

# Return to, and Reintegration into, urban settings

## 1. The Issue

Research conducted by UNHCR and others suggests that returning refugees increasingly choose to return to urban centres. In a Desk Review, carried out in 2009<sup>1</sup>, this was found to take place amongst urbanized returnees who fled rural areas to urban centers abroad, and would thus find it difficult to reintegrate in their original agricultural community. It is notably difficult to gather accurate statistical information regarding the number of returnees residing in urban areas, due to some extent to a lack of coherence regarding the definition of 'urban'. Although the information available on the number of urban returns remains sketchy, there are apparent trends that suggest that returns to urban areas remain very high. For example, in Somalia, Hargeisa town hosts about 60% of the returnee population, while in Afghanistan, 42% of refugees returned to urban areas in Kabul, Nangarhar and Kunduz.

The challenges which returnees in urban areas face are not entirely unique to urban settings and indeed, there is considerable overlap with the difficulties faced by returnees more generally, such as limited access to education, livelihoods opportunities and reliable water sources, as well as difficulties in accessing healthcare. However, it is consistently noted by sources that **housing, land and property** issues are posing the most serious challenges for returnees to urban areas. With rapidly growing urban populations, problems of non-durable housing and insecure tenure can be rife. Barriers to durable housing solutions were found to be compounded in urban areas by a lack of familiar social networks, particularly for returnees who did not reside in the same urban areas prior to their time in asylum. Family or tribal connections which may be readily found in rural areas are often not at play in urban ones. If returnees to urban areas cannot meet the higher rent payments or have no family or social network with whom to share living space, they then risk becoming homeless or taking up tenuous existence in slum dwellings .

With regard to **livelihoods and self-reliance** opportunities available to returnees in urban areas, it is often the case that those who were residing in urban areas during exile, may indeed be in an advantaged position upon return to urban areas since they may have acquired assets or skills which can be put to use for self-reliance purposes. On the other hand, those who are residing in urban areas for the first time, and/or have only a low level of education, may present significant vulnerabilities, particularly in urban areas where there is little or no opportunity for agriculture.

## 2. Operational Challenges

*Shelter* The information gathered on urban reintegration programs in specific country situations suggests that the shelter component of such programs is generally weak. Case studies of Southern Sudan and Afghanistan in particular highlight the challenges to

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<sup>1</sup> The full study can be accessed on UNHCR's website using the following link: <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/search?page=search&docid=4b0d502c9&query=urban%20reintegration>

forming coherent operational approaches to providing shelter in city centres. That is not to say that no efforts under the theme of shelter have been made in urban areas whatsoever, but simply that the response in urban areas remains limited, in comparison to efforts being made by UNHCR in rural areas.

*Returnee Monitoring* Returnee monitoring is ongoing in urban areas, however, occasional disparities are notable in the presentation of information in reports. Returnee Monitoring Reports tend to provide information with respect to district or provincial level activities but not relative to cities or specific villages. This may be indicative of inherent difficulties in attaining information at the city level, perhaps because of low visibility of beneficiaries in urban areas, or because the information would be too detailed to present in this manner.

*Livelihoods* The livelihoods and self-reliance programs implemented by UNHCR in urban areas are usually small scale. In Liberia, and in Southern Sudan, there is some level of vocational training and self-reliance work organized as part of the reintegration activities in urban areas. In urban areas it should be possible to provide far more support for small business, since in rural areas there is little or no market for activity of this nature and people in urban areas tend to be somewhat more independent. On the other hand, there is a perception in the humanitarian community that many refugees gained experiences, skills and even capital during exile (especially if they lived in urban areas during that time) and that upon return these refugees are opportunely placed to avail themselves, without external support, of livelihood opportunities in urban centres.

*Co-existence and Other Protection Related Activities* Co-existence activities have been implemented in urban areas, e.g. in Bosnia and in Liberia. UNHCR reintegration activities in specific urban areas of Afghanistan, for example, have the specific aim to provide protection to extremely vulnerable individuals, identified through the preliminary monitoring processes for returnees.

*Education* More needs to be done to support returning families' confidence in the education system in the area of return. Despite this concern, there is evidence of some operational activities in the sector of education ongoing in urban areas for the benefit of returnees. Good examples of these activities can be found in Southern Sudan.

*Partnerships* Having a high number of decentralized stakeholders and actors (whether or not tending to the same beneficiaries or with widely divergent mandates), is one of the key challenges to conducting fully functioning and efficient programs for urban reintegration. Despite these difficulties it is generally accepted that the execution of functional reintegration projects has to meet the challenge of working with, and being supportive of the activities of, other humanitarian agencies, national authorities and development agencies.

In conclusion, there is a need to reflect upon and analyze the challenge of transposing the strengths of UNHCR reintegration operations into city contexts – keeping in mind the

intermingled urban population and the mix of agencies and government authorities that need to be coordinated in order to develop a coherent position.