

Case Study:

**Mozambican Refugees in Malawi:
Livelihoods and their Impact on the Natural Resource Base**

by

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Mozambican Refugees in Malawi: Livelihoods and their Impact on the Natural Resource Base

In many of the world's least developed countries, refugee livelihoods are highly reliant on surrounding natural resources as well as relations with host communities. This is particularly so in the early stages of an influx when external assistance may be limited, but also true for many protracted situations (e.g. Sudan, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Malawi). While understandably most refugee interventions focus on immediate, and often life-threatening needs (such as for food, water, medical care and shelter) other resources can be important for a refugee's survival – including grazing and agricultural land, fuelwood, wild products (used to supplement food rations), and a range of income-earning activities.

This case study explores the relationship between refugee livelihoods and natural resources, and in particular the 'transforming processes and structures' by which refugees gain access to (and impact on) the local environment. The article is based on fieldwork undertaken in the Dedza and Ntcheu districts of Malawiⁱ, where a range of local institutions and less formal 'rules and norms' affected the availability of natural resources to incoming Mozambican refugees. The findings show that refugee livelihoods had a limited longer-term impact on the environment, though there were important local differences as well as appreciable changes in the availability of fuelwood. This is partly explained by the nature of local 'regulations', which help shape the way in which refugees were able to access, utilise and ultimately impact on, the surrounding landscape. It is therefore essential that the delivery of external aid (including rehabilitation or compensation activities) develop mechanisms that better understand, foster and engage with local people and their livelihood strategies.

Case Study: Mozambican Refugees in Malawi

For almost ten years, Malawi played host to a population of over one million refugees fleeing from neighbouring Mozambique. This was an influx of huge proportions, representing some ten percent of the host country's population, which at the time was ranked highest in the world as well as causing the greatest economic 'burden'. The potential impacts on Malawi were (and may remain) enormous, especially in a country that was both poverty-stricken and widely believed to have a highly degraded environment.

In the initial stages of the influx, refugees settled spontaneously within villages, often crossing and re-crossing the border regions as circumstances dictated. The process of self-settlement was markedly different to the more institutionalised responses in nearby Zimbabwe, and was in part due to the general policy of resistance to outside intervention upheld by the Malawian government. By 1986-87, as the refugee numbers swelled to enormous proportions, the Government was eventually forced to seek external assistance. Over the next few years, refugee settlements in Malawi covered the full typology of settlement patterns, from more formal camps to spontaneous settlements. In Dedza district for example, most refugees settled under the jurisdiction of the village head, being given areas of communal land on which to live. The resulting numbers living on one site resembled more formal camps, although in reality many refugees settled within village areas or within fields. These 'reception centres' (as they became known) were not closed camps, and while food and other rations were distributed, refugees also made use of local resources (especially fuelwood) as well as undertaking piecework for Malawian farmers.

Refugee Livelihoods and the Natural Environment

The relationship between refugee livelihoods and the natural environment in Malawi, and other countries, is clearly a matter of importance, and was the subject of a number of claims at the time that refugees were potentially damaging an already fragile environment on which poor rural Malawians were highly dependent.ⁱⁱ Such claims have since been repeated in other countries, most notably in Tanzania, where environmental damage by refugees was cited as one reason for the expulsion of Rwandan refugees in 1996. However, the notion that the arrival of refugees has a dramatic impact on the natural environment often rests on the presumption that the environment was largely stable prior to their arrival. In such a context, large numbers of refugees could potentially have a huge impact by upsetting the natural balance.

Pre-influx Degradation

Refugees however do not generally enter pristine environments. Most regions of the world are undergoing some sort of environmental change that can be summarised as "degradation", and it is not uncommon for refugees to enter a region that is subject to existing problems of resource depletion. Indeed it is often difficult to distinguish refugee impacts from the on-going processes of degradation, and in many instances, the importance of refugees in fuelwood depletion can become overstated - with

refugees being blamed for 'damage' they did not cause (or that did not really exist at all).ⁱⁱⁱ

In the case of Malawi, the pre-influx environment of Dedza district (and to a lesser extent Ntcheu) was heavily deforested by the time of the refugee influx during the mid-1980s. There were remaining woodlands and forests, including significant government reserves, as well as fairly extensive (but somewhat depleted) communal woodlands. These existed alongside more scattered tree cover in wooded burial grounds, fields and around homesteads. There was also considerable local variance. Indeed in some areas, forest cover had been virtually non-existent for at least a hundred years (and probably a lot longer), whereas other localities had more recent and extensive woodland cover – some of which had been cleared in the first part of the 20th century, while others had remained more densely covered prior to the influx of refugees.

