

Sierra Leone: resettlement doesn't always end displacement

by Claudia McGoldrick

Almost one quarter of a million displaced Sierra Leoneans were resettled in their areas of origin by the end of 2002, officially ending the internal displacement crisis in the country and further consolidating recovery after more than a decade of devastating civil war.

A success story, in which the wishes of internally displaced people themselves prevailed, said some observers. Not so, insisted others, pointing to numerous flaws and problems along the way.

So was the resettlement process really the final chapter in Sierra Leone's displacement story? Arguably not, at least with respect to durability of return and resettlement as required by the UN Guiding Principles.

From relief to recovery

Since April 2001 there has been a concerted effort to resettle large numbers of Sierra Leonean IDPs - as well as returning refugees - and to phase out IDP camps. At that time, the UN shifted its IDP assistance efforts from protracted provision of humanitarian relief to support of resettlement and recovery efforts, confident of advances being made in the peace process and increasing stability throughout

the country. This confidence appeared well-founded: by the end of 2001 the world's largest UN peacekeeping mission was deployed across the country and a disarmament programme was completed. In January 2002, President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah declared an

official end to the 11-year civil war, which had killed an estimated 50,000 people and displaced up to half of the country's 4.5 million population.

Displaced Sierra Leoneans were resettled in accordance with the national government's Resettlement Strategy, which applies to IDPs as well as refugees and ex-combatants with their dependants, and states that it will "only facilitate resettlement into an area when it is deemed that the area in question is sufficiently safe to allow for the return of displaced

IDPs and returnees, amputee camp, Freetown, Sierra Leone



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people in safety and dignity".¹ UNHCR was one of numerous agencies that helped to plan and implement the strategy, aiming to harmonise the resettlement of refugees and IDPs. Both groups were offered resettlement packages, which included a two-month food ration, household utensils, plastic sheeting and, in some cases, transportation. According to OCHA, a total of some 220,000 registered IDPs were resettled in five phases between April 2001 and October 2002. Many more returned home spontaneously. Officially at least, this left no more IDPs in Sierra Leone.

Displacement continues

Not surprisingly, the resettlement process raised some thorny issues. Firstly, what is the real number of IDPs in the country? Nobody can be sure, since over the past decade of conflict there have always been large numbers of unregistered IDPs. This is important because only registered IDPs have been eligible for assistance in the camps, and for resettlement packages. With registration itself often unreliable, there may still be an unknown number of IDPs who are not recognised and will not be assisted to return home.

Secondly, there are also many IDPs who do not wish to be resettled. Their reasons vary: some are traumatised, some have security fears related to their areas of origin, some have lost their coping mechanisms and have become dependent on camp life, while others are still unwilling to return to areas where they know there is a lack of infrastructure and basic services. Many have become urbanised in the capital, Freetown, and in the words of one aid agency, "will strictly not be IDPs in the 'assistance' sense of the word". Since one of the principles of the government's resettlement strategy is to discourage dependency on humanitarian aid and prolonged displacement when areas of return have been declared safe, there is little if any assistance available for 'residual' IDPs.

Another contentious issue is that some IDPs may have been resettled to unsafe areas. The declaration of areas as 'safe for resettlement' – the main factor in effectively ending displacement – is based on a number of criteria spelled out in the government's resettlement strategy. These criteria include the complete absence

of hostilities, unhindered and safe access of humanitarian workers and sizeable spontaneous return movements. Virtually the entire country has been officially declared safe for resettlement. But concern has been expressed in some cases that certain areas were prematurely classified as safe, or that established criteria were not properly applied, especially in light of the volatile situation in Liberia that has already resulted in cross-border raids and abductions of Sierra Leonean civilians. The downsizing and eventual withdrawal of the UN peace-keeping force, UNAMSIL, has heightened anxieties for some. Allegations have also been made that insufficient or even misleading information was given to displaced people about conditions in their areas of origin.

A further cause for concern is that inadequate resettlement packages, combined with a chronic lack of shelter and basic services in areas of return, have caused many resettlers to drift back to urban areas. Plans for community rehabilitation programmes have in many cases not yet been developed, partly due to insufficient donor funding.

Resettlement or eviction?

Many of these problems have been highlighted by NGOs such as MSF and Refugees International. According to MSF, the "process ... more closely resemble[d] eviction than resettlement ... due to a lack of respect for the basic rights of the people to be able to choose their fate, and to be treated with dignity at each stage of their return."² In some cases, reported MSF, people were being resettled to areas considered by the UN as too dangerous for its own staff. While the UN acknowledged that numerous challenges had arisen during the resettlement process, which needed to be urgently addressed, it also said that the MSF report to some extent focused on specific issues out of context, thereby misrepresenting the full reality of the situation.

The resettlement process in Sierra Leone has suffered lack of agreement on even the most basic definitions. The absence of reliable statistics has meant that it was unclear who was an IDP to begin with, so naturally it remains unclear as to when IDP status ends. While some people maintain that displacement cannot end without fulfilment of the UN Guiding Principles – requiring safe, dignified and durable return and resettlement – others insist that the majority of IDPs in Sierra Leone returned even when informed of the real situation in their home areas and that ultimately the will of IDPs themselves to end their displacement prevailed. For those IDPs not wishing to return for various reasons, the government decided they should no longer be considered IDPs. The prevailing lack of consensus over these fundamental issues has, at the very least, shown that there must be more to the label 'IDP' than simply a formal status granted or removed by the authorities without full regard to conditions on the ground and that there can, in some cases, be a fine line between voluntary and forced return.

Lessons must be learned from this experience and future mistakes avoided. Sadly, the cycle of war and displacement that has plagued Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea and, more recently, Côte d'Ivoire will ensure that these issues are kept very much alive.

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1. National Commission for Reconstruction, Resettlement and Rehabilitation, 'Sierra Leone Resettlement Strategy', Revised October 2001, p4
2. MSF, 'Populations Affected by War in the Mano River Region of West Africa: Issues of Protection', May 2002, p2: www.msf.org/countries/page.cfm?articleid=EB07B3BF-3442-4FDE-A1D6E36464BB6EA9

Destroyed school, Eastern Province, Sierra Leone.

