



## Going home?

A systematic review  
of the literature on  
displacement,  
return and cycles  
of violence

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## Introduction

To date, repatriation or in other words ‘going home’ is the most preferred sustainable solution put forward by the United Nations High Commissioner For Refugees (UNHCR) and governments to address displacement triggered by violent conflict. The return and reintegration of refugees, Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), and former combatants is also widely presented as being crucial to peacebuilding and national reconciliation; to the promotion of state stability and legitimacy; and to the triggering of post-conflict economic development. The prioritization of return (over local integration or resettlement options) was put forward from the late eighties and early nineties onwards, receiving strong impetus in 1992 by the then UNHCR High Commissioner Sadako Ogata, who declared the nineties as the ‘decade of voluntary repatriation’ (Long 2011, 240). The growing importance of repatriation as strategy in the past three decades has not, however, coincided with an increase in safe, voluntary and dignified returns. On the contrary, scholars, practitioners and human rights organizations have observed how refugee returns are often organized in unstable and war-like situations, and do not always maintain a voluntary character (Chimni 1999; HRW 2017; Long 2013: 106–109; Toft 2007). Moreover, investigations into the later stages of repatriation have shown that return is a very problematic concept and a long-term process (rather than an event) that carries many challenges (Allen 1996; Allen and Morsink 1994; Black and Koser 1999; Markowitz, Stefansson and Anders 2004; Oxfeld and Long 2004). Strikingly, despite the growing salience of these critiques, issues of return and repatriation remain significantly under-researched. Very little is known about the lived experiences of those who returned and/or stayed behind, the longer term dynamics of return, and about the position of returnees in (re)constituting societies. So, there is a limited understanding of a process that profoundly impacts and transforms entire societies in conflict-affected areas, and which “remains a powerful symbol of the end of conflict and a return to normalcy” (Black and Gent 2006: 31).

In Central-Africa, the widespread reality of protracted conflict and protracted refugee situations (PRS) creates a particular environment for return. While northern Uganda has emerged out of a violent conflict between the Lord’s Resistance Army and the Ugandan government, eastern Congo, Burundi, the Central African Republic (CAR) and South Sudan continue to experience recurrent outbreaks of violence and population displacement. In general, processes of violence and displacement in this region tend to continue to be a part of people’s lives after returning ‘home’, exemplifying that ‘return’ can hardly and unambiguously be seen as the ‘end of the refugee cycle’ (Black and Koser 1999). Furthermore, case-studies reveal that return itself often imposes renewed tensions, particularly when returnees reclaim properties or compete over scarce resources. Also, the increasing involvement of the international community and humanitarian organizations in these processes of return (such as repatriation operations, DDR programmes, reintegration assistance) and of post-conflict reconstruction, opens up new spaces of contestation, adding new layers of complexity to the existing contexts<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> These observations are of course not restricted to Central-Africa, but extend to

Starting from the complex reality of return, this paper recognizes that cycles of violence, displacement and return are intimately related and often inherently part of one another. This paper aims to offer a critical overview and discussion of scholarly and policy-oriented literature on processes of return in conflict and post-conflict societies without ignoring the international historical and political contexts and policy-frameworks that have continuously shaped and influenced research interests and agendas. Indeed, the paper argues that much of the literature has maintained a close connection to the official policy-frameworks and rationales of repatriation operations and discourses in terms of peacebuilding and economic development. Furthermore, the paper posits that the scope of many studies tends to be limited to specific social groups of returnees and localized understandings and researches return on a case-by-case basis, which explains the absence of a deeper understanding of how returnees, but also stayees, and political and humanitarian actors experience, practice and give meaning to 'return'. For these reasons, this paper advocates a research agenda that is attentive to the social, political, economic and cultural transformative impact of population return on regions and societies in or emerging out of violent conflict.

The analysis presented in this paper is based on a systematic evidence-based literature study and aims to provide a critical discussion of the literature on return and repatriation processes researched in the last three decades. It starts by explaining the methodological aspects of the search process, followed by an introduction to situate the main debates in their historical context and within an evolving international policy framework on return and the search for 'durable solutions'. Next, it critically discusses the main themes that emerged from the literature: (1) a conceptual debate on return, (2) the socio-economic development dimensions of return, (3) its linkages to peacebuilding and conflict prevention, (4) the psycho-social effects of war, and (5) the politics of return. The subsequent section then provides a closer look at four specific countries in Central-Africa: Uganda, South(ern) Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Central African Republic (CAR). The paper concludes with a future research agenda based on the identified gaps in existing 'evidence'.

## Methodology

The data for this paper was collected through a qualitative systematic 'evidence-based' literature study. Widely applied in the medical and natural sciences since the seventies, systematic reviews grew increasingly influential in the nineties as the 'gold standard' for an evidence-based policy, eventually also increasingly being used in other academic disciplines such as the social sciences (Young, Ashby, Boaz and Grayson 2002). Through a fixed protocol of data collection, systematic reviews came to be seen as a key tool to reduce the researcher's bias and establish a reliable, comprehensive rigorous 'evidence base' to inform policy-making (Dixon-Woods et al. 2006; Mallett, Hagen-Zanker, Slater and Duvendack 2012; Petticrew and Roberts 2006). However, scholars have warned of the dangers of presenting systematic reviews as neutral, rational and objective, and of the uncritical adoption of a rigid evidence-based methodological framework that has mainly been used to assess the effectiveness of policy interventions (Cuvelier, Vlassenroot and Olin 2013; Dixon-Woods et al. 2006; Hagen-Zanker and Mallett 2013; Mallett et al. 2012). They argue for more reflexive and flexible approaches that combine the core principles of rigour, transparency and replicability with a more "user-friendly handling of retrieval and analysis methods" (Hagen-Zanker and Mallett 2013: 1; Mallett et al. 2012: 447).