Livelihood Strategies and Impacts

Farming and Other Strategies

In general, relatively few refugees gained access to land for cultivation, and where they did, there is little evidence that their methods of farming were any more degrading than those of the local population. In the more hilly areas of Ntcheu district, anecdotal evidence suggests instances of localised soil erosion, such as where new fields were opened up on steep slopes – though most instances of soil erosion were linked to the clearance of trees from forested areas. Otherwise it seems that refugees had little (if any) discernable impact on soil fertility and declining agricultural productivity. Indeed farmland resources had been declining in productivity before, during and after the influx, with much of the expansion into marginal areas occurring before the influx. By the time of the refugees' arrival into areas such as Dedza district, there were limited supplies of even the most marginal land in which to expand. Rather than leading to resource-use conflicts and a breakdown in local regulations, this limited supply seems to have only led to a reduction in the opportunities available to incoming refugees. In fact, most refugees in Dedza and Ntcheu districts settled under the jurisdiction of local village heads, something to which there was general adherence. There are even examples of Mozambicans consulting local village heads in order to settle disputes with other refugees, as well as obtaining permission to open up new fields.

Most early arrivals from Mozambique survived through a range of coping mechanisms that, as numbers grew, relied increasingly on the large-scale provision of international aid. Institutions such as churches and local NGOs played an important part in the early stages, and despite limitations on farming resources in districts such as Dedza, refugees were able to find other means of survival. Food aid was both a primary source of food, and a basis for a great many livelihoods. In a lot of cases thriving markets developed, particularly in camps, though it is difficult to know how much refugees were dependent on the formal assistance programmes or whether they were self-sustaining. Many enterprises progressed beyond a purely subsistence level, to shelter provision, bus travel, the daily purchase of firewood, shopping and market trading. In the spontaneously settled regions of Dedza and Ntcheu, refugees continued to farm their existing fields by crossing the border into Mozambique. Also a small minority of refugees brought with them productive resources, such as sewing machines, cattle and carpentry tools, with other deploying traditional skills and family trades, like pottery production, tailoring, domestic utensil manufacture, shelter construction, furniture making, food production and sale. Wild resources such as plants for relish, edible fungi, insects and rodents were also important sources of food for more vulnerable refugees lacking significant land resources of their own.^{iv}

Forests and Fuelwood Collection

Most Mozambican refugees made particular use of tree products (pole and fuelwood) with sometimes substantial increases in local demand. There were many claims of rapid deforestation made at the time but these now appear somewhat overstated, especially considering the difficulty of separating refugee impacts from those of the host population. While rapid deforestation has undoubtedly occurred during the period of the influx, there is little overall difference in rates of forest loss between refugee and non-refugee affected areas.^v

Where deforestation has been significant it has been in mostly localised instances, such as the clearance of formerly forested areas for refugee settlement or the increased removal of trees (for shelter) from nearby communal forests. In aggregate terms this may not be significant, but in many cases these resources are important for local livelihoods.

Furthermore and quite apart from tree cover loss, woody biomass (especially fuelwood) has declined rapidly during the period. Evidence suggests that this decline has been greater in refugee-affected areas, though not necessarily with the resulting loss of woodland cover. Indeed trees are rarely felled for fuelwood alone, with most being collected from the ground or as a by-product of trees felled for other purposes such as shelter construction.

Local Regulations and Institutions

In summary then, the main environmental change attributable (at least partially) to the influx is the decline in woody biomass (fuelwood availability), whereas actual deforestation is less clear, with instances of considerable local variance. There is also little evidence of the depletion of other natural resources. Clearly this varied picture is not just the result of sheer numbers, but also the way in which livelihoods interact with the environment. An essential part of this relationship is the nature of local 'regulations' that allow (or prohibit) the access and use of natural resources, and three such examples are explored below.

Burial Grounds

Burial grounds demonstrate a form of socio-cultural regulation that has mostly withstood the increasing pressure placed on resources. They have tended to remain virtually unchanged over the decades, regardless of whether they were in refugee or non-refugee affected villages. The customary practices for burial grounds limit the use of tree products for the funerals of community members only, and even then just the collection of deadwood or brushwood. These 'rules' are based on established norms that have evolved from indigenous forms of ancestral worship (often no longer practiced) and which are usually enforced with penalties, such as the payment of a chicken if a tree is felled. Burial grounds vary from village to village as well as over time, and are not merely static or historic 'institutions' that serve to protect indigenous trees. There are even cases where the planting of *exotic* trees such as pine or bluegum (plus bananas) has been permitted.

Communal Woodlands

Most communal woodlands are typically remnants of much larger natural forests though often not specifically set-aside for such purposes, either being areas yet to be

cleared, or unsuitable for cultivation. There are relatively few examples of large communal woodlands in Dedza district and they tend to be less well protected than burial grounds – though in comparison, burial grounds are very small and were never likely to be a target for any increased demand for tree products. Some of these communal woodlands come under the jurisdiction of one village head, though many are ‘open-access’ resources situated on hills and shared by surrounding communities.

In Dedza and Ntcheu districts, there are several examples of village heads deciding to clear or agree changes in land use on formerly forested areas. Pressure for farmland led to one communal woodland being cleared in the 1960s, as the village head decided it was in the community’s best interest. There are also some examples of refugees contributing to this process; such as where they settled on (and cleared) woodland and following their return, the village head agreed to the redistribution of land - though this time as farmland rather than as a communal resource.

