



Visiting a restoration project in refugee camps.
Abdon Awono/CIFOR

Promoting sustainable forestry resource use and improved livelihoods in refugee settings

A CIFOR-ICRAF-UNHCR partnership to support communities affected by displacement in Cameroon

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DOI: 10.17528/cifor-icraf/008991

Sub-Saharan Africa hosts 6.3 million refugees, more than 26 percent of the world's refugee population. This represents an increase of 186 percent over the last decade compared to the previous figure of 2.2 million. As one of the most stable countries in the Central Africa region, Cameroon hosted about 2,190,106 forcibly displaced persons spread across the country as of 31 May 2023. This comprised 469,281 registered refugees, 8,825 asylum seekers, 1,066,254 internally displaced persons (IDPs), and 645,746 returnees arriving mainly from Central Africa Republic and Nigeria.

In most of these regions in Cameroon, refugees and displaced people add pressure to already vulnerable ecosystems and existing social tensions. This leads to conflicts over land and resource use between displaced people and host communities. Excessive use of natural resources, competition for resources, and non-consensual entry onto the common or private lands of host communities are the main drivers of this conflict. Moreover, consequences of climate change, deforestation, and environmental degradation often make these conflicts worse.

The vision of UNHCR Cameroon is that all refugees, host communities, and support structures in Cameroon will meet their energy needs in a sustainable way, without fear or risk to their health, well-being, or personal safety, while minimizing environmental impact.

With this vision, UNHCR aims to gradually improve and strengthen environmental considerations in UNHCR Cameroon's operational responses to integrate green community infrastructure and to develop innovative sustainable energy and reforestation programmes in refugee-hosting areas. This will involve the following:

- Promote multipurpose plantations and community-managed agroforestry activities (refugees and host population).
- Rehabilitate degraded ecosystems around refugee sites.
- Promote management of natural resources for the benefit of refugees and local populations.
- Encourage collective and individual awareness of environmental issues.
- Promote multiple-use plantations and agroforestry activities managed by the community (refugees and host population).
- Improve access to fuel-efficient technologies and renewable energy at the household and institutional level.
- Adapt energy options to needs and context.
- Exploit local know-how by promoting good energy management practices.

The environmental impacts of displacement

Environmental degradation has become a major concern in refugee-hosting landscapes in Africa. For daily subsistence, refugees rely heavily on forest and tree resources for woodfuel, construction, fruit and non-timber forest products, as well as other environmental services. This exerts a lot of pressure on the already fragile ecosystems where most refugees are hosted.

This pressure can lead to forest, land, and soil degradation, and biodiversity losses. This, in turn, can cause tensions with host communities. With refugees often staying for extended periods, long-term support to livelihoods for both refugees and host communities has increasingly been recognized as critical during humanitarian interventions.

In response, CIFOR-ICRAF offers an approach that generates and applies evidence and promotes synergies between actors, and coordination between humanitarian, development, and environmental groups. Ultimately, this will lead to the development and adoption of innovative solutions. Targeting sustainable development and resilience at a landscape level through an integrated landscape approach is increasingly recognized as a viable method to overcome sectorial gaps and find solutions through dialogue with actors at multiple levels.



Refugee woman carrying wood for cooking on fields near by refugee camp Gado-Badzere, East Cameroon.
Photo by Emily Pinna/CIFOR



Why a landscapes approach?

Engagement landscapes are discrete geographic locations where CIFOR-ICRAF carries out concentrated, long-term work to support transformational change and enhance resilience. To that end, it fosters collaboration and synergies between players, contributing to international dialogue and guiding planning, programming, and policymaking.

This approach adapts CIFOR-ICRAF's experiences and lessons learned from a wide range of innovations implemented in over 30 countries in the Global South. These interventions address major global challenges related to deforestation and diversity loss, the climate crisis, the transformation of food systems, unsustainable supply and value chains, and extreme inequalities, as manifested in refugee-hosting landscapes.

Refugee-hosting engagement landscape programme for more resilient landscapes and livelihoods in Africa

Achieving long-term solutions in refugee landscapes can be challenging, but it also presents an opportunity. A great part of the long-term damage can be avoided if early interventions include nature-based solutions for provisioning of basic needs, resilient livelihoods, and landscapes. Furthermore, deforestation and land degradation can be reversed

if dialogue between refugee and host communities, as well as other stakeholders, leads to long-term solutions. The refugee-hosting Engagement Landscapes programme in Africa aims at viable equitable livelihoods in resilient landscapes that foster well-being for people and the planet.

