The Impact of Refugees on the Host Community in Ethiopia “The Case of Gambella Region”

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Abstract: Third world especially Africa is hosting many refugees. Due to continuing civil war and persecution the refugees cannot return home and this produces various socioeconomic implications for the host community. Many refugee policies and programmes in Africa, recent have failed to take into account the impact of refugee on the host communities.

To know more about the event this study tried to investigate the socio-economic, environment and security impact of refugees on the host community in Gambella region, Ethiopia. The research designed used for this study was qualitative research design. In response to the research problem, qualitative approach was used in this study. Simple random sampling technique has been applied. In light of this, both primary and secondary data were used. Primary data was obtained through key informant interviews and focus group discussions. Secondary data was obtained from published materials, books, journals, government agencies and humanitarian organizations reports.

The study used snowball sampling technique for collecting data from the study area. The refugee population in Gambella is significantly matches the size of the local host community which has brought many impacts on the host communities. The finding of this study revealed that the presence of refugees in the region has negative impacts. The finding indicates that, the presence of refugees has negative on socio-economic, environmental, and security impacts on the host community. Finally, the study conclusion that the negative impacts of refugees are found to be greater than its positive impacts and this put the region in odd situation, and potential threat for the people of Gambella region of Ethiopia.

1. Introduction

The Horn of Africa is one of the most conflict prone regions of continent (Kassahun, 2013). For the last 50 years the region has suffered protracted, chronic and complex conflicts and almost all the countries that constitute the region have experienced intra- and inter-state conflicts of varying degrees and intensity (ibid). Although these conflicts have their own specificities, they share similar characteristic that is control over natural resources and elite manipulation of traditional competitions over scarce resources for political consumption, in order to attain, maintain or expand political power (Markakis, 1998). A dramatic feature of the conflicts in the Horn of Africa the interface and connection they show, what appears an intra-state conflict assumes a regional dimension engulfing the entire region.

The ongoing civil war in South Sudan has already produced hundreds of thousands of refugees, mostly hosted in refugee camps in Gambella, Ethiopia. By January 2017, the number of South Sudanese refugees in Gambella rose to 365,000, predominantly ethnic Nuer. Approximately there are 365,000 refugees in the Gambella region, a number that almost match the size of the regional population (IRC, 2017).

However, the new refugee phenomenon in Gambella is viewed only from a humanitarian point of view, while it may have longer-term political ramifications for the area. The presence of refugees has both positive and negative impacts on the socio-economic of the host community (Berry, 2008).

It is widely accepted that the influxes of refugees could have considerable impacts on natural resources and socio-economic aspects (Martin, 2005). The problems associated with refugees may
not be restricted to a particular area but also have spillover on the internal security situation of a region. The Gambella Region provides such case (Kurimoto 2005).

As Atim (2013) stated, refugees upset the ethnic balance in their host countries through what may be thought of as a demographic externality. Ethnic tensions may become especially pronounced when refugees possess ethnic ties with groups already present in the host society. Brown (1998) further argues that, the sudden influx of refugees can aggravate ethnic problems and changing the domestic balance of power. The same is true in Gambella Region where the influx of refugees raises many issues of politics that has locked the two major ethnic groups, the Anywaa and the Nuer into conflict.

Other researchers such as Reggsa (2010) and Dereje (2011) studies focus mainly on the impact of Sudan and South Sudan civil war by fuelling ethnics’ rivalry in Gambella without addressing comprehensively the impacts of South Sudanese refugees on the host community in relation to the socio-economic, environment and security. Despite the presence of humanitarian organizations reports, little research has been conducted on the impact of refugees on the host community. Therefore, this study aimed at investigates the impacts of South Sudan refugees on the socio-economic, environment and security impacts of refugees on host communities in Gambella Regional State.

2. Objective of the Study

General objective
The main objective of the study is to examine socio-economic, environment and security impacts of the refugees on the host communities in Gambella regional state.

Specifics Objective
Specifically the study attempts to:

- Assess the impact of the refugees on the host communities in Gambella region
- Identify the socio-economic and environmental impacts of the refugee on the host communities of Gambella region
- Find out the link between the refugee factor and inter-group interaction in Gambella region

3. Research Questions

Generally, this study is guided by the following basics research questions. The main objective of this study is to investigate impacts of the refugee on the host community. Regarding the specifics questions here are some of the following:-

1. What impacts the host communities has experienced after the coming of refugees?
2. Examine the relationships between the host communities and the refugees?
3. Identify the socio-economic, environment and security impact of refugees on host communities?

4. Significance of the Study

This study investigated the impacts of South Sudan refugees on the host community in Gambella Region State. Therefore, it will contribute theoretically to the critical issue of refugees’ worldwide and empirical evidences of the influx of refugees in Gambella region in particular. Since there are scanty literatures, this study will fill the gap in the area under study and provides insights with regard to the overall impacts of refugees on the host communities. In addition, it may serve as a source of information for other readers who are interested on the issues of refugees.

5. Research Methodology

The research was descriptive research where qualitative approach was to analyze the data. Furthermore, concurrent triangulation strategy is applied to increase the reliability of the results by comparing the data obtain from one source with the other sources.

6. Sources and methods of data collection

In this study, both primary and secondary data were used. The primary data was collected from both the host community and the refugee population living in camps by using interviews and focus group discussions. The secondary data was collected through reviewing relevant literatures that includes annual reports, publications, institutions’ performance report documents, policy documents and other types of documents were utilized.

