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Livelihood activities: A determinate of refugees wellbeing. The case of refugees living in the East region of Cameroon

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Abstract. This paper seeks to bring out the livelihood activities developed by refugees in this area and how these activities helped them tackle their health problems. The challenges they face in carrying out their daily activities are also exploited in this paper. In carrying out this research, a qualitative approach was used and the design was ethnographic. Information was gotten from 20 refugees living in this area, 5 health workers in the public and private sectors, 2 United Nations High Commission for Refugee (UNHCR) staff, and 4 other staff from Organizations such as Plan International and CARE. Vital information was also gotten from the local population. This information was gotten with the help of interviews, focus group discussions and observation guides. Purposeful sampling was done to get participants for the study. It was realized that refugees from this country are faced with so many health challenges and need to come out with strategies that will enable them to stay in good health. Though some of the strategies that the refugees take negatively impact their well-being, what they actually want is to come out with their own activities that will enable them to feel connected to their sources.

Keywords. Livelihood, Activities, Wellbeing, Refugees, Strategies

1. Introduction

Displaced persons and refugees usually suffer in their new environment due to lack of access to key resources like water, fuel and shelter. The limited availability of these key resources goes a long way to influence the wellbeing of these vulnerable populations. However, the available resources in the physical environment and the knowledge put together by these refugees are very important for their survival. On the other hand, the sufferings experienced by these refugees are visible in their interconnectedness with their social, cultural, political and economic welfare but they try to make sense of this by creating mechanisms that can enable them cope.

Since Kleinman 1997 explains that suffering is a social and cultural experience, it can be expressed differently by refugees because of their different coping mechanisms. Reconstructing their lives by indulging into livelihood activities seems to be very prominent in bringing back refugees to a meaningful life style. In this light, Chambers and Conway (1991:12) explains livelihood as the capabilities, assets and activities required for a means of living. They elucidate that: ‘A sustainable livelihood allows to cope with and to recover from stress and shocks, to maintain its capabilities and provide sustainable livelihood opportunities for the next

generation (Carney 1999:78). On the other hand, Olawoya (2000) as cited by Mark (2009) makes us to understand that ‘Livelihood activity can be conceptualized as that activity which an individual engages in, in order to support/sustain or maintain himself and his family’. Often, livelihood activities are considered mainly as income generating activities. Refugees’ number in Cameroon is relatively small compared to major hosting countries like Kenya, Ethiopia and Chad. Still the country faces difficulties in adequately catering for these refugees’ (UNHCR, 2007). That is why humanitarian organization should not limit their activities only on provision but also on training.

The right to pursue economic activities and the right to work are addressed both within the 1951 convention and the ICESCR. These rights are again reinforced by provisions of the ICESCR, in which Article 6(1) states, “The States Parties to the present covenant recognize the right to work, which includes the right of everyone to the opportunity to gain his living by work which he freely chooses or accepts, and will take appropriate steps to safeguard this right” (United Nation General Assembly 1966, Article 6.1). Despite being acknowledged as a crucial component of human and refugees’ right, the rights of refugees to pursue economic activities remain highly contentious. Article 18 of the same Convention provides for the right of refugees to engage in self-employment, for example in agriculture or trade (UNHCR 1951, Article 18).

Though refugees have all the rights available for them to live, Yotebieng 2019 points out that refugees worldwide, live in unequal political economic contexts that drive a multitude of environmental risk factors, so obtaining a decent job is sometimes very difficult. This includes restricted access to different forms of capital driven by various forms of hardship including xenophobia and exclusionary immigration policy (Yotebieng et al 2019 p3). Refugees however, need to be in possession of accessible resources in their environment in order to have a better standard of living or wellbeing. Resources are known to moderate negative impacts of stressors and encourage coping. ‘Ellis says that, it is with these assets that households are able to participate in labour, production and exchange with other households’ (Ellis, 2000:10). Yet, there are different categories of resources upon which livelihoods are built, such as natural, social, human, physical and financial resources (Carney, 1999:12). Livelihoods are achieved differently and strategically. For example, Liberian and Sierra Leonean refugee households in Guinea strategized their settlement by diversifying their resources. They placed some household members in camps to access resources there, and other members in urban areas where a different set of resources could be targeted (Levron, 2006).