With growing awareness of the importance of natural resources to the well-being of refugees and host communities, CIFOR-ICRAF applies a landscape approach that provides evidence-based, feasible, and context-specific solutions. To that end, the approach:

- structures the engagement and empowerment of host and displaced communities in dialogue and consultation to minimize conflict over natural resources and the environment;
- conducts research to fill gaps in understanding, and integrate knowledge from multiple disciplines and resources, using refugee and host communities as a basis for evidence-based decision making and interventions;
- ensures communication methods and science-based advocacy at national and global levels to provide long-term investments in food and nutrition security, water, and energy for host communities and displaced people (IDPs and refugees), and to improve policies that support sustainable forestry and agroforestry systems;
- integrates the gender dimension into all activities to ensure consideration of the needs, aspirations, and opportunities of men and women, including young people, the elderly, children, and people with special needs.

The refugee-hosting engagement landscape programme for more resilient landscapes and livelihoods in Africa programme engages and empowers host and displaced communities in dialogue and consultation to minimize conflict. This involves:

- taking into account and integrating local and customary governance to build and strengthen local institutions, both formal and informal;
- promoting knowledge sharing between displaced people, refugees, and host communities, as well as other stakeholders, and the adoption of local sustainable management practices;
- providing transformative solutions with multiple local and international partners.

Challenges of sustainable forestry resource use in refugee settings

The challenges involved in attempting to attain resilience, sustainability, and environmental health in host landscapes are multiple and complex, with cultural, ecological, economic, social, and political dimensions:

- Demand for woodfuel and building materials: fuelwood is used for cooking and/or boiling water, and is often harvested unsustainably. This puts additional pressure on forests and ecosystems, and generates conflicts with host communities. Eighty-five percent of displaced people in camps burn biomass, firewood in particular. (UNHCR, 2019).
- Agriculture: different agricultural practices of refugees/IDPs and host communities can create conflict. In many parts of Central and East Africa where displaced people live, agriculture is mainly practised by smallholders. It is based on long-standing traditions that have evolved in local environments and reflect the biological and cultural diversity of these regions.
- Pastoralism/livestock: these livelihoods and production systems are also linked to culture, identity, and socio-political institutions, and could be part of refugee/IDP livelihoods. However, they involve different relationships to land than agriculture. Furthermore, access to pasture and water generates significant conflicts between nomadic pastoralists and sedentary farmers in Africa, particularly in areas affected by social and political unrest (Jobbins and McDonnell, 2021).

Firewood storage in refugee camp Gado-Badzare, East Cameroon.
Photo by Emily Pinna/CIFOR





Nursery near Gado-Badzere refugee camp, East Cameroon.

Photo by Emily Pinna/CIFOR

CIFOR-ICRAF-UNHCR partnership: A common vision to improve natural resource management by refugees and displaced persons in Cameroon

Generally, resilience, sustainability, and environmental health in host landscapes are multifaceted and complex, involving cultural, ecological, economic, social, and political dimensions. Consequently, despite many organizations working in refugee-hosting landscapes, achieving long-term, holistic, and sustainable solutions remains a challenge.

Researchers have demonstrated the impacts of land-use systems, cross-border trade in firewood, and consumption on natural ecosystems. Backed by this evidence, CIFOR-ICRAF has shown how tree growing can mitigate the environmental impact of displacement and develop sustainable woodfuel value chains and food security in Cameroon. Since 2018, CIFOR-ICRAF has been supporting integrated landscape-level interventions in the town of

Garoua-Boulai and the Gado-Badzéré refugee camp. However, it soon became apparent that the actions of a single organization could not solve the environmental and social problems related to population migration, given its complexity and scope.

In October 2022, CIFOR-ICRAF launched a new tool called [Guidance for a Landscape Approach in Displacement Settings](#) (GLADS). It outlines how an integrated landscape approach can be adapted for displacement or refugee settings. Developed in partnership with UNHCR Cameroon, the tool aims to guide stakeholders in building context-relevant understanding, inclusive approaches, continuous learning and outcomes towards sustainability, and resilience in refugee-hosting or displacement settings.

