

# Refugee water supplies: Some political considerations

by Clive Shelley

**While the technical solutions to securing water supplies in emergency situations are not easy, there are established and accepted methods. The most difficult thing may actually be the politics of the local situation — maintaining order diplomatically when so many different demands are being made.**

IT IS ESTIMATED that a significant natural or man-made disaster occurs every three days, and the inevitable consequence is that people are increasingly having to flee their homes and become dispossessed, or they are displaced, often into someone else's country and culture. In many instances people can be helped within the community, allowing an easy return home one day, but often this is not the case and they have to move further afield. People do not move large distances because they wish to, but because an event such as famine, flooding, war, or a combination of

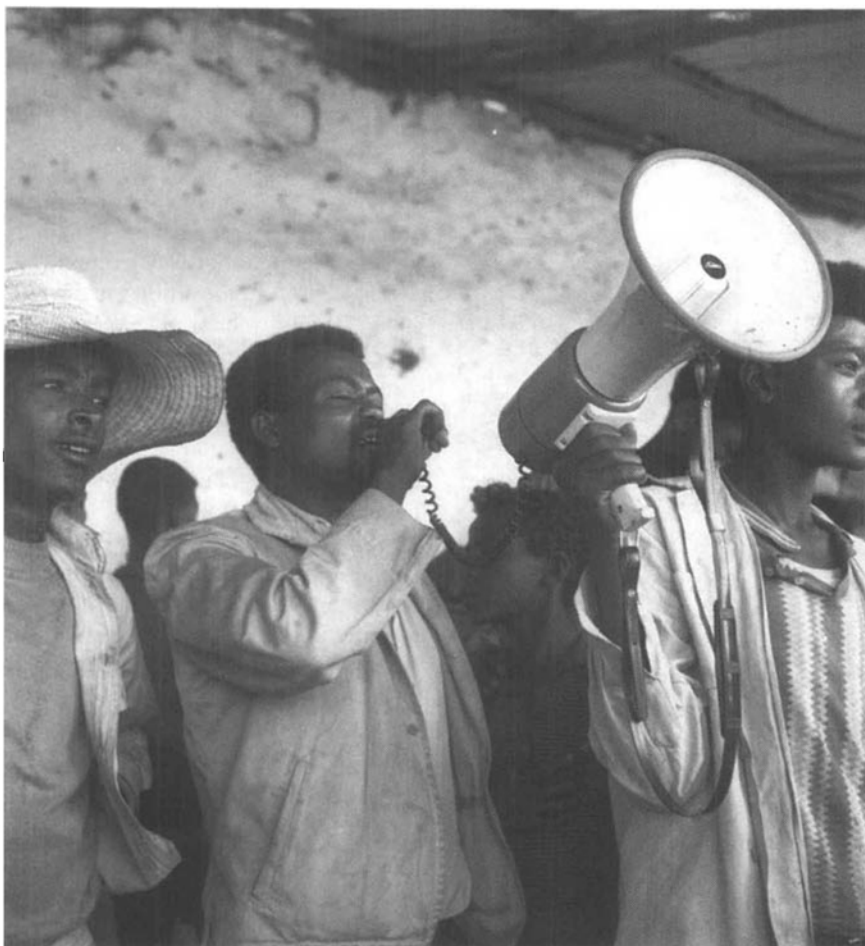
these events forces them to. They will move from somewhere that is very dangerous to somewhere else that is less so. These descriptions are only relative, as the place that is less dangerous is often under natural or man-made stress too. The refugees will take with them a host of needs, many of which cannot be met by their own resources, and there is no guarantee that these needs can be met in the area that the refugees migrate to either.

