



An aid volunteer at the Bidibidi refugee camp in Yumbe, Uganda. Photo by: [Denis Onyodi / Uganda Red Cross-Climate Centre / CC BY-NC](#)

GLASGOW, Scotland — The Bidibidi refugee settlement in Uganda is home to [270,000](#) South Sudanese refugees and surrounded by arid land, which many refugees share with members of the local community through informal agreements. For both groups, sourcing fuel usually means cutting down trees. But this can lead to degradation and deforestation which, in turn, increases the risk of landslides and flooding.

Environmental sustainability is increasingly a priority for organizations that support communities hosting refugees, as they look at ways to ease competition for natural resources and prevent tension between groups, experts told Devex. This is particularly important in camp settings, which can have a heavier impact on the environment than the arrival of refugees in urban areas where some infrastructure already exists.

Textbox:

[How to support displaced populations' mental health during lockdown](#)

Mental health cannot be an afterthought in the coronavirus response, experts say.

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Charlotta Benedek, head of the [UNEP/OCHA](#) Joint Environment Unit, said that where there is a very large influx of refugees, the dependence and competition for scarce resources can create problems, including environmental ones.

In Bidibidi, the unit is working with partner organizations to find solutions to reduce the

dependence on wood, Benedek explained, while educating communities in the camp on alternative fuels and energy-efficient cooking practices.

Climate change and environmental degradation are not only increasing the drivers of displacement but also aggravating the conditions of those who are already vulnerable, said Charlotte Slente, secretary-general at the [Danish Refugee Council](#). There is a huge need to support host communities where the arrival of refugees and migrants may influence the availability of resources — such as wood, bamboo, and land for agriculture — which potentially spurs unrest or xenophobia, she explained.

So how can organizations adapt their approaches to support environmental sustainability for refugees and host communities?

## Think long-term

Working in emergency situations, there has been a tendency for humanitarian organizations to focus on the short-term needs of communities, without considering environmental sustainability and resilience approaches, the experts agreed.

The lack of long-term vision can be a problem, said Lama Gharaibeh, energy and climate adviser at the [Norwegian Refugee Council](#). But as soon as the situation is more stable — as it is now in Jordan, for example, which received a huge number of Syrian refugees in the last few years — it's time to start investing in sustainable projects for long-term impact, she said.

Part of the problem is that funding, and therefore operations, tend to be short-term for humanitarian organizations, Benedek added. A shift in focus and greater flexibility from donors — to allow for more time to test ideas and see the impact — could help investment in long-term solutions, she said.

## Transfer assets

Introducing changes that have a lasting benefit for the host community is an important part of [NRC](#)'s work in Jordan, where it is supporting the installation of solar water heater systems and energy efficiency upgrades in homes and schools. There, the majority of refugees live in rented accommodation in urban settings but expensive utility bills and maintenance were causing disputes between landlords and tenants. Education authorities were also facing extremely high electricity bills as schools adopted a double shift system to accommodate the high numbers of children.

Textbox:

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The government hopes the infrastructure project will jump-start an economy in crisis and "spread the wealth" to the country's poorest states. But scientists, NGOs, and communities argue that it responds to corporate interests and flies in the face of indigenous land rights.

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The new systems improve shelter conditions and reduce the financial burden for refugees, and ownership of these is eventually transferred to landlords or authorities, Gharaibeh explained. “It’s really important ... in enhancing social cohesion and reducing the tension ... to actually deliver assets to the community itself,” she said. “These types of solutions and services that can last a longer period of time .. will also impact positively on the environment and help the government.”

The project also provides technical training to young adults from both communities, equipping them with skills in the maintenance and installation of renewable energy.

Identifying livelihood opportunities that bring together and benefit both the host and refugee communities can help lessen tensions, Benedek noted. In Bidibidi, where the burning of waste is an environmental and health issue, one option that is being explored is recycling plastic bottles to build housing which would also create livelihood opportunities, she explained.

## **Look to new technologies**

New technologies, particularly those developed locally, can offer solutions. Examples of this can already be seen in energy and agriculture, Slente said. In Kenya, charcoal coated seed balls — designed to protect the seeds inside — are being used to tackle deforestation. While in Uganda, solar-powered water supply systems are being installed in refugee settlements. Slente said she is hopeful that collaborative partnerships, including those with the private sector, will help organizations embrace new technologies and other innovative solutions.

New technologies can also benefit host communities in the long-term. If humanitarian organizations invest in solar panels, rather than bringing in diesel generators, that can be a “win-win,” Benedek said. “The municipality ... or the local government would actually get a resource which is useful, they can also benefit host communities, and it is sustainable from a climate perspective,” she explained.

## **Bring in the experts**

Some sustainability techniques and methodologies are technically complicated and require expertise, Slente said. It’s important to make use of local expertise, where possible. This can also enhance cooperation with authorities and acceptance from local communities.

Urban planners, and experts in water and sanitation or energy, play an important role in planning settlements in a way that causes minimal impact on the environment, Benedek explained. Disaster risk reduction experts should also be brought in to assess and anticipate any secondary risks, such as flooding or landslides, caused by potential deforestation.

## Create opportunities for dialogue

In urban contexts, refugees live in similar conditions to the urban poor, though they face specific vulnerabilities and stigma, said Lucy Earle, principal research on urban issues at the [International Institute for Environment and Development](#). It's important for refugees and other displaced populations to be involved in discussions with local authorities, such as those around upgrading services.

In Kenya, [IIED](#) will facilitate forums that bring together communities and refugees to discuss their common problems. Data from this research, as well as local knowledge, can then be used to plan measures that would improve life for both refugees and the host community, Earle said. Such dialogue is especially important where camps or settlements are long term, Benedek added. Engaging refugee populations will also help organizations understand their culture, which can vary even within the same settlement and influence preferences when it comes to activities such as cooking and fuel.