This literature review adopted a less rigid and more flexible approach to data retrieval and analysis. The process of data retrieval consisted of a database-driven

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situations of population return all over the world.

search through several academic search engines, followed by a snowball search based on relevant publications. The analysis was initially guided by a process of tagging, which identified relevant publications that were subsequently thoroughly read and evaluated.

The literature from the database-driven search was collected between February and March 2017. Five databases were selected: African Journals Online (AJO), JSTOR, SCOPUS, Web of Science and Google Scholar. JSTOR, SCOPUS and Web of Science were selected for their extensive coverage of academic literature. AJO was included to target publications from African scholars.<sup>2</sup> Google Scholar was selected as a means to find grey literature outside the mainstream publishing channels.

Three Boolean search strings were used to gradually narrow the scope of the assessed publications. While the first search string was intended to target processes of violence and displacement (displace\*, \*conflict\*, violence, \*war\*), the second and third search strings aimed to respectively target specific social groups of returnees (return, returnee, eintegrat\*, former IDP\*, former refugee, ex-combatant, former combatant), and processes of return and home-making (reintegrate\*, re-integrate\*, citizen\*, stayee\*, reconstruct\*, reconciliat\*, social repair, home, belonging). 'Home' and 'belonging' were incorporated to include publications that elaborated on the concepts of return and homecoming itself. For every database, only the first 500 publications were considered due to a decreasing relevance after this point. 1990 was used as a cut-off year, reflecting the start of the 'decade of voluntary repatriation'. Only English publications were selected. Publications on diaspora populations and on the return of veterans<sup>3</sup> who fought in WWII, or in the 'war on terror' in Iraq and Afghanistan were discarded to remain with a core group of literature that focuses on physical return to countries in or emerging out of violent conflict. This search strategy generated 789 publications.

After retrieval, all publications were subjected to a second screening by reading the abstracts (and, when in doubt, scanning full texts) in order to identify the most relevant ones, resulting in 433 remaining references. This second screening also involved a process of tagging which aimed to give a general overview of the main themes present in the literature.

The snowball search took place from June to August 2017. Reading through the database-collection, it was noticed that some of much-cited and influential studies and grey literature (such as policy documents, reports, etc.) did not surface during the initial search. Therefore, bibliographies and footnotes of literature studies, as well as publications making important arguments and often being cited within the database-collection, were screened and eventually selected.<sup>4</sup> Finally, a small number of publications were suggested by experts, were already known by the author or found by coincidence outside the search protocol, (Apio 2015; Atim and Mazurana 2018; Akesson and Baaz 2015; Bjarnesen 2013; Branch 2011; Hopwood and Atkinson 2015; Hopwood 2015; Kiconco and Nthakomwa 2018; Kibreab 1999; Macdonald and Porter 2016; Macdonald 2017; Long 2011; Scalettari 2013). This generated an additional 55 studies, bringing the total number of publications to 488.

### **Situating the Debates**

The past three decades have witnessed a dynamic and evolving landscape in terms of actual return movements and experiences, and eventually of policy and research. Before the nineties, relatively few researchers were interested in exploring what happened once refugees decide to return home. This general lack of interest has largely been attributed

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<sup>2</sup> Although it should be mentioned that this search only generated 6 publications of which 3 were withheld.

<sup>3</sup> However, the discursive separation of western 'veterans' and African 'ex-combatants' in many studies is interesting in this regard. See McMullin (2013) for a critical discussion.

<sup>4</sup> This sometimes even involved a second snowball search, based on influential studies retrieved during the first one.

to international thinking about repatriation in the context of the Cold War and to nationalist thinking that envisioned 'return' as an unproblematic event of 'homecoming' (Allen and Morsink 1994; Allen and Turton 1996; Chimni 1999; Long 2013).

During the Cold War, resettlement was actively promoted over repatriation as a durable solution to refugee situations. Refugees coming from Eastern Europe were highly valued by the US and its allies and warmly welcomed to the 'free world'. The small number of 'defectors' were often highly skilled and educated. They held valuable inside-information from the USSR or its Eastern European allies, and their personal stories of persecution and repression supported the propaganda war between the Western and Eastern Bloc (Toft 2007: 143). In response, countries in the Western Bloc adopted generous asylum policies, promoting the resettlement and local integration of refugees rather than their return. This mindset was further influenced by the collective trauma of the Holocaust, and feelings of guilt for having initially refused entry to Jewish refugees (Toft 2007, 145). A genuine debate on repatriation was further complicated by the creation of Israel, with competing demands of Zionists and Palestinians to 'go home' being backed by respectively the western and eastern bloc and leading to a stalemate situation (Allen & Morsink 1994: 2–3). In this context, refugees were generally not considered as a burden to host countries. Their stay was perceived as temporary, thus rendering repatriation a "relatively low-priority issue" (Crisp 2001: 174). Consequently, the promotion of resettlement over repatriation as a durable refugee solution resulted in a rather reductionist policy framework on refugee return. Crisp (2001) writes that UNHCR's role in repatriation operations was largely confined to ensuring its voluntary character and providing transport and small repatriation packages. Reintegration assistance and activities were rarely recognized or included (174).

