Political and economic reintegration: key to successful return

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Refugees and IDPs require national and international actors to make concerted efforts to ensure that they are successfully reintegrated into the economic, social and political landscapes of their countries of origin.

The triggers for displacement often reflect a rupture in the relationship between the State and its citizens, signifying the State's inability to fulfil its obligations to protect its citizens from violent conflict. Mending this relationship is crucial, and political reintegration of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) is fundamental to successful reintegration. This involves including individuals in the political landscape of their countries of origin through enabling them to interact with the government, to be included in decision-making processes and not to be made invisible or be impeded from accessing local authorities.

Return is a difficult process, especially if refugees have been in exile for prolonged periods of time or were born in displacement. During their time in displacement, conditions and structures will have changed or been redrawn in the country of origin. In some cases, refugees are seen as foreigners by their home communities. IDPs, on the other hand, can face a slightly different reintegration challenge. Although they have not left their national territory, they have often been rendered invisible, or at times are seen as undesirable and have been marginalised. They live in conditions that resemble and are sometimes worse than those experienced by refugees, and live in fear of exploitation, violence and human rights abuses. Both groups often face discrimination and exclusion from host communities as well as local and national authorities.

A State's violations against its citizens, especially violations committed by its security apparatus, breed distrust among the population, including returnees. State persecution (particularly in contexts of fragility) is often the reason why individuals, families and communities fled their homes in the first place. The successful return and reintegration of refugees and IDPs – to regain their place as full members of society with equal access to basic rights and services as other citizens – requires a re-engineering of the State–citizen relationship.

Burundi and Sudan offer good examples of addressing such challenges in refugee and IDP return processes.

Burundi

Since gaining independence in 1962, Burundi has experienced repeated episodes of ethnic violence between the majority Hutu and minority Tutsi populations. With the advent of stability following a peace agreement brokered in 2000 and the re-election in 2010 of Pierre Nkurunziza as president, Burundian refugees returned from neighbouring countries in large numbers – over half a million between 2002 and 2011. Upon their return, however, returnee refugees claimed that they felt invisible in the eyes of the authorities. They felt that they had been erased from the political landscape and that this, and the abuse of power by some in authority, was having an impact on their livelihoods and their access to land. Women in particular faced considerable challenges given that by law they could not inherit land.[1]

In 2015, the situation in Burundi deteriorated and the country risked relapsing into violent conflict. President Nkurunziza indicated that he would run for a third term, which was disputed by various sections of the population. This led to government forces targeting those who opposed the president; human rights violations were widespread and more than 400,000 Burundians have

fled the country since 2015 (mainly to Tanzania, Rwanda, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo).[2] What the Burundian situation reveals is that, despite the elections of 2010, the political process was incomplete. Returnees expressed a sense of invisibility upon return; they felt that they were not heard or able to talk to authorities and that opportunities, especially economic opportunities, were dependent on political affiliation. These

Burundian refugees fleeing violence in 2015 are transferred to a ferry that will bring them to Kigoma, Tanzania (and thence to Nyarugusu refugee camp).

were indications that the political gains that Burundians, including returnees, and the international community believed Burundi had made were unsustainable.

Sudan

The Darfur region in western Sudan has traditionally been a vast expanse where nomadic and farming communities co-existed and interacted. As a result of population migrations and climate change, the relationship between the various groups has turned increasingly tense and prone to conflict. Over time, as a result of the increasing domination of the government in Khartoum by northern Arab tribes, native administrative mechanisms were dismantled and there was increased repression of the non-Arab tribes who engaged in agriculture.

The conflict in Darfur started in 2003 and resulted in mass internal displacement. Darfur was re-shaped into a largely urbanised context with three major cities: El Fasher, El Geneina and Nyala. Nyala, for instance, which is now the third largest city in Sudan, tripled in size as a result of the mass displacement. Some efforts were made by the Sudanese authorities – with support from the international community – to support the return and reintegration of IDPs in areas of origin but the prospects for return as a larger-scale durable solution were always limited due to changing realities linked to scarcity

of natural resources as well as changing power relations and dominance by groups supported by the government in Khartoum.

In addition, the long duration of displacement coupled with the limited prospects for return and absence of viable rural livelihoods meant displaced and returning refugees had little opportunity other than to adopt urban lifestyles and livelihoods. As very little effort was made by authorities to develop economic opportunities around the cities, most of the displaced ended up in the informal sector, at most times indistinguishable from the urban poor. Recent calls for social justice and inclusion may trigger the necessary attention by local, regional and national authorities to their situation.

Recommendations

The situations in Burundi and Sudan illustrate that refugee and IDP return is a multidimensional process requiring attention to the economic, social, political and psychological aspects of return and reintegration. The success of return is linked to political processes. The holding of elections and semblance of stability do not, however, guarantee sustainable return unless displaced people are given a voice. It is important to focus on ensuring that the political and economic reintegration of refugees and IDPs is factored into any

peace building and post-conflict State formation. The return of refugees and IDPs should be seen as fundamentally linked to the relationship between the State and its citizens and any return process should therefore be accompanied by social and national dialogue efforts to encourage reconciliation, inclusion and participation.

Individuals should be given a substantive platform to air their grievances over aspects such as the delivery of services and access to opportunities being reserved for certain political constituencies. Furthermore, confidence building between a State's security apparatus and the population should be a key and deliberate focus. Transitional justice mechanisms should be set up to ensure accountability for crimes committed, including sexual and gender-based violence. Such mechanisms should include a facility for displaced people to reclaim their rights (including to property and land). And the international community should ensure that efforts to coordinate humanitarian and development work to bring about collective

outcomes do not leave out the peace-building elements. Successful reintegration of returnees requires that peace and political processes should not only focus on formal political processes and institutions but should also include returnee and local communities.

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1. For a more about the challenges of refugee return in Burundi see Lukunka B N (2018) '"They Call Us Witches": Exclusion and Invisibility in the Burundian Returnee Reintegration Process', *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2018-39059-008 and Lukunka B N (2017) 'The Romance of Return: Post-exile Lives and Interpersonal Violence over Land in Burundi' in Buckley-Zistel S and Krause U (Eds) *Gender, Violence, Refugees*
www.berghahnbooks.com/title/Buckley-ZistelGender

2. Human Rights Watch 'Burundi: Events of 2017' www.hrw.org/world-report/2018/country-chapters/burundi