

Darkness and Disorder: Refugees, Humanitarian Agencies, and the Struggle to Provide Sustainable Energy Access in Refugee Camps

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NOTE: The Independent Scholar Fellowship application form may have been updated since this proposal was submitted.

Abstract

Energy powers us, it is the electricity in our computers, our light in the evenings, and the fuel in our stoves and cookers. Without it, our social rituals and professional outputs start to fall away. Energy is often viewed as a technical or quantitative subject, but it is also embedded within our everyday social practices of making a cup of tea, sending emails, cooking supper, and driving to the supermarket. In refugee societies, energy is a much-needed resource to support resilience in displaced communities.

Within refugee camps, energy has been neglected by both humanitarian organisations and academic research. This Fellowship aims to change that by developing an ethnography of the humanitarian energy world and telling the stories of refugees in their own words. The research will produce a book titled 'Voices in the dark: Energy Access and the Politics of Living in Refugee Camps' to demonstrate how energy is used by refugees. Berghahn books have already expressed interest in publishing the book through their Forced Migration series.

Building on existing data collected during my 10 years as a humanitarian, my research uses ethnographic methods to explore the political narratives and ethnographic uses of energy. Refugee voices, their energy needs and priorities are placed at the heart of this enquiry, demonstrating how important electricity and clean cooking access are for vulnerable households. The project will also work with policymakers at UNHCR and UNITAR to embed learning on how humanitarian actors support refugees in accessing sustainable energy.

Outputs of the Fellowship will include the 'voices in the dark' book, as well as a peer reviewed academic journal article in Cultural Anthropology. The results of my research will be published as a blog with the UN-led Global Plan of Action (GPA) for Sustainable Energy Solutions in Situations of Displacement.

The Research Idea *The project's topic, problem, or question*

People living in refugee camps are often left without access to electricity or cooking fuels. Worldwide there are now almost 80 million forcibly displaced people, the majority of whom live without access to affordable energy and struggle on a daily basis to access even basic resources. Many refugee communities remain in extreme conditions of poverty for generations, with families living in camps for over twenty years. Humanitarian agencies, such as UNHCR, are responsible for ensuring refugees have energy. However, in reality, the practices of many humanitarian agencies do not provide sustainable solutions. As a result, the basic energy needs of millions of people are not being met by the humanitarian system. Rather, many refugees are forced to secure their own energy access.

My research seeks to demonstrate the impacts of this system, posing the question: how is energy valued and accessed in refugee camps? To answer this, I will draw on empirical evidence I have collected from households and enterprises in Kenyan and Rwandan camps to share the stories of refugees on electricity and cooking. This will be combined with new evidence developed during the year of the Fellowship to produce the book 'voices in the dark' on the lived experience of refugees. This book will combine practical and grounded narratives emerging from refugee discussions, with academic analysis to produce an innovative study of energy needs in camps. It will embed learning from my professional practice, alongside telling the stories of refugees in their own words.

Background *Current research reference points and their limitations*

Humanitarian energy is an emerging sector, one which I have helped to develop. However, as an academic subject refugee energy is at a nascent stage. My interdisciplinary academic work seeks to work across three areas, bridging the academic areas of social studies of energy, anthropology, and climate change debates. Specifically, my unique contribution is to bring the voices of refugees to the forefront of policy and practice on energy in humanitarian settings: demonstrating how the views of marginalised communities can be embedded within inclusive emergency planning.

The first area of literature relevant to my research is socio-ethnographic literature on energy demand, which focuses on the social practices of energy, rather than energy as a quantitative or technical issue. My work draws on this literature by working with the

end-users of energy in refugee camps and listening to their priorities on energy. My work is also embedded within forced migration studies and uses anthropological methods to understand the local and global practices of humanitarian energy. The third and final area of literature that underpins my research is climate and environmental literature. Sustainable energy technologies offer an opportunity to increase electricity access without increasing global emissions. While relatively few examples of large-scale renewable systems exist in refugee camps, the international literature on clean energy technologies is important in informing my analysis. To date these areas of literature have not considered energy for refugees in any depth, and my research offers the opportunity to open-up a new topic for academic scholars and practitioners.

Project Thesis *The hypotheses or innovative claims the research may enable you to support*

The innovative claim of my project is that 'refugees are informed users of energy and currently secure their own access to energy'. To test this claim, I specifically focus on how refugee communities use and value energy. My existing research suggests that energy is important to refugees for social and practical reasons, and that refugee-led informal businesses within camps are the main providers of energy. Sustainable energy is important for autonomy and dignity within refugee homes, but also to ensure social and environmental justice for refugee communities.

During the Fellowship I hope to complement these findings with further data analysis on the nature of energy delivery in humanitarianism: questioning how humanitarian systems support refugees in securing access. In undertaking this research, I will demonstrate that refugees are critical decision-makers and often act independently of humanitarian agencies. This finding is original, as current sector orthodoxy suggests that humanitarian agencies provide the majority of energy solutions. Such findings would disrupt current aid strategies which seek to only 'protect' refugees, instead asking how refugees can be placed at the heart of decision-making on energy in humanitarian response.

The methodology for this study is innovative, as listening to the voices of displaced people directly can enable inclusive refugee-led enquiry. My research critically considers whose views and experiences are heard when it comes to energy in refugee camps: the 'voices in the dark' of my title. This is a novel approach as it combines

theoretical conceptualisations of inclusion with lived experience evidence from refugee communities.