Allen and Turton (1996: 1) also argue that nationalist thinking contributed to a lack of interest in return issues. Repatriation was commonly seen as an unproblematic event that reestablished a broken 'natural tie' between people, place and identity (Kibreab 1999; K. Long 2013; Warner 1994). The simple return of people to their 'patria' or homeland and their own social communities and territories, was believed to resolve all issues and be sufficient for the reestablishment of political stability and legitimacy, peace and consequently the end of displacement (Allen & Turton 1996; Long 2013; *cf. section on the concept of return*).

Although scholarly interest in displacement steadily increased during the seventies and eighties, studies on processes of return remained almost non-existent (Allen & Morsink 1994: 2), as was confirmed by Coles (1985) and Crisp (1987) in their elaborate reviews of literature and policy frameworks. Crisp also argued that existing studies largely concentrated on three streams of interest (international law, political motivations, and logistics, and mainly focused on the international approach towards repatriation, evaluations of organized repatriations, their funding, responsibilities, etc. The experiences of returnees themselves had rarely been examined (Crisp 1987 cited in Allen & Morsink 1994: 2). This radically changed from the late eighties onwards, when a booming interest in processes of 'return' has been attributed to (1) the increasing prioritization of voluntary repatriation over resettlement as the most desired refugee solution by the international community; and (2) to a number of large-scale post-conflict return movements (Chimni 1999; Crisp 2001; Macrae 1999; Toft 2007).

The policy shift from resettlement to repatriation can partly be explained within the context of the end of the Cold War and of a surge of conflicts in Africa. After the collapse of the USSR, the unexpected exodus of citizens of the former Soviet republics combined with new refugee crises in the Balkans, the African Great Lakes and Southeast Asia (among others) created pressure on countries of asylum. Additionally, western states became increasingly reluctant to host refugees whom they perceived as being part of large migration flows from the poorer 'South' to the wealthier 'North' (K.

Long 2013: 101). Further, in the absence of Cold War geopolitics, the value of refugees as a propaganda tool had dwindled, reducing them to 'locusts' instead of 'diamonds' (Toft 2007). As a result, asylum policies became increasingly more restrictive and repatriation a preferable response strategy.

Partly as a result of these shifts, the ambitious 'refugee aid and development' strategy of the seventies and eighties was replaced by a new 'returnee aid and development' strategy. The 'refugee aid and development' approach was developed in response to growing refugee populations and decreasing capacities of asylum countries to host them, particularly in Africa. A range of projects funded by UNHCR, aimed at connecting refugee assistance to larger 'sustainable' development goals through the inclusion of 'host' populations and promoting self-sufficiency. In this way, refugees would be able to contribute to the local economy, thus reducing the burden for their hosts (Crisp 2001: 170). According to Crisp (2001), this strategy was not in line with the changing interests after the Cold War and the diverging objectives of donor and asylum governments, the former being interested in 'finding lasting solutions to refugee problems' and the latter in benefiting from 'international burden sharing' (172). Voluntary repatriation was promoted as the 'only effective solution', pushing UNHCR to focus its attention more on repatriation and reintegration of returning refugees than on providing humanitarian assistance (Crisp 2001: 173).<sup>5</sup>

In 1985, the UNHCR Executive Committee issued Conclusion no. 40 on Voluntary Repatriation which expanded UNHCR's mandate to returning populations (Allen & Turton 1996: 2). In the following years, the percentage of UNHCR's total budget expenditure on return operations increased accordingly, from 2 percent before 1984 to approx. 14 percent in the period 1990-1997 (Crisp 2001: 175; Macrae 1999: 3). The broadening of its mandate was considered necessary because, along with the growing importance of 'voluntary repatriation', people were increasingly returning to conflict-affected regions (which at that time became defined as 'political emergencies'<sup>6</sup>). In response to growing criticism on this worrying trend, UNHCR became gradually more involved in assisting, reintegrating and protecting returnees.

Macrae (1999) and Crisp (2001: 178) argued that UNHCR had a 'comparative advantage' over receiving countries, as it was familiar with the returning population and had the necessary expertise, experience and logistical capacity to provide immediate assistance upon their return. Importantly, this policy shift converged with a growing demand from donors to justify the use of funding, leading eventually to a re-establishment of the 'rationale for international assistance' (Macrae 1999: 10). In 1992, the High Commissioner justified this shift as follows:

"given the number of countries involved, the magnitude of the numbers returning and the fact that their successful reintegration is critical to any national reconciliation and reconstruction process, the issues are not simply humanitarian. International security is at stake" (UNHCR 1992, cited in Crisp, 2001: 176).

UNHCR's mandate in assisting and reintegrating returnees was now framed in terms of peacebuilding, conflict resolution and the prevention of new outbreaks of violent conflict (see UNHCR 1992, 1998, 2004). In addition to the connection between return assistance and peacebuilding, a close relationship was also established between return and economic recovery. Returnee aid thus had to serve wider development objectives, which, in turn, would also contribute to peacebuilding. To these ends, UNHCR developed closer partnerships with UNDP and the World Bank. This last partnership is also known as the 'Brookings process' and paved the way to a joint policy agenda aimed at closing 'the

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<sup>5</sup> For more elaborate discussions on what is presented here as a very short summary, see Crisp (2001), Macrae (1999), Chimni (1999), Long (2013), Allen & Turton (1996), Toft (2007), Stein (1994), Rogge (1994).

<sup>6</sup> In her article, Macrae (1999) provides a critique on (the politics of) the term 'post-conflict': many countries experiencing return can better be conceptualized as 'chronic political emergencies'.

gap between humanitarian assistance and long-term development' (Crisp 2001: 185). Macrae (Macrae 1999: 1) aptly argues that UNHCR's attention to peacebuilding and economic development in returning areas "have been based on an analysis of the causes of conflict which focuses largely on internal and economic factors".