Some needs, such as shelter or food, can often be provided from afar, and on many occasions these have been supplied through those various agen-

cies well versed in disaster and emergency relief. Television news frequently shows convoys of aid including food, blankets, medicines, and fuel getting through to those in need. Not so with water. It cannot be cheaply and easily packaged and transported long distances. Water has to be found as close as possible to wherever people are, and it is usually by trying to extend local sources that the needs of refugees are met. When populations are forced to flee they do so *en masse*, and refugee camps sheltering fifty or one hundred thousand people can develop in weeks. The water needs of communities of this size will often dwarf those of the host area, bringing competition for a vital and often scarce resource. Fifty thousand people need a minimum of two hundred and fifty tonnes of water a day just to survive, and ideally about one thousand tonnes to drink, cook, and wash. An average water tanker carries ten tonnes, so that is *one hundred tankers a day!* Compared to the problems of transporting food — about twenty-five tonnes (two or three trucks) a day in dried form — the problem of transporting water is huge. If the refugees have brought livestock with them this figure could easily double.

## Whose water is it?

It is vital that rights to water use are established early and clearly. Satisfying water requirements for refugees must involve the co-operation of the government of the host nation, and a thorough assessment of the increased strain on the resources must be made, along with an assessment of the ability of existing resources to cope with the extra demand, or an examination of the possibility of using any hitherto untapped resources if existing ones are inadequate. Underlying this is the need to preserve existing supplies to the normal resident population, and also to show that they will continue to be preserved. If these primary needs are not maintained, then local people will see refugees getting water at their expense, and see their standard of living reduced through no fault of their own. This will be exacerbated if the local and refugee populations have had previous boundary or tribal disputes — old sores will soon open again.



P. Almasy/WHO Photo

*Relief agencies must ensure that they do not undermine the host country's local officials, who should be consulted and included as much as possible.*

If supplies are adequate then local fears can to some extent be assuaged by not only investing in the technology to stretch the supplies to meet new needs, but also reinforcing or extending local supplies. Local people may have a part to play in the construction of facilities for refugees, thereby providing employment and some financial input into the local community. Hopefully, the refugees will one day go home, and the infrastructure put in place to provide for their needs will be of use locally for many years thereafter. These subsequent uses must be taken into account at the outset of a project.

All these aspects rely on establishing political co-operation throughout, from high-level government ratification of the size and location of a camp to day-to-day working arrangements with local officials, including the use of existing local labour and expertise, and the development of strategies to ensure a fair distribution between local and refugee water needs.

### Local viewpoints

Local liaison must take into account the status of local officials. It may be that decisions taken at a high level by the government might not be fully agreed with locally. In order to maintain their status locally, officials might be tempted to put obstacles in the way of the development of refugee infrastructure. The building of a camp for refugees is often the most significant development to happen in an area for many years, and it may be one of the few chances that local officials will have to exercise power over outsiders and to influence large-scale events in the area. Although local officials generally have to implement government decisions, there may be instances where they feel that they can profit politically from the situation.

On the other hand relief agencies need to ensure that the resources (including cash) and the vehicles they control are not flouted in such a way as to undermine the standing of local officials. It is therefore essential that when water provisions for refugees are being planned there is close consultation between all parties so that areas of responsibility can be drawn up and fully understood. At a higher level, positions may change. Political pressures, such as influences from other governments and the imminence of elections, can easily change a government's public policy on caring for refugees within its boundaries. This is likely to result in agencies only being allowed to plan for the short-term



Unicef/Jacques Danois

*Transporting food to refugee camps is difficult enough, but people need about forty times as much water!*

needs of refugees, as any long-term planning could be seen as sanctioning the long-term residence of the immigrants.

### A social role

As well as the immediate role of water — to enable people to survive from day to day — water also plays a key role in providing long-term hope. Refugee camps mean basic survival, but they also keep an immigrant population together. Most host nations do not relish having hundreds of thousands of totally dependent people crossing their border. They may, of course, look upon it as a fact of life and buckle down to deal with it as best they can, often with the help of external assistance. The more that refugees are kept together as a unit, the easier it will be for their numbers to

be monitored, and ultimately the easier it will be for their repatriation when and if their domestic situation permits it. The provision of water is a basic cornerstone in the management of large numbers of people and it keeps their communities and culture alive until they can return home. Without adequate water supplies, refugees are faced with the choice of staying and dying of thirst or moving on. The more they move on the more they will be dispersed and family units broken up, prolonging their final return home and possibly exerting intolerable strains on the resources and goodwill of the host communities wherever they are.

