

Sheltering animals in refugee camps

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Animals play an important role in many people's lives in displacement. Camp planners and managers need to take animals' needs into greater account in order for displaced people to continue to benefit from this interaction.

One of the key challenges in emergency response is planning long-term support. Animals in refugee camps, however, suffer not only from a lack of long-term support but in most cases are also neglected during the initial response. The welfare of humans is of course the priority – but animals contribute to that welfare.

In most emergencies, refugees will bring their animals with them to the camps or will start buying and trading animals soon after settling into their new shelters.¹ In the initial stages of emergencies, refugees may have to rely heavily on support organisations but in time people start searching for ways of making a living. Animals provide a significant contribution to human livelihoods, whether for pastoralists, those who sell animals or animal products or provide feed and other services, people who use animals for transportation, security and

cultural activities, or simply families who are dependent on animals for food or income. Animals are even used as a way of storing financial capital in the absence of access to banks. Cooperation between refugees, the host community, the host government and support organisations is very important to provide the care that animals need. A number of aspects relating to the camp or settlement need to be considered to ensure its appropriateness for sheltering animals – aspects such as access to water points and grazing land, and the veterinary support that is essential for both their health and human health.

Key considerations

Refugees understand the importance of animals in establishing their new life in camps. Examples of refugees sacrificing the materials they are given for their

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own shelters to build animal shelters – to provide protection from extreme weather, predators and theft – include refugees in Kenya's Dadaab camp, Afghan returnees in 2009, and Bangladeshis displaced in 2009 by Cyclone Aila.

Land rights are a frequent concern. Refugees and internally displaced people no longer have control over the land they and their animals occupy. Pre-planning, good management and establishing avenues for good cooperation with all stakeholders are important elements in securing practical solutions.

Another aspect to consider is refugees' cultural norms regarding their interaction with their animals. Some prefer to keep their animals inside their household plots, while others do not; some communities have specific rules and taboos in dealing with certain animal species. This information is crucial for creating successful settlements, taking into consideration owners' preferences regarding the location of their animals.

It is also important to consider the gender, age and health status of those family members who are responsible for taking care of the animals. If these family members are individuals usually considered more 'vulnerable', then the animal shelters should be close to the human shelters for the sake of secure and easy access. This should be balanced against the potential risks to human health of the close proximity of animals to human shelters – risks such as transmission of disease from animal to human.

Climate conditions affect the design decisions for sheltering the animals. In hot climates, good ventilation and shade are essential, while well-sealed structures should be used in areas with cold climates. The safety of the animals is also affected by their structures' location; lockable shelter doors may be necessary in areas where animal safety is a concern.

One of the few examples of livestock shelters provided by an external organisation comes from the Pakistan emergency response following the 2005 earthquake. The surviving livestock were put in communal shelters after being vaccinated to prevent spread of disease.



Donkey shelter built by Za'atari camp residents.

and a new programme was established to introduce 'cob' – a mixture of clay, sand and straw – as an earthquake-resistant construction technique for livestock shelters.

Za'atari camp in Jordan provides a recent example of how refugees bring different species of animal into their living space. For many residents, caged birds bought at the camp's market provide a sense of home, as many of the residents used to keep birds back in Syria. Chickens are kept for food and income, and perhaps companionship. Donkeys and horses are used for transporting people and goods. Residents have built animal shelters adjacent or close to their own shelters using corrugated sheets and/or canvas – two of the few available and affordable materials.

Za'atari camp, whose structure and layout have altered over time as the camp has grown, allows residents to have animals and to build shelters for them. In purpose-built Azraq camp, the next largest camp for Syrian refugees in Jordan, residents are not allowed to build additional constructions; there, birds are the only animals allowed in the camp, since they do not require additional spaces within shelters.

Recommendations

The Livestock Emergency Guidelines and Standards (LEGS) project has published standards and guidelines for designing, implementing and evaluating livestock interventions.² Unfortunately, these are not used widely in emergencies, whether from lack of awareness of their existence, shortage of funding and/or time, or a combination of factors. There needs to be

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a more concerted effort to introduce the guidelines and standards to organisations, aid workers and stakeholders, at the same time consulting the end users on how to enhance the practical application of LEGS.

The best way to provide appropriate aid to humans and animals after disasters is to consult the people themselves – they are the users of the space and the owners of the animals. They know the materials needed to build appropriate shelters for their own animals, as well as the preferred design, and many will already have the necessary construction skills.

Constructing appropriate animal shelters will reduce the possibility of health problems within settlements. The level of pre-planning that can be done for animals'

shelter requirements in displacement will depend on the nature of the emergency and cooperation with the host community. However, raising owners' awareness of all issues relating to their animals' health and shelter needs will help displaced people in refugee camps to co-exist with their animals in safety while continuing to benefit from interacting with them.

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1. The author's research focuses primarily on human shelters but evidence about the need for animal shelters has tended to emerge alongside the human needs.
2. www.livestock-emergency.net

