



## **JRS Liberia: The practical contributions of the forcibly displaced to development**

The outbreak of civil war in Liberia in 1990 displaced over one million people within the country, and forced over 700,000 to seek protection in neighbouring countries. The displacement of so many ravaged entire communities. Bereft of their existing livelihoods, individuals and families were forced to support themselves in unfamiliar environments and amidst unfamiliar persons. Schools and businesses were forced to shut down, and fundamental services such as health care and public utilities were unable meet the extraordinary demand. The brutalities of war and displacement jeopardised the safety and security of all.

The Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) began accompanying displaced Liberians in 1992. After having been forced out of the country due to increased violence, JRS returned to Liberia in 2003 and started accompaniment projects with Liberian refugees in Guinea and Cotê d'Ivoire. Towards the war's end, the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) aided the repatriation of 320,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) and 110,000 refugees to Liberia. Yet another 50,000 refugees returned home spontaneously.

Returning refugees faced seemingly insurmountable challenges. The homes and communities that they were forced to leave were heavily impacted by the war. Entire infrastructures needed to be renovated. Yet even more importantly, people's livelihoods needed to be rebuilt. Thus stands the challenge of migration and development: how to make the two concepts to mutually benefit each other. Forced migrants are excluded from the international debate on migration and development. This exclusion neglects the fundamental coherence between human rights and development: that sustainable development cannot occur until an individual or group has the political, social and economic capacity to live the lives that they value. The negation of this fundamental coherence lies at the root of why persons are forced to migrate. Moreover, this exclusion withholds a potentially important source of development for both countries of origin and reception.

The JRS experience in Liberia offers a concrete example of how forced migrants can use their skills and capacities to contribute to development and post-conflict reconstruction. The key that unlocks this potential is human rights protection – in order for their potential to be realised to its fullest, forced migrants must have access to a political, social, economic and cultural environment within which they can lead the lives that they value. The following pages describe how JRS Liberia, in collaboration and with the leadership of the local population, was able to harness forced migrants' development potential for the benefit of themselves and their communities.

## **Contributing to development during the return home**

Lofa County, situated in northern Liberia, experienced the most rebel activity during the civil war. Over 95 percent of the county's population fled during the period of hostility. Four years after the war's end, Liberians were returning to homes and communities that were in dire need of repair and reconstruction.

Together with returning refugees, JRS Liberia determined that in addition to fulfilling basic necessities such as access to food, shelter and healthcare, the skills and capacities of returning refugees had to be harnessed if true development was to occur. By utilising this potential, JRS Liberia was able to witness the following successes in Lofa County:

- The provision of almost 300 shelters for vulnerable returnees, built with supplies provided by JRS Liberia, and by the labour and expertise of the refugees and local population. Social workers, among them trained Liberians, provided follow-up counselling and monitoring services for new homeowners.
- The redevelopment of school agricultural programmes, supported by the skills and capacities of returning refugees. By the end of 2007, refugees assisted 29 schools in this way.
- The construction or renovation of 12 schools, benefiting more than 4,500 students, by the hands and leadership of returning refugees and IDPs.
- The creation of a health awareness programme managed and maintained by returnees and the local population. At least 1,100 people in 22 towns within Lofa County benefited from the programme. Basic health knowledge was integrated into local communities, and a new hospital was built to healthcare for rural Liberians.

Alongside its work in Lofa County, JRS Liberia's close collaboration with Tappita communities in eastern Liberia led to additional improvements in the development situation for returnees and local Liberians:

- The reconstruction and renovation of 15 schools, benefiting approximately 6,500 students and 200 teachers. Both community members and returning refugees volunteered their time and energy to this project.
- The construction of 247 new shelters, under the leadership of local residents, benefiting mostly vulnerable persons such as widows, single mothers, the elderly and disabled.

- The introduction of seed, fish and livestock harvesting, which improved the self-reliance of local communities. The diversity of goods produced with the skills, capacities and leadership of local residents and returning refugees improved the health and diet of the Tappita communities, and boosted local income.
- The training of approximately 300 persons in carpentry, masonry, sewing, tailoring, baking and cooking.

### **Contributing to development in the host country**

The experiences of JRS Liberia demonstrate that forced migrants can also use their skills and capacities to benefit the communities that offer them protection. Between the years of 2005 and 2008 JRS Liberia worked in the Saclepea Refugee Camp, located in eastern Liberia. According to UNHCR, approximately 1,300 refugees from Cotê d'Ivoire and Sierra Leone are currently encamped there.