This process, encompassing the growing concern of the international community with peace, stability and economic development in post-conflict situations; and the expressed need for deeper involvement of UNHCR, UNDP and the World Bank in repatriation and reintegration operations, evolved synchronously with large return movements throughout the nineties and early 2000s. Although Long (2013) warned that a unilateral interpretation of repatriation was "an almost exclusively post-Cold War phenomenon" (87), the numbers of displaced people returning to their countries of origin during the 'decade of voluntary repatriation' was unprecedented. Rogge (1994) estimated a return of approximately 3.5 million displaced people between 1971-1990 (16-17). Harild et al. (2015) note almost as many returns for 1995 and 1996 alone (3).<sup>7</sup> In the aftermath of the collapse of the USSR, massive returns took place to El Salvador, Nicaragua and Guatemala (Long 2013; Stepputat 1999; Worby 1999), while hundreds of thousands of Cambodians were suddenly and quickly repatriated from Thailand in order for them to participate in the 1993 elections (Eastmond & Öjendal 1999). One million refugees returned to Ethiopia and Eritrea (Bascom 2005; Kibreab 2001, 2002, 2003) after new governments took power in 1991 and 1993. Between 1992 and 1996, about 1.7 million Mozambican refugees repatriated following the 1991 Paris Peace Accords (Long 2011: 240), and half a million Rwandan refugees were repatriated from refugee camps in Democratic Republic of Congo (Pottier 1999). And the largest return movement since WWII was believed to be the Bosnian repatriation from the second half of the nineties onwards (Black & Koser 1999: 3).

Both the policy shifts and large-scale refugee repatriations had a significant impact on the field of refugee studies, which was now increasingly turning its attention to the 'afterlife' of the refugee. In response to the policy shift of the international community towards repatriation instead of resettlement, it was argued that "what is being promoted as the most desirable solution to refugee crises is a poorly understood social and spatial phenomenon" (Bascom 1994; Norwegian Government, Department of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs 1994: 5, cited in Chimni 1999: 4). To fill this gap, the United Nations Research Institute of Social Development (UNRISD) launched a research programme on the return of refugees. Symposia in Addis Ababa, Harare and N'Djamena resulted in two widely credited edited volumes of Allen & Morsink (1994) and Allen (1996) on African repatriation and reintegration operations and experiences that 'put returnees on the map'. Other research followed, expanding further the geographical scope to African (Kingma 1997; Koser 1997; Preston 1997), Asian (Eastmond & Öjendal 1999; Van Hear 1994; Worby 1999) and Central American (Bailey & Hane 1995; Brentlinger, Hernan, Hernandez-Diaz, Azaroff, & McCall 1999; Sundquist & Johansson 1996) processes of repatriation.

Developments like the 'returnee aid and development' strategy and the 'Brookings process' were largely echoed in the focus of research and the growing body of studies on the issue of return. Most of the identified debates discussed below can in one way or another be traced back to how UNHCR, and by extension the international community, defined return in terms of peacebuilding and economic recovery. Scholarly attention to return has, even more than similar work on refugees, largely been inspired and influenced by these policy priorities and concerns. It helps to explain why most of the selected and reviewed literature tends to be policy oriented and guided by normative interests aimed at improving the repatriation and reintegration of returnees. Scholarly

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<sup>7</sup> Of course, these are mostly recorded return movements by UNHCR in the context of increasingly organized repatriation operations.



attention has generally moved towards what determines refugee decision-making to 'go home' (e.g. Koser 1997) or to evolve into actors of change and development once returned (Cassarino 2004).

This paper presents the major debates identified through the literature review on return. The first section of this literature review will present the conceptual debate in existing literature on the nature of return. This reveals the continuous scholarly endeavor to better understand how processes of return have and are being practiced by returning populations, and how policy and research frameworks should be adapted in order to be in line with these lived experiences. The second section presents an analysis of how the linkages between repatriation, reintegration and development are understood in existing literature. It argues that successful, sustainable repatriation is generally understood as consisting of reintegration based on economic development. A considerable number of studies look into the socio-economic dimensions of population return, aimed at improving repatriation and reintegration interventions. The third section presents studies that focus on cycles of violence, displacement and return. Many scholars working on these issues are influenced by concerns of peacebuilding, conflict resolution, and reconciliation, which are considered to be crucial for preventing new cycles of violence and displacement. These studies have particularly focused on processes of Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) of former combatants; access to land; reconciliation; and the role of displaced persons in peace accords. The fourth section concentrates on the literature focusing on psychosocial effects of war, which have gained increased attention among researchers and policy makers, mainly in respect to its relevance for peacebuilding, reconciliation and post-conflict reconstruction. The fifth and last section looks at the literature illustrating a return of 'the political', which refers to the reconnection of returning populations to the political status they left behind when moving into exile. Although this is a much more recent field of study, scholars have increasingly dealt with population return as an intricate political process that aims to bring peace, security and democratic legitimacy.

### **The Concept of Return**

One of the most vivid debates in the identified and selected literature is about the concept of return itself. Two sets of questions dominate this debate: the first aims to achieve a better understanding of how processes of return have and are being practiced, experienced and given meaning by returning populations, researchers and policy-makers; the second focuses on ways forward by rethinking policy and research frameworks that are in line with experienced processes of return.

