

Returnees in Sierra Leone

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Over ten years of brutal civil war displaced approximately 4.5 million people, about half Sierra Leone's population. After the conflict ended in 2001, UNHCR facilitated the participation of both returnee refugees and returnee IDPs in community-level reconstruction projects.

UNHCR's response to the Sierra Leonean humanitarian crisis came at a time when the refugee agency was expanding its services to include IDPs. To complement their activities, and in the spirit of Guiding Principle 28, UNHCR launched major programmes for both ex-refugee and IDP returnees. Fifteen per cent of UNHCR programme funds were allocated to Quick Impact Projects (QIPs) to meet the immediate needs of returnees and those who had stayed behind. In 2003-05 about 2,000 Community Empowerment Projects (CEPs) were implemented in all areas of return in a range of sectors, including agriculture, health, water, sanitation and community services.¹

Principle 28

1. Competent authorities have the primary duty and responsibility to establish conditions, as well as provide the means, which allow internally displaced persons to return voluntarily, in safety and with dignity, to their homes or places of habitual residence, or to resettle voluntarily in another part of the country. Such authorities shall endeavour to facilitate the reintegration of returned or resettled internally displaced persons.

2. Special efforts should be made to ensure the full participation of internally displaced persons in the planning and management of their return or resettlement and reintegration.

CEPs were small-scale, community-managed interventions which involved – without discrimination – returning refugees, IDPs and those who had never moved. Nearly half of all CEPs were implemented in Kailahun, the far eastern district where the war originally started and whose population suffered

the highest rate of displacement. UNHCR's implementing partners, primarily international NGOs, provided technical skills and financial management. Decisions about the type of projects to be implemented were made by villagers with input from traditional elders, women and youth. Each project cost no more than \$5,000 and was supervised by a transparently selected management committee. Villagers contributed labour and materials for projects which typically involved repair or construction of schools, village courts, clinics, wells, latrines, rice mills and rice-drying floors.

CEPs provided both symbolic and practical support to returning communities. In Maloma village the reconstructed court building has become the community focal point, actively used to host meetings, dispense justice and hold elections.

Integrating IDPs, refugees and stayees into the same programmes was often challenging. The size of the return package offered to returning refugees proved a contentious issue. When UNHCR and the government of Sierra Leone agreed on equality for all those in need, UNHCR had to reduce the amount of rations normally given to returning refugees.

Refugees and IDPs returned to their villages with different experiences and skills. Many of those who had been in refugee camps in Guinea had benefited from education programmes and had higher levels of literacy than those who had stayed behind. UNHCR tended to choose as implementing

partners those international NGOs it had worked with in Guinea. Returning refugees often had better language skills and knowledge of NGO operating procedures than former IDPs. Ideally, UNHCR should have tried to work more closely with Sierra Leonean humanitarian agencies which had previous experience of working with IDPs.

While UNHCR's reintegration programmes helped to meet the needs of some refugees and IDPs in Kailahun, the main shortcoming of UNHCR's work with IDPs was its limitation to areas where there were high numbers of officially repatriated refugees. Former IDPs in other parts of the country, including the capital city, Freetown, received much less support from international donors and NGOs.² Nevertheless, UNHCR's efforts to include refugees and IDPs in joint community projects show the influence of the Guiding Principles on a major humanitarian agency.

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1. Stefan Sperl and Machtelt De Vriese, 'From emergency evacuation to community empowerment: Review of the repatriation and reintegration programme in Sierra Leone', UNHCR 2005. <http://www.unhcr.org/publ/RESEARCH/420b80384.pdf>

2. See: Claudia McGoldrick, 'Sierra Leone: resettlement doesn't always end displacement', FMR17, May 2003. <http://www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/FMR17/fmr17.13.pdf>



Two community elders in a remote village in Peje West Chiefdom, western Kailahun District, Sierra Leone.