

Forgotten people: former Liberian refugees in Ghana

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More than three years after the cessation of refugee status for Liberian refugees, the viability of the ECOWAS integration scheme implemented as a solution for those Liberians who continued to stay in Ghana is seen to be limited.

Although exile can be interminably protracted, refugee status is not granted permanently. According to the 1951 Refugee Convention, when the circumstances under which people were recognised as refugees no longer exist (the premise of 'ceased circumstances'), the Cessation Clause may be invoked while they are still in a country of asylum. Through this process thousands of Liberian refugees in Ghana saw the end of their refugee status in 2012, after which UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, brought in an integration scheme through the freedom of movement protocol of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) as a 'sub-regional solution' for Liberians who remained in exile.

Prolonged displacement for Liberian refugees

After the beginning of the Liberian civil war in 1989, the Ghanaian government established the Buduburam refugee camp in 1990 in response to the arrival of displaced Liberians in the country. After the final ceasefire agreement of the war in 2003, UNHCR repeatedly urged the repatriation of refugees to Liberia. The pace of repatriation, however, was sluggish among the remaining Liberians in Ghana due to the precarious political and economic environment in Liberia. Many Liberian refugees in Ghana had been hoping for third-country resettlement but, with peace restored in Liberia, most no longer met the criteria for resettlement.

The other remaining 'traditional' durable solution – local integration – failed to gain support from either the host government or the Liberian refugees themselves. The Ghanaian administration viewed local integration as an imposition on the country and did not offer integration as an option to refugees who remained.

Local integration was also unpopular with refugees, mainly because of the lack of socio-economic prospects for them in Ghana.

Not only did these refugees remain without a durable solution but their living conditions had also become increasingly challenging. After the 2003 ceasefire, the amount of humanitarian aid was continuously reduced and almost entirely terminated by 2010. In addition, refugees continued to face a number of barriers to engaging in economic activities outside the camp, such as local xenophobia and their own lack of knowledge of local languages. Thus, with the exception of a few recipients of remittances, many Liberians were reduced to bare subsistence inside and around the camp.

ECOWAS-based integration as a 'solution'

In January 2012, UNHCR announced the cessation of refugee status for Liberian refugees worldwide as from the end of June 2012. As nearly a decade had passed since the 2003 ceasefire agreement, the international community deemed that the situation in Liberia had greatly improved and that the causes of the displacement no longer existed. At the beginning of 2012, the Liberian refugees living in Ghana were left with two options: either to repatriate by the end of June 2012 before the invocation of the Cessation Clause or to remain in Ghana through an agreement that existed among the member countries of ECOWAS.

ECOWAS is not a refugee-protecting body but a regional confederation of fifteen West African states – including both Ghana and Liberia – which was founded in 1975 to promote trade and economic integration across the region. The sub-regional integration scheme was based on the 1979 Protocol on Free Movement adopted by ECOWAS which confers on community

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citizens the right to enter, reside in and establish economic activities in the territory of any ECOWAS member state.¹ Since the late 2000s, UNHCR had been focusing on this scheme as an ‘innovative solution’ for protracted refugees in West Africa. Staff members of UNHCR Ghana believed that increasing refugees’ mobility offered a means of ensuring their enduring access to sustainable livelihoods and meaningful employment opportunities by providing legal residency and better access to labour markets across ECOWAS countries.

At the end of June 2012, approximately 7,000 Liberians remained in Ghana and continued living in exile under the new label of ECOWAS migrants. Even though the Ghanaian administration officially announced the closure of Buduburam camp in 2012, most of these Liberian former refugees continued living inside the camp area and in February 2014, almost two years after the cessation of their refugee status, Liberians remaining in Ghana were finally issued ECOWAS passports, which included a two-year work and residence permit.

The provision of this migrant status, however, has not brought meaningful changes in their daily lives.

Dearth of economic opportunities

Stephanie, a single mother with a school-age daughter, had been living hand-to-mouth by combining various means of subsistence, such as doing household jobs for other refugee families and receiving charitable assistance from other refugees and her church inside the camp. When asked how her life had changed since the provision of ECOWAS work and residence permit, she responded:



One of the main business streets inside Buduburam refugee camp, Ghana, now relatively quiet since the departure of many refugees due to the invocation of the cessation clause. With the reduced camp population, refugees with businesses experienced a steep decline in sales and found it hard to survive.

