



Livestock in refugee camps: the case for improved animal management

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An Ethiopian context

Millions of people worldwide continue to be displaced across countries or within borders because of violence and persecution. To protect their livelihoods and increase their chances of survival, many people fleeing their homelands take their livestock with them.

The long-term survival of animals and people's livelihoods are hindered by an absence of consistent animal management programmes for refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) within host countries.

This study illustrates the negative effects the lack of appropriate animal management can have on existing relief work. It draws on research gathered in three Ethiopian refugee camps. The study aims to improve understanding of why host country governments, humanitarian and animal welfare organisations should incorporate animal management into camp administration based on current guidelines and best practice.

The research included a literature review, focus groups with camp residents and face-to-face interviews with local government representatives, camp managers and local communities.



Introduction

Worldwide, 51.2 million people¹ are displaced across or within borders. Most are from the world's poorest regions and heavily reliant on animals for their livelihoods and food security.

For some communities, in addition to providing savings and insurance for their future livelihoods, animals form part of their moral and cultural values. The loss of animals can have not only economic consequences, but also affects identity, status and psychological wellbeing. As a result, people are often compelled to take their animals with them when they flee to areas of safety.

Although the link between livestock, food security and recovery in disasters is increasingly acknowledged in the humanitarian sector, countries hosting refugees/IDPs have considerable difficulties implementing successful camp animal management. The consequences of the poor animal husbandry and mishandling common to refugee/IDP camps are unhealthy, less productive animals, injuries and even death.

The loss of livestock and working animals can leave refugees/IDPs facing a significant second disaster caused by long-term malnutrition, food insecurity, debt and dependency. Healthy working animals and livestock provide food and income and are critical to the resilience of families that have already lost so much.

This study highlights two crucial challenges that have arisen in the Ethiopian camps largely due to the lack of basic animal management practice. These are: the spread of infectious diseases between animals, and between animals and people, and conflicts between refugee and host communities.

The research highlights the need and provides recommendations for collaboration among national governments, humanitarian organisations and animal welfare organisations. Together they can ensure that effective animal management practice is integrated into existing programmes within refugee camps.

Policy context

While international policies and guidelines exist² on animal management in refugee/IDP camps, in Ethiopia, as elsewhere, there is a general lack of awareness of them. During the last decade, the Ethiopian government and its emergency response partners have gradually included animal issues in their disaster response contingency plans, particularly for slow-onset hazards.

Practical examples of this include the increased investment in emergency relief and recovery activities in pastoral areas of Afar and Somalia. With livestock such a key element of pastoralist and smallholder farmer livelihoods, its management is not a new concept to Ethiopia – but it is overlooked in refugee/IDP situations.

The camps studied

Ethiopia shares borders with six countries and is part of a region severely affected by massive displacement caused by political, social and environmental challenges.

The current management of all refugee/IDP camps is led by the Administration for Refugees and Returnee Affairs (ARRA). ARRA facilitates and supports the effective management of camps, but does not provide any livestock interventions such as health checks, or the provision of feed or water.

The research findings presented here draw on data gathered from three refugee camps in the Beshangul-Gumuz Administrative Region of Western Ethiopia: Sherkole, Tongo and Bambasi. Most of the camps' populations are Sudanese refugees, many of whom were pastoralists and agro-pastoralists. The population of the three camps, plus the Adamazin Transit Camp near the Sudanese border, was 39,125.³

There is no accurate data on the number of animals in the three camps. However, an estimate from Sherkole Refugee Camp, which is home to approximately 10,000 people,⁴ indicated around 20–25 goats and sheep per person. Throughout the three camps, researchers noted that the main animals owned included cattle, sheep, goats, donkeys and dogs. These were left in the open at night.

While most of the animals observed were left to graze, some refugees who restocked when in Ethiopia bought fodder. It was understood from the limited access to running water that all animals used the river for drinking water.