#### *- Processes of return*

Scholars focusing on experiences and practices of return have examined the law and practice of 'the right to return'; questioned the idea of 'return' as a process of 'homecoming' and 'reintegration'; and discussed whether or not 'return' can be seen as 'the end of the refugee cycle'.

The right to leave and return to one's country is considered a basic right, reflected in Article 13(2) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948. In a context of violent conflict, peace and tripartite agreements often explicitly specify 'the right to return' for displaced populations. Importantly, this right is also increasingly understood as the right to reclaim houses, properties and lands (HLP). The notion of restitution or compensation gained international acceptance in the context of Cambodian and Guatemalan repatriation operations in the 1990s, and was also explicitly mentioned in the 1995 Dayton peace accords ending the war in Bosnia (Williams 2009: 53–54). The implementation of 'the right to return' in Bosnia (and to a lesser extent in other former Yugoslavian republics), sparked extensive scholarly interest. It is argued in existing

literature that the ‘right to return’ has been used by the international community as a political tool of nation-building, to ‘reverse ethnic cleansing’ and to recreate former Yugoslavia’s multi-ethnic character in newly established states (Black 2001; Bougarel, Helms & Duijzings 2008; Dahlman & Tuathail 2005a, 2005b; Jansen 2006; Ó Tuathail & Dahlman 2004; Sert 2011). Black (2001) argues that funding for post-war reconstruction was increasingly linked to and conditioned by processes of repatriation, referring to the right of ‘minority groups’ to reclaim their former properties in newly established and largely mono-ethnic nations that emerged out of post-war former Yugoslavia. While it is generally agreed that this was largely a successful, but lengthy, process, authors have argued that issues such as ethnic reconciliation and poverty reduction have been ignored (Black 2001; Ó Tuathail & Dahlman 2004). Moreover, the intention of creating multi-ethnic nations did not materialize (Sert 2011: 231).

Other literature has questioned the link of return, apart from being a right, to the notion of voluntariness. UNHCR’s High Commissioner Sadako Ogata did not merely declare the nineties the decade of repatriation, but that of ‘*voluntary* repatriation’. Scholars have increasingly objected to this imagined reality, arguing that ‘voluntariness’ has gradually made way for the acceptance of ‘safe’ and ‘imposed’ returns (Chimni 1999; Toft 2007).

Return has also been understood as ‘homecoming’.<sup>8</sup> The primacy of voluntary repatriation as a sustainable solution to displacement since the late eighties has been underscored by the idea of repatriation as encompassing a return to the ‘patria’, or the homeland. ‘Return’ was seen to involve a sense of belonging to and identification with a community and a place or territory, both intrinsically linked and giving meaning to ‘identity’ (Kibreab 1999; K. Long 2013: 28–29). In this light, Hammond (1999) notes that the ‘terms of the repatriation canon’ such as reintegration, reconstruction and readjustment suggest an understanding of repatriation as a return to a place which is familiar, implying the restoration of a broken, ‘natural tie’ (30).

Together with notions such as ‘re-integration’ and ‘re-construction’, however, the homecoming model has received rising criticism since the early nineties. Returning populations often resettle elsewhere than their former ‘homes’ (Joireman, Sawyer, & Wilhoit 2012; Sert 2011; Vorrath 2008); struggle with social reintegration into their home communities being considered as ‘stayee communities’ (Bascom 2005; Sonja Fransen & Kuschminder 2012; Kibreab 2002; Oxfeld 2004); and thus rarely ‘come home’ or return to a context they knew from before the outbreak of violent conflict. According to Warner (1994), the idealized notions of homecoming attached to the policy framework of voluntary repatriation are not only unrealistic, but also tend to contain nostalgic equations between individuals, community, territory and government, fostering a false understanding of ‘return’ as the reestablishment of a natural tie between people, place and identity and neglecting societal transformations in conflict affected areas redefining this ‘natural tie’ as well.

The decade of ‘voluntary repatriation’ thus ended with the recognition that repatriation is not necessarily the ‘end of the refugee cycle’, but often a very problematic and difficult process casting returnees in new socio-economic and political realities (Black & Koser 1999). In his chapter on Eritrean refugees returning from Sudan in the early nineties, Kibreab (1996) describes the different economic and social transformations that affected these refugees in exile:

“Many former rural dwellers became urbanized. For some this proved a deskilling experience, and the integration of such groups in Eritrea is likely to be an uphill

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<sup>8</sup> Evidently, the following discussion is only based on publications detected via the search protocol and specifically linked with ‘return’ processes. Diaspora literature was discarded during the screening process. Other important contributions to the broader debate of national belonging and homemaking are therefore not included (e.g. Malkki 1995; Blunt & Dowling 2006).

task. Social networks which provided support in times of crisis have either been weakened or replaced by more commoditized relationships. The moral ties which maintained extended family life have commonly been set aside. Traditional modes of leadership have become almost meaningless.” (Kibreab 1996: 60)

While Stein (1994: 68) comes to the same conclusion and stresses that “repatriation is not a panacea”, Markowitz and Stefansson counter the understanding of the ‘impossibility’ of return presenting an edited volume of ‘encouraging experiences’, with the aim to illustrate that “the blessings of homecoming can make it well worth the struggle” (12).