In addition various actors’ such as United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), government representatives and other organizations of relevance who are working with the host communities and refugee camps were include in the sample.

7. Methods of data analysis

Depending on the objectives of a given study and nature of the data available qualitative methodology was use to analyzed the data descriptively.
8. Results and Discussions

Socio-economic impact of refugees on host community

After the outbreak of the Second Sudanese Civil War in 1983 the UNHCR with Ethiopian Government set up first refugee a camp in Itang, Gambella. But soon the camp was over populated and it become necessary to open a new camp for the new arrivals. Following the establishment of new camps there was a large scale humanitarian relief. This high amount of aid engulfed the market and had a devastating impact on the local agricultural production. It is obvious that, the presence of refugees implied an increase competition over scarce resources. Some cultures of the refugees has also, sipped into the host community as inhabitants interact on daily basis with refugees who possess different languages, cultures and even mannerisms. It is normal that some host members adapt some of the values of the refugees while others subject refugees to xenophobia treatment.

There is shortage of aid/charity from humanitarian agencies and this has made refugees become miserable and starving which leads to frustration and therefore becomes the basis for emotional and psychological problems. This situation drives the refugees to drink alcohol, fight and causes other social problems in the communities.

The study revealed that some refugees ladies engage in commercial prostitution in which a woman or girl receives money from a regular sexual partner. In addition, drug abuse by refugee youth especially is common in refugee settlements and this has enormous peer influence on the host community.

Based on the views of respondents refugees compete with the local citizens over the scarce resources such as land, water, housing, food and medical services. These change the flow of goods and services within the society as a whole and their presence impacted the host country’s balance of payment and price of different services, which may cause inflationary pressures on prices and depress wages.

Contrary to the burden placed on the local poor host community with regards to price increase of food items, farmers on the other hand have benefited positively from the high price of food items. However, this price has a negative impact on the majority of poor local hosts.

In general the presence of refugees changed the availability of goods and services on the market. Their presences affected the livelihood systems of the local farmers. Some of the farmers continuously sell their products to the refugees and drink alcohol. This exposes farmers to hunger, and social problems at large in which a number of people continuously rely on aid for food stuffs.

Land is a serious issue that affected the host community negatively due to the presence of refugees. Most of the local people claimed that their villages and grazing lands that is lost due to the influx of refugees and as a result the local people relocated from their villages to other areas for refugee.

This implied that despite some of the positive gain regarding socio-economic, their presence has far more negative socio-economic impact on the host community.

9. Environmental impacts of refugees on the host community

The presence of refugees in Gambella region has affected the environment. Refugees in the areas use the forest to fulfill their timber and firewood consumption. According to the informants the influx of refugees has creates a sudden and massive demand for scarce natural resources such as land, fuel, water, food and shelter materials with long-term implications on their sustainable.

All informants replied that there is still a devastating impact of refugees on the forest in the region. This posted a serious problem to the host community who depend on the forest for their livelihoods. Another impact of the refugees on the environment is loss of wild animals and plants on which the people relied on for food. This environmental impact can be observed from the loss of wild life population from Gambella National Park (GNP) which was known in the past for its large number of wild life population. This implied that the presence of refugees has negative environmental impact on the host community.

10. Security impact of refugees on the host community

The presence of refugees in Gambella region has adverse effect on the security. Several refugees are being involved in domestic politics, leading to political tensions, violence and attacks against others ethnic groups.

The region is facing renewed ethnic conflict along its western border. Since late January 2016, what
began as a dispute over land rights between Anywaa and Nuer ethnic groups has spread, claiming dozens of lives. Many informants believed that the clash is, in part the result of influx of refugees who flee the war in South Sudan. Lack of border security also posed a big security threat to the host community of Gambella region. This implied that the presence of refugees has critical security impact on the host community.

11. Conclusion

The study was carried out with broader objective of assessing the socio-economic, environment and security impacts of refugees on the host community in Gambella region. One of the peripheral regions of Ethiopia, Gambella, has been predominantly characterized by presence of large but also every increasing number of refugees from South Sudan. The overall findings in this study leads to general conclusion that the massive presence of refugees have more of negative implications than positive gains on the host community. Economically, the presences of refugees have both positive and negative impacts on the host community. Some of the positive economic impacts for the host communities included creation of new employment opportunities to the host communities, diversification of production and commercialization of local goods.

The study also revealed that refugees have negative impact on both environment and security on the host community by destroying the forest and other natural resources and fueling the ethnic’s tension in the region.

The recommendations are based on the findings and analysis of this study and how to improve concerning issues faced by both host community and refugees. In their effort to address refugee problems, policies of national government and international organizations should be holistic enough to easier the burden refugees place on host community.

The humanitarian organizations should be able to distinguish different categories among host communities, especially those who are poorer, more vulnerable and more likely to be hurt by refugee competition just as the case in Gambella region, Ethiopia. In this way durable solutions would be sought to mitigate if not eradicate the negative implications for the host communities. Another major strategy to mitigating the impact of refugee situations on host communities is the concept of burden sharing. This is when the international and donor agencies acknowledge the burden refugees place on host countries and their communities and offer a helping hand to include hosts as well. It is the opinion of many refugee authors that unless national and international refugee institutions deliberately include many hosts in their relief and development effort. More related studies are needed in future to undertake an in-depth look into how refugees can serve as potential assets for their hosts especially if their skills and expertise are well managed can represent an all round potential for the benefit of host communities.

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References


