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‘Repatriation is not for everyone’: the life and livelihoods of former refugees in Liberia

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Introduction

I think repatriation is not for everyone. At least, it didn't work for me at all. In Ghana, I was not worried about my daily life so I could somehow visualize my future in a positive way ... But in Liberia, I first have to secure daily basics like food and shelter ... it is very hard for me to think about my future here.

(Female returnee to Liberia from Ghana)

The international refugee regime presents repatriation as the most optimal, most feasible of the three durable solutions. Nevertheless, the number of studies which have followed up the process of the reintegration of returnees to their country of origin is scant. This paper will therefore investigate the repatriation of Liberian refugees from Ghana and their economic adjustments upon return using detailed case studies.

In early 2008, Liberian refugees in Ghana were in a state of transition from almost two decades of relatively stable conditions to a post-refugee situation. This change was due to refugees' protests between February and April 2008 against the promotion of local integration by UNHCR for the remaining Liberian refugees in Ghana. In response to a series of demonstrations, the host government took strong actions against Liberian refugees, including deportations and the threat of invoking the cessation clause of refugee status.

After this turmoil, UNHCR launched a large-scale repatriation programme for the residual Liberian refugees in Ghana. Under the repatriation pressure from the host government and UNHCR, about 10,000 Liberian refugees repatriated to Liberia between April 2008 and March 2009.

The data for this paper are drawn from my one-year fieldwork between August 2008 and July 2009 in both Liberia and Ghana. The central focus of my fieldwork was to assemble data on livelihood strategies employed by Liberian refugees in the Buduburam refugee settlement in Ghana. However, since my fieldwork period in Ghana overlapped with the active period of repatriation, many of my refugee interviewees decided to repatriate during my field research period.

As I had, as it were, waved my refugee interviewees off from Ghana, I began to wonder how they were adjusting into their home country after their long exile. So I changed my original fieldwork plan and decided to follow repatriates from Ghana to Liberia between April and May 2009 to conduct interviews with these returnees. My returnee interviewees were mostly those whom I had already met in Buduburam. Before their departure, I asked them to call me as soon as they obtained a new telephone number in Liberia.

To maintain contact with them, I occasionally called them from Ghana. In addition, in order to meet more repatriates from Ghana, I asked my key refugee informants in Ghana to put me in touch with their friends and relatives who had returned to Liberia. As a result of these efforts, I was able to conduct more than eighty interviews in Liberia with repatriates from Buduburam, including some with Liberian government officials and staff members of UNHCR Liberia.

The results of their return were mixed. Upon their arrival in Liberia, some settled in with relatively little stress whilst others confronted a series of daunting hardships. The process of integration experienced by these Liberian returnees, including the construction of new livelihoods in their country of origin, was largely influenced by their asset conditions. In particular, their levels of access to social networks in Liberia played a principal determinant role in their integration.

This paper is divided into several sections. First, I will provide the general context of the Liberian refugee population in the Buduburam refugee settlement and their repatriation between April 2008 and March 2009. Second, as the main body of this paper, I will look into the post-repatriation life of returnees, especially the economic aspects of their adjustments such as their efforts to construct new means of subsistence upon return.

In particular, I am going to analyse the instrumental roles played by personal networks in facilitating returnees' integration into their country of origin. Finally, I will argue for the highly selective nature of repatriation and integration which challenges the feasibility of repatriation as the most ideal durable solution for refugees.

Repatriation between 2008 and 2009

The Liberian refugee population in Ghana has a history of two decades. The influx of Liberian exiles into Ghana dates back to 1990 because of the Liberian internal war launched in 1989 by Charles Taylor against Samuel Doe's regime. In order to accommodate these Liberians in the country, the Ghanaian government founded the Buduburam refugee settlement in 1990.¹ The civil war ended in 2003 with the final ceasefire agreement between the warring parties and the stepping down of Taylor from power.

After a period of provisional government between 2003 and 2005, in the 2005 presidential election, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, former finance minister of Liberia and a World Bank and UNDP employee, became the first democratically-elected female Head of State in the history of the African Continent. Arguably, it has since 2003 become the international consensus that Liberia has achieved peace and stability and has made enormous strides in establishing the country's foundations towards long-term development (for example, see World Bank 2010).

¹ The Buduburam refugee 'settlement' is a formal name. But Liberian refugees interchangeably use both 'settlement' and 'camp'. In this paper, whenever refugees used 'camp' during interviews, I kept it as they said.

With the globally shared view of Liberia's recovered stability after 2003, the UN refugee agency centralised its focus on residual refugees' repatriation to Liberia. Between 2004 and 2007, UNHCR organised a large-scale repatriation promotion programme for residual Liberians in the sub-region and encouraged their return to their country of origin. Simultaneously, as commonly observed in long-term refugee situations, in recent years, the level of assistance from UNHCR and other international aid organisations for this prolonged refugee population has been sharply dwindling.

However, many Liberian refugees had not yet become prepared to return to the precarious political and economic situation in Liberia and had chosen to remain in Ghana even with very little assistance (see also Agblorti 2011: 5). At the end of the three-year sub-regional repatriation programme in 2007, about 27,000 Liberian refugees still remained in Ghana, which placed Ghana as the host of the largest number of Liberian refugees in the world at that point (UNHCR 2008).

With the unsatisfactory result of the repatriation programme and very limited availability of resettlement opportunities for Liberian refugees, UNHCR shifted its focus onto the local integration of the residual Liberian exiles in Ghana as a last remaining solution (Geraldine 2008: 6). Nevertheless, the Liberian refugee population in Buduburam adamantly refused local integration when they heard of the intention of UNHCR.

Their rejection of this particular durable solution led to a series of refugee protests in the Buduburam refugee settlement between February and April 2008. Incensed by these demonstrations, the host government arrested and detained refugee protestors and even deported some of them. Further, in April 2008, the Ghanaian Minister of the Interior requested all Liberians to go back to Liberia (Government of Ghana 2008). The Minister also expressed his government's intention to break up the Buduburam settlement into manageable smaller units and to disperse residual Liberians to other parts of Ghana.

After these shocking announcements to refugees by the host government, in agreement with the governments of Ghana and Liberia, the UN refugee agency again initiated a new repatriation programme for residual refugees in April 2008 with an increased financial incentive for a returnee from 5 to 100 USD (50 USD for those below the age of 18). Repatriation of Liberian refugees, especially in its early stage, took place in this very tense environment.

With the intention of decreasing the number of Liberians as a prelude to subsequent local integration, the UN refugee agency continuously reminded refugees 'to make sound decisions about their future' whilst further cutting down the amount of aid for these Liberians. Under the repatriation strain from non-refugee stakeholders, about 10,000 Liberian refugees repatriated to Liberia between April 2008 and March 2009, which reduced the size of this refugee population by about 40% within one year (UNHCR 2009).

From the following section onwards, I will present my research findings based upon my interviews with these repatriates from Ghana to Liberia.

Is repatriation homecoming?