Traditionally there have been tendencies amongst humanitarian organizations to approach the issue of livelihoods and self-reliance from a technical perspective, focusing on the effective design and implementation of initiatives such as income generating projects, micro-credit programs, agriculture, and vocational training programs, Crisp thinks that: ‘While this technical perspective is important as is the question of financial resources, there is also a need to link the question of livelihoods with the issues of rights and protection which refugees need to enjoy (Crisp, 2003:9). According to Jacobsen (2002), social groups that are politically or economically marginalized, like the pastoralists in the Horns of Africa, or ethnic groups like the Twa in Rwanda, find themselves at double risk when they are displaced and have even more difficulty pursuing livelihoods

In Cameroon as in other refugee hosting countries, many host communities face a lot of challenges because of the large influx of refugees, particularly in terms of land management, access to social services (mainly health and education) and natural resources, such as wood, food and water. These pressures on resources contribute to further impacting the livelihoods of the population in refugee hosting sites in the East region (UNHCR, 2019). Most refugees have

settled outside camps with 70% living in rural, peri-urban and urban areas of Eastern Cameroon with an increasing gap between funding and needs and a growing crisis with Nigerian in Northern Cameroon therefore supporting CAR refugees self-reliance has become more urgent than ever (Barbelet, 2017). Coming from an area where the main livelihood activity was agriculture and livestock, they are supposed to start from scratch because they lost everything as a result of the war. Arriving in a new environment, these refugees from CAR living in the periphery of this area where resources are not even enough for the indigenes are supposed to start a new life depending on the same insufficient resource. How do they manage to carry out livelihood activities that can enhance their wellbeing with limited available resources? Our objective was to actually find out how livelihood activities have changed the narrative of refugees' lives

2. Methodology

2.1. Theoretical Approach

The sustainable livelihood approach improves understanding of the livelihoods of the poor. It organizes the factors that constrain or enhance livelihood opportunities, and shows how they relate. It can help plan development activities and assess the contribution that existing activities have made to sustaining livelihoods (Serrat, 2017). Serrat further points out that, the vulnerability context of livelihood approach is characterized as insecurity in the well-being of individuals, household and communities in the face of external environment. He makes us understand that conflict, illness, and diseases are triggered by shock especially during force migration and displacement. On the other hand, the ability to build a sustainable live in the mist of these challenges depends on the available resources found in the area. However, refugees are usually vulnerable as a result of the shocks that they experience during conflict and this is usually seen in their standard of living. To understand the livelihood activities of refugees in the context of vulnerability as a factor for well-being, one need to take into consideration all the factors that determines sustainable livelihood.

2.2. Study Design

The design for this study was qualitative with focus on ethnographic approach which relied on interview and participant observation.

2.3. Population

The population for the study was characterized of men and women who have been living in this area as refugees. It included both those who take part in livelihood activities as well as those who stay idle with no zeal to indulge in any activity.

2.4. Sampling

To get participant for the study, two sampling procedures were used. A purposeful sampling method was used to get participants from united nation agencies and other NGO's that pay particular interest on refugees matter. Also, information was gotten from key informant chosen through purposeful sampling; this was made up of medical doctors, head of households, those in charge of distributing food and other items in the sites. We actually asked the organizations in charge of refugees to direct us to the units involved in refugees' livelihood and well-being. Refugees who participated in the study were gotten through random sampling; this

was to get a global understanding of refugees' livelihood activities in this area. In depth interviews and participant observations were used to get appropriate information.