“No change. We are living on help from other Liberians [inside the camp]. I wash their clothing and clean their house for a little cash or a portion of food. This is how we have survived for a long time... I do not have any special skills. We cannot manage outside the camp.”

Some Liberians unsuccessfully attempted to explore employment opportunities outside the camp area. Marshall, owner of a small shop in the camp, expressed his despair during this job search:

“I applied for two jobs at local supermarkets but I did not get either of them. I don’t speak local [Ghanaian] languages. Discrimination from locals remains strong. Even if I have a work permit, I don’t think I can get a job in Ghana.”

Adam, a Ghanaian programme officer who had worked for NGOs in the camp for over a decade, questioned the viability of the sub-regional integration scheme:

“I was always sceptical about the feasibility of this ECOWAS option. UNHCR said that the work permit enables refugees to move to a place where they can find good jobs. But where can they find good jobs? Ghana does not have many employment opportunities and many locals are unemployed... The ECOWAS status might be useful for those with special qualifications such as doctors, nurses

or computer experts. But how many Liberians have such technical skills?"

Former refugees who were interviewed in 2015 were in unanimous agreement that the camp economy had been weakening for the last several years. This is in part due to the changing demographics in the camp. In refugee populations, it is common for those who are wealthier or more resourceful to be the first to repatriate or leave. In response to earlier pressure to repatriate and the cessation of their refugee status, Liberian refugees followed a similar pattern. Kevin, a former refugee who lived in Ghana from the mid-1990s, observed:

"The camp economy is dying. Many small enterprises closed down due to the reduced number of customers. Most of the richer ones left Ghana before the cessation. They used to help poor ones but they [richer ones] are all gone. Remaining Liberians are all very poor."

In Ghana, after better-off refugees departed, vulnerable people with few marketable livelihood skills and economic resources were left behind, increasing the proportion of impoverished refugees in the remaining camp population. Put differently, former refugees who were least well-suited to be able to take advantage of the ECOWAS integration scheme were the ones left in exile to survive as 'economic migrants'.

'Solving' the problem or concealing failure?

Given these findings, the feasibility of the ECOWAS-based integration scheme as a 'solution' deserves careful scrutiny. First, the provision of work and residence permits alone has done little to facilitate integration of the remaining Liberians in Ghana. Most of them engage in means of subsistence built on the camp economy and do not require extensive mobility in their livelihoods. In addition, few could afford the cost of transportation to venture out to external markets.

Second, fundamental impediments to integration such as language barriers and xenophobic attitudes among locals remain untouched. Due to the persistent reluctance of the host government to integrate refugees, the Ghanaian government

and UNHCR made little effort to set up a conducive environment for the successful integration of remaining Liberians.

Third, the limited absorptive capacities of the West African region should not be overlooked. Most ECOWAS member countries, including Ghana, have stagnant economies and high unemployment rates. Even if the former Liberian refugees could move freely to markets in neighbouring states, it is difficult to imagine that many of them would be able to secure gainful employment.

The introduction of this sub-regional integration scheme risks disguising the failure of the international community to provide a durable solution for these refugees. Although the Liberians' refugee status ceased, their exile and plight continued. Substituting the label of 'economic migrant' for that of 'refugee' is not a real alternative to a durable solution. It is a 'quasi-solution' that serves to conceal the failure of the global refugee regime to deal with the challenges of former refugees who have been left with ambiguous migrant status and little attention from the international community.²

It is imperative that the international refugee regime closely monitors the situations of former refugees in West Africa to find out whether the ECOWAS integration scheme can really constitute a solution for Liberians who continue in exile. Otherwise, such refugee populations who are not able to attain a durable solution will eventually 'disappear', removed from official statistics by being stripped of refugee status. Given the ubiquity of protracted refugee cases worldwide, we may witness more of these 'forgotten' former refugees in the near future.

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