



A depleted forest. The rising demand for firewood, land, and basic resources is accelerating deforestation, land degradation, and pollution. PHOTO/FILE

Pressure on environment sparks call for clean energy, climate-smart livelihoods

Stakeholders are now urging a shift towards clean energy alternatives, climate-smart agriculture, and sustainable livelihoods to protect forests and communities while strengthening economic resilience among both refugees and host populations.

BY DAVID WALUGEMBE

Uganda is Africa's largest refugee and asylum seeker centre and the 6th largest in the world, which desperately puts pressure on the environment, requiring urgent and coordinated intervention.

As refugees continue to settle alongside host communities, the rising demand for firewood, land, and basic resources is accelerating deforestation, land degradation, and pollution – threatening already fragile ecosystems.

Stakeholders are now urging a shift towards clean energy alternatives, climate-smart agriculture, and sustainable livelihoods to protect forests and communities while strengthening economic resilience among both refugees and host populations.

The latest data from the Uganda Refugee Department from the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) indicated that Uganda has nearly two million refugees, constituting about 5 percent of the 45 million population across 12 districts in 13 refugee settlements.

Of these, over 1 million are refugee

children 92 percent reside in the refugee settlements in rural areas, and only 8 percent reside in urban areas.

During the interview, Mr Joseph Irumba, technical advisor – monitoring and evaluation at AVSI Uganda, urged the need to guard the refugees from going to the nearby forests to cut down trees for firewood, like in the Budongo forest and Kigoma, among others, by providing alternative lighting and cooking energy solutions.

Mr Irumba said if the refugees are not well regulated, they will exert pressure on the already constrained environment, which may lead to worse climatic disasters as a result of deforestation and pollution.

“The more people use energy-saving methods, the less they cut down trees, and the environment is preserved. We should not approve anything if it is not environmentally friendly,” he said.

For agriculture, Mr Irumba commended the refugee communities to use regenerative climate-smart agriculture mechanisms, proper waste disposal management, and good agronomic practices to produce good products.

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Gender.

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Ms Piranock
Refugee



A Participant showcases smart cooking stoves during the meeting

He also called on communities to use organic manure from animal waste, rather than industrially processed fertilisers that may have effects on the environment.

"Energy-saving initiatives enable refugees to save about Shs32,000 monthly per household. Reducing the expenses from 14 percent to 6.5 percent, saving money for good health, school fees, investment and research," he said.

The AVSI technical advisor reasoned that the environment should be added among basic needs, adding that people should be encouraged to foster the environment as part of basic needs in their home and proper waste disposal.

The need to protect the environment from exploitation among the refugee host communities is among the key concerns of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which suggests strategic priorities like making the best use of existing resources, which are being rapidly depleted, to ensure that refugees are included in mental health service provision.

From candle hustle to solar

Refugees have adopted climate-smart and environmentally clean initiatives from the poor methods they initially used.

Ms Piranock Angela, Kikuube District, narrated that she shifted from costly, unsafe energy sources, spending money on kerosene, candles and batteries while still experiencing poor lighting, safety risks and limited productivity at home, to solar energy.

"I was spending a lot of money on other lighting solutions. To save more and facilitate my children's learning, especially with homework, I decided to invest in solar lights," she said.

Despite being in a refugee host community, she invested in a solar home system, reducing her reliance on expensive and hazardous lighting sources, improving safety at home, enabling children to study at night, and supporting phone charging.

She says beyond immediate household benefits, the intervention strengthened her economic outlook and aspirations, planning to expand her businesses further, invest in improved household assets and upgrade her solar system to generate additional income, including charging phones for neighbours.

Climate-smart agriculture

In the same regard, Mr Wilson Katwebe said got rid of tobacco farming and using artificial fertilisers, the practice that would not only pose significant challenges but also cause land degradation, threatening ecosystems, food security, and livelihoods.

Mr Katwebe pointed out that he could wait for about nine months of harvest, making it difficult to consistently meet basic household needs, including school fees. Despite considerable effort, the income generated rarely matched the investment.

"I faced a lot of challenges in tobacco growing, ranging from food insecurity and low harvest, yet I invested a lot of time, and soil pollution as a result of using artificial fertilisers," he narrated.

After the engagements and strengthening his agricultural knowledge, he applied agronomics practices and organic manure, planted the beans on 0.7 acres and harvested five bags, earning about Shs1,04,000.

"Farming is no longer just survival; it is helping us move forward. I intend to expand my vegetable production,

ABOUT AVSI

Since its founding in 1972, AVSI has operated in 48 districts and 9 refugee settlements, reaching nearly 313,035 direct participants annually through programmes in education, agriculture, health, protection, environment, energy, food security, nutrition, and livelihoods. AVSI is currently pursuing two projects, Graduating to Economic Resilience (GER), and a five-year initiative dubbed the Sustainable Market Inclusive Livelihood Pathways to Self-Reliance (SMILES) (2022 November–2027 October), working with 14,000 households (extremely poor refugee and host community) comprising 70,000 individuals in Kyaka II, Kyan-gwali, Kikuube and Kyeg-gwa Refugee Settlements, to support them to become resilient.

The duo projects tackle livelihoods, agriculture, food security, protection, energy and environment, consumption support, financial inclusion through VSLA, Technical skills development (including youth apprenticeship, Farmer Field and Business School, and Enterprise Selection), enterprise development, and strengthened social protection linkages, while promoting gender equality and social inclusion.



strengthening the household's resilience and financial security," Mr Katwebe pledged.

Access to livelihood opportunities

To ensure the project's sustainability, Mr John Makoha, Country Representative, AVSI Foundation Uganda Region, commended the need to ensure refugees and host communities have access to meaningful, dignified, and sustainable livelihood opportunities.

Mr Makoha said good development practices should be put in place to advance the refugee communities despite the financial struggles due to the aid cuts.

"By combining these projects and learning from them collectively, we

create efficiencies in resources, time, and expertise while unlocking richer opportunities for shared learning and innovation, illustrating how access to markets, technology, and opportunity can respond to the yearning for resilience," he said.

He called for more interventions to ensure self-sufficiency and resiliency among refugees.

Shift from dependence barriers

In his statement at a Joint Learning Summit last week, organised by AVSI, Mr Patrick Okello, the commissioner for refugee management at OPM, showed a need to address the remaining barriers in employment and enterprise for refugees through results-driven deliverables to transition refugees and host

communities from aid dependency to self-reliance.

"We need to carry out humanitarian and development self-reliance and resilience actions by enhancing our collaborative oversight roles through collectively assessing situations and finding solutions which support inclusive, market-based livelihood pathways," Mr Okello said in the statement.

Mr Okello urged the government to strengthen the national systems and remove barriers to economic participation by the refugees to enable them to meet their essential needs in a sustainable manner and with dignity, shifting from a predominantly humanitarian approach to a development-oriented one.

Timothy Njakasi, an organic farmer, says extension workers help in transmitting new information. PHOTO/FILE

Participants at the Joint Learning Summit. Government were urged to strengthen the national systems and remove barriers to economic participation by the refugees. PHOTO/D. WALUGEMBE