Other examples of more extensive communal woodland tend to exist on the hilly areas of Dedza and Ntcheu districts, in areas unsuitable for cultivation. These are generally common property resources, and not under the ultimate control of any one person or group. Socio-cultural norms persist, with unlimited access to gather fuelwood (usually from the ground) and wild products, but generally not the felling of trees - unless with permission for a specific need, such as for hut building. Over the decades and even centuries, these communal woodlands have become depleted as more and more people have utilised the resources. The presence of refugees in the area seems to have only served to accelerate the process, with increased pressure contributing to the removal of much of the remaining tree cover – though also reflecting the relatively uncontrolled access that is permitted.

Again these are not static processes, and following the repatriation of refugees, some formerly wooded areas have been converted to other uses (such as farmland or private woodlots) while others have been left to regenerate. There have also been attempts by the Forestry Department to re-establish resource use regulations, with village heads charged with trying to prevent the felling of trees – though evidence suggests that seedlings and even roots continue to be unearthed for fuel.

Government Forest Reserves

Lastly, there are some sizeable forest reserves (on either customary or public land), which are managed and policed by the government Forestry Department. A product of the colonial era, forest reserves were established on mostly higher lands at the top of watersheds. Access is permitted to these reserves for the collection of fallen wood (usually for fuel, but also small poles) and other wild products including mushrooms and caterpillars. A small fee is supposed to be paid for each head-load of wood gathered. In some forests there is also a charge for grazing rights, while in general the felling of trees is prohibited.

Even given the uniformity of these regulations, there is an interesting contrast between Dzonzi-Mvai reserve (Ntcheu district) and Dedza Mountain reserve (both in areas that hosted large numbers of Mozambicans). In Dzonzi-Mvai reserve, much of the recent deforestation has been attributed to the presence of refugees during the mid-1980s to early-1990s, although the forest was becoming depleted before the influx. Meanwhile, evidence from Dedza Mountain reserve indicates a much lower level of deforestation, although there are signs of declining fuelwood availability. This is despite both reserves being subject to similar pressures during the influx.

The difference can be partially explained by contrasts in management and enforcement regimes. Access to both forests for the collection of fuelwood is essentially free, though subject to a fee if caught by a patrol worker. Indeed, both Dzonzi-Mvai and Dedza Mountain reserves showed appreciable declines in woody biomass, though less so in the latter (as compared to a reserve which was virtually unaffected by the presence of refugees). It seems however, that the pressure of hosting refugees around Dzonzi-Mvai reserve led to an appreciable breakdown in the rules governing the felling of trees. This did not occur in Dedza Mountain reserve, which is a commercial plantation where the policing of regulations (illegal felling, fires, etc) is an essential part of maintaining its commercial value - with the cost of patrol workers offset by the returns. Furthermore forest management in Dedza Mountain reserve is far more intensive and controlled, including the continual raising of seedlings, and the planting/felling of trees to ensure a continual supply – which in turn helps to increase the availability brushwood and provide a bulwark against degradation.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion Mozambican refugees made an important use of natural resources for their livelihoods, including farmland and supplementary food, but *especially* woody biomass (for poles and fuelwood). This seems to have contributed to the decline in fuelwood availability, though it is more difficult to attribute any substantial deforestation (loss of tree cover) apart from in localised instances. This varied picture can be partially explained by the local regulations and institutions that help determine the accessibility of resources: the limited access to farmland; the availability of wild resources (for the most vulnerable); and, the variety of regulations and management practices that determine forestry resources. Often these are not formal regulations, but established rules and socio-cultural norms of access.

The challenge for policy-makers is less to standardise interventions, but rather to create mechanisms that foster and engage with local strategies. In the case of Malawi, several key players attempted to address biomass decline with large-scale, supply-led programmes (of either fuelwood distribution or forest replanting). Success was limited, and if long-term sustainability is important, community participation and supporting local institutions of resource management should not be underrated. Both refugees and hosting populations eke out livings through a wide diversity of livelihood strategies. These strategies are changing and highly adaptive. Simply replacing the equivalent forest area (or biomass volume) that existed before the influx will not necessarily best meet current livelihood needs.

ⁱ The author undertook the fieldwork during 1998-9, as partial fulfilment of a DPhil (PhD) in Development Studies, University of Sussex, UK.

ⁱⁱ For example, Kalipeni (1992) Population Growth and Environmental Degradation in Malawi, p273-282 of *African Insight*, Volume 22, Number 4.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jacobsen (1994) *The Impact of Refugees on the Environment: A Review of the Evidence*, Refugee Policy Group, Washington DC. McGregor (1993) Refugees and the Environment, p167-170 of Black and Robinson (eds.) *Geography and Refugees: Patterns and Processes of Change*, Belhaven, London.

^{iv} Refugee Studies Programme (1993) *Aid, Non-Governmental Agencies and Refugee Livelihoods: Recommendations for a Way Forward*, Universities of Zimbabwe, Malawi and Oxford. Wilson et al (1989) *Food Provisioning Amongst Mozambican Refugees in Malawi: A Study of Aid, Livelihood and Development*, Refugee Studies Programme, Oxford.

^v Based on the author's analysis of data produced for the Ministry for Forestry and Natural Resources, Government of Malawi.