Warner pointed out that voluntary repatriation indicates a return to a home and community with which refugees were associated and embraced before their flight into exile (Warner 1994: 162). As a corollary to these perceptions, institutions dealing with refugees tend to depict repatriation as a ‘homecoming’ to a former life and a familiar cultural environment, as a fairly straightforward way of restoring the pre-displacement life in the familiar settings (Stefansson 2004: 171). However, the repatriation of Liberian refugees from Ghana did not necessarily conform to this notion of homecoming.

The term ‘homecoming’ is certainly misleading if ‘home’ is understood as a place of migrants’ former housing before their exile, because a good number of returnees did not have their house any more as it had been destroyed during the fourteen years of devastating war. Instead, they spent a first few nights at the Transit Centre prepared for returnees.

With permission from UNHCR Liberia, I accompanied some UNHCR staff members to meet a returnee flight from Ghana. As soon as they arrived in the country, repatriates were sent to this Transit Centre for screening by the immigration bureau of the Liberian government. After receiving a medical kit and other everyday items, those who did not have accommodation on that day stayed over in the Centre. Returnees were allowed to remain in this place for a maximum of 72 hours.

After these three days, they had to move out of the Centre to release places for new arrivals of returnees regardless of whether they had secured shelter or not. On the other hand, repatriates who had relatives with accommodation were welcomed by them with big hugs at the Centre and left immediately for their own places. From the very first day of their return, whether a returnee had access to support networks or not made a very visible difference.

‘Liberia is a new place for me!’

For the majority of young Liberians who had only faint memories of Liberia or who were born in exile, their repatriation to Liberia was like going to ‘a foreign country’ rather than home. Whenever appropriate, I asked these returnees from Ghana about how they perceived Liberia after spending such a long time in exile. As expected, young returnees who had left Liberia as children described their country of origin as a ‘strange place’. Jerry, who had left Liberia at the age of eight and had now returned to Liberia for the first time since then, explained his feelings as follows:

“I know Liberia is my home country by birth. But I feel like it is a new country for me. I really don’t have any emotional attachment to this place ... I left Liberia at a very young age and stayed in exile for almost twenty years. It is hard to believe this is my mother country ... ”²

² Interview with Jerry, Monrovia, 18 April 2009

Joana, a 36-year old female repatriate who decided to leave Ghana after thirteen years of exile, gave me a slightly different perspective:

“When I arrived in Liberia, I felt so strange. It was a new place for me ... But this is my home country. When I was in Ghana, especially after the demo, I was very nervous and sensitive. I had to be careful what I said. Here in Liberia, I don’t have to worry about it. We are not monitored by anyone here.”³

Staying in Monrovia

Contrary to the widespread perception that refugees go back to their original town or village when they repatriate, a wealth of studies provide evidence that refugees do not necessarily return to the same specific locale which they left (Hammond 2004, Lubkemann 2008, Zieck 2004). Similar to these cases, upon their return, most Liberian returnees from Ghana did not go back to their original hometown for various reasons. In this sense, the repatriation of Liberian refugees from Ghana should more accurately be described as return to their country of origin, rather than a homecoming.

Regardless of where they had been living in their pre-displacement life in Liberia, the majority of repatriates decided to remain in Monrovia after their return.⁴ Many chose to stay in the capital because of their need to search for a job. Francis, one of the returnees from Ghana, said to me: “I am from Lofa [a Liberian county bordering with Sierra Leone and Guinea]. But I won’t go back there. In Liberia, everything is in Monrovia. This country is not decentralized at all. You won’t find any jobs in rural areas!”⁵ Some returnees from Buduburam remained in the capital for the better education of themselves or their children since there were very few schools at that stage in the interior of the country.

UNHCR Liberia, as well as the Liberian government, was aware of this urban concentration of returnees resulting from access to economic and educational opportunities. One veteran UNHCR staff member shared his concern with me:

“Now, Monrovia is clearly over-congested: 1.1 million people out of 3.4 million reside in Monrovia. Not only returnees. There is a trend of urban migration from rural areas to the capital to find jobs ... Before the war, there were more foreign companies operating in the interior, such as LAMCO in Nimba county, but the number of these companies has reduced after the war. Everyone is moving to Monrovia.”⁶

³ Interview with Joana, Monrovia, 15 April 2009

⁴ However, after my departure from Liberia, I learned that some of these refugees decided to go to their villages in the hinterland as they had failed to obtain any meaningful employment in Monrovia and found it difficult to rely on their friends’ charity for many months.

⁵ Interview with Francis, Monrovia, 28 April 2009

⁶ Interview with an experienced UNHCR Officer, Monrovia, 12 May 2009

One high-ranking official at the Liberia Refugee Repatriation and Resettlement Committee (LRRRC), the government body responsible for returnees, linked this urban migration characteristic of returnees with security concerns. Owing to the lack of gainful employment and the limited assistance for repatriates in Liberia, he was afraid that these returnees might turn to negative survival strategies such as theft and robbery, and thus create a security concern in the city.

The significance of personal connections

The integration process for returnees does not lend itself to generalisation: some faced a number of challenges in settling in whilst others managed to establish their life with relatively little stress. In the initial phase of return, access to shelter and daily food was essential for all returnees. To secure these fundamentals, a returnee's personal contacts often played a chief role. In particular, whether a returnee had access to assistance from relatives or not made a considerable difference in his/her initial integration adjustments.

Gloria is a 22-year-old female Liberian who repatriated to Liberia in early 2009 under the UNHCR repatriation package after her ten years of exile. During the Liberian war, Gloria's family took a decision to send some of the family members outside the country. In the early stage of the civil war, one of Gloria's aunts was resettled in the United States.

Gloria and her three sisters and her cousins moved to Ghana with the expectation of being brought to the US by her aunt. However, as this intended family resettlement scheme did not materialise, they finally abandoned this plan and made up their minds to go back to Liberia after the 2008 refugee demonstrations. Because Gloria's mother and other senior siblings had remained in Liberia, her repatriation was very much a return to her 'home'.

When I met up with Gloria in Monrovia in April 2009, less than two months after her repatriation, her life was very much settled thanks to her family's assistance. Her accommodation was provided by her elder sister and she was fed by her too. Gloria was about to start her university life in Liberia from a new academic year with financial help from her immediate family members. Most of the similarly privileged returnees spent several months at a relative's house, without paying any rent, and were able to gradually settle into a new setting.

Further, if immediate family members were economically functional, it was not uncommon that they also provided financial assistance for returned members. Another former Buduburam-based female refugee who repatriated to Liberia in February 2009 was occasionally receiving financial assistance from her siblings in addition to the provision of accommodation and food. All of these assistances were cushioning her return adjustments in Liberia.