2.5. Data collection tools and technics

Data for this article was collected with the help of different tools and technics. The tools were prepared in respect to the type of technic conceived. For focus group discussion and in-depth interviews, an interview guide was used as tool for data collection. This guide consisted of themes from which semi structured questions related to refugees' livelihood were generated. Also, an observation guide was also used as tool to get information through participant observation. Participant observation helped us to observe the different livelihood activities and how they manage resources in their new environment. Through this technic, it was easy for us to get information on how they manage food and non-food items offered to them by humanitarian organisations. The language for data collection was French, incase were they could not speak French the help of a translator was implored.

2.6. Data collection and analysis

Data collection for this article was done among the refugees in the East region of Cameroon. Primary data were collected with the help of one on one interview, focus group discussion and participant observation. Information was gotten through informal discussion in public places such as market, restaurants and hospitals. The information were recorded and transcribed later. Refugees' daily activities were observed and noted in an observation guide on the field. Participant observation helped us see the different types of activities refugee indulge in, where they get resources to carry out these activities, how they carry it out and how it influenced their well-being. It also helped us to see what they do with the aids that are given to them by humanitarian organisation. Pictures of refugees various activities were also taken with the help of a camera. The bulk of data collected on the field had to be analyzed. In doing so, they were coded with colour, The data was organized into themes that cut across all of the data source. Focus was geared toward participants' daily activities and perception of well-being. Memos were taken down that were included as narratives in the final report. Aliases where used to protect the identity of participants on the field.

2.7. Validity of data.

For use to test the validity of data gotten on the field, we had to triangulate data source to make sure the different sources of data collection, provided the same information. Carrying out a thick description of the daily activities of the refugees in this area was a clear prove that the data collected on the field were accurate.

3. Result

The refugees involved in this study were those who recently entered Cameroon after the war in Central African Republic in 2014. They involved both men and women who abandoned their activities back in their country and flee to Cameroon and are now willing to take up activities that can help them gain meaningful live in their new settlement. Relying on past knowledge to rebuild broken life is very essential especially among these refugees who need resources to start a new life.

It is however important to understand the efforts people and organizations are already making to stabilize and enhance the refugee situation in the East Region. Even though every refugee population and situation is different, an attempt has been made to determine general

trends such as seeking international protection, receiving humanitarian assistance, relying on social networks and solidarity, engaging in agriculture or trade and service provision. Diversifying their actions by carrying out different income-generating activities; they try to make out the most of the opportunities available for them in order to improve their living Conditions.

3.1. Refugees engagement in income generating activities

Apart from receiving humanitarian assistance, some refugees engage in income generating activities such as buying and selling of goods (firewood, charcoal, vegetables, and other food items) or in providing services for other refugees who are in need of it. To enable refugees have a decent lifestyle, UNHCR have always tried to encourage them by providing small loans that can be used to start a business. These micro-credits are intended to provide financial support to qualified people seeking to set up or expand a viable and possibly sustainable livelihood, with the hope and expectation that they will be able to set up activities that will sustain and rejuvenate livelihood in the community. Since most of them carry out unskilled labour, training sessions are provided for them by UNHCR.

3.2. Transformation of cassava by refugees

Though resources are scarce for refugees, it does not stop them from receiving training which can help them to engage in any activity. Since these refugees are open to formal and informal training offered by UNHCR and partners, they are taught to produce food items with the resources available at their disposal. For example, the transformation of cassava tube into cassava flour and other byproducts. From our observation on the field, we understood, that in order to produce cassava flour, the cassava tube is harvested, peeled and soaked in water for at least four days. During these four days, the cassava is believed to have undergone the process of fermentation, making it easy to be transformed. The fermented cassava is put in another water to remove any toxic substance in it.

The fermented cassava is put in a sac with small outlet on it to enable water come out during pressing. In cases where the quantity of cassava is small they use their hands to press it. In cases where the cassava is much, a heavy object is put on it for water to come out. The semi dry cassava dough is put on a mat and allowed to dry under the heat of the sun. The transformed cassava is ground into flour and stored in containers for household or commercial purpose.

