

Resilience, adaptation and learning: Malian refugees and their Mauritanian hosts

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Malian refugees in Mbera, Mauritania, have brought with them the skills and experience they gained in managing the effects of climate change in their home country, and are learning new skills in exile. Both refugee and host communities are benefiting.

Mauritania currently hosts 60,511 refugees who fled Mali in 2012. These refugees hail from the north of Mali and are now living in Mbera camp and its surroundings, in south-eastern Mauritania.¹ They left their home areas because of growing insecurity; prior to their flight, however, most of them had experienced the negative consequences of climate change over several decades or longer. Droughts, for example, have recurred every 10 years or so in northern Mali since 1973.

Being mostly herders, Malian refugees often bring their livestock with them into exile. Demand for natural resources in their host communities – such as water and pasture for livestock – has placed increased pressure on these resources, exacerbated by climate change. The natural environment has also been affected by other activities such as firewood collection and use of water for domestic and agricultural purposes. Fortunately, refugees bring solutions as well as their own needs with them. Having themselves dealt with the negative consequences of climate change in their home country, they are better equipped to deal with such challenges and to mitigate some of these in the host community. The refugees acknowledge that their openness to learning in their new situation was developed during their own search for solutions to the severe consequences of climate change which they experienced at home.

Deciding to move: tipping points

Several Malian refugees now living in the Mbera camp had been forced to move previously from their homes because of climate change, though they remained in their country. Their immediate response to the negative impacts of climate change was then,

and remains, to attempt to build resilience by way of indigenous innovations, such as the use of various types of mulches to conserve soil water and the use of animal skin to wrap around jars in order to keep water cool. The sense of community also plays a central role as a means of survival, with the most resilient members of the community extending a generous hand to the less resilient.

When a community's innovative adaptation strategies are stretched beyond their limits, however, people start to consider moving further away from home. The tipping point is reached when, in addition to failed adaptation strategies, relationships become strained, as safeguarding personal and immediate family interests becomes the priority over generosity to others.

The decision to move is usually reached after consultation, following which there could be a large exodus of the greater part of community members. Decisions can also be reached individually, for example by youth who have reached the age of maturity and consider it an obligation to fend for themselves. At the other extreme, some people would rather die on their land than move elsewhere. Others would consider seeking refuge in a neighbouring country only if the predominant religion practised there were the same as their own.

Facilitating integration

The existence of a democratic culture, national affinities, shared ethnicity and family ties across the border are all factors affecting the predisposition of host communities to embrace persons forced to move. The Government of Mauritania has maintained an open-door policy towards Malian refugees for decades, and has asked the

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Malian refugee herders gather at Mbera camp to sell livestock.

local population to receive the refugees and to consider them as brothers and sisters.

Rearing of cattle and, to a lesser extent, small ruminants is the most important activity undertaken by the majority of Malian refugees. Moreover, the stock of cattle owned is an indication of wealth (savings that can be transformed into cash) and of status. Strategies used by Malian refugees to ensure they can integrate easily in the host country include recovery, rebuilding or adapting their livelihoods options.

With regard to recovery, displaced persons who left home in haste have two options. They can rely on a trustworthy herdsman to drive their cattle to a safe, accessible haven, probably with the help of reliable friends or traditional or administrative authorities who would provide safe passage. Alternatively, they can take the risk of returning personally to retrieve their animals. When possible, the rebuilding of livelihoods is achieved by cleverly selecting animals which yield the most milk, have the greatest number of calves or produce the most meat to be used as seed capital to commence rebuilding of stock in the country of asylum. If such rebuilding is not a feasible option, the refugees will instead adapt, embracing whatever livelihoods options are available in the country of asylum,

sometimes through partners funded by donors, and use this as a springboard to re-engage with small ruminant and subsequently cattle production. These strategies may indeed be carried out simultaneously.

Adaptation strategies

Malian refugees in Mbera have successfully replicated several innovations developed in Mali in response to climate change. These include gardening (to grow produce for household consumption) and working through associations to resolve pressure on natural resources and to reduce environmental degradation.

