

May 2016

[www.fmreview.org/solutions](http://www.fmreview.org/solutions)

## Reflecting on Liberia and Sierra Leone

J O Moses Okello

**In post-conflict Liberia and Sierra Leone, partnerships that were mutually supportive and that included the displaced themselves facilitated rapid and enduring results.**

Not too long ago, Liberia and Sierra Leone experienced extreme violence with both of them teetering on the brink of being failed states. Today they are on the mend, albeit struggling. What happened in their case and how were their fortunes turned around?

Governments and their international partners tend to prioritise resources aiming at buttressing peace agreements and related political processes such as elections, but in isolation and at the expense of other equally critical needs such as revitalising the economy and restoring basic social services and infrastructure. In both Liberia and Sierra Leone, a deliberate effort was made to tackle these concurrently. Security and a return to law and order were other basic areas that required attention. Restoring governmental authority (such as police and other institutions of governance) and putting in place minimal mechanisms for the delivery of services were priorities. This was also the period when early foundations for the return to rule of law were created, including the rehabilitation of courts and courthouses.

Long years of exile tend to rob people of the opportunity to learn or develop traditional coping mechanisms. People who go through this experience face monumental challenges when faced with re-establishing themselves upon return. In Liberia and Sierra Leone support had to be provided to returnees in the form of cash grants, food, shelter materials and other relief items in the initial stages of the return process. This enabled a 'soft landing' for the returnees but they were, nevertheless, faced with other problems.

It was also important that reintegration programmes avoided unhelpful distinctions between groups of beneficiaries or return areas. It was critical, for example, to ensure that ex-combatants were given special attention so as not to be tempted to sell their only skill – warfare – but counter-productive to treat

them as entirely distinct from returnees. There had, therefore, to be a point of convergence, mostly at the community reintegration level, where assistance saw no distinctions but gave equal recognition and treatment to everyone. Likewise, no distinction was made in respect of internally displaced persons and former refugees returning to the same locations. It was similarly unreasonable to ignore the needs of displaced persons and former refugees returning to urban areas in favour of the rural areas. Attention had to be given also to individuals who were not displaced – 'stayees' – who were equally in need.

Apart from the social provisioning, a very important matter in the post-conflict recovery process was ensuring food security. The wars had debilitated the countries' productive capacity and displaced most of the agriculturally productive segment of the population. Improving food security thus required substantial attention, including extending humanitarian food assistance alongside improving agricultural productivity and supporting small-scale subsistence farming. It had to be recognised that the transition from relief to development was not a linear experience and that relief and development assistance were required concurrently for a number of years.

Partnership between a renewed state apparatus, civil society and the private sector is indispensable for post-conflict reconstruction. Responding to the needs of the forcibly displaced is a complex undertaking that needs broad partnerships to be forged involving all relevant actors – traditional development partners, financial institutions, bilateral donors, agencies with relevant mandates, international and national NGOs with their specialised knowledge, the private sector and, not least, the broader local civil society.

J O Moses Okello [jomokello@gmail.com](mailto:jomokello@gmail.com)

Formerly UNHCR Representative in Liberia