Given the different dynamics of ‘homecoming’, more recently, scholars have also attempted to address the question of how ‘return’ is actually practiced and experienced. As part of this literature, interest has turned to transnational perspectives, including studies focusing on borders and circular mobilities that view migration as an integral part of the ‘return’ experience and vice versa (Bailey & Hane 1995; Barrett 2008; Eastmond 2006; Iaria 2014; L. D. Long & Oxfeld 2004: 2; Stepputat 2004). In contexts described as ‘protracted refugee situations’ (PRS), scholars have also examined how refugee strategies define migration patterns, pointing at the choice to visit their lands and relatives in their home countries, yet simultaneously maintaining residence and the benefits of refugee protection in the host country (Chatelard 2010; Hovil 2010; Kaiser 2010; Monsutti 2004). This practice, aimed at minimizing risk by dispersion, is described in existing literature as ‘split return’ (Harpviken 2014); the shift between livelihood opportunities and the maintenance of a network of social relations in different places, indeed helps to strengthen their socio-economic position and security.

This recognition of ‘split return’ inspired a perspective on return as an ambiguous and fluid concept. In her paper on Sudanese refugees in Uganda, Hovil (2010) illustrates how these refugees “effectively created their own ‘durable solution’ through a combination of economic and social integration within the Ugandan population, and ongoing movement in and out of Sudan” (1). Other scholars explored even more ambiguous returns, including repatriations that can best be understood as new forms of displacement because of the settlement in places where ‘returnees’ have never been before (Ballinger 2012; Cornish, Peltzer & Maclachlan 1999). A pertinent example is the home-making process of Jewish settlers in Israel, as described by Hagemann (2015), or the ‘displacement’ of more than half a million Burkinabe immigrant laborers from Côte d’Ivoire, a return to a country some of them had never seen before (Bjarnesen 2013). These cases helped rethinking current and traditional understandings of ‘return’ as emplacement.

#### *- Normative standards and policy responses*

The second set of questions in existing literature on return relates to the establishment of normative standards informing the concept and the practice of ‘return’ both in academia and policy. Different approaches are presented in the selected literature on how to examine processes of return and reintegration and which conceptual framework to apply. The same literature critically assesses how to adapt policy-frameworks to the ever-changing realities and understandings of return.

In this respect, two theoretical contributions deserve particular attention. One is by Laura Hammond (1999), who based on the case study of returning Tigrayans to Ethiopia focuses on the later stages of repatriation, and advocates for the development of a new language rethinking the ‘repatriation equals homecoming model’. By translating terms such as ‘re-integration’, ‘re-construction’ and ‘re-recovery’ to the ‘operative principles of social change’, such as construction, creativity, innovation and improvisation, Hammond suggests that the experiences of returnees can teach lessons about “culture change, the construction of communities, and the multiple meanings of and connections between, notions of identity, culture, home and geographical place” (p.228). However, while her

work has been cited extensively, few scholars have yet examined the social transformative impact of population return on (post-)conflict societies (see e.g. Wood 2008; Grabska 2013; 2014). Such analyses require a focus on entire communities, including consideration for the currently under-researched experiences and perspectives of stayees (cf. *section on repatriation, reintegration and development*).

A decade later, Long (2008, 2013) argued that repatriation should not only be envisaged as the (re)creation of a 'home' as a social process, but also as a political process (2013: 223). Based on field research in Guatemala, Long posits that repatriation should be understood as a 'political act' through the renegotiation of the social contract between citizen, nation and state. Acknowledging the likely absence of such a relationship before leaving the home area, Long argues for a reconceptualization of *repatriation* into *empatriation* (2013: 29). For Long, reference should be made to 'nation' when defining social contract. In doing so, she aims to establish a collective reconciliatory basis for refugee empatriation, "premised on the value of restoring a *national, group-based* relationship" (2013: 179). In her approach to repatriation as a political process and a 'return' to a political community – rather than a place – Long also argues to disconnect repatriation from (immediate) physical return. She introduces the perspective of continued mobility, suggesting ways for a more durable effect of physical repatriation (212). This disconnection between 'citizenship' and 'residency' is supported by the growing body of empirical work on 'split return' (cf. *supra*) which argues that 'return' should not be seen as the end of movement, but includes larger dynamics and patterns of migration. The importance of mobility solutions is also increasingly recognized by UNHCR itself (Long 2013: 203; UNHCR, 2007, 2008, 2016). The ECOWAS' refugee labor mobility framework (Agreement 2007; ECOWAS Commission 2008) that provides legal migration options for refugees within the West-African community and UNHCR's Comprehensive Solutions Framework (UNHCR 2003) aimed at accommodating the 'Afghan use of mobility', can be understood as a direct illustration of this process.

### **Repatriation, Reintegration and Development**

The connection between repatriation, reintegration and development is another dominant theme in existing literature on return. In the context of the emerging 'returnee aid and development strategy' during the late eighties and early nineties, scholars have shown increased interest in the socio-economic developmental dimensions of repatriation and reintegration processes (Allen 1996; Allen & Morsink 1994; Black & Koser 1999). Many studies focus on assessments of specific repatriation operations (Naqvi 2004; Sperl & De Vriese 2005; Worby 1999), the rebuilding of livelihoods and land access (Bascom 2005; Binns & Maconachie 2005; Kibreab 2001; Özerdem & Sofizada 2006; Wood & Phelan 2006), and the decision-making process of refugees to 'return home' (Harild et al. 2015; Koser 1997; Omata & Kaplan 2013; Stefanovic, Loizides, & Parsons 2015; Stepputat 2004). Most of the research identified through the literature review that has been discussed in this section, tends to be policy-oriented inspired by normative assumptions aimed at improving repatriation and reintegration interventions. In addition, research findings increasingly point to the challenges that returnees confront, thus fueling and influencing the debate on the problematic nature of return itself (cf. *the concept of return*). However, the strong emphasis on economic reintegration, official repatriation operations, and a particular interest in the challenges of returnees, all have left stayees, spontaneous return movements, the role of the state, and the long-term impact of the humanitarian presence largely at the margins of scholarly interest despite the fact that these dynamics profoundly impact and transform - societies. It prevents building a broader and more comprehensive understanding of 'post-return' development.

