

Enhancing Household Food Security in Refugee Camps in Ethiopia

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The Somali region is located in the eastern part of Ethiopia. Its capital, Jijiga, is located 635 km from the capital Addis Ababa. Currently there are three refugee camps in this region, namely Kebribeyah, Awberie and Sheder, which together host about 28,500 individuals. To allow refugees to complement the basic food ration, UNHCR and its partners started a number of homegardening projects. The results will help UNHCR decide on a more formal approach to gardening in refugee camps.

The stream of refugees to the camps is ongoing, with an average of 1000 individuals arriving per month and about 16,000 asylum seekers waiting for screening at the newly opened Sheder refugee camp. Most refugees in this region originate from Somalia, Sudan and Eritrea. As of September 2008, the total number of refugees hosted in Ethiopia was about 77,000.

Most of the Somali refugees arrived in 1991 when warlords overthrew the dictator Mohamed Siad Barre, who had been in power for 21 years, and Somalia turned into a state of chaos. Another wave arrived in 1994 after war erupted between factions in northwestern Somalia. These refugees were initially settled in eight refugee camps, but seven of them were closed after voluntary repatriation in 2005. Only Kebribeyah remained, until two other camps were opened in the region (Teferiber in 2007 and Sheder in 2008) due to rising conflict among the transition governments of Somali and other warlords, which continues today. Most of the Sudanese refugees arrived in Ethiopia in 1991 and 1992 from South Sudan following the start of the civil war. These refugees were settled in five refugee camps in the western part of Ethiopia. The Eritrean refugees first crossed the Ethiopian border soon after the Ethio-Eritrean conflict in May 2000, and since June 2004 they have been re-located to the western zone of the Tigray region. Several ethnic groups among the Ugandan and Eritrean refugees are farmers and pastoralists.

Food security

A number of issues of concern related to food security were identified by UNHCR and WFP in the refugee camps in Ethiopia. First, the refugee diet is both monotonous and does not meet the full micronutrient needs of the population.

UNHCR and its partners

UNHCR's mandate is to ensure effective protection and quality assistance to refugees and others persons of concern and to implement durable solutions in a consistent manner across the world. UNHCR is the main funding agency in Ethiopia, and its key international partners are WFP (The UN World Food Programme), ZOA Refugee Care, IRC (International Rescue Committee) and the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and GTZ. WFP coordinates the provision of food (a general food ration) for the refugees, as well as supplementary food rations for the selective feeding programme and the school feeding programme in the refugee camps.

The NGO ZOA is working actively with Somali refugees and IDPs (Internally Displaced People) on various livelihood issues, such as environmental protection, vocational skill development and training, income generation, backyard gardening and water development activities.

UNHCR's main national partners in Ethiopia are institutes like the Administration for Refugee & Returnee Affairs (ARRA, the implementing governmental partner), local NGOs like Save Rural Society (SRS), which focuses on environmental protection, and the Mother Child Development Organization (MCDO).

Almost 90 per cent of the refugees have been living in Ethiopia for more than 15 years, and these protracted refugees depend fully on food aid, which means they have been receiving the same kind of food commodities all this time: cereals (wheat and/or maize), vegetable oil, salt and sugar (together amounting to 1750 to 2100 kcal/day/person). Second, the dietary diversity is very poor, due to lack of affordable fresh foods (which are also scarce in the region). UNHCR is not able to provide fresh vegetables in many refugee camps, while the hosting government's current land policy does not allow the refugees to cultivate crops themselves outside the camps. Third, it was found that children and pregnant women are especially vulnerable. Anaemia rates among children and women of childbearing age are high. Although these rates were reduced from 35 - 67 per cent in 2007 to 34 - 38 per cent in 2008, they are still too high and a public health concern.

Based on these findings, in August 2007 WFP started to provide a more diversified food ration, including pulses and fortified corn-soya blend (CSB). UNHCR decided to provide peanut butter (50g), tomato paste (70g) and lentils (50g) for pregnant women and children aged 6-24 months. In addition, to allow refugees to complement the basic food ration and to discourage them from selling part of their food ration (for income, partly used for buying vegetables), UNHCR started a number of homegardening projects.

