

The provision of household energy: Coping mechanisms of internally displaced people in Benguela Province, Angola

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Introduction

Angola has been devastated by decades of civil war. Several attempts failed to conclude a lasting peace agreement between the Government – formed by the MPLA-party (Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola) – and the rebel group UNITA (National Union for the total Independence of Angola). The 'Lusaka Peace Process' initiated in 1994 with the signing of the Lusaka Peace Accord finally collapsed in December 1998. The resumption of full-scale war forced hundreds of thousands of ordinary people to flee their homes in the countryside, to seek refuge either in provincial capitals held by Government forces, or to flee to the coast where a situation of relative calm persists. Most of these internally displaced people (IDPs) fled for the third or fourth time.

People who arrived in coastal towns were immediately obliged to assemble in camps established in run-down public buildings, offering nothing more than a roof. The Government failed to provide them with food, water, clothes, medicine, health care, sanitation facilities etc. The international community was approached to take care of the basic needs of these people.

Support for IDPs in Benguela Province

Since 1992, German Agro Action, together with its local partner organisation Acção Angolana para o Desenvolvimento, has supported vulnerable people in the Angolan Province of Benguela. With the resumption of fighting in late 1998, approximately 5000 new IDPs came to the coast and were assembled in two main camps located in the towns of Benguela and Lobito, 600km south of the capital Luanda.

La fourniture d'énergie domestique dans une province angolaise: comment les personnes délocalisées font face aux contraintes.

Cet article décrit les mécanismes mis en place par les populations déplacées de la province de Benguela en Angola afin de pourvoir à leurs besoins en énergie domestique. Les guerres répétées ont contraint les populations à abandonner leurs demeures et à s'établir dans des camps situés dans les zones côtières. Les ressources énergétiques dans ces zones sont rares, contraignant les populations à acheter le bois ou le charbon de bois parfois en vendant une partie des aliments fournis par les agences d'aide ou en échangeant leurs services. L'accès à l'énergie est problématique car les sources d'approvisionnement sont éloignées et le parcours très souvent miné. Des solutions à court terme (techniques de cuisson améliorées, plantations, cuisines communautaires) ont contribué à améliorer la situation.

Arable land is extremely scarce in the dry, semi-arid strip and there is a harsh competition for it. IDPs have experienced extreme difficulties in getting even very small plots on which to start subsistence agriculture. Thus they depend almost 100% on external aid coming from international organisations.

Most of the IDPs have remained in the urban camps, surviving on food aid on the one hand and trading on the other. Possibilities to earn cash income are extremely limited because the displaced people compete with thousands of unemployed resi-

dents for the very few jobs in the formal sector. Hence, they fulfil their needs by selling either parts of their food aid or other relief items they do not most urgently need, or by exchanging services – including sexual ones – for charcoal. The monthly ration distributed to one family consists of 50kg of milled maize (Figure 1), 6kg of beans, 4litres of oil and 400g of salt. If available, one bar of soap is added. In order to get the food aid they have to participate in public works at least 5 hours per day. Even though the market value of these goods is above the minimum wage, it is



Figure 1: Food aid being distributed at the camp

not nearly enough to cover all the needs of a family for one month. The need to buy medicine, to contribute to burials and the daily need for fuelwood (firewood and charcoal) imposes a heavy burden on the household economy. They only buy fuel because they live too far away from areas of fuelwood to go and fetch it.

These mechanisms to acquire fuelwood are not confined to IDPs but are the same for the urban poor who struggle daily to make ends meet and to secure a most basic level of livelihood. The situation is more specific for those IDPs who have been resettled in the countryside, as they cannot take part in urban trading networks and are obliged to rely on scarce natural resources only.

In the year 2000, the Provincial Government transferred about 200 IDP-families from the urban camps to a rural area about 60 km out of town. Each of them was allocated one quarter of a hectare in order to start subsistence farming. Neither the IDPs nor the resident population were consulted prior to the transfer. The resettlement camp was established without taking into account the most basic factors for human survival such as: water sources nearby; a basic social infrastructure; natural resources for construction and fuelwood; social

acceptance by local people. Again, international organisations were expected to provide all that – trapped in a situation where they were politically opposed to the Government action but were aware that the practical and social needs of the IDPs had to be addressed.

