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# OPERATIONAL PRACTICE PAPER 2

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## Supporting Sustainable Refugee Return in Protracted Situations<sup>1</sup>

*'As a child refugee who grew up in exile, I can tell you that life in exile is by far one of the most heart-wrenching, gruesome and mind-bending things anyone can experience.'*<sup>2</sup>

### The numbers affected

Every refugee statistic represents a life uprooted and on hold. The UN refugee agency, UNHCR, estimates that by the end of 2016, a total of 22.5 million refugees had been forcibly displaced as a result of persecution, conflict, violence, or human rights violations.<sup>3</sup> Only 3 per cent of the global refugee population returned home in 2015, often in less than ideal conditions, with concerns that many of these returns may not be sustainable. Significant factors in the low rates of return were insecurity and conflict in countries of origin, an absence of socioeconomic support in areas of return, and a lack of political will to resolve the root causes of displacement.<sup>4</sup> Many of these refugees have been in exile for years. Based on UNHCR's definition (see box), 11.6 million refugees were in protracted refugee situations at the end of 2016, with 4.1 million of them in a situation lasting 20 years or more. The number of refugees in protracted situations increased in 2016 as many Syrian refugees have now been displaced for five years.<sup>5</sup> Refugees need sustainable solutions so that they can live in dignity and peace.

### Sustainable refugee return

This Operational Practice Paper focuses on efforts to support sustainable refugee return, keeping in mind that this is not the only available, or necessarily desired, option for refugees. Sustainable return processes require the reintegration of refugees, which can be complicated by their protracted refugee experience and conditions in the country of origin.<sup>8</sup>

Full return of all refugees is not feasible as a result of factors such as very considerable amounts of time spent abroad by refugees, with entire generations born in exile with little knowledge of their 'home' country.<sup>9</sup>

Voluntary return has been found to be more sustainable than cases of forced refugee return, as refugees who return voluntarily are less likely to want to leave again.<sup>10</sup> Forced and early repatriations have also resulted in a recurrence of conflict and renewed refugee movements.<sup>11</sup> UNHCR points out that in order for voluntary return 'to be successful and ensure it is conducted in safety and dignity, both countries of origin and asylum need to be fully committed to a process in which decisions are made voluntarily, without coercion, and are based on objective information', with sufficient support for reintegration and concerted efforts to address the root causes of displacement.<sup>12</sup> It is illegal to return refugees to unsafe locations where their lives or freedoms could be threatened.<sup>13</sup>

**Protracted refugee situation:** Refugees from the same country who have been in exile for five consecutive years or more in a given asylum country.<sup>6</sup>

**Voluntary repatriation:** Voluntary return, in safety and dignity, of refugees to the country of origin.

**Sustainable refugee return:** Re-establishes former refugees in the country of origin, in a way that provides the returnees with adequate safety, housing, livelihoods and access to services. This should reduce the likelihood of secondary involuntary movement within the country of origin, i.e. as internally displaced persons (IDPs), or displacement back to asylum countries.<sup>7</sup>

Previous examples of sustainable refugee return in protracted situations indicate that refugee return can be spontaneous (refugees return on their own) or assisted (refugees return with official help); returns can happen rapidly or at a slower pace; and resolving protracted refugee caseloads often involves resettlement to a third country and local integration, as well as return to country of origin.<sup>14</sup> Official efforts to support voluntary repatriation often involve tripartite agreements between the country of asylum, the country of origin, and UNHCR, to facilitate the return process.<sup>15</sup> This has involved UNHCR planning and implementing repatriation, including coordinating repatriation grants and developing Quick Impact Projects to enable returning refugees to settle back in their places of residence. Such agreements should engage with refugees in order to not compromise the sustainability of repatriation efforts.<sup>16</sup>

### Flexible and staggered return

Refugees often engage in gradual 'staggered' or 'cyclical' return.<sup>17</sup> This involves displaced families or whole communities dividing themselves up before return, sending some members to explore conditions and establish whether there is a basis for a permanent return in the country or area of origin.<sup>18</sup> Those returning first establish livelihoods and housing, with the rest of the family (often women and children) gradually returning once these goals have been achieved, provided the situation remains stable and services available.<sup>19</sup> In South Sudan, for example, a gradual process of spontaneous return after 2005 allowed refugees to plan ahead and minimise the risk to their families.<sup>20</sup> However, pursuing such a strategy requires an extended family network, and not every refugee family is part of such a network.<sup>21</sup> Those without tended to use the official UNHCR repatriation process and struggled more than those who had self-settled.<sup>22</sup>

In other cases, the dispersal of family members between exile and return locations is more permanent to 'maximise access to livelihoods, services, or other priorities for family wellbeing in different locations at the same time'.<sup>23</sup> Research indicates that return 'appears to be most effective when it can be combined with other strategies such as continued transnational relocation or regional dual residence/citizenship' as they offer more secure and sustainable returns and help diffuse the risks involved in returning to a site of former persecution and violence.<sup>24</sup>

