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Refugee Returns to Towns and Cities:
Experiences from Côte d'Ivoire and Rwanda

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Executive Summary

More than 60 percent of refugees worldwide are now estimated to live in urban areas, and increasingly humanitarian agencies are expanding their focus to become engaged with refugees and displaced persons living in cities and towns. Policy and operational shifts are underway, with emphasis on expanding access to protection, self-reliance and essential services among refugees who live in urban and non-camp locations.

Increased urbanization of forced displacement raises new opportunities and challenges in facilitating access to durable solutions, including the capacity and willingness of refugees to return to their countries of origin, and the prospect of increased returns to towns and cities rather than rural locations. With support from the U.S. Department of State's Bureau for Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM), CWS undertook this research project with the goal of identifying factors that are related with relative success of refugee return to urban areas. Specifically, CWS sought to explore relationships between two variables – (a) place of origin in home countries and (b) place of settlement in countries of asylum – with refugees' capacity for successful return and reintegration into urban areas.

The project drew on both a review of relevant policy regarding voluntary repatriation and urban and non-camp refugees, and field research conducted in Côte d'Ivoire and Rwanda. Data collection was focused in Gisenyi, Rwanda, a regional city of 106,000 inhabitants, and Bloléquin, Côte d'Ivoire, a town that is home to just over 30,000 persons. This served as an opportunity to examine return dynamics and urbanization in town and small city contexts, which may not receive the same attention from researchers nor humanitarian agencies as do large urban areas.

Policy Context for Urban Returns

UNHCR's Urban Policy (2009) and Alternative to Camps policy (2014) marked important advances for not only the legitimacy of refugee presence in urban and non-camp locations, but also in recognizing that forcibly displaced persons have agency and make rational decisions in an effort to live in as much safety and with as much dignity as possible. These two policy documents intend to inform the pursuit of durable solutions, though they tend to focus on broad principles rather than specific examples of how urbanization might be factored into planning and implementation of voluntary repatriation or other durable solutions. Two such principles set forth are self-reliance as a means of protection, and that development processes can and should be engaged when responding to displaced persons in urban or non-camp locations.

Review of UNHCR policy regarding voluntary repatriation finds that the most recent guidance, issued in 2008, reflected increasing awareness of the significance of return and reintegration to urban areas, and the broader implications of the urbanization of forced displacement on refugee return and reintegration. This marked an evolution from previous guidance issued in 1996 and 2004, which either did not mention specific challenges of return to urban areas, or only noted the risks of returns to cities rather than (presumed rural) areas of origin.

Meanwhile, a UNHCR desk review of projects conducted in 2009 noted that urban reintegration was becoming an accepted theme, but that shifts in program design and implementation had not yet taken root. Registration processes remained based largely on the assumption that intent to return equates with intent to return to place of origin, regardless of whether that is a refugee's

actual intent. Anticipation of spontaneous returns were absent from reintegration planning, and monitoring tended to be based on district or province but not allow for disaggregation of information by municipality or neighborhood. These observations were echoed in a World Bank desk review conducted in 2015, which observed that urbanization within forced displacement is becoming a permanent, not temporary, phenomenon and that facilitated returns only make up a portion of refugee returns to countries of origin.

With this policy context in mind, urbanized refugee settlement in countries of asylum and returns to urban or other non-camp locations may present several opportunities and challenges, including: (a) ensuring strong and meaningful urban refugee participation in the planning and implementation of repatriation initiatives; (b) developing realistic and innovative incentives for well integrated urban refugees to return voluntarily to their country of origin; and (c) identifying additional migration mechanisms that might make urban returns more sustainable. Key findings and recommendations (in sections 6 and 7 of the report) seek to address these and other assumptions set forth in the relevant policy guidance.

Field Research

The project used a mixed methods approach to the collection of primary field data, incorporating both quantitative data collected through household surveys and qualitative data gathered through semi-structured interviews. The household survey collected data on socio-economic, demographic and personal subjective variables. This included information regarding experiences during flight and in exile, decision-making regarding repatriation, and both the return and reintegration processes. Interviews explored the nuances and social complexities of refugee return to urban areas and, like the household surveys, elicited responses related to flight, asylum experiences, returns decision-making, and reintegration process.