In exploring repatriation operations, economic reintegration and decision-making, studies are mainly concerned with examining the ‘sustainability’ of return. This research interest also reflects increasing attention of the international community towards longer-term perspectives of reintegration programming. Official UNHCR positions for instance, recognize that “experience shows that if the issue of sustainability of reintegration of refugee and displaced populations is not addressed properly, the countries concerned will almost inevitably slide back into conflict.” (UNHCR 2004: 267). While ‘durability’ is often considered to involve no subsequent remigration (Black & Gent 2006: 21),<sup>9</sup> UNHCR defines ‘sustainability’ of return as ‘effective reintegration’ that succeeds when “returnees are similar to the local population in terms of socio-economic conditions and security” (UNHCR 1997: 2, cited in Fransen 2017: 1).

Studies on the socio-economic dimensions of return tend to focus on the challenges returnees face in realizing ‘effective reintegration’. Existing literature largely approaches successful, sustainable repatriation as reintegration based on economic development, with specific attention to the recovery of livelihoods and access to land (Bascom 2005; Binns & Maconachie 2005; Fransen 2017; Kibreab 2001, 2002, 2003; Özerdem & Sofizada 2006). Although organized repatriations often bring along development benefits because of the presence of humanitarian assistance (Bascom 2005), returning populations put enormous pressure on receiving societies and increase competition over often scarce (natural) resources and social services (Barasa & Waswa 2015; Sonja Fransen & Kuschminder 2012; Wood & Phelan 2006). Kibreab argues in this perspective that the reception of returnees by stayees is dependent on whether former refugees “constitute an [economic] opportunity or a burden to areas of return” (2002: 77). Reflecting concerns for peacebuilding, many studies also warn for the risks of renewed conflict if such tensions between stayees and returnees are not addressed (Huggins et al. 2004b; McMichael 2014; Unger & Wils 2007; Unruh 2008, 2013; Watts & Holmes-Watts 2008). It is argued that in some cases spontaneous returns may be more successful than official repatriation operations (Bakewell 2000; Bascom 2005; Eastmond 2006; Kibreab 2001).

In other cases, official repatriation operations tend to ignore socio-economic and political realities and factors involved in return decision-making processes (Dolan 1999 cited in Bakewell 2000: 372; Özerdem & Sofizada 2006), thus undermining rather than supporting sustainable return. Kibreab illustrates for instance how in the case of refugees returning to western Eritrea, spontaneous repatriates chose areas of return with a favorable agricultural climate, while refugees settled by the government ended up in places that were not suitable for ‘rain-fed agriculture’ (2001: 3). Spontaneous return, however, received limited attention in existing literature, and mainly concentrates on circular migration, or ‘split return’ (cf. section on the concept of return), thus addressing only a small specific group of returnees. Also, the position of stayees has received little attention in literature and repatriation and reintegration processes are mainly studied from the experiences and perspectives of the returnees. Cassarino (2004) for instance does not consider the stayee population in his theoretical framework aimed at increasing the understanding of the developmental impact of returnees (cf. supra). An exception is the work of Ellen Oxfeld (2004) who illustrates how a ‘stayee’ community received returnees with great ambivalence perceiving them as both family and ‘visitors’, questioned their new customs and experienced feelings of alienating in social interaction.

In search of what constitutes a successful, sustainable return, several scholars have studied the decision-making process of refugees on whether to stay or to repatriate (Black et al. 2004; Harild et al. 2015; Koser 1997; Omata 2013; Stefanovic et al. 2015;

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<sup>9</sup> Although it must be said that migration and strategies of continued mobility after return are gradually more included in UNHCR’s policy frameworks (cf. *the concept of return*).

Van Uffelen 2006). This literature points at the importance of socio-economic and security conditions in both the countries of exile and those of return. It is argued that the decision to repatriate is often based on whether the return or local integration is expected to be 'sustainable' or not. At the same time, it is acknowledged that return can be a staggered or reiterative process, which itself in the long term can also contribute to a more 'sustainable' return (Long 2013; Stepputat 2004). An element often examined in this perspective is the role of information. While it is generally agreed that information about the conditions in the country of return can potentially influence the decision to return or not, Koser has stressed that "repatriation is a complex process" and that "the information factor should not be overstated" (1997: 14).

As mentioned above, the concern about 'sustainability' of return, is also present in UNHCR's 'returnee aid and development' strategy that aimed for a longer-term perspective on returnee reintegration. Researchers investigating the socio-economic dimensions of return have given significant attention to UN repatriation and reintegration operations that reflect these policy interests. A series of programmes attracting much research attention fall under the '4Rs' approach and the 'Quick Impact Projects' (QIPs). 'Quick Impact Projects' (QIPs) were intended to be small in scale, based on gender equity and community participation, and connect successful reintegration to sustainable development. They were first introduced in 1991 in Nicaragua and widely implemented in other return operations, becoming "a standard UNHCR reintegration practice by the middle of the 1990s" (Crisp 2001: 180–181). Researchers have generally acknowledged the value of QIPs for repatriation in Guatemala (Naqvi 2004; Worby 1999), Mozambican repatriation (Oda 2011) and for the creation of a so-called 'safe zone' in Somalia (Kirkby, Kliet, Frerks, Flikkema, & O'Keefe 1997). Crisp, however, states that QIPs often suffered from 'inadequate planning, data-collection and project identification' (2001: 182-183). Moreover, it has been argued that QIPs generally missed the opportunity to include former soldiers and DDR programming (Spear 2006).

