



# Asking the right questions

David Stone

What does climate change mean for potential returnees to, for example, South Sudan – a land from which many had fled several decades ago?

Will people who have lived in camps for the intervening years be able to resume a productive agricultural livelihood, should they even wish to? Will the crops that they may have traditionally grown still be productive in an area that may now be drier and hotter than before? Has anyone assessed the groundwater availability and recharge capacity? Are the varieties of trees that aid and

development agencies are planting to rehabilitate the environment in former refugee- or IDP-hosting areas the most appropriate for what may be a changing climate? Answers to such questions are largely unknown, not necessarily because people cannot work out the consequences but because – by and large – the planners and managers of relief and development operations are not asking these questions.

More proactive, focused and appropriate assistance is urgently needed for returnee situations, for example where people who are finally leaving camps or camp-like situations are able to return to their former homes and attempt to re-establish their lives and their

*Returning Sudanese refugees load trucks at the Ikafe transit camp near Yumbe, Uganda, December 2007.*



livelihoods. In most situations of this type, people are provided with only the most meagre levels of support – on a one-off basis. Families trying to rebuild their lives and livelihoods are often unable to make ends meet and may have no option but to turn to environmental exploitation as a source of revenue and income.

Many communities in northern Uganda are currently in this situation, being unable to afford fuel and food prices, and with restricted access to safe drinking water. While waiting for their first harvest to mature, people are turning to illegal charcoal making as a means of income, exporting it to South Sudan where market prices are five to six times the local cost in Uganda. The consequences of

wholesale land clearance for charcoal making and agriculture must be expected to have longer-term negative consequences for such regions, for the people who may once again live there as well as for the environment.

*David Stone (david.stone@proactnetwork.org) is Director of ProAct Network, an NGO concerned with the environmental ramifications of human displacement (<http://proactnetwork.org>).*

As agencies scramble to catch up with this issue and be seen to be 'responsible', there is a risk that some basic requirements will be overlooked or deliberately set aside. Amidst the flurry of international discussion and activity, the people who are likely to have to bear the brunt of the consequences of climate change hardly figure. They are rarely being consulted as to their situation, their needs or possible options which may well shape their future well-being. They are not being enabled or encouraged to enter the global debate. Part of the reason why they are ignored relates to the level at which dialogue and decisions are taken and resources allocated. Another and more chilling reason, however, is because many of these people and communities may not be aware that they are, or could well be, on the frontline of a series of events that are likely to change their lives, perhaps forever.