Field research took place in Bloléquin, Côte d’Ivoire in August and September 2015 and in Gisenyi, Rwanda in April 2016. CWS included 552 respondents in the Bloléquin household survey and 416 in the Gisenyi survey, as well as 20 interview participants in both locations. In comparing the two case studies, some contextual differences and variations in sample characteristics should be noted:

Côte d’Ivoire	Rwanda
Returns to town setting (local hub)	Returns to city (regional hub)
Modest majority camp-based returnees (62%)	Slight majority non-camp returnees (53%)
Urban asylum context negligible (6%)	Urban asylum context small but not negligible (~25%)
Household returns experiences relatively recent (3-4 years prior)	Household returns experiences relatively distant (~20 years prior)

Key Findings

The two case studies reinforced or expanded upon premises regarding urban displacement and repatriation that were identified in the policy overview section. Some findings suggest that certain assumptions within the policy and academic literature may need to be considered more closely, or may be reflected more in some returns contexts than others. Key findings include:

Finding One: Urbanization occurs at multiple stages throughout the forced displacement and returns processes. The study's findings suggest that not only is urbanization taking place, it is doing so across various stages of displacement and return: (a) forced displacement into country of asylum; (b) re-displacement within country of asylum; (c) return to country of origin; and (d) post-return internal migration within country of origin. This finding validates policy approaches that assume displacement-related urbanization is not a temporary phenomenon, and that increased movement to non-camp locations in asylum and urban locations upon return should be anticipated and factored into planning processes.

Finding Two: Urban returnees who had lived in non-camp settings tended to be less reliant on external assistance, and to engage in a wider array of livelihoods activities while in exile, compared to camp-based returnees. Recent policy and academic literature has noted that urban, non-camp settings offer greater opportunities for refugees to engage in livelihoods activities than camp or remote rural settings. The household survey responses indicated that urban returnees from non-camp settings reported a broader mix of activities that supported them during their time in exile, including business, labor and trading. Camp-based urban returnees were much more likely to report external assistance as their main source of support. While this does not confirm asset building per se, it does suggest the non-camp environment may be more conducive to asset building than the camp environment.

Finding Three: Non-camp settings still allow for refugees to access essential services, but not at the same rates as in camp settings. UNHCR registration rates and regular access to assistance was close to universal in the Côte d'Ivoire case, and in both the Rwanda and Côte d'Ivoire cases was reported to be much higher by camp-based returnees than by non-camp returnees. Similarly, camp subgroups reported greater access to health care and education than non-camp subgroups. The household survey did not ask respondents whether services were inaccessible, or simply not accessed, while in exile.

Finding Four: Non-camp refugees are more likely to repatriate sooner and return 'spontaneously' to urban locations than their camp-based counterparts. In both the Côte d'Ivoire and Rwanda cases, non-camp returnees tended to indicate that they had returned earlier than camp-based returnees. In the case of Bloléquin, returns from non-camp locations began at least a year before UNHCR-assisted repatriation was formally initiated. This supports the premise set forth in recent policies that circumstances of return will be different for urban or non-camp returnees, who may be accustomed to greater freedom of movement, self-reliance and autonomy as compared to refugees living in camps.

Finding Five: Perceptions of conditions in countries of origin are a key factor in voluntary returns to urban locations, although "push" factors still play a role. The perception that conditions back home have improved was the main factor noted in the household survey responses. A minority of Ivoirian respondents, about 25% in the Bloléquin sample, indicates that deterioration of conditions while in asylum was the main factor, and a number of interview responses indicated that this was a factor that influenced their decision. While respondents generally indicated their decision to repatriate was voluntary, it is possible that options were becoming constrained as time in exile went on, particularly for camp-based refugees who were reliant on assistance provided.