Whilst extended families could be a source of assistance, it was in general difficult for repatriates to draw sufficient and constant support from them compared with immediate family members who were more obligated to assist their close relatives. For example,

Diana, a female Liberian returnee with a six-year-old son, was accommodated by her aunt's family. They were however requested to contribute some money (about 20 USD per month) into the household budget. When I met Diana in a café in Monrovia, she described her challenges:

“After a long exile [between 1993 and 2008], my relationship with family members who had remained in Liberia is no longer the same. We have all changed. I am not a teenage girl anymore! [at the time of this interview, she was 28 years old]. They expect me to take care of myself and my son ... Also, they don't have the capacity to accommodate us. They themselves are constrained by limited resources. Our arrival is another burden on them”.⁷

Depending on Buduburam-based networks

Not all returnees were fortunate to have access to family support in Liberia. Particularly, for those who had lost immediate family members in the civil war, the lack of familial support made their return daunting. These returnees depended upon their friends from the Buduburam settlement just as they had done when they were living in Ghana. For instance, Christiana, a 26-year-old female returnee who had lost contact with other family members during the civil war, explained about her 'camping life' to me:

“I have been moving around my friends' places for the last several months. They are all friends from Buduburam camp. First I stayed at Nora's place between September and October 2008. But her boyfriend came in so I had to move out. Then I went to Tito's place and I am still with her. I am not paying rent”.⁸

According to Christiana, Tito returned to Liberia around mid-2008. She is helping Christiana with food and petty cash in addition to shelter. Tito is a college student in Liberia and is still receiving financial remittances from her parents in the US.

Whilst some returnees had extended their Buduburam-based networks to Liberia, the durability of these ties was often limited. Once their stay became prolonged, they were pressurized to move out of their initial accommodation or to put some money into the household. Yonnio, a Buduburam returnee who had lost his parents and all of his three siblings during the civil war, said to me:

“I am getting housing and food through my friend. I met him in Buduburam. He is my best friend (...) but I can't rely on him for good. The place I am staying now, I know his parents are complaining about my extended stay there. I need to move out soon...”⁹

⁷ Interview with Diana, Monrovia, 19 April 2009

⁸ Interview with Christiana, Monrovia, 23 April 2009

⁹ Interview with Yonnio, Monrovia, 18 April 2009

Also, having to depend on other people even in the home country seems to have created huge embarrassment and psychological pain for returnees. Another former unaccompanied minor, Mahyan returned from Ghana to Liberia in August 2008. When I interviewed her in May 2009, she was entirely reliant on her Buduburam church-mate and was without any job:

“I am completely dependent on support from other people. In the first few weeks, I stayed at my cousin’s place. Then I moved to my current host family from the same church in the [Buduburam] camp ... This is a very embarrassing life! I have to rely on someone entirely even though I returned to my country!”¹⁰

Christiana, Yonnio and Mahyan were all only very thinly connected with other relatives or had barely had communications with them during exile, so they were unable to draw substantial support from their extended family members upon return to Liberia. When living in Buduburam, they were heavily dependent upon charity from other refugees and small-scale income-generating activities such as hair-braiding, dealing with a limited number of refugee clients. Even on repatriation to their country of origin, they had to depend on assistance from other people.

High transition cost without reliable networks

As the evidence presented above shows, support from family members (and friends) cushioned returnees’ transition by providing shelter, food and even some finance. These forms of assistance had clear financial implications. If a refugee could not utilize these personal connections, his/her starting cost upon return would be much larger.

For instance, monthly rent in Monrovia, even for a small room with a communal kitchen and toilet, required about 20 USD per month, and advance payment for at least six months was a common practice. Renting a house in the capital could cost at least 100 USD a month. In many cases, a repatriate without a free place to stay had to use the 100 USD repatriation stipend provided by UNHCR just for rent, whilst a returnee with a family house was able to save it or invest it into other purposes such as their education or business.

Food expenditures also burdened many repatriates without immediate support networks. According to my own experiences, a small meal from a market in Monrovia normally cost 1.5-2.0 USD. Unlike when they were in Buduburam, they could no longer ask their kind neighbours to share food with them. If a refugee returned without securing basic things for living such as shelter and food, he/she first needed to find a way to manage them all without help.

¹⁰ Interview with Mahyan, Monrovia, 24 April 2009

Constructing new livelihoods

As previous scholarly works have indicated, returning refugees are often confronted by challenges in the process of integration (Eastmond & Ojendal 1999, Marsden 1999, Rogge & Akol 1989), which sometimes shatters the optimistic image of the homeland constructed while in exile (Cornish *et al.* 1999: 282). Although the integration of returnees is a multi-faceted process involving social, cultural, political and personal adjustment, establishing a new economic basis often becomes the pivotal but onerous challenge (Tapscott 1994: 254, Jackson 1994: 152).

Although there is a limited number of studies on the integration process of returnees to their country of origin, what the existing literature suggests are considerable variations in levels of economic adjustments amongst repatriates. In the case of Liberian returnees from Ghana, the transferability of livelihood strategies and access to meaningful networks in Liberia were key determinants to differentiating the degrees of returnees' economic integration.

Transferring overseas remittance support to Liberia

In the Buduburam refugee settlement, overseas remittances from the diaspora community in industrialised countries were the most important livelihood source for this refugee population confronting a decreasing level of international aid over recent years. Whether a refugee had access to remittances or not largely differentiated their socio-economic status in the Buduburam refugee community. If returnees could carry their remittances with them on their return to their home country, this could serve as an important cushion for reducing the transition costs of repatriation and could also be used as an initial capital sum with which to embark on new income-generating activities.

For instance, Charles returned to Liberia from Ghana with his wife and two children in November 2008 after seventeen years of exile, including ten years in Ivory Coast. Charles is from one of the influential families in a distinct ruling elite group in Liberia, Americo-Liberians, who were descendants of freed American slaves to Africa.¹¹ He has a bachelor's degree in accounting and business management from the University of Liberia. He had a decent pre-war life in Liberia. Before the war, he was a financial manager at LAMCO (a US-based iron-ore company).

Charles's family, especially on his mother's side, has a long migration history to the United States since the 1970s. His three siblings had moved to the US under resettlement programmes in the 1990s. When he was living in the Buduburam settlement in Ghana, he

¹¹ Liberia was founded by interests in the United States as a means of resettling liberated American slaves, who were subsequently called Americo-Liberians. Since the country's formation, the political and economic privileges solely rested with these 'ruling elites' from the United States and these former slaves ruled the nation as quasi-imperial masters and governed the country by indirect rule until well into the late twentieth century (Railey 1997). On the other hand, indigenous Liberians were relegated to second-class status and were given only very limited access to social, political and economic power.

was regularly receiving substantial sums of remittances from them.

Even after his repatriation, Charles continued to receive a financial stipend from his family members. While his wife was making some income through helping her sister's used-clothing business in Monrovia, the main income source for his household was these overseas remittances. Since his repatriation, every month he was receiving at least 100-150 USD from his siblings. Using these remittances as start-up capital, Charles was planning to start his own enterprise in Monrovia. He told me that his household had never really had any major problem in their integration in Liberia due to this financial assistance.