In 2023, considering their common interest to promote the conservation and sustainable management of forest in displacement settings, CIFOR-ICRAF and UNHCR signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU). It combined their efforts to strengthen the resilience of refugees and host communities in Cameroon as part of the EU-funded [Governing Multifunctional Landscapes](#) project.



CIFOR-ICRAF and UNHCR partner to support communities affected by forced displacement and promote sustainable forestry resource use in Cameroon. Photo by UNHCR

Institutional complementarity for social and environmental transformation in refugee settings

The cooperation between UNHCR and CIFOR-ICRAF is based on their mutual roles and mandates as institutions. It also reflects awareness of factors to consider for impact such as:

- the need to associate conservation and development to significantly contribute to the economic, social, and cultural development of refugees;
- the need to conserve and sustainably manage the refugee and host community settings, which have important natural and ecological resources for both present and future;
- the need to identify and understand threats on forest ecosystems;
- the importance of the results of research in effective policy development and decision making at different levels.

Area of intervention

Landscape fragmentation is a major issue in Cameroon's forest-savanna transition zone. The first activities of the UNHCR and CIFOR-ICRAF partnership will be implemented in Garoua-Boulai in Cameroon's East Region, which is home to almost 64,000 Central African refugees. This border town, together with the nearby Gado Refugee Camp, has been an important

centre for hosting refugees from the Central African Republic since 2012. Both organizations have committed to participatory research to develop and implement solutions to improve natural resources management. Ultimately, this will enable communities to create futures for themselves and their descendants.

Expected outcome of the partnership/plan of action

The main outcome for this joint intervention will revolve around reducing the vulnerability of displaced persons and their host environments, including host populations and landscapes. This will align with SDG 2 on zero hunger, SDG 3 on good health and well-being, SDG 7 on affordable and clean energy, and SDG 13 on climate change. The intervention will also mobilize resources to enhance the livelihoods of refugees and members of the host community, as well as the sustainable use of forests.

Actions within the framework of the partnership are twofold:

- rehabilitating the landscape to reduce impact of a prolonged stay of displaced people within a 'hosting multifunctional landscape', taking into account the environment during massive displacement of people.
- encouraging self-reliance by building micro/small enterprises with capacity to generate income and create employment with less environment impact.

ABOUT CIFOR-ICRAF

The Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) and World Agroforestry (ICRAF) envision a more equitable world where trees in all landscapes, from drylands to the humid tropics, enhance the environment and well-being for all. CIFOR-ICRAF is a non-profit science institution that generates and applies evidence to meet today's most pressing challenges, including energy insecurity and the climate and biodiversity crises. Over a combined total of 65 years, we have built vast knowledge on forests and trees outside of forests in agricultural landscapes (agroforestry). Using a multidisciplinary approach, we seek to improve lives and to protect and restore ecosystems. Our work focuses on innovative research, partnering for impact, and engaging with stakeholders on policies and practices to benefit people and the planet. Founded in 1993 and 1978, CIFOR and ICRAF are members of CGIAR, a global research partnership for a food-secure future dedicated to reducing poverty, enhancing food and nutrition security, and improving natural resources.

ABOUT UNHCR

UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, is a global organization dedicated to saving lives, protecting rights, and building a better future for people forced to flee their homes because of conflict and persecution. It leads international action to protect refugees, forcibly displaced communities, and stateless people. Formally known as the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR was established by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1950 in the aftermath of the Second World War to help the millions of people who had lost their homes. Today, UNHCR works in 137 countries providing life-saving assistance, including shelter, food, water, and medical care for people forced to flee conflict and persecution, many of whom have nobody left to turn to. UNHCR defends their right to reach safety and helps them find a place to call home so they can rebuild their lives, putting those most affected at the centre of planning and decision making.

UNHCR and CIFOR-ICRAF will jointly develop themes to serve as the basis for their partnership. These documents will also serve as joint tools to search for funding to implement the MOU.



Refugee woman from CAR carrying wood for cooking, Mandjou, East Cameroon.

Photo by Emily Pinna/CIFOR

Acknowledgement

This work was supported by the European Union through the Applied Research in Ecology and Social Sciences in support of sustainable management of forest ecosystems in Central Africa (RESSAC) programme, implemented by the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) and its partners. The authors would like to express their gratitude to all those who contributed during the stakeholder workshops and follow-up consultation processes. The content of this paper is the sole responsibility of the authors and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Union.

Landscape near refugee camp Gado-Badzare, East Cameroon.
Photo by Emily Pinna/CIFOR



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