As mentioned previously, in 2002, the UNHCR, UNDP and the World Bank deepened the Brookings process by developing the '4Rs' approach. Repatriation, Reintegration, Rehabilitation and Reconstruction were four key areas that would guide program planning "to support poverty reduction and peace-building" and facilitate a more sustainable return (UNHCR 2004: 268). Pilot projects in Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan and Eritrea were soon followed by other cases (Lippman & Malik 2004; Sperl & De Vriese 2005; UNHCR 2004). While UNHCR stresses that 4R programmes should aim to address the needs of returning populations in an 'integrated manner' (UNHCR 2004: 271), it has been argued that contextual factors are not always taken into account. For Özerdem and Sofizada, the conceptualization of the 4R's approach did not mark "a concerted *effort* to change *how* projects were *implemented*" (2006: 79). In their analysis of the wider policy-implications of land-related challenges for returnees in Afghanistan (ie landlessness in context of a largely agrarian society), they argue that the sustainability of reintegration is significantly compromised partly due to the failure of the international community to include the centrality of land in policy frameworks.

Also, discussions on reintegration and economic development largely neglect the state, and by extension, all actors involved in conflict or post-conflict governance. Many studies start from an aid-centric approach, mainly defining the gaps in humanitarian assistance to improve reintegration programming. However, the engagement of political (state) actors in economic reintegration and development in the context of population return is rarely addressed. Scholars working on land access and land conflicts in the aftermath of return for instance have stressed the need for land reform or for large government-led land reform programmes, yet without looking into existing governance

contexts (Huggins et al. 2004b; Unruh 2004, 2008; Watts & Holmes-Watts 2008). This explains the lack of knowledge on local political dynamics of land reform, its implications on the ground, and on how local political actors position themselves towards humanitarian agencies. Further, while economic reintegration activities of UNHCR and humanitarian organizations receives sufficient attention, the long-term impact of their presence is hardly discussed in existing literature.

### **Cycles of Violence, Displacement and Return**

Another dominant theme in the reviewed literature includes the linkages between cycles of violence, displacement and return. Existing debates are centered around issues related to peacebuilding, conflict resolution and prevention in the context of population return to countries in or emerging out of violent conflict. It is argued that, in order to break cycles of violence and displacement, “it is critical to locate the forces or factors that engender violence within this cyclical process” (Hovil 2008: 19). The selected literature focuses on four major themes related to violence and processes of population return: (1) Demobilization, Disarmament and Reintegration (DDR) processes; (2) access to land; (3) reconciliation and transitional justice; and (4) peace agreements.

A widely shared critique to dominant repatriation discourse is that the very return of displaced people to their country of origin is too easily considered proof of the fact that peace is achieved. As Black and Gent argue, “the end of the Cold War (...) created a ‘peace dividend’ (...) Return was not only a solution for individual refugees, but also came to be seen as a central pillar of peace processes” (2006:17). For Juergensen, “repatriation (is) one of the most important social artifacts of any peacebuilding and reconstruction process” (2002: 161). Repatriation processes that did not signify or indicate an end of violent conflict have inspired these critiques on the return-peace equation. A notorious example is the ‘self’-repatriation of half a million (mostly Hutu) Rwandan refugees from eastern Zaïre in 1996, which was initially interpreted by the international community as a large success. Later analyses revealed, however, that some 700,000 returnees were ‘missing’ and that the refugee camps had been violently dismantled to push refugees and ex-Forces Armées Rwandaises *genocidaires* back to Rwanda for retribution for their involvement in acts of genocide (Pottier 1999). Based on similar cases, Black and Gent conclude that “international organizations dealing with post-conflict countries” increasingly recognized that “return itself is not enough to promote peace; rather, this return needs to be ‘successful’” (2006: 24).

One particular issue that received wide scholarly attention is the return of ex-combatants, particularly in relation to processes of Demobilization, Disarmament and Reintegration (DDR).<sup>10</sup> Almost one third of identified and reviewed publications focuses on ex-combatants, and about 20% on DDR specifically. For Johanna Söderström, “the fear of returning soldiers is an ageless phenomenon” (2015: 1). Their return is generally considered as a threat to post-conflict state stability, and a potential factor in sparking new outbreaks of violence. Scholars have pointed at the crucial importance of their reintegration into civilian life or into the national army or police force (Kingma 1997; Porto, Parsons, & Alden 2007). Although recent publications have revised the one-sided image of the ex-combatant as a ‘threat’ (McMullin 2013; Söderström 2015; cf. *the return of the political*), it remains widely accepted that DDR plays a critical role in the transition from war to peace. The UN’s Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards (IDDRS) of 2006 specifically stipulate the importance of social and economic reintegration as the ‘ultimate objective’ of DDR processes (quoted in McMullin 2013: 2).

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<sup>10</sup> A more elaborate discussion of DDR processes can be found in the complementary literature study “Does DDR work? A review of the evidence”.

The design and implementation of these DDR interventions, however, have met with considerable critiques. The socio-economic 'reintegration' approach in particular has been criticized for rarely achieving its intended purpose of transforming combatants into integrated and productive civilians. This failure has largely been attributed to insufficient attention to community participation and social embeddedness of DDR programmes (Bowd & Özerdem, 2013; Knight & