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Economic reintegration of returnees in Liberia

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Since the early 2000s, the United Nations Industrial Development Organization has been implementing economic recovery programmes for returnees in certain post-conflict countries. It remains uncertain, however, to what extent these training programmes have been instrumental in returnees' economic reintegration.

Liberia has gradually been recovering from the social and economic damage caused by fourteen years of brutal civil war, between 1989 and 2003, which forcibly displaced about 700,000 Liberians outside the country. A significant number of Liberians repatriated following the final ceasefire agreement in 2003; and in 2012, when the UN High Commissioner for Refugees invoked the Cessation Clause, tens of thousands of the remaining refugees returned.

Liberia's limited infrastructure and weak economic foundation, however, have caused concern about its capacity to successfully integrate the new arrivals. Approximately two thirds of all Liberians live in poverty, especially in rural areas. During the prolonged conflict, many international businesses left, taking away employment and capital. Given such conditions, the large number of returnees from neighbouring countries has placed an enormous burden on the country's budget and scarce resources¹ and there was consequently a strong incentive for the government to consider how to bolster livelihoods opportunities for returnees.

Against this backdrop, between 2013 and 2014 the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) offered two training programmes in Liberia. The first programme, the Entrepreneurship Development Programme (EDP), provided 120 hours of training through two modules: first, Introduction to Entrepreneurship, Work and Life Skills and second, How to Establish and Manage Your Business. From November 2013 to May 2014, EDP trained 685 returnees. Drawing upon the results of UNIDO's assessment of the local employment market, the second programme, the Skills Training Programme (STP), offered a wide

range of vocational skills and techniques such as plumbing, beauty care, catering, computer hardware servicing, car mechanics, baking and hair braiding. From March to July 2014, STP trained 327 beneficiaries.

By equipping returnees with marketable livelihood techniques and business management skills, the intention was that the returnees would be able to build their own enterprises or find employment to sustain themselves in the fragile Liberian economy. The findings from our research, however, show mixed results for the impact of UNIDO's programmes.

Mixed outcomes of vocational training

Since the principal objective of these training programmes was to facilitate the economic readjustment of returnees, whether a beneficiary has some form of income sources or not after receiving UNIDO's training is an essential indicator of impact. Therefore, we asked all of the survey participants whether they were currently engaged in any livelihood activities.

Of the 74 randomly selected respondents (37 from EDP, 37 from STP), 44 respondents – 59% – said they were not involved in any income-generating activities as of December 2014, despite having completed UNIDO's training. The vast majority of these 44 individuals attributed the reasons for this either to lack of access to financial capital to start up a business or to the economic downturn caused by the Ebola epidemic.

The absence of lending services has been a long-standing challenge in Liberia and, crucially, UNIDO's training programmes did not include any provision of financial support. Many respondents mentioned this issue, as exemplified in remarks by Greg, a returnee from Ghana and STP participant:

"I completed the plumbing training course in July 2014. But ... I have never used what I learned. I wanted to start my own business but never had any capital to do so. Yes, after UNIDO's training we have gained the knowledge but it cannot be put into practice."

The 327 participants in the Skills Training Programme have acquired some new livelihood techniques but, in the absence of access to capital to embark on their own enterprises and with few other employment opportunities, many of them have been unable to use these skills.

Another major reason why they are not working was the impact of the Ebola crisis in 2014 which resulted in significantly reduced or negative economic growth in Liberia and had a particular impact on some attempts at building livelihoods²:

"I received training on baking from UNIDO. I wanted to start a baking business but could not do it. During the Ebola situation people were afraid to eat food from another person because they did not know the status of the next person."
(Kevin, returnee from Guinea)

For the other 30 people – that is, those who were engaged in some form of income generation – the role played by UNIDO's training remained somewhat ambiguous. According to our survey results, almost all of them are now running the same business activity in which they had been involved before they undertook the UNIDO training. In other words, these returnees had already established reliable and durable income-generating strategies before becoming beneficiaries of UNIDO's reintegration programmes.

However, most of them claimed to highly value the lessons and techniques which they had acquired during UNIDO's training programmes. While continuing with the same livelihood activity, some STP trainees acknowledged improvement in their current vocational skills and many of the EDP trainees had capitalised on the entrepreneurial and business management skills taught by this programme. For example, Martha, a returnee from Guinea and owner of a shop



Automotive Servicing Training at NETLIB Vocational Training Institute.

in Monrovia, described the improvements she had been able to make in her business:

"My business is improving immensely since I completed the UNIDO training. I am making use of the EDP lessons on stock taking. I am also making use of the lessons on promotion to increase sales revenue."

What does the study tell us?

Given the multi-faceted nature of economic readjustment, equipping returnees with livelihood techniques alone is demonstrably inadequate for enabling them to build successful economic livelihoods. One important implication to draw from this study may be the need to pair vocational training programmes with subsequent provision of or access to start-up capital. Although many of those receiving training were positive about the overall quality of the training they had

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received, they also believed that access to financial capital was the crucial missing piece. Unless they are able to turn their livelihood skills into a viable enterprise, both their own and UNIDO's time and investments in these training programmes will remain latent.

This limitation in turn highlights the importance of partnerships in facilitating returnees' economic readjustment. It is not necessary for financial support for initial capital to be provided directly by UNIDO; micro-finance institutions or local banks or development agencies may be better suited to provide such assistance for returnees.

Searching for best practice

Although vocational training programmes for refugee returnees are increasing in number, little is known about whether and how these interventions help returnees reintegrate into

national economies. The need to develop a better understanding of the impact of such training is likely to remain high. According to UNHCR, in 2014 more than 10 million refugees were living in protracted refugee situations across the world. As we have witnessed in Liberia, Angola and Sierra Leone, once the political situation in a country of origin is deemed stable by the international community, large-scale repatriation of refugees can happen. Therefore it is essential for development agencies to understand how vocational and entrepreneurial training can facilitate the effective economic reintegration of repatriated refugees.

To achieve meaningful support for the economic integration of returnees in crisis-affected areas, UNIDO aims to strengthen partnerships with a wider range of stakeholders. These partnerships will encompass traditional refugee-supporting agencies such as UNHCR and its implementing partner organisations, as well as partnerships with specialised agencies such as micro-finance institutions. Working closely with these agencies will enable UNIDO to fill identified gaps in its current reintegration modality and to achieve better coordination with other agencies on the ground.

This single-country study is a point of departure for UNIDO, and an important follow-up task for the organisation will be to collect more data in different contexts. Through further research, UNIDO aims to identify examples of best practice in vocational training programmes for returning refugees.

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1. Omata N (2013) 'Repatriation and integration of Liberian refugees from Ghana: the importance of personal networks in the country of origin', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 26 (2), 265–282.

2. UNIDO is planning to conduct a follow-up survey in Liberia after the major impact of Ebola is considered to have passed.