In a similar manner to its development work with returning Liberian refugees, JRS Liberia determined that a positive reconstruction process would only occur through the leadership of local residents and refugees, who, after years of displacement, needed to be able to own their successes:

- The facilitation of vocational training programmes, under the leadership of Ivorian refugees, aimed to promote refugees' self-reliance as they prepared for an eventual return to their home communities. Courses were offered for advanced tailoring, hairdressing, automotive repair, radio and television repair, and computer skills acquisition. Almost 500 refugees and local Liberians benefited from these programmes.
- The training of 280 refugees in baking, soap making, tailoring and embroidery. In 2007 approximately half the programme's participants began practising private income-generating activities shortly after graduation.
- The provision of cultural activities and recreation for all camp residents, under the leadership of both local Liberians and refugees.

### **Contributing to development through education**

Liberia's educational system was left severely damaged after 14 years of war. The number of the country's teachers, in particular, reached a critically low point. Remote communities were hit the hardest. Realising that the quality of the education system mattered as much as the quality of its infrastructure, JRS Liberia, with local residents and refugees, endeavoured to address the shortage of teachers.

The result was a specialised and sustainable teacher-training programme was launched in the Suehn-Mecca District of Bomi County, located in western Liberia. The goal of the project was to update teachers' skills and expertise, and to offer a workshop series on counselling, peace, life skills and management.

The project, led by local and refugee Liberians, benefited approximately 100 schoolteachers and principals, with special attention given to female teachers. Students, school administrators and the local community benefited from an enriched corps of qualified educators. The project ended in the Suehn-Mecca District in November 2006, but continued on to serve 800 teachers from three districts in Lofa County.

## **Conclusion**

The experiences of JRS in Liberia demonstrate that, given the opportunity, forced migrants can contribute to development and post-conflict reconstruction in host and home communities. However, given the scope and size of JRS' operations in Liberia, only a small percentage of forced migrants were able to take part in development activities. Yet JRS' experiences can be used as an example for larger scale programmes that can impact a greater number of forced migrants. The potential exists, yet the political motivation is needed to make the potential a reality.

The debate on migration and development has thus far excluded forced migrants from the agenda. The effect has been to place forced migrants in an entirely separate category of policies that do not align with those that focus on economic and labour migrants. Forced migrants do indeed possess different rationales for migrating than other groups, and their situation does require an additional set of legal and policy mechanisms to ensure their protection. Yet it is also true that present day global migration flows are mixed. In many cases both forced migrants and labour migrants use the same irregular migratory channels and fraudulent documents, and both journey with smugglers at great personal risk.

Thus the reality of mixed flows requires that disparate migration policies become coherent with one another. Moreover, policies that utilise migration for development must endeavour to use the skills and capacities of all migrants, while providing them with access to basic human rights. This means that the exclusion of forced migrants from the migration and development agenda can no longer hold, since doing so negates the fundamental principles of human rights and human development, which dictate that people should have the opportunity to expand their choices and functionings, in order to lead lives that they can value.

The experiences of JRS in Liberia show that local communities in host and home countries benefit from the development potential of forced migrants. Long-term encampment policies consequently deprive forced migrants of opportunities to use their skills and capacities. The result is an eventual loss of abilities and the erosion of self-reliance. Prolonged encampment can frustrate the residents of the host community due to the antagonism that can be felt between them and encamped forced migrants. Animosity between the host and encamped population may lead to civil strife and even violence.

Thus it is important that encamped forced migrants have the opportunity to utilise their skills and capacities in the local community. Ivorian refugees in Liberia's Saclepea camp had this opportunity, and as a result the dynamic between them and the local population improved. Returning Liberian refugees were able to use the skills and knowledge they acquired while encamped in neighbouring countries for the benefit of their home communities.

European Union policymakers can use JRS' experiences in Liberia as an example of how to bridge the gap between policies that manage forced migration and those that promote development. Asylum seekers awaiting a decision in closed administrative detention centres can instead use their skills and capacities to contribute to the local labour market. Policies that more flexibly allow recognised refugees to work throughout Europe can positively impact the economy of the EU as a whole. A stronger collaborative link between EU migration policies and development programmes can be used to channel the development potential of forced migrants towards the improvement of their home communities. Furthermore, forced migrants who return to communities that can offer sustainability and human rights protection may reduce the need for further forced migrations to Europe and elsewhere.

Finally, JRS' experiences show that a stronger coherence between forced migration and development policies can serve to bring migration back to what it should always be: a *choice*, rather than a necessity.

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