Challenge of transferring Buduburam-based survival means

In contrast, if a returnee's livelihood means was embedded in the Buduburam environment, its transferability to Liberia was significantly restricted. As a former unaccompanied minor and now in his mid 20s, James had somehow made a living by doing housekeeping chores for other Liberian households in the Buduburam refugee settlement. As his client households repatriated, James lost his main income sources and eventually decided to go back to Liberia. His original survival plan upon his return was to find new households for which he could do the same work. When I met him in Liberia, however, James was struggling to find new 'client families' in an unfamiliar environment. He complained:

“It is not easy to do the same work here. I cannot find families who can give me cleaning or washing work. I left Liberia very young. I don't know many people here ... To do this kind of [housekeeping] work, you have to have trust and good relationships with people. I have not established them yet. It is hard for a stranger ...”¹²

Furthermore, in the Buduburam settlement, sharing resources between neighbours and friends was a common livelihood means for many households. Nonetheless, this coping strategy was also not readily transferrable to Liberia in that it was built upon their proximity of living space and long-term relationships forged within the settlement community. Hence, those who had been dependent on this internal support in the settlement faced challenges in rebuilding such networks elsewhere. For instance, Bobby, a 25-year returnee from Buduburam, was making ends meet by combining a small-scale business and mutual assistance from other refugees during his exile in Buduburam. But upon his return, he suffered from the shrinkage of his support networks:

Me: How is your new life in Liberia?

Bobby: Tough. My life was easier when I was in the [Buduburam] camp.

Me: What is the difference between Buduburam and Liberia?

Bobby: In Buduburam, I could somehow find a means to survive. I didn't have any formal employment but I could run to someone in an emergency.

¹² Interview with James, Monrovia, 14 May 2009

Buduburam camp was like a big family. Sharing resources was happening all over. But here [in Liberia] I can't do the same. I no longer have such people.¹³

These refugees forged their own 'social world' (Marx 1990) in the Buduburam settlement during their long exile. Their social world, nevertheless, was specifically attached to their friends and neighbours residing in close proximity within the settlement. Unless returnees moved together with these helpers to Liberia, the ties were lost upon their repatriation.

Even if they did return with some of them, the dispersed living locations of returnees made it difficult for the mutual assistance to function in the same way as it had in Buduburam.¹⁴ For instance, Louis, a 22-year old repatriate who was getting support from his Buduburam connections after his repatriation, explained to me: "I am getting assistance from my friends from the [Buduburam] camp. But here, it is very cumbersome. I have to travel to ask for their support. We are no longer living in the same camp. I have to pay transport cost to reach them before I beg for their help".¹⁵

For returnees like Louis, it was difficult to fill the livelihood gap which was caused by the loss of their mutual assistance networks in Buduburam. In the process of multiple dislocations, their social connections formed during exile were lost too. Upon return to Liberia, they had to generate new social ties although this process is expected to take some time.

Job searching in Liberia

If returnees were unable to transfer their livelihood assets from Ghana, they needed to construct economic subsistence in Liberia. Due to their return to the capital city where agricultural subsistence was very suitable, most of the returnees had to seek employment either in the private or the public sectors as their new livelihood means.

As other scholarly works have noted, new arrivals became linked to local labour markets through their specific networks of interpersonal and organisational ties (Poros 2001: 245, Vertovec 2009: 39). Following are two contrastive case studies illustrating the extent to which access to potent networks differentiated the job-searching task of returnees.

Leonard is a 35-year old former Buduburam-based refugee. He is from an eminent lineage with some former high-ranking military officials as his ancestors and several relatives currently occupying senior government positions.

Leonard left Liberia for Ghana in 1997. His main purpose of moving to Ghana was to travel onwards to the United States. He had several family members who had moved to

¹³ Interview with Bobby, Monrovia, 18 April 2009

¹⁴ During my fieldwork in Liberia, I did not come across any case of non-relative returnees from Ghana deciding to live together as a group.

¹⁵ Interview with Louis, Monrovia, 14 May 2009

New York State in the United States before the civil war. His relatives processed the necessary documents for him. Leonard had interviews with the US embassy in Ghana in 2001 but during this process, the events of 11 September 2001 happened and his application was suspended since then.

During his exile in Ghana, he was mainly living on remittances from his relatives, so his life in exile was fine. But he was getting tired of waiting for his migration process to be revived. As his migration dream was fading, he lost the incentive to stay in Ghana. Therefore, he gave up his migration plan and decided to go back to Liberia to start his university education there. He repatriated in late 2006. Some of his older brothers had stayed in Liberia during the internal war so Leonard was accommodated by them upon his return. Whilst studying at the University of Liberia, he wanted to start working both to have an income and for his career development.

When I interviewed Leonard in May 2009, he was working for one of the major bilateral development agencies in Liberia. His uncle played a facilitating role in finding him a job. His uncle on his father's side was then a senior government official who was well-connected with all donor agencies due to his influential position in the central government. This uncle was also politically affiliated with the incumbent Liberian president and was a key member of her party too.

When I asked Leonard about how he had obtained his current employment, he explained to me that it was due to his uncle's strong connection with this donor agency. When I interviewed the expatriate Director of this bilateral donor organisation subsequently, the Director frankly admitted that this post was 'created' for Leonard and given to him without any competition since it was not advertised. His monthly salary was roughly 400 USD, which was considered very good payment in the current economic climate of Liberia.¹⁶

Samuel, a male Liberian returnee with decent employment in an international NGO, described the importance of connections for job-hunting: "In Monrovia, connections are everything! Qualifications are not enough. Credentials or titles don't carry you that far. In Liberia, even university graduates cannot find good jobs and are selling things on table markets. You need someone who can put you into the system".¹⁷

His remarks were echoed by other returnees. 'Someone who can put you into the system' could be your relatives, friends, church-mates, former school-mates or neighbours. According to my interviews with those who had managed to secure a decent employment, however, most of them obtained their current position through 'strong ties' (Granovetter 1973) such as their relatives or long-time family-friends.

¹⁶ According to a Liberian government official, the monthly salary for a minister would be more than 1000 USD and allowances. At director level, the salary would be 600-800 USD per month. The lowest salary rank for government officials was 75-90 USD.

¹⁷ Interview with Samuel, Monrovia, 30 April 2009

The case of Leonard is an outstanding example. His powerful contacts were already built before his return to Liberia. Leonard capitalised on these connections upon his repatriation in order to construct his new livelihood. On the other hand, for the majority of returnees without strong personal networks, finding gainful employment became an extremely onerous challenge. Following is the description of a returnee who confronted a series of adversities in establishing her economic foundation upon repatriation.

Born in 1982, Comfort was 27 years old when I interviewed her in Monrovia in April 2009. Her parents used to be farmers in a rural area of Liberia but they later migrated to Monrovia for better jobs. However, soon after their migration to the capital, Comfort's father became unable to work actively due to an illness and her mother was making a small income by selling clothing in a local market. Comfort recalls that their pre-war life was financially very tough. In 1996, when she fled from Liberia, Comfort was then 14 years old but she was still in her third grade at an elementary school because she was in and out of schooling due to the lack of money for tuition fees.

Comfort fled from Monrovia because of the major fighting between Taylor and the warring parties. She was in school when this brutal round of the war was launched. Unable to return to her home to meet her family members, she followed other adults without knowing where she was heading.

