and other groups working with refugees should not use this as an excuse to do nothing, neither should the refugee communities be unduly blamed as being the sole cause of such problems. Moreover, hosts can also benefit from using new technologies, such as wood-saving mud stoves, and from learning new farming and forestry techniques that aim to reduce soil erosion and water resource depletion.

UNHCR should put more emphasis on these environmental management projects in order to prevent environmental degradation, rather than worry about dealing with the consequences of the degradation in the future. An influx of thousands of people into one area will inevitably create environmental problems, particularly when both the refugees and host population depend on natural resources for their daily survival. However, much can be done to ensure that the degradation is mitigated. UNHCR has numerous manuals and statements on environmental policies and standards, yet in the case of Tanzania, these policies are rarely fully implemented. This is most likely because of limited funding: for example, the UNHCR Tanzania mission's budget was substantially reduced during the time I was there. However, more emphasis should be placed on the importance of environmental management projects and their connection to the overall well-being of both the refugees and hosting communities.

Refugee hosting area projects, in general, are extremely valuable. This is not just due to their obvious, immediate benefits, such as improved health care and better education, but also because they can ultimately improve the relationship between the refugees and hosts and can lessen, or even prevent, conflict between the two groups. I found that while almost all of the participants in the focus groups believed that the refugees caused the environmental problems in the area, when asked whether overall it was a positive thing that the refugees were there, the overwhelming majority answered in the affirmative.

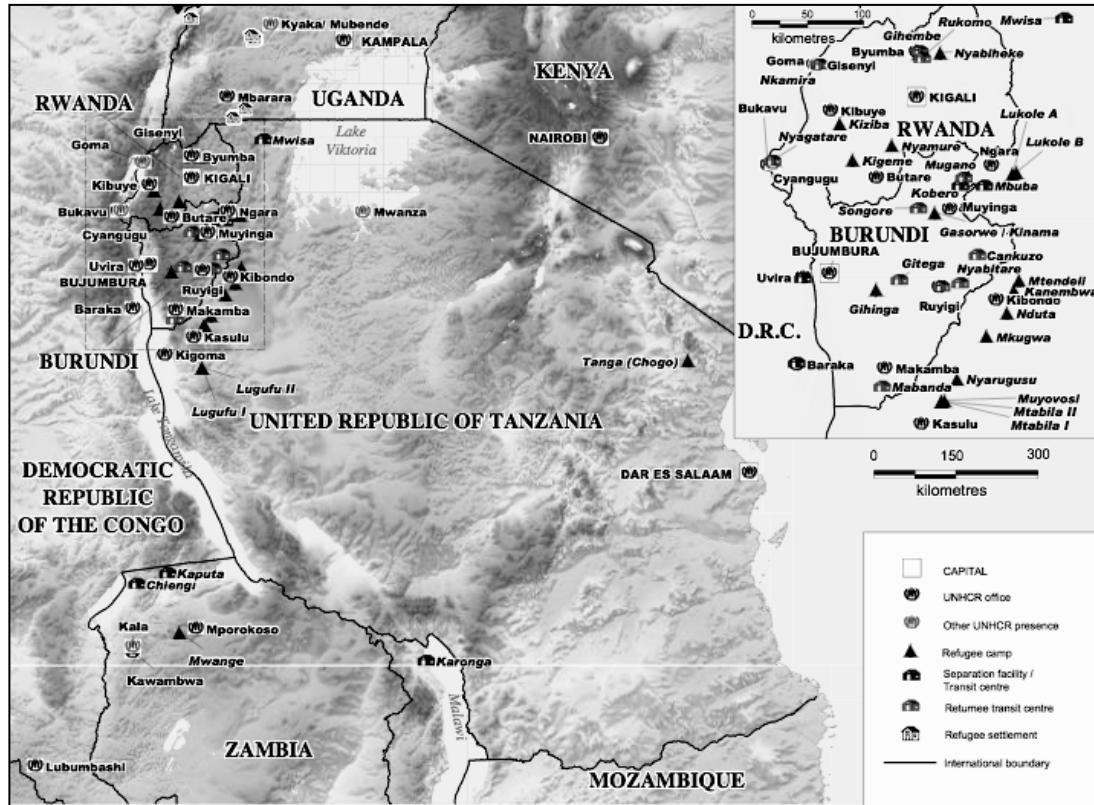
UNHCR is not officially mandated to support or implement development projects, particularly in non-refugee communities. However, in the case of Tanzania, the local communities and the local government officials expected the UNHCR to support both community projects and refugee-specific projects. Unless other UN agencies or other donors are willing to financially support refugee hosting area projects, UNHCR must continue to fund them. These projects may ultimately support long-term and sustainable economic development in the refugee hosting areas (Whitaker 2002), which is significant for Western Tanzania, as it is one of the most underdeveloped areas in Tanzania.

Like refugee hosting area and environmental management projects, conflict resolution meetings should be held in all refugee situations and on a regular basis. As discussed, current Tanzanian refugee law restricts the movement of the refugees and prevents them from travelling beyond a 4km radius of the camps. Further, Tanzanians are not allowed to enter the camps without a pass, which is difficult to obtain. The refugees and local communities, therefore, do not interact on a regular basis. Not only do the

conflict resolution meetings allow both villagers and refugees to vent their grievances and discuss possible solutions to ongoing problems, they are also a unique venue for interaction between the two groups.

Finally, more empirical research is necessary because each case is different. There are so many factors that must be considered, such as the history of the refugee-host relationship, economic benefits of the refugee presence and government reactions to the refugees. My study has shown that the environmental degradation has previously been overlooked as a factor that might influence the refugee-host relationship. However, environmental degradation has had a substantial influence on this relationship in Tanzania, and should therefore be given greater consideration.

UNHCR Map of Tanzania:



Source: UNHCR Global Appeal 2006-UNHCR in the United Republic of Tanzania. Online. <http://www.unhcr.org>

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