Methodology *Methods and procedures your research will employ, with description of interactions, among different disciplinary inputs*

My research uses a number of social-science and anthropological methods. Firstly, ethnographic interviews and informal discussions, which have been used to develop qualitative data with refugees detailing their energy experiences. My methods are based in anthropology, and build on the observation and ethnographic work I have conducted over the past 10 years such as energy life story interviews. I have already conducted over 70 such exchanges with refugees in camps in East Africa and humanitarian practitioners implementing sustainable energy solutions.

Secondly, I will complement this existing material with new analysis using critical discourse methods to examine humanitarian energy policy-documents as outlined my workplan. Specifically considering the way in which key documents frame refugees and their access to energy technologies. This will require desk-based analysis of 100 humanitarian energy documents, including those covering projects in Ethiopia, Uganda, Djibouti, Jordan and Bangladesh. I have already collected the majority of these documents and will work with practitioner colleagues to secure access to the most up-to-date publications.

I will combine the new results from this discourse analysis with the existing interview material to produce an in-depth description of how refugees use energy. This will critically inform debates modern humanitarianisms and climate mitigation efforts within UN systems. Analysis of this material will be used to structure the 'voices in the dark' book, which is likely to comprise of five chapters. I have already drafted three chapters of this book, and would use the Fellowship to write the remaining chapters and publish with an academic publisher.

Work Plan *How your methods and procedures will be structured over the period of the award, including share of work time to be devoted to award research*

I plan to dedicate 100% of my time over 12 months, structured along the following lines:

- Months 1 to 2: Literature review and present research plan to academic mentors.
- Month 2: Outline abstract and pitch for the book 'Voices in the dark: Energy Access

- Month 2: Open engagement with practitioners at UNHCR and UNITAR to hear feedback on ideas.
- Month 3: Present research at Association of Social Anthropologists (ASA) conference, feedback on findings on the material culture of energy in refugee camps.
- Month 3: Submit news article at The Conversation and blog with GPA at UNITAR to share initial findings with practitioners.
- Months 4 to 5: Analysis of 100 policy documents: documents already catalogued but not yet analysed.
- Month 5: Re-draft first three chapters of book, based on existing material (3 chapters are already drafted of a total of 5 proposed chapters).
- Month 6: Present at Royal Geographic Conference, for feedback on the role of humanitarian agencies in sustainable energy provision.
- Months 6 to 8: Final drafting and preparation of monograph manuscript (last 2 chapters) and submit to publishers.
- Month 9: Draft and submit journal article to Cultural Anthropology.
- Month 11: Review monograph output and peer-review comments.
- Month 12: Present to practitioners as part of the Annual Humanitarian Energy Conference (HEC) to UNITAR and UNHCR practitioners.
- Month 12: Publish monograph and blog on Rethinking Refuge website.

Outcomes *Describe project contribution, dissemination, and any further steps and longer-term goals*
 The main output from the research will be the book 'Voices in the dark: Energy Access and the Politics of Living in Refugee Camps'. Berghahn Forced Migration Series have already expressed interest publishing the book. Publishers such as Routledge, Oxford University Press, and Polity will also be explored as the likely audience includes a broad range of readers.

The project will develop an academic article in a peer-reviewed journal. I plan to focus this article on solar technologies and how refugees engage with them, submitting to the journal Cultural Anthropology during month nine of the Fellowship.

- Journal Article: 'Lanterns, Panels and Mini-grids: The Story of Renewable Energy and the Material Culture of Refugee Energy'. Submit to Cultural Anthropology.

Alongside these outputs I will also produce public dissemination outputs:

- Blog: 'Energy ethnography and engagement with practitioners in humanitarian energy'. Rethinking Refuge website.
- Blog: 'Humanitarian energy delivery models and energy planning in UN agencies'. For the GPA website.
- News Article: 'Humanitarian Energy Institutions and the Provision of Sustainable Energy in Refugee Camps'. Submit to The Conversation following discussion with the inter-disciplinary editor.

My research has the potential to have impact in both academia and practice. In the academic world, the research will provide evidence for researchers in refugee studies on the topic of energy. While in the practice world I will continue to co-chair of the GPA Research and Evidence Group to enable my work to be shared directly with humanitarian practitioners.

Ethics Statement *Any measures required for ethical conduct of the research, including needed, regulatory compliance*

Much of my data collection has already been conducted under the University of Oxford CUREC ethics and compliance process. This was a detailed process, for example, structured participant information sheets and research summaries were shared with interviewees and risk assessments were conducted prior to fieldwork. Further data collection will also follow this process to ensure ethical conduct of the research.

Due to the varied nature of working with refugee communities, I place ethical considerations at the forefront of my research and adopt a 'do-no-harm' humanitarian practitioner's approach. During my previous data collection, I was able to work with communities who expressed a clear desire to engage, using a variety of methods to facilitate relationships during repeated engagements. For example, by building inter-personal relationships and spending time directly with families beyond talking about energy. Informed consent was gained before each interview and interviewees were assured that their comments would be kept anonymous.

Particularly in the case of working with women from a traditional background, it can be a challenging negotiation to establish and maintain a relationship. While my research

does not focus solely on women, the majority of energy use in refugee homes is consumed by women for cooking and tasks that require lighting. Therefore, I used specific approaches in those interactions. For example, within the in-depth interviews conducted, some short life history discussions often occurred before talking about energy, to understand the complexity of junctures at which energy is connected with refugees' lives and to enable women to feel valued and heard in their own right rather than just as consumers or receivers of technologies. My own positionality as a woman in largely female spaces also allowed me to connect with women and their families – to talk openly about energy and many other topics.