Only 1.3% of refugee households living in Mbera had an agricultural background at the time of arrival at the camp; however, as of 31 December 2019, statistics available to UNHCR indicate that approximately 10% of households in the entire refugee community were engaged in **gardening** either independently or with the assistance of UNHCR's partners in the camp.

Refugees have replicated several techniques they had used to circumvent the negative effects of climate change when they were in Mali. Firstly, the refugees brought with them heat-resistant varieties of seeds not known to the host community,

including purple onion and tomato seeds. Secondly, they engaged in environment-friendly practices, such as the production of compost for enhancing soil fertility, whereas the norm in the host community was to use unfermented animal dung, which has the negative consequence of increasing attacks by soldier ants. Thirdly, indigenous water conservation techniques, such as the use of circular sunken seed beds as opposed to the Mauritians' usual flat beds or sunken rectangular seed beds, started being used.

The combined use of these techniques resulted in impressive yields during the 2019 farming season, and these positive results obtained by the refugees have aroused enthusiasm in the host community for the activity. An exchange visit was recently jointly organised by partners and UNHCR at the Mbera camp, which afforded Malian refugee women engaged in gardening an opportunity to share their experiences in water management, soil fertility enhancement and natural pest control techniques with women from the host community.

Mauritania has passed a number of laws in order to protect its natural resources from being over-exploited, with the Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development responsible for enforcement. When there is no effective presence of the Ministry in an area of the country, such as is the case in the district of Bassikounou where Mbera is located, Natural Resources Management Associations (NRMA) are created to regulate access to and rehabilitation of natural resources. In Mbera camp, however, where NRMA do not exist, refugees have been inspired by their own experiences back home and have created several **associations** in order to combat environmental degradation. For example, a group, called *Volontaires Réfugiés pour la Propriété du Camp* (Refugee Volunteers for Camp Cleanliness), regularly organises clean-up campaigns within the camp which they occasionally extend to the host community.

Afforestation associations have meanwhile planted more than 60,000 locally adapted tree species distributed by SOS Desert, within the last five years. These campaigns are usually organised during World Environment Day

Celebrations (5 June) and National Day of the Tree celebrations during the first week of August. These actions, which have been spearheaded by refugees, have helped to dispel the idea that refugees are the greatest degraders of the environment. They are now rather seen as partners for change.

Refugees have equally learned from the host community and adopted local environment-friendly practices. Bushfires account for some of the worst environmental degradation in Mauritania. Following awareness-raising campaigns and directives on how to raise the alarm in case of a bushfire, the number of bushfire outbreaks and disasters caused were reduced to four in 2019. Malian refugees – who knew very little about fire-tracing – now have a fire-fighting brigade and jointly intervene with host community brigades and gendarmes to fight wild fires. They were also equally involved in preventive measures such as the establishment of over 100km of firebreaks.

The openness of refugees to **learning** has further resulted in their adopting small ruminant fattening techniques which enable animals to put on more weight for the same quantity of pasture consumed, leading to the reduction of the pressure on pastures in the long term. In addition, for example, the use of para-veterinarians – which was non-existent in the refugee community but is practised in the host community – has been embraced by the Malian refugees.

Local-to-local knowledge exchange takes place through both formal and informal channels. Informal channels include interactions among community members when they meet at water points, at pastures and at weekly markets or festive ceremonies. Formal platforms of interaction are often created by UN agencies and other partners intervening at hosting sites on occasions held to mark international days of observance and activism, such as World Refugee Day and the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. Moreover, a partner agency has facilitated the creation of mixed refugee–host community committees in the villages within the district of Bassikounou. These committees are empowered in the

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management of conflicts including those related to access to natural resources.

Rethinking assumptions

There needs to be a rethink about the commonly held perception that an influx of refugees or persons relocating to other places because of climate change crisis or conflict or both is always negative. Refugees bring a wealth of resources with them, including human resources developed through facing climate-related crises in their home countries. These experiences often enable them to tackle similar challenges in the country of asylum and to inspire host country citizens to do the same. Harnessing the potential and resourcefulness of both refugees and host community members can

over time shape the way countries respond to climate change crisis, contribute to the promotion of food security and natural resource protection practices, and at the same time offer protection to refugees.

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1. 61.3% Tuareg; 37.2% Arab; 1.5% other minority tribes