Water provision must therefore be of a standard that will make refugees want to stay; the standard will vary depending on where they have migrated from. But meeting these targets may well conflict with the



*Extending free water to the host community may disrupt the local economy by putting water sellers out of work, creating animosity between the refugees and parts of the local community.*

situation locally, where the hosts may have to travel long distances for intermittent supplies of lesser quality, and may have to pay for it as well. This will give rise to claims of preferential treatment for refugees and lead to antagonism.

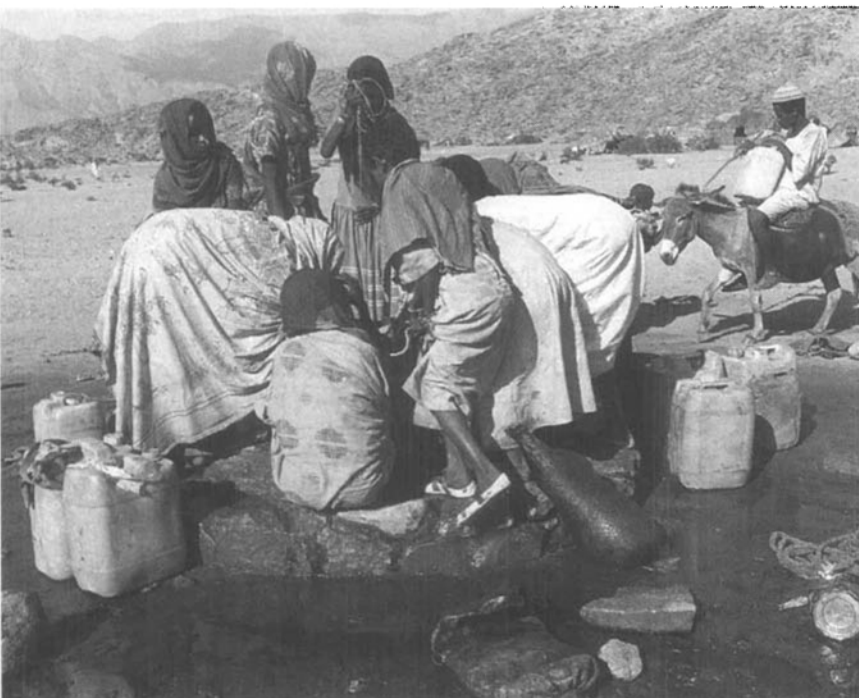
If local people gain access to refugee supplies, then they could well be getting it free or more cheaply than normal. This will put extra demand on the refugee supply and could also disrupt the local economy if the income from the sale of water is

reduced. If local water sellers cannot get access they may disrupt the refugee provision in order to maintain or enhance their own more commercial activity. Wide local consultation is therefore essential, and this must include the refugees themselves too, so that they are aware of local conflicts and jealousies that could arise through the competition for easily obtainable water. Again, 'Whose water is it?'

The nearest that we will probably come to answering that question is to accept that water resources should be looked upon as a friendly 'loan' from the host for the duration of need. As with any loan there is a responsibility on the recipient to ensure that it is used for maximum benefit. The relief agency will have to be flexible and fair about where the extra water comes from, who receives it and for what use, and how the construction and operation phases are managed. There will be many different agendas! ●

---

*Clive Shelley is a UK-based water and sanitation operator who has spent time in East Africa through RedR with UNICEF installing refugee water supplies. He is now at NorthWest Water, Burnley Wastewater Treatment Works, Woodend, off Barden Lane, Burnley BB12 9DS, UK.*



*Rights to water use must be established early and clearly if confrontations are to be avoided.*