Food production and gardening

Home gardening provides a low-cost, sustainable strategy for increasing household food security through dietary diversity and the introduction of micro-nutrient rich foods. Gardening improves the direct access to food, and when it does not depend too heavily on imported and costly inputs, it increases the self-reliance of households. Vegetable plots in combination with animal husbandry provide supplementary foods with high nutritive values, including proteins and vitamins, which are especially important for vulnerable groups (malnourished children, pregnant and lactating woman, and sick people). In addition, excess produce can be easily marketed locally. The proposed activities in the project can be easily done by women and are an acceptable activity for women-headed households. Gardening further creates self employment opportunities and fosters women's empowerment.

The following criteria are important in the gardening projects initiated by UNHCR and its partners:

- Refugees and IDPs are expected to not be repatriated in the following year (rather the number of refugees is expected to increase, and it is assumed that staff will be available in the camps).
- It is expected that the security situation will not deteriorate significantly and that market conditions will be more or less stable.
- There is interest in backyard gardening and poultry raising, and commitment and cooperation can be expected from the community and the implementing agencies.

In the Somali Regional State, the gardening project initiated by ZOA, UNHCR and ARRA focuses on Shimebba, Aw Bare and Kebribeyah camps and their immediate surroundings. Even before the project began, some of the refugees in Kebribeyah and Aw Bare refugee camps had already started backyard gardening with the limited resources available to them (most of these gardeners are women, but it is difficult to provide accurate numbers on how many are involved). In Kebribeyah refugee camp most of the refugees have enough backyard space to cultivate crops and the land is relatively fertile. In Aw Bare each refugee family has about 70m² of land, which is a bit stony, but contains enough top soil.

The project's primary target groups are households with more than three children under five years of age; households with women or children who are severely anaemic; households with children who are severely malnourished; families with people living with HIV/AIDS; disabled persons; households with an agricultural background; and households supporting the elderly. Priority is given to people who meet

these criteria and who are highly motivated. In total there are 400 beneficiaries (200 households per camp that have started backyard gardening and poultry raising).

UNHCR and ZOA support selected refugees in providing training and inputs (seeds, farm tools, and also plastic sheets for water harvesting). The most common vegetables cultivated by the refugee communities are kale, spinach, okra, capsicum, pepper, tomato, onion, cabbage, cow peas and sorghum. Small livestock, like poultry, are also produced.

Refugees are not allowed to use land outside the camps. Water shortage is also a major issue in most of the refugee camps. Most refugees do not have access to production inputs like vegetables seeds, different farm tools and initial capital, and they also often lack skills to undertake backyard agriculture or animal husbandry practices.

Based on the ongoing gardening activities in refugee camps in Ethiopia and elsewhere, UNHCR has already determined that more emphasis is needed on:

- Training on backyard gardening practices, poultry production, nutrition and meal preparation, and on income generation;
- The provision of seeds, fruit tree seedlings and selected poultry breeds that are adapted to the climate and soils;
- The promotion of appropriate water harvesting technologies, compost preparation and use; and
- Identification and selection of viable income generating activities.

Agriculture in refugee camps is also hampered because: 1) most families lack capital for investment, 2) some refugees are just waiting to go home but still want to start agricultural activities; 3) many women are not able or allowed to do heavy labour (and other physiological and sociological factors); and 4) there is a lack of commitment from the government /host community to provide guidance to the refugees.

Promising technologies

Multi-storey gardens (MSGs) are ideal for areas with constrained land, poor soil quality and reduced water availability as is found in Eastern Ethiopia. The gardens are grown in the top and sides of a sack, rather than planted directly in the ground. They require reduced land space (only the space needed for five grain sacks) and are very water efficient. UNHCR and its partners intend to provide the materials individual households would need to create MSGs. The methodology can be easily employed in small areas (as small as 10 m²). An additional metre of land is needed to house two chickens in the space directly behind the yard. The introduction of MSGs will be supported with training on capacity building and water harvesting and saving technologies. UNHCR has been partnering with GTZ in Kenya and Ethiopia to develop technical training modules on the MSG that emphasize nutrition, environmental protection, water conservation and the ease with which sufficient vegetable can be grown for home consumption.

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