

Home here and home there: Janus-faced IDPs in Kenya

by Roseline Achieng

Prior to elections in 1992 and 1995 ethnic cleansing initiated by political leaders left some 300,000 Kenyans homeless.

Donor pressure led the government to initiate an IDP return programme. Organisers assumed that IDPs would go home and pick up livelihoods as if nothing untoward had happened. The UN Development Programme thought it could implement its mandate to provide an enabling environment for return without analysing what had happened and without assessing the potential for rebuilding trust between IDPs and those who had displaced them.

However, as the programme got under way it was soon clear there was a lack of political will to restore security, redress injustices against the displaced and find lasting solutions to problems of land shortage and tenure insecurity. Particularly in the Rift Valley, returnees faced struggles in resuming livelihoods. A decade after their displacement women and men in some of the worst hit areas are still unable to return home or access farmland.

My research was among internally displaced Kikuyu women, from an area called Burnt Forest, who are now living 65 kilometres away in the 'no man's land' of Langas. Langas is made up of makeshift houses built in a swampy depression by IDPs from a variety of ethnic groups. Ties to home are manifest in the use of the names of Kenyan towns of origin for areas of the shanty differentiated by drainage lines. Neighbourhoods are ethnically constituted. Ethnic sensibilities are encouraged by associations that distribute news, food and music from 'home' and organise ceremonies.

For these displaced women home is here but also there – in Burnt Forest where they retain use rights to land.

Home here – the actual place of lived experience, where contestations and negotiations take place – is opposed to home there – a metaphorical space of personal attachment, exemplar of 'how things used to be' and a space for negotiating the former order. The relationship between home here and home there is trans-local. For these IDPs the construction of meaning is part of a power struggle on the meaning of places and gender relationships. The continuation of ties to their former homes is also reflected in land-labour relations and the exchange of subsistence goods that exist between the Kikuyu women and their displacers – Kalenjin young men. Displaced women, keen to prevent their fields being permanently appropriated, access their land by renting to the Kalenjin or hiring them to till, weed and harvest. Through appealing to societal institutions, friendship ties and networks women are negotiating 'good neighbourliness' strategies that link them to their displacers.

Many IDP women are engaged in the illicit brewing and sale of alcohol. They depend on each other for contacts and support in buying off police and health inspectors threatening to arrest them. Makeshift bars are used by women to exchange news from home and to offer and seek help.

If we are to grasp the meanings that IDPs give to events, processes and places they encounter, we need to:

- adapt an interactive and generative research methodology seeking to understanding the rationality and agency of the actors
- understand that IDPs and refugees face different realities with different livelihoods options



- realise that communities in crisis re-organise, form groups or associations or provide themselves with space in which to initiate coping strategies
- stop seeing IDPs as a homogenous category: some want to return, while others have found new meanings in their lives in new locales
- base support to reintegration on what IDPs themselves have initiated and want.

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