Whilst escaping, she met one of her former grown-up neighbours from Liberia and followed her to Ghana via Ivory Coast. This lady became her main caregiver during her exile until she passed away in 2005. Since the death of her internal helper, Comfort somehow managed her life in Buduburam by combining multiple income sources in a way often seen among poorer refugees. She did not have any relatives abroad and so had no access to overseas remittances. During her exile in Ghana, she gave birth to a son, although her partner did not provide any material support for them.

Between February and April 2008, she participated in refugee protests and was arrested and detained by the Ghanaian police. Frightened by the brutal reactions from the Ghanaian administration, Comfort got herself immediately registered with UNHCR repatriation programme although she had no plan to return before the refugee demonstrations. During interviews with me, she repeated that she did not choose to return but was 'forced to repatriate' due to the pressure from non-refugee stakeholders in Ghana.

Since her repatriation in October 2008, she has been facing various challenges in her attempts to settle in Liberia. Amongst all the onerous difficulties, finding a job has been the toughest for her. She applied for about twenty jobs in banks, government offices and private companies but none of them worked out. When she was in Ghana, she had learned computer skills at a vocational training school but this qualification did not help her to get a job in Liberia. Comfort lamented to me that in Liberia the quality of contacts differentiates what kind of jobs one can access.

With her scarce connections with those in influential positions, she was feeling hopeless about obtaining gainful employment. She told me that even though there are many job advertisements in newspapers, most of them have already been given to someone.

After her return to Liberia, she received the 150 USD repatriation stipend from UNHCR (100 for Comfort and 50 for her son). With no accommodation, however, she had to use this 150 USD to rent a room. Rent was 25 USD per month and she had to pay six months in advance. Thus, the 150 USD was gone immediately just for rent.

Comfort's son is now six. She came back to Liberia with him but due to the daunting financial challenges, she had to give her son to another Liberian family. When I interviewed her in Liberia, her biggest and most immediate concern was accommodation, as her housing contract would end soon but she had not yet been able to find any means of generating an income to extend her contract.

The case of Comfort sharply contrasts with that of Leonard. According to my observations, most returnees from Ghana at least had some prior contacts in Liberia. As Vertovec has underlined, however, the quality of networks matters: "dimensions of social position and power, such as the class profile of the networks, have been shown to have considerable conditioning impact on the migration process" (Vertovec 2009: 39).

Guannu described how nepotism and favouritism have been historically rooted in the Liberian elite community: "In government, nepotism refers to the placement of relatives in public positions, most especially if they are not qualified, while favouritism is the preference of friends for public positions" (Guannu 1985: 101).

Even in post-war Liberia, connections with economic and political elites still generates avenues to important livelihood opportunities. Alternatively, the returnees with weak contacts were unable to draw meaningful resources from their personal connections in their country of origin. The significance of the potency of connections was particularly demonstrated in their job-searching process.

Returning with the wrong timing?

To my eyes, internal differentiations in the levels of returnees' integration were more than conspicuous. But how did non-refugee stakeholders perceive the situations of the returnees? Their views varied. UNHCR and staff members of the Liberian Refugee Repatriation Reintegration Committee (LRRRC, the Liberian government body responsible for refugee and returnees) in general perceived that the (re)integration of former refugees from Ghana was gradually moving towards success, which was a predictable response given their official position and responsibility.

When I raised some concrete cases of returnees' struggles to settle in, some of the UNHCR and LRRRC officers attributed the cause of their adjustment challenges to being 'because these returnees didn't take advantage of educational and vocational training

opportunities in Ghana', as if these repatriates had been lazy about investing in themselves. It is very obvious that most of the repatriates suffered from the lack of social connections in their job searches, not from any lack of vocational skills.

Conversely, staff members who were working for UNHCR Implementing Partners in Liberia gave me more frank comments. In an anonymous interview, an experienced officer at one of the UNHCR Implementing Partners shared his personal view as follows:

“We hear very few success stories of returnees. UN support for returnees is phasing out although there is so much to be done for their reintegration in Liberia ... Reintegration is not an automatic process. Their struggles need much more attention from donors. Reintegration is not just dumping people back in the country of origin.”¹⁸

Dwindling support for returnees

Notwithstanding the number of integration challenges facing returnees from Ghana, the level of support for them was already being phased out when the repatriates from Ghana arrived in Liberia between 2008 and 2009 under the UNHCR package. Before their departure from Ghana, these refugees were informed of various forms of assistance awaiting them on their return. On one of the main streets in the Buduburam settlement, there was a big UNHCR banner saying “Come home! Liberia is back on her feet!” Upon their return, nevertheless, returnees faced different realities from what they expected.

Linda, a female repatriate from Buduburam, was counting on UNHCR's micro-loan programme to start a small business in Monrovia but found that an applicant needed guarantees and collateral to get this loan, and these were not easy to find for a person who had just come back from a long exile. She expressed her frustration about the lack of UNHCR assistance for returnees:

“It seems to me that most of the UNHCR support programmes are not set up in place yet. I made enquiries to UNHCR about other support schemes but they said that they are setting them up. When I called again, they said ‘We will get back to you’, but I have never heard any response from them for the last five months ... In Ghana, we got the impression that Liberia is ready to accommodate us. We thought some assistance programmes were prepared but not really.”¹⁹

When I shared these complaints of returnees with UNHCR Liberia staff members, with some annoyance, one of the Liberian field officers explained: “The large scale repatriation programme was done between 2004 and 2007. We really didn't have any budget for repatriates after that.”²⁰ Another UNHCR local staff member added:

¹⁸ Interview with a UNHCR Implementing Partner staff member, Monrovia, 21 April 2009

¹⁹ Interview with Linda, Monrovia, 19 April 2009

²⁰ Interview with UNHCR local staff member, Monrovia, 12 May 2009

“Reintegration support has already scaled down after 2007 [when the three-year sub-regional repatriation programme for Liberian returnees ended]. But there was a big influx of returnees from Ghana after refugee demonstrations in 2008. UNHCR [Liberia] was not really prepared for such a large-scale return”.²¹

As these testimonies from local UNHCR staff members hinted, repatriation from Ghana between 2008 and 2009 was an *ad hoc* initiative without adequate coordination between the sending and the receiving sides. Notwithstanding some announcements about assistance upon return, recent repatriates from Buduburam were going back to their country of origin where reintegration support was being pulled away.

Article V on Voluntary Repatriation in the 1969 OAU Convention stresses the importance of collaboration between the country of origin and the country of refuge, and of facilitation for returnees’ resettlement with ‘every possible assistance’ by all responsible parties. Nevertheless, it was difficult for me to see any coordinated facilitation for repatriates by these responsible institutions in and between Liberia and Ghana.

Unwelcome guests?

In addition to the declining levels of assistance from UNHCR for returning Liberians and the suffering which they experienced, the Liberian government was also unable to provide any meaningful integration support for their own countrymen. According to a LRRRC programme officer, as of 2009, their ongoing support for returnees was limited to employment referral services, provision of advisory services for retrieval of property, and scholarship programmes for returnee students.

