

# Preventing re-displacement through genuine reintegration in Burundi

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**Displacement is often part of a cyclical process of conflict and displacement. Preventing displacement, therefore, is not only about preventing new displacement but about ensuring that people do not get re-displaced.**

As soon as a conflict is resolved enough to allow for return (whether voluntary or coerced), and the return package has been handed over to those who have signed up for the repatriation programme, the crisis is deemed to be over, funding is re-directed (i.e. reduced) and reintegration falls off the radar. The problem with this process is that where inadequate attention is paid to the extremely complex, fragile and fraught process of reintegration, the possibility for renewed tensions, conflict and eventually re-displacement increases.

Burundi is a good example of this. The country is undergoing the long and painful task of reconstruction after decades of violence, political turmoil and displacement. Although several tens of thousands remain in exile, more than half a million displaced Burundians have returned over the past few years, some after more than three decades in exile. Their return is seen as a success by external actors, including UNHCR, which has described it as “one of the most successful operations on the African continent”.<sup>1</sup>

The fact that so many people have been able to return is extremely encouraging and symbolises optimism for the country’s future. But while much has gone right with the return process, there have been some serious shortcomings with the process. These shortcomings are evidenced both within Burundi and in neighbouring countries, in particular Tanzania, where thousands of refugees continue to resist return. The effective reintegration of those who have been displaced is probably the greatest challenge facing the country, and a priority if future displacement is to be avoided.

Reintegration is notoriously hard to quantify. However, it is clear that a key measure of sustainable return is the ability for all Burundians to genuinely and meaningfully exercise their rights as citizens, especially the ability of those who have been living in exile to properly reintegrate into Burundian society.

Nowhere is the evidence of the exercising of rights more evident than in the ability for returnees to gain equitable access to land. In Burundi, the vast majority of the population makes their livelihoods from subsistence agricultural production. It is not surprising, therefore, that the dominant issue in the return process is the ability for returnees to reclaim land – land that has been used by those who did not flee for the past decades. Land, in this context, relates to issues of justice, reconciliation and sustainable peace as well as livelihood. And this is where a key shortcoming in the process has become evident: land has been treated primarily as an economic commodity that can be resolved with humanitarian assistance rather than a strongly political one. Of course, it

is an economic resource – people need land to grow crops to feed their families – but for returnees who have been alienated from the state for decades, access to land is an important indicator of reintegration and the reinstatement of active citizenship and inclusion. The realisation of citizenship for returnees, therefore, is centrally contingent upon fair and effective repossession of land – and specifically family land – signifying an end to the causes of flight that broke their citizenship bond in the first place.

Yet to date, many have not been able to reclaim their land, especially in cases where it is occupied and the current inhabitants are unwilling to leave. Where returnees have attempted to make claims to their land through judicial institutions they have often found that the ruling is not in their favour. Even when it is, they fear for their safety from retaliation by the current occupants, particularly when the land occupant is powerful or influential. For those who cannot reclaim their land, there are limited options with regard to accessing alternative land, and many have been relocated into what are called ‘peace villages’; these villages incorporate returnees with other vulnerable groups in need of land, allotting them space to build homes and farm. Although this is generally seen as an improvement over the dire conditions in which people had been living in transit camps, they are deeply unpopular. Serious questions remain over whether, being set apart and isolated, they will in practice offer people adequate opportunities for reintegration into the social fabric of Burundi society and persuade its remaining citizens still living in exile to return home.

While land is not the only challenge, equitable land distribution in Burundi is certainly critical to the success of current peace-building process and an important indicator of the potential for lasting peace. By this measure, to view return and reintegration in Burundi as a success would be to ignore the serious problems that are brewing. Tens of thousands of Burundian refugees living in Mtabila camp in neighbouring Tanzania continue to resist repatriation despite appalling living conditions and the withdrawal of many services within the camp, raising serious questions about the assumed success of the returns process.

In particular, for as long as access to land is seen as primarily a humanitarian rather than political process, there is a very real possibility that mass return would destabilise the country. Instead, it is vital that government agencies, policymakers and humanitarian actors pay adequate attention to the need to address the current demands on land in a way that is simultaneously equitable and feasible. They need to ensure that adequate time and resources are invested in a complex and fragile reintegration process. Preventing displacement in this

context, therefore, is about ensuring that reintegration is grounded in a broader framework of national reconstruction and about ending previous displacement in such a way as to break cycles of conflict and displacement.

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This article draws on research conducted in Burundi in 2009. See International Refugee Rights Initiative, Social Science Research Council and REMA Ministries *“Two People Can’t Share the Same Pair of Shoes”*: Citizenship, Land and the Return of Refugees to Burundi, Citizenship and Displacement in the Great Lakes Region Working Paper No 2, November 2009.<sup>2</sup>

1. [www.unhcr.org/494b7e302.html](http://www.unhcr.org/494b7e302.html)
2. <http://tinyurl.com/IRR-REMABurundianreturn>