Plate 1: Cassava transformed into flour by refugees women



Source: (Field work)

The plate above shows cassava that has been transformed into cassava flour and are put in small basins for sale. Since markets are not something of everyday but once a week, these

refugees keep selling their products around their neighborhood throughout the week. De Vries emphasis that: ‘Vocational training schemes should be oriented towards the local labour market of the host country or towards employment opportunities in the country of origin in case of impending repatriation; (De Vries 2006).

These refugees can only produce in limited quantity as a result of lack of access to large portions of lands. This however limits their production capacity, since they need to plant other crops on a small parcel of land. Though this project is very feasible, few refugee women engage in it because of the difficulties in accessing land for cultivation and a ready market. Also, these women complained that they were not able to store the cassava products in their homes due to lack of space.

3.3. Production and packaging of bread by refugees

Trying to come out with sustainable livelihood activities may be difficult especially for refugees whose stay in a country cannot be quite determine. This is because many countries see refugees as temporal citizens and cannot really invest on them. This does not however stop refugees from investing on themselves. During our field work, we observed how some refugees did engage in the production and packaging of bread as a way of sustaining their livelihood and those of others who work with them. These refugees don’t wait on the monthly ration offered to them by UNHCR and other humanitarian organisations. They have organized themselves in groups in order to facilitate the production, packaging and selling of their product. Though it seems to be a family business, other refugees are employed in the sector.

After production, buyers come around to collect and supply to small store owners around the site. These refugees made us to understand that, the money they get from this activity enable them to produce more bread and employ more people in the industry. This also helps them to generate income that can be used to buy drugs at the hospital and to seek better health care out of the refugee site. Having their own money from the sale of bread enable them to be less dependent on the assistance they receive from donor agencies, since the assistant does not come in regularly.

Plate 2: Refugees baking and selling bread to secure livelihood.



Source: (Field work)

3.4. Production of beds by refugees

Migration, be it force or not influences peoples life style. How people cope with the burden of migration is determine by their ability to adapt and the access to available resources in the host area. Seeing the need of having a decent life is very essential for refugees’ dignity.

In this light, some refugees have indulged in the production of beds with materials coming from the forest around the site. These beds are produced and sold to other refugees who are living in the site and those in the host community who are interested in it. Though the ministry of forestry is trying to educate the local population on the importance of preserving the forest by not felling trees, these refugees need the wood to produce items that they can use to sustain their lives like fire wood, coal and bed. Sleeping on the bed helped reduced those health risks which they were exposed to while sleeping on bare floor. Refugees are exposed to health dangers especially during the dry season where temperatures are very low at night. During this period, most of them are exposed to respiratory tract infections like cough and cartar.

Plate 3: Refugees engage in bed production as livelihood activity



Source: (Field work)

The above picture illustrates some refugee men producing beds from trees harvested from the forest in this area. Though it is an income generating activity, it also served as a new hobby for those who lose all their properties. Through this, they know that they can still engage in an activity that can enable them come out of poverty.

3.5. Women engaging in small businesses as a means of livelihood

The circumstances, in which most refugee women find themselves in, do influence the types of activities they carry out. With the challenges faced by women to obtain a decent employment as refugees, they do not just seat on their benches of sorrows instead, they try to come out with activities that will enable them improve on their standard of living. Though religious rules and regulation do limit women's access to credit and other economic opportunities, refugee women in the East region have ceased the opportunity they have to indulge in gainful activity no matter how minimal it may be. Since most of these women are the ones leading their homes, they need to put in extra effort to make ends meet. Most of them lose their husbands in the war and need to take care of the children single hand while some engaged in relationships that left them with undesired pregnancy. In all, they need to provide security for themselves and the child.

The food rations provided to them by humanitarian orgainsation are not totally consumed; these women take portions of their food rations to the market for sale. Through this, they are able to have some income which can help purchase other items of their choice. These women usually sell the items they collect from World Food Program such as rice, bean, corn, oil etc. The quantities of products these women take to the market are very small.