This officer frankly admitted that these services were not making success stories yet and were given on a very limited scale (for example, only two scholarships were given in the 2008/2009 academic year). He also acknowledged that there was very little assistance for returnees in the area of livelihoods due to the lack of funding.

Arguably, Liberia has established a reputation of being a successful post-war recovery state. The integration of returnees should be an integral component of post-conflict nation building but, contrary to the reputation, the government in the country of origin appeared to be refusing to acknowledge the adversity of returnees.

Whilst observing the dearth of effective governmental interventions, I came to question whether the Government of Liberia was really ready to accept repatriates from her neighbouring states. When I spoke with Mr Johnson, the Liberian businessman who accommodated me during my research in Liberia, he was quite negative about the influx of returnees: “The country is not ready to accept returnees. Look at this high unemployment rate! Liberia doesn’t have financial resources for them. UNHCR is pulling out from reintegration support for returnees. Where can we accommodate them? How?”²²

²¹ Interview with UNHCR local staff, Monrovia, 6 May 2009

²² Personal communication with Johnson, Monrovia, 6 May 2009

With my findings on the daunting challenges facing returnees in Liberia, I discussed the absorptive capacity of the country with the Director of LRRRC, Mrs Wheatonia. Whilst she denied that the country was not ready to welcome returnees, she also emphasised the necessity for external support for these repatriates.

“Liberia is on the way to recovery. We still need external assistance for the reintegration of returnees in the country. Reintegration entails readjustment costs and time. There is massive demand for funding to enable returnees to kick-start their life in their new environment. But now there is a huge funding shortage. The bulk of returnees is yet without jobs. This transition is a big issue for LRRRC so we are appealing for financial support from diaspora communities.”²³

‘Successful’ or ‘failed’ repatriation?

One of the problems in the current repatriation discourse in the international refugee regime is the lack of a working definition of ‘successful’ repatriation or reintegration, which makes the evaluation of repatriation very difficult, if not impossible. Nonetheless, the individual cases from my fieldwork presented here clearly point to large internal differentiations in the degrees of success in returnees’ integration processes; some struggled so much whilst others managed relatively easily. Despite the absence of official assessment indicators, I believe that it is not impossible to appraise their repatriation in relation to returnees’ socio-economic conditions, their own feelings or satisfaction and their livelihood goals.

Degree of self-sufficiency after repatriation

Was the degree of self-reliance of returnees improved in the country of origin? As illustrated with the case of Leonard, those who were already doing well in Ghana might have improved their already self-reliant life-style upon their return because many of them obtained gainful employment through their personal contacts in Liberia. On the other hand, a good number of Liberian returnees experienced a severe setback in their living conditions upon repatriation. They mentioned that their levels of self-sufficiency clearly decreased in Liberia as they lost peer assistance for food and other necessities after their repatriation.

Earlier in this paper, I mentioned the case of Mahyan who was unable to cope on her own and was entirely assisted by her church-mate from Buduburam upon repatriation. When I asked her about her post-repatriation life, she told me with deep dismay that her life had become worse in Monrovia in that she had to secure the very basics such as shelter and daily food, which she used to have when she was living in Buduburam. She had had a

²³ Interview with Wheatonia, the Director of LRRRC, Monrovia, 12 May 2009

house in a rent-free zone in the Buduburam settlement. When she did not have cash for food, she was occasionally obtaining meals from her refugee friends and neighbours in the settlement. But she could not carry any of these assets with her to Liberia.

When I interviewed Mahyan in Liberia in May 2009, she had been repatriated for less than a year, so the decline in her self-reliance could have been inevitable because she was still in the early stages of her new life. But would Mahyan improve the situation without external intervention in the subsequent year? Would she be able to construct powerful networks and mobilize them to get a meaningful job in Monrovia? Unfortunately, at the time of my fieldwork, I did not see any concrete clue that her life would be ameliorated dramatically given her limited asset profile and lack of potent personal connections in her country of origin.

Refugees' own feeling about their return

Even with their deteriorated economic conditions, if some ex-refugees felt happy or satisfied to be back in their 'homeland', we may still be able to call their repatriation a 'success' or an 'achievement'. For instance, Bascom's study on Eritrean repatriates has reported that they preferred poorer economic conditions in their homeland to a better situation in exile and were sanguine about their future too (Bascom 2005: 176).

With respect to their levels of satisfaction, again, there were internal differentiations amongst Liberian returnees. As expected, those who were managing well were generally satisfied with their decision to repatriate. Meanwhile, many of those who faced severe adjustment challenges regretted their decision. Comfort, whom I have already mentioned in terms of her failure to find new means of generating an income, had been suffering a great deal since her arrival in Liberia. She complained to me about her deplorable situation:

Me: How are you seeing your repatriation now?

Comfort: I am regretting my decision so much. No matter what UNHCR says, repatriation is neither an achievement nor a solution for me!

Me: What do you want to say to UNHCR?

Comfort: If UNHCR still says repatriation is the best solution, I really want to ask why so? 'Home sweet home' or 'nothing like home' ... but home is a place where you can find life easier, right? Since I came back to Liberia, everything is getting worse! Can I still call this place home? I am only facing problems and my life is deteriorating so much. Why is it the best solution for me? ²⁴

Similar comments were made by other returnees who were daunted by a series of survival challenges in Liberia. These former refugees remained jobless after their repatriation and had to beg for charity from their limited networks which had been built up in Buduburam.

²⁴ Interview with Comfort, Monrovia, 29 April 2009

Some of these returnees started remembering their Buduburam life as the good old days, although they did not necessarily embrace their exile life in Ghana when they were living in Buduburam.

Pursuit of livelihood goals upon repatriation

Over their time in exile, refugees' livelihood aspirations often 'transmuted' for betterment (Van Hear 2003: 7). For these returnees, an important indicator for evaluating the success of the return was whether they were carrying forward their prospects or not. Again, there were variations between returnees largely depending on their socio-economic stability in their new environment. The following two cases are contrastive.

Elvar, a 27 year-old male returnee from Ghana, is from a well-known family that had previously produced some former government ministers. His family also sent many relatives to the US over several decades. When Elvar was living in Buduburam, he was entirely reliant on regular remittances from his parents in the US. When he was in Ghana, his primary goals were to go to computer school and to acquire IT expertise. With stable financial support, he had already achieved these goals in exile. Also, he even found employment at a local IT company.

After his exile in Ghana between 2001 and 2006, Elvar returned to Liberia in December 2006 of his own accord. He decided to go back to Liberia because he found a better job as an IT expert at a private bank through a member of his extended family who held an executive post in this company. Elvar said that his return to Liberia was more for advancement in his career as a computer expert. Even though he had already found a job in Liberia, his parents continued to remit funds to him during his first year of repatriation to help Elvar to settle into the new environment.

In Liberia, Elvar was making roughly 500 USD per month from this job, which was considered a very good salary there. He was quite happy with his current job and his life in Liberia. His next aspiration is to study a more advanced level of computer science to further strengthen his IT skills. When I interviewed him in Liberia, he was thinking of going to university or advanced computer school in the US in the near future. His family in the US has been processing the necessary documents in order to bring him to the US as an immigrant. During our interview, he told me that he had never really experienced any major obstacles either in Ghana or Liberia in pursuit of his goals.

