

# Enabling Energy: Access to Clean Energy Can Enhance Refugee Economic and Social Empowerment

by Silvia Ainio and Alessia Vittorangeli

Among the many speeches animating the World Economic Forum this year, one powerful voice stood out. Mohammed Hassan Mohamud, a 28-years-old Somalian refugee who has lived in the north-western Kenyan camp of Kakuma since the age of 8, passionately advocated for a more equitable access to opportunities for refugees, in order to empower future generations and contrast the dependency and enforced idleness experienced in refugees camps.<sup>1</sup>

Mohammed is the youngest Zonal Chairman in Kakuma camp, where he represents more than 20,000 people living in the most populated area of the settlement. His speech highlighted the need to move away from handout-based models of aid and approach refugees as partners in development efforts, rather than a burden on host communities or

international aid resources.<sup>2</sup>

“Because we live in a semi-arid climate” he said, “sometimes myself and other people in the camp focus on highlighting alternative sources of energy and environmental protection. We have lots of sunlight here. We have so much dust in the wind. So we ask ourselves how we can harness that power of the elements and maybe produce energy.”<sup>3</sup>

The world is today confronted with the highest number of refugees in modern history, with more than 135 million people currently in need of humanitarian assistance.<sup>4</sup> Of all the people living in refugee camps, only 11

<sup>1</sup> Ceri Parker, “8 Top Stories from Davos 2019”, in *WEF Agenda*, 25 January 2019, <https://wef.ch/2RdVf4C>.

<sup>2</sup> Kate Whiting, “From a Refugee Camp to Davos: One Co-Chair’s Story”, in *WEF Agenda*, 22 January 2019, <https://wef.ch/2U8HYfr>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Andrew Scott, Leah Worrall and Sam Pickard, “Energy, Migration and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”, in *ODI Briefing Papers*, July 2018, <https://www.odi.org/node/33109>.

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per cent has access to reliable sources of energy.<sup>5</sup> Sustainable energy in refugee camps is still a widely under-explored issue. Nevertheless, energy consumption is a key prerequisite for economic and social development. Access to electricity and clean sources of energy is an essential tool for poverty reduction.<sup>6</sup>

The different services enabled by energy, such as cooking, lighting, communications, mobility, cooling and heating, help people meet their essential needs and reach their full potential. Reliable access to energy in such contexts has a direct impact on access and quality of education, street safety, but also economic productivity, as electricity enables artisans or entrepreneurs to improve the efficiency of their activities, to attract more customers and ultimately to have more control over their lives.<sup>7</sup>

"If we had enough energy, we would open restaurants that stay open at night, we would set up milk shops that use refrigerators and we would want to open shops that sell what you tend to buy at night," said Fadimata Wallet Haibala, chair of the women refugees'

<sup>5</sup> Glada Lahn and Owen Grafham, "Heat, Light and Power for Refugees. Saving Lives, Reducing Costs", in *Chatham House Reports*, November 2015, p. 7, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/node/19082>.

<sup>6</sup> Shonali Pachauri et al., "Energy for All: Harnessing the Power of Energy Access for Chronic Poverty Reduction", in *CPAN Policy Guides*, No. 3 (2013), <http://www.chronicpovertynetwork.org/resources/2014/6/16/energy-policy-guide>.

<sup>7</sup> Mustafa Alrawi, "Give Refugees a Chance or Face a Lost Generation, Davos Co-Chair Says at Opening", in *The National*, 22 January 2019, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/1.816535>.

committee at Goudoubo camp.<sup>8</sup>

From a social standpoint, access to clean energy also entails multiple benefits. Today, over 80 per cent residents in refugee camps rely on firewood or other solid fuels to cook. Smoke inhalation from biomass combustion in poorly ventilated areas is extremely harmful, causing the death of some 20,000 forcibly displaced people each year.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, collecting wood in the camps' surroundings can lead to tensions with the host communities over scarce resources.<sup>10</sup> Replacing firewood with clean cooking technologies would enhance residents' safety and significantly improve air quality in the camps.

The main obstacles towards achieving a more sustainable energy system are often not technological but rather political, institutional and cultural. Refugees are often seen as a burden for local governments, especially in countries where the local population faces similar needs related to energy scarcity. Besides, governments and humanitarian agencies tend to be reluctant to implement long-term solutions in refugee camps, as the camps' lifespan is expected to be relatively short. However, it is estimated that the average stay in refugee camps is around 18 years.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Energy 4 Impact, *Moving Energy Starts Clean Energy Projects to Boost Health and Enterprise in Refugee Camps*, 4 July 2017, <https://www.energy4impact.org/node/6773>.