In the resettlement camp, the IDPs received the same ration of food when they took part in Food-for-Work activities as they had in the urban camps. The possibilities to improve household income by extra trading and occasional labour are much more limited out of town, thus people rely far more on available natural resources. Located at the northern edge of the Namib Desert, the area suffers from considerable ecological degradation: except for the cultivated plots, no vegetation is available. Up to the horizon one cannot see a single tree (Figure 2). Erosion has marked the landscape, soils are of extremely poor quality and water is very scarce and slightly salty due to the proximity of the ocean.

German Agro Action alleviated the difficult situation of the resettled IDPs by providing them with shelter, access to water and health services, food aid, seeds and agricultural tools.

Wood needs of IDPs

It is recognised that IDPs need firewood (or charcoal) for cooking, heating and light, but they also need timber for constructing houses (especially the roofs), latrines and basic social infrastructures (health centres, schools, churches). The availability, the access and the transport of this wood pose major problems to IDPs. Where natural resources are scarce it is almost impossible to find suitable wood for free. People are therefore obliged to pay for it, which they usually cannot afford. As most settlements of IDPs are temporary ones, people are very concerned about losing their construction material if they are obliged to leave. In the mentioned example, German Agro Action provided shelter by distributing tents, as the scarcity of natural resources such as wood and grass does not permit the construction of houses made from local material.

It is less obvious for most outsiders that IDPs also need wood for

- doors and windows in order to protect their personal belongings from being stolen (Figure 3)



Figure 2: Resettlement camp



Figure 3: Wood is also needed for doors to protect personal belongings

- fencing in order to keep small animal within the proximity of their homes.

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– and as handles for agricultural tools, as crutches and for the production of coffins. Especially in extremely degraded deforested areas, some of these issues become major problems for vulnerable households. It is, for example, a cultural shame to bury a family member in a mat or a banana leaf – simply because the family cannot afford a coffin. In their belief, the poor burial could have a negative effect on the well-being of the relative in the hereafter and thus falls back on the living family members as well. Hence everything has to be done to organise the wood for a coffin even if the family has to take on a huge debt.

But the daily need for fuelwood is an ongoing concern and poses the biggest environmental risk for hosting areas.

Coping mechanisms to deal with firewood scarcity

According to international standards, addressing the supply of fuelwood and construction materials should be a priority when IDP or refugee camps are established. Where this principle has not been adopted, as in the example of Benguela Province, resettled IDPs face major difficulties accessing fuelwood, and face harsh competition with local residents for using the scarce natural resources. As women are traditionally responsible for cooking, and hence also for the provision of household energy, they are the ones who suffer most from this situation. Collecting firewood poses several burdens and threats to them: the long distances they have to walk, assaults on the way, mine accidents in unsafe areas and fear of black magic.

Where women have to walk very long distances to find suitably wooded areas, they use up a lot of time on the way and come back completely exhausted, carrying the heavy burden of the bundle. Collecting enough wood for a



Figure 4: Children need supervision

week can take up to one full day away from home. They have to prepare food for the family in advance, to organise supervision for the children they leave behind (Figure 4), and cannot participate in a food-for-work activity on that day.

Walking long distances from the camp to very isolated areas they fear getting lost, because they are unfamiliar with the area. More serious even, they are afraid of assaults and rape which can occur on the way. In order to be protected, they form groups and ask men to accompany them. If they are single and cannot approach their husbands for protection, they sometimes have to pay the protectors by giving away a share of the collected wood.

Angola is one of the most heavily mined countries in the world. Mine accidents occur, especially when women who are not familiar with the area collect water or firewood. As they have few alternatives they have to take the risk of a mine accident leaving them maimed for the rest of their life. Also, since the residents need the limited natural resources, they try to impede the access of IDPs to fuelwood. This is either done by formally prohibiting access to certain areas reserved for residents, or by reg-

ulating what type of trees can be cut. In the case of Benguela coast, traditional chiefs set up these rules. In order to enforce them, people often use threats related to myths and magic. They worry the new settlers by, for instance, telling them that a particular path leading to a wood collection area is frequently used by ‘the big snake’ which allows only resident people to pass, and attacks strangers.

These aspects prevent women from making full use of one of the very few items they could collect free of charge, and oblige them to seek other coping mechanisms to get fuelwood. Because of their fear and the physical hardship connected with fetching firewood, they would always prefer to earn enough money or exchangeable benefits to acquire fuelwood on the local market. The results of an appraisal exercise in the camp showed that even though women were most concerned with acquiring water and fuelwood, they asked for support for agricultural production more urgently, because increased yields would permit them to buy fuelwood.

