Making return and reintegration sustainable, transparent and participatory

by John Rogge and Betsy Lippman

This special FMR issue on the return and reintegration of people displaced by conflict or violations of their human rights outlines some of the many challenges that they face when making their decision to return. It also highlights some of the strategies employed by the authorities or agencies supporting the displaced in order to ensure that return occurs in safety and dignity and that reintegration and recovery are sustainable.

It is estimated that there are currently some 25 million people internally displaced in over 50 countries.[1] This represents an increase from 20 million in 1997 and 1.2 million in 1982. There are almost twice as many IDPs as refugees. In Sudan, which for more than a decade has had the world's largest IDP population, the ongoing Darfur crisis has added yet another 1.2 million in the past year alone. However, many of the crises that created displacement have ended and the displaced have returned home or are in process of doing so. Many of Angola's 3.5 million IDPs are currently returning, half of Sri Lanka's 800,000 IDPs have returned and, if the comprehensive Peace Agreement between the Government and the SPLM in Sudan is signed, as is expected later this year, a sizable proportion of Sudan's well over 4 million IDPs will also be on the way home.

The return of IDPs invariably means that two other groups of displaced persons also return – refugees and demobilised combatants. Moreover, many crises also produce significant diasporas of people who are not necessarily refugees. Hence, the numbers returning in a post-crisis situation can be very large. They usually have variable needs and may have diverse aspirations. The authorities or local populations may react positively or negatively to returnees depending upon the nature of the crisis and the alliances that the displaced are perceived to have had. For example, southern Sudanese now returning from Khartoum after some

two decades may well be viewed with suspicion by those who remained or even resented when they compete for access to limited resources and services on their return.

In an ideal situation, the return and reintegration of these diverse groups should be undertaken within an agreed framework adopted by national and local authorities, the international community, local civil society and the displaced themselves. The most successful return and reintegration processes have been those where 'pull' factors have been created in areas of origin through upgrading of basic services, creation of livelihood opportunities and, most importantly, the establishment of law and order. Returnees who have left their places of displacement because of 'push' factors – such as acute discrimination or overt hostility by local authorities or populations – often require special assistance and protection in areas of displacement, during – and even after – return.

While protection needs are normally associated with areas of displacement they often follow the displaced to their areas of return and are a key consideration for those returning and those that have remained behind. Muslim IDPs in Sri Lanka, for example, remain very wary about returning to the Jaffna peninsula. IDPs who have returned to their farms in eastern Uganda continue to fear abduction by the Lords Resistance Army and thus keep their children in the towns or in the camps to which

they had been displaced. Responsibility for providing protection falls on national and local government authorities but they often lack the will and/or the capacity to fulfil this responsibility. The international community can monitor and report incidences but is seldom in a position to take preventive action.

Protracted conflicts that produce large displacement invariably also produce massive destruction of infrastructure, decay in basic services and disruption to what may already be fragile economies. Agricultural land reverts to bush and large swathes of land may be contaminated with landmines and unexploded ordnance. When peace comes, and if security is re-established, there may be little for the displaced to return

to. In many cases IDPs and refugees have lived in camps where they had access to at least minimal levels of health care, basic education, food security and potable water. Returning to areas where none of these safety nets exist makes sustainable reintegration a long and difficult task. The problem may be exacerbated by the fact that returnees have become dependent and may have developed wholly unrealistic expectations of support on return.

Compounding the problem is that local authorities in areas of return may have little or no capacity to manage an effective and efficient return and reintegration programme. They themselves may have been displaced and are usually left without sufficient resources. Building local capacity for governance, rule of law, mine clearance and development is currently a major and costly problem in areas of return in Angola and Liberia. But building capacity is key to longer-term development. Cambodia has showed how consistent effort and longer-time availability of resources can eventually reap dividends.

A major challenge of most post-conflict situations is that of creating an enabling environment for the return and reintegration of the displaced. Post-conflict environments are also environments awash with weapons, especially small arms. Establishing security and the rule of law is fundamental to a successful return and reintegration

process. Demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration (DDR) of combatants is a key component of this. Local warlord-led militias that are not demobilised can be the spoilers in a peace process. The return and reintegration of IDPs and refugees in Sierra Leone ran relatively smoothly because it was accompanied by a timely 'DD' process. However, the jury is still out on the 'R'. Much more work and analysis needs to be done on the 'R' part as it fundamentally impacts on the reintegration process of the displaced. Liberia and Sudan will provide ample learning opportunities in the coming years.

Property restitution issues and access to land are further necessary elements of an enabling return environment. Unless institutions or mechanisms are in place to deal with such issues disputes can rapidly escalate into conflict, especially if different ethnic or political groupings are polarised. Resolving land and property disputes is inevitably time-consuming, especially if records never existed or existed and have been destroyed during conflict or when traditional or legal authorities have limited capacity. Afghanistan exemplifies the acute complexities of this issue and the protracted time frame required for dispute resolution.

Sustainable reintegration is inextricably tied to rebuilding the social fabric and social capital of communities with an understanding of the causes of the conflict and a deter-

mined effort not to recreate these. Interventions must not privilege any category of returnee or privilege returnees vis-à-vis those that remained behind. This has often been the case with mandate-oriented agencies that work with specific target populations and receive funding in line with their mandates. Today there is much greater recognition by the humanitarian and development communities that programmes must take a holistic, integrated approach to communities. This can be done while still meeting the specific needs of particular members of a community such as child ex-combatants, women-headed households, orphans and others who require special attention. Facilitating inclusive, representative participation by the community in defining and prioritising its needs and implementing and evaluating projects based on these needs can affect both the sustainability of the interventions but just as importantly social cohesion – no easy task as communities form and reform with new arrivals. Real participation takes time but has a value well beyond the investment.

Many of the articles in this issue touch on the importance of ensuring genuine involvement by the people that the international community wishes to help. We must have the humility to remember that the best solutions often come from within, not from without.

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[1] See *No Refuge: the challenge of internal displacement,* UN, 2003. online at www.reliefweb.int/idp/docs/references/WebinfoOrder.pdf and *Internal Displacement: a global overview of trends in 2003*, online at www.idpproject.org/press/2004/Global_Overview.pdf

Landmines pose a serious threat to returnees in Afghanistan.