### Security, livelihoods, and access to services

Security, access to adequate services, housing, and livelihood opportunities are key to ensuring that return is sustainable.<sup>25</sup> The lack of these factors has hindered voluntary repatriation in cases of protracted refugee displacement from Afghanistan, Iraq, South Sudan, and Somalia, for example.<sup>26</sup> The likelihood of living in poverty in the country of origin can also make refugees reluctant to return.<sup>27</sup> Profiling of Afghan refugees in Pakistan in 2011 found that the factors that would encourage return were 'improved security (37%), employment opportunities (34%), and access to housing (23%)', for instance.<sup>28</sup>

Some research suggests that education, employment, training, and the ability to build up assets in the country of exile may help equip refugees to reintegrate and re-establish livelihoods upon return,<sup>29</sup> although more research on this is needed.<sup>30</sup> Case studies carried out by the World Bank suggest that opportunities for integration in the host country strengthen the ability of refugees to either stagger their return or geographically disperse family members to maximise access to services, livelihoods, or other priorities, until they decide conditions in the country of origin are favourable for them to return.<sup>31</sup> This research found that refugees with 'assets and skills who chose to return do so faster and reintegrate more sustainably than returnees who have lost or depleted their assets and have marginal or eroded capacities'; suggesting that it might be beneficial if refugees can have access to basic services and employment rights in their host country.<sup>32</sup> Some evidence suggests that one of the benefits of education in displacement, for instance, is that it can help avoid future cycles of displacement by better equipping displaced youth to return to their country of origin and find decent work.<sup>33</sup>

Access of refugee households to livelihood assets, social networks, and opportunities in the country of origin are key factors helping refugees return earlier than others.<sup>34</sup> In Liberia, it was much easier for refugees from higher socioeconomic groups to return than for those from poorer socioeconomic backgrounds, as many had maintained a foothold in Liberia, which facilitated their return.<sup>35</sup> Poverty often constrains refugees' ability to return, with those in poorer households often remaining in exile for longer or struggling to survive upon return.<sup>36</sup> Issues with housing, land and property rights and restitution in the country of origin can also be major impediments to return, while

the ability to reclaim their rights has helped contribute to refugee return.<sup>37</sup>

For refugee return to be successful in the long term, those returning need to be able to meet their basic needs and not feel forced to move again to meet them as a result of conditions in their country of origin.<sup>38</sup> Involuntary internal displacement after return can be a problem. In Somalia for example, many people who returned from refugee camps became IDPs living in destitution in and around urban centres.<sup>39</sup> Research with protracted refugees found that the failure of livelihood programmes upon return meant that many had to leave again to find work.<sup>40</sup>

### Challenges for supporting sustainable refugee return

Research indicates that key issues affecting international assistance for sustainable refugee return relate to:<sup>41</sup>

- politically driven return which is not really ‘voluntary’, and is rushed;
- inadequate information for returnees on the conditions in areas of return and prospects for assistance;

- the politically driven focus on repatriation resulting in insufficient funding to support the reintegration of returnees;
- difficulties addressing refugee land rights and property restitution;
- the need for planning which recognises that returnees increasingly settle in urban environments;<sup>42</sup>
- problems of coordination and donor alignment around reconstruction and reintegration strategies and the sometimes poor synchronisation of these programmes with the return process; and
- short attention spans by the international community and governments that leave support for reintegration incomplete.

Evidence on what works for sustainable return programmes is still emerging and their impact also varies for different displaced persons and settings.<sup>43</sup> However, a number of lessons to build on can be learned from previous experiences, as follows.

## LESSONS FOR SUPPORTING SUSTAINABLE REFUGEE RETURN

### ■ Provide refugees with access to quality information to inform decision-making about return

It is important for return programmes to consult refugees and take into account that they are ‘purposive actors’, making decisions about whether to return or stay by comparing conditions in the country of origin (security, access to adequate services, housing, and livelihood opportunities) with those of the country in exile.<sup>44</sup> This can mean that refugees attempt to remain in exile despite an increasing ‘push’ from host countries to leave as they do not feel current conditions in the country of origin are suitable for their return.<sup>45</sup>

Providing access to quality, accurate, trustworthy information is important for informed decision-making with regard to voluntary return and to help ensure sustainable reintegration.<sup>46</sup> Information can be provided through a number of different formal and

informal sources and it is important to pay attention to refugees’ informal channels and local sources of information.<sup>47</sup> There is some evidence that the ‘go and see’ operations of UNHCR and NGOs, which enable refugees to spend some time in their homeland before making a final decision to return, are fairly effective means of providing accurate information for refugees.<sup>48</sup> They help refugees to reach a final decision to either return, or to discard the possibility of returning ‘home’ and focus on integration instead, providing local integration is an option.<sup>49</sup>

