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REFUGEES CREATE A WORLD OF THEIR OWN

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OTTAWA, IDRC -- There is no future for the people in refugee camps in Somalia: the camps have become something more than emergency relief, but something less than permanent settlements. For an estimated half-a-million people driven from the Ogaden area of Ethiopia by the four-year war with Somalia, the prospect of returning home seems as remote as the one of becoming part of the Somalian community.

Out of this uncertain existence, the refugees are creating new rules and new ways of living, a world of their own that is fast becoming a new sort of "normal" life. A United Nations report describes the emerging refugee society created by the camp setting in three areas of Somalia most heavily populated by refugees. The report, entitled "Survival strategies for and by camp refugees," is based on the observations of a team from the UN Research Institute for Social Development, who recently spent six weeks in the camps studying the food situation there.

They found that the chief resource in the new society is the food provided by various relief agencies. Not that the food is being misappropriated, far from it. Indeed, all the food dispatched to the refugees appears to reach the camps, the report states, but the amount sent appears to be based on an over-estimation of the camps' current population. Also, children are allotted the same portions as adults.

As a result, some households have a surplus, which becomes the basis of economic activity in the camp, which is a world largely without money. Part of the food ration is traded with the outside community for commodities that have a more important cultural value -- the sorts of foods that people may have eaten before they became refugees. Grain rations, such as maize, sorghum, rice and the like are traded for small amounts of goat meat, fresh milk, or cheese. Some of the ration is sold for cash that might later buy more valued food or clothing, or teaching materials for children's education. Some may even be invested in livestock or merchandise in an attempt to begin building up an independent life again.

But, like the real world outside the camps, the resources are not always distributed equally -- the refugees who manage the system get the biggest share. The rest of the refugees are divided into two groups: the "haves", who receive a regular share, and the "have-nots", whose access to food is uncertain. This disadvantaged group, about 10 to 15 percent of the refugee population, appeared to the study team to be the real victims of displacement.

Unable to cope or adjust to life as refugees, these marginal families cannot manage to look after themselves. The report recommends improving the food monitoring system to ensure that everyone gets a fair share.

In the refugee society the traditional male and female roles are being transformed. Almost two-third of the families are headed by women -- widows or "grass widows" whose husbands are away fighting or still living in the Ogaden.

Men in the camps have "lost their previous major functions as providers and decision makers", the report says. They are catered for, and all major decisions governing the lives of their families are made for them by officials. "Camp life therefore has made the males idle and redundant to a large extent," the report notes.

Women, on the other hand, continue to work much as they always have: cooking, collecting water and fuelwood, washing, rearing children, and, if time permits, undertaking extra income-producing work such as handicrafts.

But women are also discovering themselves as increasingly independent, resourceful and productive individuals. A female consciousness is emerging, the report says, as women realize they can manage very well on their own in the camps, or that husbands are of little practical help. Marriage for love is beginning to replace marriage of convenience.

Women are also becoming vain. As a result of competition for the relatively few available men, physical beauty has come to be seen as an important asset, and gifts of clothing and jewellery as important status symbols.

Children in refugee society have more leisure and less discipline. Play has replaced hard work as farm help or the solitary shepherding that would have been routine in the old life. As a result, says the report, life as refugees has brought the children an unexpected bonus: "the opportunity of enjoying childhood". But, the report adds that the rare joys of childhood do little to prepare them for a future outside the camps.

If the refugees are to have a future, in or out of the camps, they will need further help. If they are to remain in the camps, then the report recommends changes in addition to improvements in the food distribution system. More training and income-generating activities should be launched for both men and women, and women should be freed of some of their present work so that they can participate. If an attempt is to be made to integrate the refugees into Somali society, then the report says a practical long-term settlement strategy is imperative. And finally, as refugees and their problems seem sadly likely to be with the world for some time to come, research and training to meet their special needs would improve the lot of both future refugees and their hosts.

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