



Committee: United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)

Topic: The impact of refugee camps on ecosystems

Written by: Marcela Castañeda, Camila Mota and Paola Zavala

I. Committee Background

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) is a committee of the United Nations (UN) which “coordinates environmental activities and assists developing countries in implementing environmentally sound policies and practices.” It was established after the Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment in 1972 (Environment & Society, 2004). UNEP’s headquarters are located in Nairobi, Kenya and it has dozens of regional offices located around the world. Currently, the committee’s mission is to “provide leadership and encourage partnership in caring for the environment by inspiring, informing, and enabling nations and peoples to improve their quality of life without compromising that of future generations.” Some of UNEP’s major achievements have been the establishment of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in 1988, the creation of the Global Environment Facility (GEF) in 1992 and the development of the International Cyanide Management Code in 2002 (Who We Are, UNSDG, 2020).

II. Topic Information

A) History of the Topic

According to the United Nations, refugees are people forced to escape from their country due to persecution, war, or intense violence. The term “refugee” is often

confused with the term “migrant”. The difference between a migrant and a refugee is that refugees are forced to leave their country due to conflict, while migrants choose to leave their nation to find better living conditions. Under international law, nations are obligated to provide refugees with the same rights as any other legal citizen as long as they respect them. This means they have rights such as freedom from torture and ill-treatment, freedom of speech, freedom of movement, etc. To enumerate, nowadays there are an estimated 65.5 million refugees. This is due to the dozens of conflicts taking place around the world such as the civil wars in Syria and Yemen, violent and systematic persecution in Myanmar, and terrorism in countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq, and Kenya (UNHCR USA, 2020). Refugee camps shelter millions of vulnerable people and grant them food, water, and medical attention. They also provide additional services such as emergency relief items, water, sanitation, counselling, registration, and legal aid. Currently, about 2.6 million refugees live safely in refugee camps that are located all around the world. The most populated refugee camps can be found in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Jordan, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda (Protecting Refugees, UN Refugees, 2020).

National Geographic defines an ecosystem as “a geographic area where plants, animals, and other organisms, as well as weather and landscape, work together to form a bubble of life” (National Geographic, 2011). The movements of refugees from one place to another has had a significant impact on the environment and local ecosystems. For instance, when refugees flee their homes, they are often forced to survive in the wilderness before reaching a refugee camp. As a result, the UN Refugee Agency estimates that thousands of metric tons of forest are cut down every day by people trying to find wood for cooking or heating fuel. Refugee camps also have a severe impact on the environment. Many refugee camps are “100 percent reliant on fuel obtained by nearby forests. Hundreds of tons of wood are being consumed every single day. This massive deforestation threatens the stability of the

of the ecosystems on which both refugee and host communities rely for their livelihoods and health.” The mass felling of trees can lead to soil erosion, land degradation, and loss of vegetation. As previously stated, the environmental impact is not only felt by the refugee population, but by the locals who also rely on the environment for survival. Competition for resources can lead to an acceleration in depletion and conflict between the two populations (Harper, UNHCR, 2016).

Environmental problems are found everywhere around the world, although when the number of people is on a large scale, the danger of losing the ecosystem's richness is dangerous. Moreover, refugees are forced together in an ample space with masses of people because of survival measures. Soil erosion, deforestation, contamination of water reserves, and more, are the significant problems that correlate to refugee's influence. Nevertheless, refugees live in positions where they can not be demanded to put environmental concerns before their own protection and well-being. Organizations such as UNHRC, aides nations affected environmentally with what they are proficient in, like clean-up procedures, recovery, and more without compromising the refugees to an impassable situation for them (Refugees and the Environment, UNHRC, 2001). Among refugee encampments, the deterioration of the conditions they live in is intense. From all the ecosystem dangers refugees live through, the low-quality water and food resources affect the health of a considerable number of people and prompt high risks of contagious diseases to infect rapidly, and increases levels of malnutrition (Gill Shepherd, HPN, 1995).

B) Current Issues

Kenya: Kenya hosts more than 473,971 refugees from more than 20 countries. In addition, the world's three largest refugee camps, Kakuma, Hagadera, and Dagahaley, are located in Kenya. The camps are ever-growing and expanding into land occupied by animals and large forests. The need for resources is also at an all-time high. Trees are continuously being cut down for fuel, the building of shelters, and cleared for space. This has led to environmental damage to natural habitats such as the destruction of vegetation, soil erosion, and loss of natural resources. A large number of inhabitants have also created a waste crisis. The lack of recycling and correct disposal procedures means that garbage is often buried in the ground, polluting the soil and groundwater (Mohamed, University of Nairobi Research Archive, 2011).

Nigeria: Thousands of people have been displaced from their homes in Nigeria due to attacks by the terrorist group Boko Haram. Those displaced are forced into refugee camps which have had a significant impact on the environment. The camps are often not well planned or organized. They pop up temporarily until either the refugees can return to their homes or they reach UN-run camps. These impromptu camps are built by clearing the land and cutting down trees to build shelters and create fuel for cooking and cleaning. This has led to desertification and deforestation. In addition, it is important to point out that Nigeria is also currently undergoing an environmental crisis due to climate change. Alterations in the country's weather patterns have led to droughts and inopportune farming conditions. This has forced farmers and animal herders to migrate to other parts of the country or become climate refugees (Nigeria, UNHCR, 2020).

Turkey: Turkey hosts around 3.6 million refugees from Syria. One of the biggest environmental challenges for the country and its refugee camps has been the mass generation of waste, which has led to additional health and environmental risks. Waste volumes have increased by 21.5% in Southeast Turkey since the arrival of refugees, costing around US\$25 million per year in collection and transportation. In 2017, the country opened three new waste transfer stations for items collected in refugee camps. In relation, there has been an increase in the illegal “wild” dumping of waste. This means that waste from the refugee camps is not being disposed of correctly, polluting the ground and water around the camps (Crisis & Environment, 2019)

C) UN Action

In 2016, the UN Refugee Agency established the UNHCR Innovation Fund, a special branch with the aim of providing the “necessary funding, support for experimentation and community in order to nurture innovation and adaptability within UNHCR.” Right now, one of the primary goals of this fund is to “explore waste-to-value options, embed environmental education into curricula, and find innovative funding models with the private sector and test existing energy delivery models such as “pay-as-you-go”.” Moreover, the UNHCR has stated that it wants to help refugees, host communities, and governments find ways to restore ecosystems and create mechanisms where displaced people can earn an income through sustainable natural resource management, thus linking environmental and energy issues with livelihoods and community resilience” (Harper, UNHCR, 2016).

III. Essential Questions

1. What is a refugee?
2. What is an ecosystem?
3. Does your country host refugee camps?
4. What impact do refugee camps have on the environment?
5. Is your nation working on addressing this issue? If so, how?
6. What is the United Nations doing to address this issue?
7. Which non-governmental organizations are working on solving this issue? Is your delegation working with any of them? If so, which ones?

IV. Quorum

- Afghanistan
- Brazil
- Canada
- China
- France
- India
- Indonesia
- Iran
- Mexico
- Pakistan
- Russia
- Saudi Arabia
- South Africa

- Syria
- Turkey
- United Kingdom
- United States

V. Resources

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