In his mid 20s, Amos had had extremely traumatic experiences of his family being targeted by the rebels during the civil war. He alone was carried to Ghana by a school teacher of his missionary school. Since then, he lost communication with other family members but in 2007, he confirmed that only his father, now in his late 60s, was alive in a rural village of Grand Gedeh county, although he was no longer working on account of his age.

In Buduburam, Amos had survived his daily life by combining peer support, casual labour and the UNHCR/WFP food ration. Only once in a while did he receive sporadic remittances from his friends who had got resettled in the west. After the 2008 refugee protests, some of his refugee caregivers repatriated to Liberia. Also, Amos expected that the Ghanaian government would be tough on remaining Liberians, so he chose repatriation. When he was in Ghana, his livelihood objective was to attain higher level education. Since he was unable to achieve this in exile, he still held it as his aspiration in his post-repatriation life in Liberia.

Amos returned to Liberia in August 2008 under a UNHCR package. When I interviewed him in April 2009, he was depressed by the number of survival challenges which he faced. He had applied for eight jobs since his return but had failed to secure any of them. The UNHCR 100 USD stipend had quickly disappeared for his food, shelter and other necessities in the first month of his return. He had to beg support from his Buduburam friends and extended relatives with whom he had been able to make reunion.

Amos felt that he had not been making any progress towards his goal after he had repatriated. He thought that he had been rather better positioned to achieve his objective while he was in Ghana where he had better access to some scholarship programmes which were providing educational opportunities specifically for refugees. In Liberia, he had very little access to these opportunities.

More problematically, as his living conditions had significantly deteriorated upon his repatriation due to the loss of any means of subsistence, his immediate goal was to find work and to make an income for his survival. He said, “First of all, I need to help myself before dreaming about my future”.

Amos’s case was not an exception. Those who returned with a meagre asset profile first struggled to secure their absolute minimum needs for survival such as shelter, rent, income and daily food, which they had somehow managed to obtain in exile. As Amos’s comments above imply, his return to Liberia was thus perceived as a major setback in pursuing his goal. After attaining the most optimum durable solution, many returnees faced a setback or even had to make a downward revision of their livelihood goals.

Re-returning to Buduburam: failed repatriation?

A good number of those who encountered challenges in integration expressed their intention to return to Buduburam. Amy, one of these returnees, was seriously thinking of going back to Ghana after five months of desperate struggle in her country of origin. A few days before my departure from Liberia, I met her and found her in a gloomy mood.

Me: I heard you are thinking of returning to Ghana?

Amy: Yeah, I am thinking about it ... I’ve realised I can’t make it here.

Me: Can you manage it in Ghana?

Amy: Well, I still have some friends in the camp. I think I may be able to ask

for help. But I need to prepare money for travelling ...²⁵

Amy's proposed return to Buduburam did not happen since she was unable to find the roughly 50 USD for her return trip to Ghana. However, some did manage to do so. At the end of my fieldwork in Ghana in July 2009, there was a good number of returnee Liberians back in the Buduburam settlement. More or less, they had shared similar livelihood challenges in Liberia and had decided to go back to Buduburam where they believed that they would be able to survive.

Paul repatriated to Liberia in his mid 20s under a UNHCR package in late 2007 but went back to Ghana in 2009. Without any relatives abroad, his principal survival techniques in Buduburam had comprised wheel-barrowing and peer support from his friends and neighbours. Paul had decided to leave Ghana because of the extremely harsh living conditions, but his life in his country of origin turned out to be even more dreadful than that.

With few reliable contacts in Liberia, he continued camping around his Buduburam friends' places and occasionally slept outdoors. He lived on the charity of his friends as long as they were willing to help him. He tried to resume his wheel-barrowing work but could not purchase a wheel-barrow which cost 75 USD in Monrovia. For more than a year, he was never able to find any gainful job there. He begged some cash from his friends and luckily managed to make his way back to Buduburam.

Me: Why did you come back to Ghana?

Paul: In the camp, at least I can find some helpers. They can give me small jobs and also some food. Marcus, Joana, Fiona ... they can save my life. But there was no one like them in Liberia. I didn't really know many people there.

Me: How are you managing now?

Paul: I wash someone's clothes.

Me: Do you want to go back to Liberia in the future?

Paul: No, I don't want to go back there. I like to stay in the camp. I don't like this camp life but at least it's better than Liberia.²⁶

According to Long, there is evidence that returnees will go back to their country of asylum if repatriation fails to offer a viable protection and access to livelihood resources (Long 2010: 36). She has termed this phenomenon 're-emigration', but amongst refugee communities in Buduburam, this return movement to Buduburam was referred to as 're-returning'. Whilst the term 're-emigration' does not necessarily suggest returning to a specific place, for these failed Liberian returnees, it had to be moving back to the Buduburam refugee settlement where they had memories and experiences of survival.

²⁵ Interview with Amy, Monrovia, 16 May 2009

²⁶ Interview with Paul, Buduburam, 12 July 2009

Commonalities in the re-returnee group

Whilst interviewing several returned Liberians to Ghana, I came to realise that there were some commonalities in their backgrounds. Most of them had originally come to Ghana without immediate family members as they had been separated from them during their escape. None of them had any family members abroad, and therefore never received remittance assistance during their exile. In Buduburam, they constantly relied upon other refugees. Due to the dire survival challenges and little prospect for improvement in Ghana, they had decided to go back to Liberia in despair.

Even though they had slight hope of any positive changes upon their repatriation, as in the case of Paul, they faced only adversities in Liberia since they did not have anyone who could cushion their (re)integration process, particularly with housing and daily food. Without such help, the UNHCR 100 USD stipend disappeared very quickly. In a sense, these re-returnees were still lucky since they had managed to reach to Ghana again. As I suggested earlier, there were certainly more candidates in Liberia, like Amy, who had the intention to return to Ghana provided that they could find the resources.

Because their official refugee ID had been deleted from UNHCR statistics when they left Ghana, these re-returnees to Buduburam were no longer reflected in any of the UNHCR statistics. According to Liberian refugees in the Buduburam settlement, however, there was a constant influx of these failed repatriates into the settlement although their existence was completely invisible to UNHCR and other non-refugee stakeholders in Ghana.

Theorising refugee repatriation

Drawing from these individual case studies of returnees, this section poses some theoretical reconfiguration of the understanding of refugee repatriation.

As the evidence hitherto illustrates, repatriation, especially for prolonged refugee populations, is to a large extent a social asset-oriented process, meaning that the success of return and integration was highly conditional upon the quality of social connections in Liberia. In international migration, networks serve as a risk reduction tool for migrants and it is a common strategy for them to create a set of people whom they can count on in the destination area (Massey *et al.* 2008: 43). Thus, migrants head for places where they have already created personal ties in that these linkages can assist migrants with finding a home or employment opportunity upon migration and serve as the most trusted source of information for migrants (Van Hear 1998: 59, Castles and Miller 2009: 29).

