

# Return and resettlement in Liberia

by Jessica Schultz

*An Oxfam GB initiative to improve understanding of the concerns and expectations of Liberian ex-combatants offers lessons for sustainable reintegration assistance.*

In preparation for working in post-conflict communities in several areas of Liberia, Oxfam GB consulted a sample of civilians, displaced persons and current and ex-combatants (using this category in its broadest sense to include anyone associated with the fighting factions - including porters, cooks and 'wives'). Oxfam also consulted those with experience of providing services to ex-combatants during a previous disarmament process in 1996-97.

Focus group and individual interviews identified local preconditions for sustainable return. All those interviewed said they would not want to return home with their families unless combatants were disarmed. They also called for the deployment of UN soldiers in villages of return, reintegration packages, shelter reconstruction materials, free and fair elections and education opportunities.

Key reflections on the reintegration process in 1996-97 were that:

- Programmes aimed only at ex-combatants divided communities and caused resentment.
- Local people did not patronise businesses run by ex-combatants.
- Skills training and vocational programmes, particularly for children, were too short-term to ensure sustainability; many were thus forced into continued dependence on their former military commanders.
- Commanders retained power through participation in programmes and even served as community spokesmen.
- Insufficient effort was made to persuade communities to take back children who had been involved with militias.

Most ex-fighters were hopeful about prospects for acceptance upon their return but realised that "those who did bad things" in their own villages would be unlikely to be accepted.

They accepted the difficulties of changing a culture of violence overnight. Children who are accustomed to responsibility, easy money and sex will have a difficult time returning to their previous lifestyles. There is great concern that kids will create gangs to replace their previous social networks. Abducted women and girls have limited options and many, particularly those with children, will remain with their partners. Women actively involved in fighting could be stigmatised and excluded from communal work.

Liberia, like other post-conflict states, is facing the challenge of how to hold thousands of perpetrators accountable while also honouring the victims and survivors, reforming institutions, and changing attitudes and the political culture. Encouragingly, over half of those interviewed supported the work of Sierra Leone's Special Court to prosecute those most accountable for war crimes and crimes against humanity. A few displaced women emphasised the need for public accounting of horrific events and forcing perpetrators to court to explain themselves. Almost everybody, including ex-combatants, agreed that ordinary combatants

should be forgiven after making a formal apology to their community.

Most Liberians appear willing to let bygones be bygones. Many agree with the sentiment expressed by a Liberian aid worker: "Grabbing people to investigate them would just stir things up. If you start pulling on a tree, the tree pulls the roots." However, armed combatants still maintain a visible presence in many areas. Some felt unable to comment on prospects for reconciliation and transition to peace. As one said: "We don't know what should be done now. After disarmament we will know what to do. Since they still have guns we cannot answer this question."

Many hopes now lie with the successful implementation of the disarmament and reintegration process. With so much at stake, it is essential to take account of the differing needs and expectations of the Liberian people, to ensure continuity between demobilisation and reintegration programmes and to establish structures and services in communities to help families to overcome the mental and physical stresses of reintegration.

**Jessica Schultz was Oxfam GB Humanitarian Protection Adviser in Liberia until May 2004.**  
Email: [jessicaschultz@onebox.com](mailto:jessicaschultz@onebox.com)

*Male resident helping single women build their shelter, E J Yancy IDP camp, Liberia*