Plate 4: Refugee women selling food ration received from WFP



Source: (Field work)

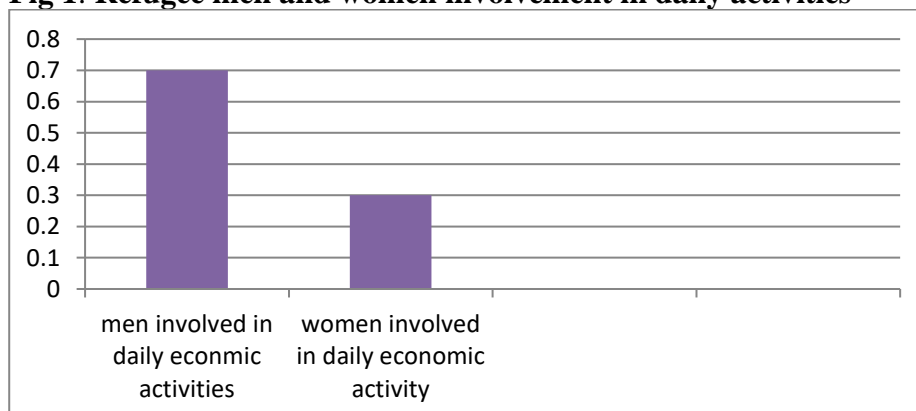
The above picture illustrates refugee women in the market selling rice, corn and other food items received from WFP and other humanitarian organizations.

When I go to the market I meet with other people and we discuss I am happy. Since many of us are selling the same item, I need to sell mine very cheap so that I can have money. I sell a bowl of rice at 300frs. I use the money to buy bread, meat and vegetable (Alai, 32 years female, East Region)

Reading from this above quote, one can say that, meeting other people and conversing is another way these refugee women come out of their suffering. They bear certain burdens, troubles and serious wounds in their body and spirit that can be forgotten when they share these them with others. The market seems to be a suitable place where their hopes can be rekindled. This is because they do not interact only with other refugees but with the host population.

The fact that refugee men are not seen in the market does not mean they do not also sell their food ration. Some hand them over to their wives to sell and engage in other activities while others arrange with the buyers who do not need to come to the market. The number of men who take part in daily activities are more than women because in the Muslim culture, women are supposed to stay at home and take care of domestic affairs while men go out to fend for the family.

Fig 1: Refugee men and women involvement in daily activities



Source: (Field work)

The above chart shows the number of men and women involved in daily activities at the refugee site.

Conclusion

In order to reframe the narrative of their lives as hopeless people, losers and beggars, some refugees try to change this account by involving in livelihood activities that they think can improve their standard of living or wellbeing. Results from the field showed that refugees use available resources in the environment to create activities that can enable them sustain their lives for the time being. In the context where fewer opportunities are available for both host community and refugees, refugees turn to go extra mile to survive irrespective of the restrictions put in place for them by the authorities. Using materials from the forest to produce materials necessary for a better standard of living shows that refugees well-being depends on the resources they are able to explore in their environment. Though the felling of trees is frowned at by the government, refugees still use this resource to sustain their living.

Using the vulnerability concept we realized that refugees who were most vulnerable were those who did not indulge in any livelihood activity. Livelihood activities actually determined the wellbeing of these refugees in that through these activities, they were able to improve their standard of living which also impacted on their health outcome. It was realized that refugees who indulged in economic activities and had financial autonomy experienced less trauma than those who were idle. This showed that livelihood activities were highly linked to refugees' wellbeing. However, resources were very vital for survival by these refugees even though they are very rare, that is why some refugees will want to use the food and non-food items offered to them as their capital especially those who could not have access to loans and credit to start up a business. Making use of the available resources has not been very easy for refugees because of the situation in which they find themselves.

However, refugees needed to combine different resources including cultural resources to enable them adapt to their new environment. Cultural resource goes a long way to shape the way refugees seek to explain adaptation processes and carry out their activities according to their perceptions and practices as displaced people. What resources are available in the physical environment and the knowledge put together by these refugees are very important for their moral, physical and spiritual wellbeing. Refugees diversify their activities in order to increase their chances of acquiring a better life in their new setting.

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