In such situations, where IDPs get food aid, they usually exchange parts of the food for fuelwood. As mentioned, the food rations are not enough to fully cover the needs of a family. Part of the food is exchanged in order to vary the diet (changing maize for dried fish, tomatoes or leaves) and to buy very basic household items such as matches. This leads to the situation that during the first half of the month (after the monthly distribution of the food aid) they exchange food for fuelwood. As everybody is doing the same, the price for fuelwood rises considerably and forces people to give away their food for very little wood in exchange. During the second half of the month, food becomes very scarce and women are obliged to go and fetch firewood (facing the above men-

tioned risks) in order to exchange it for food. Again, everyone is doing it, resulting in a very negative effect on the terms of trade for the wood. This creates a 'no-win' situation that leads to household food insecurity from which very few IDPs manage to escape. As a result of this and other factors, people suffer from bad health and small children, especially, become malnourished, even if food aid is supplied on a regular basis. When weight-for-height measurements of children in the camps were taken, it was found that many of the children were from single-headed households, where the mothers simply lacked the physical strength to do more than they already did to secure the nutritional needs of the children. Where malnourished children come from two-parent families, alcoholism is often the reason for food scarcity of the household; additional income earned by the husband is exchanged for alcohol. In some cases, he even uses the food aid leaving the wife no other option than collecting firewood throughout the whole month. In such situations, individual saving is often the only possible way for women to reduce those problems associated with fuelwood provision. In the end, they are compromising their health and that of their families, because they cannot afford to cook more than one meal per day due to lack of fuel.

Short-term solutions to improve the situation

A socially acceptable balance has to be found between the objective of sustainable natural resource management and people's welfare. As it is impossible to prohibit the collection of firewood, alternative ways of improving the use of natural resources are needed. There is scope for improving the efficiency of the fuelwood use through educating women on improved cooking techniques (such as careful control of the fire and its air supply,

gentle simmering, pre-soaking of hard foods and the use of lids), providing appropriate cooking devices, and by increasing the amount of available wood.

Given that the resettled IDPs come from several different areas, not knowing each other well, it is difficult to encourage them to save fuelwood by pooling household cooking resources. The scarcity of fuelwood is also a very limiting factor to open communal kitchens to serve children and vulnerable adults with cooked meals once or twice per day. In the more forested central highlands of Angola, people participating in the community kitchen schemes have to contribute one stick per person per day. This requisition cannot be imposed in the deforested coastal areas. Provision of cooking gas is also impossible because the transport from town to the settlement site is not a sustainable solution. The introduction of fuel-saving stoves, through their use in community kitchens, is a possible way to address the problem. From past experience of such projects, a carefully studied approach is needed, and implementation has to be monitored well. In addition, though fuel-saving stoves may lessen energy consumption, they do not guarantee reduced deforestation as people may resort to the commercial use of firewood as an additional strategy to assure their livelihoods.

Because daily survival is the direct and most urgent concern of the displaced, long-term environmental degradation resulting from their behaviour is not a priority. It is therefore especially difficult to sensitise them to the environmental impact of their coping mechanisms. Any campaign needs to provide tangible benefits, otherwise it is a costly waste of time taking into consideration women's all-day work load. Tree-planting is in principal a welcome activity, but is often severely hampered by the scarcity of drinking water. As women also have to walk quite long distances to fetch

water, they are not prepared to water seedlings without benefiting directly from them. Because living in tents in the refuge area is meant to be a temporary situation, they are not concerned about caring for a seedling that will become a fully grown fruit tree probably years after they expect to have left the area. Experience in other IDP-camps shows that tree-planting is only successful in areas where people have constructed shelter suitable for them to stay for several years. An initiative to encourage people to grow trees around these homes was very successful, as shade is very important in the hot climate of the coastal area. German Agro Action distributed seedlings of the neem tree – very welcomed by the IDPs for the anti-malaria effects of the leaves. Even young trees carry already the leaves necessary for herbal teas, and hence an almost immediate value for the people.

Conclusion

It has been shown that for displaced people, fuelwood is a complex issue related to various mechanisms developed to cope with the effects of forced displacement, poverty and lack of land. It is not just a question of environmental damage or sustainable resource management. Hence, 'deforestation around a refugee camp can be part of a more complex problem, the solution to which requires an understanding of the interactions between peoples' needs and behaviour and the local environment' (1) This article aims to contribute to that understanding.

Reference

1. UNHCR: Refugee operations and the environment. Selected lessons learned. A source book", p. 14. August 1998

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