<sup>9</sup> Glada Lahn and Owen Grafham, "Heat, Light and Power for Refugees", cit.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Gita Bhardwaj and Owen Grafham, "Why Access to Energy Can Empower Refugees",

This mind-set leads to a short-term funding approach, which hinders the kind of forward-looking investment and planning needed in areas of protracted conflict and displacement.<sup>12</sup> This is often enhanced by the political sensitivities concerning refugees' length of stay in the host country. However, while some types of long-term infrastructure investments such as connection to the energy grid are hard to pursue and entail important consumption "lock-ins", other energy-related solutions like clean cookstoves and solar lanterns are more easily deployable.

Lack of data collection also constitutes a major issue. While there is clear evidence for savings to be made by ensuring sustainable energy access in fuel management and overall energy provision, donors struggle to make cost-benefits assessments of energy options, while private sector companies cannot assess the viability of their investment.

Moreover, investing in projects in politically unstable contexts such as refugee camps entails important financial risks. Such risks call for the design of innovative distribution solutions, such as rental and lease-to-own payment terms, that could mitigate payment risks. On the other hand, they stress the need for the development of mechanisms, such as insurance, distributing risk among humanitarian agencies, private investors and governments.

in *Chatham House Expert Comments*, 6 August 2018, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/node/37408>.

<sup>12</sup> Glada Lahn and Owen Grafham, "Heat, Light and Power for Refugees", cit., p. 35.

Nevertheless, a systemic shift in thinking is already taking place. Humanitarian agencies are now acknowledging the need to move from a "procure and provide" model based on in-kind donations towards a cash-in type of assistance, strongly focused on enhancing refugees' empowerment and integration into society.

This will is demonstrated by the "Global Plan of Action for Sustainable Energy Solutions in Situations of Displacement", a non-binding framework drafted in 2018 by aid agencies in which they commit to equip refugees with access to sustainable energy solutions.<sup>13</sup>

Some steps are also being made in terms of improved understanding of the cost-benefits of access to energy. For instance, the UK based think tank Chatham House has estimated that providing all displaced households with basic access to energy would require a one-off investment of 335 million US dollars – approximately the same amount would be saved annually in fuel costs.<sup>14</sup>

Such data should target private companies, highlighting the business opportunities that lie behind delivering renewable energy technologies to refugees while addressing the risks deriving from such type of investments. A higher engagement by the private sector in responding to humanitarian crises could strongly impact the way in which development aid is disbursed

<sup>13</sup> See UNITAR website: *Sustainable Energy for Displacement Settings*, <https://www.unitar.org/ptp/node/107>.

<sup>14</sup> Glada Lahn and Owen Grafham, "Heat, Light and Power for Refugees", cit., p. 20.



and slowly shift refugees from passive recipients to active partners in developing their future.

Creating this shift is precisely the purpose of the Moving Energy Initiative (MEI), a partnership between Energy 4 Impact, Chatham House, Practical Action, the Norwegian Refugee Council and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which aims to enhance private sector's involvement by creating market-oriented initiatives that improve refugees' access to sustainable energy.

The initiative has already commissioned a series of projects, including partnerships with private developers that directly include refugees in the value chain, empowering them to open their own energy businesses (solar kiosks, energy services, etc.) and thus become distributors of energy products.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the positive impact derived from improved energy access, it goes without saying that energy provision is not a silver bullet. Energy access is not a panacea, but rather a catalyser. If refugees are to be truly empowered, the strive to widen energy access needs to be coupled with parallel efforts aimed at creating job opportunities in refugee camps, as well as providing adequate education and training. Only by approaching energy access as a means to an end, refugees could be prepared for life after the camp and their skills would be transferrable and eventually benefit their own community.

<sup>15</sup> Energy 4 Impact, *Moving Energy Starts Clean Energy Projects to Boost Health and Enterprise in Refugee Camps*, cit.

Such efforts need to be spurred through transversal cooperation among multiple actors and stakeholders. Ensuring reliable access to sustainable energy in refugee camps requires a systematic and systemic shift in the traditional thinking of humanitarian aid, which can only be achieved if governments, humanitarian agencies, NGOs, private actors, donors and refugees align their efforts to develop, borrowing from Mohamud's words, "sustainable ideas based on mutual interest, mutual respect, and human rights."<sup>16</sup>

16 February 2019

<sup>16</sup> Kate Whiting, "From a Refugee Camp to Davos: One Co-Chair's Story", cit.

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