As the nature of refugees' repatriation is found to be similar to a beginning of new life in a challenging and unfamiliar environment, the existence and extent of social networks in a country of origin can be a paramount element in refugees' return movement (Black & Koser 1999: 11, Koser 1997: 602).

Other studies of return migration also provide similar evidence. For example, empirical work on involuntary Yemeni returnees from Saudi Arabia shows that amongst returnees, those who had lived abroad for many years and severed their meaningful links with the country of origin were the least able to integrate into Yemeni society (Van Hear 1994: 25, 35). Such people were in a much worse position than those who maintained their networks with home communities through visits and remittances.

Also, unemployment amongst these returnees was higher than in other returnee groups. A similar case is reported with the repatriation of Afghan refugees (AREU 2006: 36). Those with strong social ties in Afghanistan were able to find employment more quickly and with less stress upon repatriation through these linkages, compared with other returnees without these useful connections.

Significance of family-based social assets

Through these individual case studies of returnees, I came to realise that those who were integrated into Liberian society relatively smoothly had been having a decent exile life in Ghana thanks to access to overseas remittances from their relatives in the west. As mentioned above, most of these successful repatriates were from traditionally wealthy and politically eminent families that produced a number of migrants to industrialised countries, predominantly the United States. During their exile in Ghana, these former refugees were constantly assisted by their diaspora members.

Upon return, these repatriates had mobilised their family-based social assets which had been accumulated over generations. For example, in the case of Elvar, whom I mentioned earlier, after his repatriation, his familial contact with Liberian business elites in the country significantly lubricated his job search whilst his remittances continually supplemented his daily budget.

Importantly, most of these robust networks of successful returnees were not forged by their individual efforts after their repatriation. Rather, they ought to be perceived as the inherited legacy of their ancestors. These returnees were successful not because they were just lucky or by coincidence, but because they had specific avenues to socio-economic opportunities through their familial networks in the country of origin.

Limitations of individual efforts

On the other hand, successful return to Liberia for those without specific personal connections was not readily attainable by an individual's own efforts. I presented James's integration challenges in Liberia earlier in this paper. In Ghana, James was making an income by doing domestic work for some households and was also dependent on peer support for his daily food. He was unable to transfer his Buduburam-based survival means to Liberia. Despite his desperate efforts to construct a similar subsistence in Liberia, he failed and had to depend upon the charity of his Buduburam friends. When I

met him in Monrovia, he pointed to structural inequalities between returnees with potent social assets and those without them:

“If you know good rich people in Liberia, you can start your new life from a much better position. You will find a job easily and may still be able to receive remittances. These people can easily be settled in. In Ghana, they were always assisted by their family abroad ... No matter whether you are in Ghana or Liberia, you will be better-off if you are well linked with good rich people. If you don't know such people, you will have to suffer no matter where you are.”²⁷

James is perhaps right. Job applicants without ‘someone who can put them into the system’ struggled to find access to any financially meaningful employment in Liberia. If they applied for the same post as repatriates with a privileged family background, those without any back-up support had to compete not only with current applicants but also with their generationally accumulated capital.

The result is predictable even before they compete. For those who experienced a series of adjustment challenges in their post-return life, it was not because they were ‘lazy and didn't invest in themselves during exile’, as some UNHCR and LRRRC staff criticised them for being.

Emergence of a new vulnerability context

Even if repatriation is the end of one phase of refugeeness in the international refugee regime, it is often the beginning of a new chapter which can expose some returnees to vulnerability (Black & Koser 1999: 3). The process of repatriation, needless to say, entails a change in the physical location of a returnee but also often a loss or contraction of his/her ‘location-specific assets’ (Faist 2000: 299) As illustrated in this paper, many Liberian repatriates lost their informal safety-net which had been built upon their Buduburam-based networks.

For the majority of returnees from Ghana who were unable to access effective connections in their country of origin, their vulnerability was newly generated or exacerbated as a consequence of their repatriation. As described earlier, some of these refugees who were lucky enough to have the resources to do so decided to go back to the Buduburam settlement in Ghana for their very survival. How should we understand this re-returning phenomenon? Clearly, given my research findings, it would be difficult to conclude that their refugee plight had ended with their physical return to their country of origin.

²⁷ Interview with James, Monrovia, 14 May 2009)

Conclusion

Despite the active encouragement of the repatriation of residual Liberian exiles from Ghana, the fundamental question was completely missing in the thinking of non-refugee stakeholders: Is repatriation the most ideal solution for all of these protracted Liberian refugees? My answer is No.

Allen and Turton have warned of the risk of treating the displaced population *en masse* as if they were a homogeneous group without internal differentiations (Allen & Turton 1996: 17). Each returnee had different adjustment capacities, largely depending upon the degrees of access to livelihood assets and networks in the country of origin. Returnees with a meagre asset base confronted more challenges upon their repatriation compared with those with a stronger asset profile, even if they were both attaining the same durable solution. On the basis of the evidence presented hitherto, more attention ought to be paid to the relationship between refugees' socio-economic conditions and the viability of their repatriation.

Further, given the heterogeneity in refugee communities, the provision of a single durable solution, namely repatriation, deserves scrutiny. Whether voluntary repatriation is the most optimum durable solution or not is necessarily a relational issue with respect to the availability of other durable solutions (Kaiser 2010: 51-4).

As demonstrated in this paper, in some cases, the living standards of returnees were significantly deteriorated after their return to the country of origin due to the disruptions of their livelihoods. For these returnees, at least from the perspective of livelihoods, return to Liberia did not provide a better solution than remaining in Ghana. Promoting a single durable solution can significantly constrain the possibility of refugees' ability to make a livelihood and narrow down the opportunities for pursuing their aspirations.

In 1980, UNHCR asserted: "Voluntary repatriation, whenever feasible, is of course the most desirable solution to refugee problems" (UNHCR 1980). However, this discourse is built upon the assumption that post-repatriation life in the country of origin is considered by outsiders to be necessarily better than the life in exile (Hammond 1999: 230). This idealised image of return has helped to legitimise measures which have compelled refugees to go back to their country of origin.

As three decades have passed since 1980, however, there is now the evidence to claim that repatriation is not necessarily the most ideal option, at least for some refugees. Rather, refugees' return migration, especially in prolonged cases, should be viewed as a highly selective process which is contingent upon returnees' individual asset conditions in the country of origin.

This finding also points to the important practical implication that the integration process must entail sufficient assistance from the refugee-supporting regime. Even though refugee repatriates go back to their country of origin, this does not mean that they will be adequately assisted by their national governments.

Especially in the case of mass return to a fragile post-conflict setting, an absence of state capacity to absorb returnees can result in serious impediments for repatriates to secure viable and dignified livelihoods (Long 2010: 6). Additionally, integration assistance should be designed as a long-term intervention since the repatriation process is a gradual transition that allows returnees to negotiate a complex process of belonging in the country of origin (Hovil 2010: 18).

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