Challenges of keeping and protecting animals in refugee camps

Protecting public and animal health

One of the most critical problems of keeping and protecting animals in refugee camps is infectious diseases control, both from animal to animal, and animal to human (zoonoses). The former is largely caused by unquarantined and unvaccinated animals joining camps and host community animal populations.

People and animals living closely foster the transmission of zoonoses including tuberculosis, salmonellosis and brucellosis. This is exacerbated by the prevalence of malnourishment, stress and diseases that weaken the human immune system. The uncontrolled watering of animals further increases the risk of transmission of infectious diseases by polluting water with animal faeces.

There is no national regulation that requires a quarantine service at the borders, or means of recording the number of animals that come into the country. Unchecked animals pose a risk to local animals by bringing in new strains of diseases. They are also vulnerable to local diseases if they are not vaccinated.

The research found that disease outbreaks were common among camp animals. For example, cases were recorded of Contagious Bovine Pleuropneumonia, Porcine Parvovirus and Newcastle Disease. Although the regional government provided some vaccination services to curb the spread, there were no budgets for medical supplies and transport services to deal with them.

In Ethiopia there are no separate veterinary services to deal specifically with refugee/IDP's livestock. While there are several national organisations experienced in animal management, none were working with animals in refugee/IDP camps. Refugees expressed concern over the lack of medicines to treat their animals and were using indigenous herbal medicines as well as those available from local pharmacies.

Avoiding conflicts with local communities

Livestock from refugee/IDP camps often compete with livestock from local communities for limited resources. Because there are limited water supplies in camps, the presence of large animal herds can contribute to the depletion of these resources without timely and strict control. This adds to tensions with local communities.

Competition for rangeland and the destruction of crops was a relatively frequent reason for conflict between refugees and local populations. The imbalance between grazing lands and the number of animals in the camps, along with incidences of animals straying into local community farmland, contributed to these difficulties.

If land tenure and grazing rights are violated, traditional grazing systems can be thrown out of balance. Camp coordinators confirmed that the absence of procedures for managing animals made it difficult to manage practices of livestock owners in the camps.

Both host community leaders and refugees expressed unhappiness with the lack of animal management in the camps. Community leaders around Tongo and Bambasi for example, believed it contributed to refugees taking crops and private fodder from local communities to feed the camp livestock.

Concern was also expressed that resources spent on the refugee communities' animals would mean less help for animals and owners in host communities.



Recommendations

The research highlights that refugee/IDP camp management must take better account of animals' needs to protect and promote livelihoods, reduce the danger of diseases, and conflicts with host communities.

Through joint planning and effective coordination, host governments, humanitarian organisations and animal welfare organisations can better integrate animal management to reduce these negative impacts. However, this approach requires strong partnerships between humanitarian and animal welfare organisations to ensure approaches are effective and complementary.

The following recommendations are given:

- ⇒ all animals entering refugee/IDP camps should be registered and those needing immediate veterinary services identified, and those with diseases separated
- ⇒ essential veterinary care should be provided
- ⇒ appropriate shelter and fodder should be provided to reduce the potential of conflicts with host communities, as well as mitigate insecurity of grazing animals outside the camps.
- ⇒ appropriate livestock training should be integrated within wider camp management and programmes.

Cover image: A woman milks her cow in an IDP camp in South Sudan. AFP/Getty Images

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- 1 UNHCR. (2014) War's human cost. Global Trends 2013. Available at: <http://unhcr.org/trends2013/>
- 2 For example: UNHCR/IUCN. (2005) A practical handbook for improved management: livestock-keeping and animal husbandry in refugee and returnee situations. Geneva: UNHCR. (1998) Environmental guidelines for livestock in refugee situations and LEGS. (2009) livestock Emergency Guidelines and Standards (LEGS). Practical Action Publishing: Rugby.
- 3 UNHCR Sub-Office Asosa in Ethiopia. (2012). UNHCR operational highlights - Factsheet November 2012.
- 4 Ibid.

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