Finding Six: Quality of housing may be a concern for urban returnees, even after permanent shelter is accessed. The study found that while a majority of urban returnees have been able to access permanent shelter, this does not mean that the quality of housing is adequate, particularly from returnees' subjective viewpoints. Over-crowding was noted by

several interview respondents in Abidjan and Bloléquin, to the point where larger households reported splitting up in order for all family members to have a place to stay. Threats of eviction and poor quality housing were also noted by Ivoirian respondents. Meanwhile, one-quarter of Gisenyi respondents did not indicate that they had found permanent shelter, and several interviews indicated dissatisfaction with high costs of housing or lack of home ownership. Objectively, these might not be considered indicators of inadequate access to shelter, but subjectively they may be a source of negative feelings about housing for at least some segment of urban returnees, even well into the reintegration process.

Finding Seven: Economic challenges may exist, even if employment rates are high, and may be greater for urban returnees who had fled from rural areas. One challenge noted in policy discussion is access to employment, particularly for persons who had fled rural areas who may lack skills relevant to urban job markets. In Côte d'Ivoire, the study did not find meaningful differences in employment rates between urban and rural origin subgroups. It did, however, find a sharp difference in perceived income trends between urban and rural origin returnees to the town, with rural origin returnees much more likely to indicate that income was worsening. This may indicate economic challenges that the survey tool could not capture, such as the impact of lost land or property. Even among urban origin returnees, interview responses suggest many households in Bloléquin remain in “survival mode” and are doing what work they can, but struggling to make ends meet.

Finding Eight: Subsistence agriculture remains part of household livelihood strategies in urban returns contexts. In Bloléquin, more than 60% of urban returnees indicated they access land for cultivation, as did 39% of urban returnees in Gisenyi. Of those who do have land access, the vast majority – more than 90% in both cases – reported that land is being put to productive use. The majority in both locations are primarily consuming agricultural products rather than selling via the market, suggesting that production may contribute to household food security.

Finding Nine: Social networks are available to some, though not all, urban returnees (and could depend on whether returnees were originally from urban or rural locations). In both the Côte d'Ivoire and Rwanda cases, support from family was noted by just over half of all respondents and support from non-relatives by around a third of all respondents, suggesting that social networks do play a role in assisting reintegration for some but not for all. Notably, the study found little difference in the level of support provided to urban and rural returnees by family members. In Bloléquin, urban origin returnees to the town were more likely to indicate support from family than rural origin returnees, suggesting that they were more likely to have lost family networks or that these networks do not “extend” into the town setting. In Rwanda, the level of support from non-relatives was reported by a greater percentage of rural returnees than urban returnees, but there was no difference in support from non-relatives in the Côte d'Ivoire case.

Finding Ten: Higher crime rates in large urban areas may negatively affect the safety and security of returnees. Concerns about crime and safety figured prominently in interview responses in Abidjan, where returnees noted the increased presence of armed youth gangs and violent crime, including armed robbery and killings. This concern was not observed in the responses from Bloléquin or Gisenyi, both smaller urban locations. Survey responses in those locations indicated high levels of feeling safe and to the extent safety concerns were expressed these were not connected to general crime or lawlessness.

Finding Eleven: Social ties with persons in countries of asylum are often maintained, though circular migration is not necessarily evident. One premise held by literature on returns in the context of urbanization is that circular migration occurs within repatriation, particularly in relation to pursuing livelihoods opportunities. The study did not identify examples of this occurring within the interview responses, though the majority of Ivoirian returnees interviewed in both Abidjan and Bloléquin indicated that they keep in contact with friends or family who are in the country of asylum. Social ties were less evident among the Gisenyi returnees, though several noted they still maintained friendships, family or business ties in the DRC, and three indicated that they travel periodically to the DRC.

Recommendations

The study's findings reinforce empirically the assumption that urbanization is taking place alongside forced displacement, and that dynamics present in urban and non-camp settings should be factored into voluntary repatriation policy and operations. Recommendations based on these findings include:

A. Anticipate Increased Urbanization of Refugee Return

The CWS study showed that urbanization is taking place across all phases of forced displacement (i.e., flight, asylum, return, and post-return). This finding, along with broader studies that highlight urbanization as a global trend, suggests that where voluntary returns do take place they are increasingly likely to intersect with urbanization. Updates to operational guidance on voluntary repatriation should recognize that refugee return from urban or other non-camp areas may transform urban-rural relations in important ways. In particular, return to place of origin should not be considered a “default” setting, nor should rural origin refugees returning to towns and cities or post-return migration from rural to urban areas be considered indicative of “failed” reintegration.