### ■ Provide support for refugees’ staggered returns

Analysis by the World Bank suggests that it would be beneficial if aid agencies supported the staggered process of refugee return, enabling it to take place over a considerable period of time, involving multiple locations in both country of exile and return.<sup>50</sup>

### ■ Ensure refugee return programmes are demand-driven and integrated into wider development processes

Research suggests that international humanitarian, development, and private sector actors should support authorities in return countries to bring about conditions, such as safety and security, access to land, services, education, and livelihoods, that meet refugee priorities in order to achieve sustainable return.<sup>51</sup> Support for lasting return requires interventions at both the micro level to address the specific constraints to return for particular refugee groups, and at the macro level, working on the country of origin's security, transport, power, communication, urban planning and development, key services such as health, education and social safety nets, and strengthening of national capacities.<sup>52</sup>

Development-led return interventions should include:

- demand-driven planning for return which looks at the needs of returnees and stayees;
- multisectoral and comprehensive reconstruction and development assistance that considers rights to land, housing and other property, service delivery (e.g. education, health, justice/rule of law to establish security), livelihoods, private sector engagement, participatory local governance, and reconciliation; and
- targeted assistance for groups with specific needs, or who are vulnerable.<sup>53</sup>

One example of a demand-driven project that assisted lasting return in rural communities comes from Afghanistan in the 1990s, where NGO projects assisted whole communities, both stayees and returnees, with their specific recovery and development needs.<sup>54</sup> This allowed for a staggered return process, where men from the refugee communities left the camps to plant crops, rebuild houses, repair irrigation systems, and rehabilitate local roads and schools in their villages before the rest of their households returned.<sup>55</sup> The money earned from engagement in public works provided an income to sustain households during the rehabilitation phase.

Funding for reintegration assistance needs to take into account that full reintegration can take years.<sup>56</sup> For example, efforts of refugees to reintegrate sustainably in Liberia were hindered by the failure to provide continued support after repatriation and to support the different phases of return.<sup>57</sup> Later returnees did not receive any meaningful reintegration assistance as support for return was already being phased out.<sup>58</sup>

### ■ Take into account conflict dynamics and the political economy

Successful return and reintegration programmes need to be carefully conceived and implemented, and based on up-to-date understandings of local conditions and people's perceptions.<sup>59</sup> It is important for refugee return interventions to have an understanding of the political economy context and impact on local conflict dynamics, as well as to engage with governments in return countries to address the constraints arising from these contexts in a long-term sustained and coordinated manner.<sup>60</sup>

### ■ Take into account the diverse experiences of refugees

Analysis by the World Bank and UNHCR suggests that it is important for return interventions to take into account that 'different groups of returnees will face different constraints to reintegration depending on factors such as their length of stay in exile, challenges to reclaim property, access or lack thereof to social networks in the country of return, and differences between the educational systems accessed in exile and that in the country of return'.<sup>61</sup> Other refugees likely to have diverse experiences which may hinder their sustainable return include refugees from middle-income countries; unregistered refugees; refugees born in exile; disabled refugees and refugees from persecuted minorities.<sup>62</sup> As a result, standardised approaches to refugee reintegration that failed to consider the high diversity of the returnee population are inadequate.<sup>63</sup> Experience suggests that certain groups of vulnerable returnees will require more tailored return assistance to ensure that their return is sustainable.<sup>64</sup>

## GUIDELINES AND OTHER RESOURCES

- The [Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework \(CRRF\)](#) for emergencies and protracted situations of forced displacement aims to ease pressure on host countries, enhance refugee self-reliance, expand access to third-country solutions, and support conditions in countries of origin for return in safety and dignity.
- The [UNHCR Handbook on Voluntary Repatriation](#) provides UNHCR field staff and their partners with a consolidation of the basic protection principles relating to voluntary repatriation, as well as of the UNHCR's operational experience in this field. In addition, the [Handbook for Repatriation and Reintegration Activities](#) provides a guide to planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating repatriation and reintegration activities, and the [Policy Framework and Implementation Strategy](#) outlines UNHCR's role in support of the return and reintegration of displaced populations.
- The International Organization for Migration (IOM) has produced a number of papers relating to [Supporting Safe, Orderly and Dignified Migration Through Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration](#), and [Towards an Integrated Approach to Reintegration in the Context of Return](#).

## NOTES

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- 26 Harild *et al.* (2015): xi.
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- 46 Stepputat (2004): 8.
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- 51 Harild *et al.* (2015): xvi; Starup (2014): 5.
- 52 Harild *et al.* (2015): 30.
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