Operationally, this might begin at the point of collecting information from prospective returnees in countries of asylum, and continue through engagement with returnees after repatriation. Information collection as part of voluntary repatriation registration could, for example, collect information on the types of locations where households lived, both before fleeing and during exile. It could also ask explicitly whether refugees are considering a return to a different location than the one which they had fled, so as not to assume that return equates with return to place of origin.

B. Explore New Routes for Refugee Return from Urban and Non-Camp Areas

Repatriation frameworks should go beyond affirming the right of refugees in urban or non-camp areas to return, and explore options for enabling this in a manner that recognizes the specific characteristics and challenges of refugee life outside of camps. Operationally, this could include engagement of non-camp refugees in intentions surveys, registration or verification exercises, or other activities that are undertaken in countries of asylum in anticipation of voluntary returns. Given the study's findings, preparatory work should begin early on with non-camp refugees, as they tend to return to urban areas sooner than camp-based refugees.

Reaching out to spontaneous urban returnees in repatriation activities, including monitoring conditions of return and reintegration, could expand or strengthen routes to return from urban and non-camp settings. This is based on the study's finding that non-camp refugees were more

likely to return to urban locations in a ‘spontaneous’ manner rather than via UNHCR facilitation. Intentional outreach to this group, such as extending opportunities to register for assistance or contribute input to monitoring exercises, may both increase access by spontaneous urban returnees to protection and essential services and ensure that program design is inclusive of this group’s needs.

C. Promote Repatriation through Social Linkages Rather than Rupture

One of the great strengths of the most recent UNHCR policies is their recognition that expanding urban and non-camp options can benefit host communities and governments as well as refugees themselves. Refugees, including those located outside camp settings, should continue to be supported in accessing up-to-date and accurate information about conditions in countries of origin. This should include information about town and city locations, given that improvements back home were the main motivation for return for a majority of urban returnees.

For refugees who indicate intentions to return to urban locations, or who are considered likely to return to urban locations, an interactive “reintegration orientation” prior to returning could assist prospective urban returnees to prepare appropriately. This could provide an overview of access to public services, civil documentation, housing and labor markets in urban areas, as well as other themes as identified by prospective urban returnees, either based on findings from “go-and-see” visits or from other information available about conditions back home.

Prospective returnees living in non-camp, and particularly urban, locations are more likely to engage in a wider variety of livelihood activities. To the extent that this increases access to livelihoods assets (including, but not limited to, physical assets), it seems likely that refugees will factor in these assets into their calculus of whether, when and where to return. Working with urban refugees on asset mapping or other livelihoods strategic planning could assist them to identify ways to leverage human, financial, social and possibly even physical capital that they may have developed while in exile toward self-reliance after returning.

D. Enhancing Returns Monitoring in Urban Settings

One of this project’s goals was to contribute to monitoring tools that could be applied in urban returns and reintegration settings. As an input to this recommendation set, CWS reviewed a small sample of existing voluntary returns monitoring and evaluation reports generated by UNHCR and its implementing partners. These reports suggested that monitoring has become more robust and systematically integrated into returns and reintegration operations over the past decade, which should provide a starting point for tailoring monitoring, so that it captures information relevant to urban returns. Generally, monitoring could more consistently allow for the disaggregation of data by neighborhood or municipality, which could enhance the application of findings in specific urban locations.

CWS identified a number of indicators that could be used to enhance monitoring of voluntary return and reintegration in urban settings, based on areas in which notable or actionable findings were identified in the two case studies. These indicators, presented in Section 7 of the full report, are intended for use by UNHCR, implementing partners, and local government bodies or community-based associations in monitoring reintegration in urban settings. They could also be used in baseline surveys within urban communities receiving returnees to establish benchmarks against which returnee responses could be compared.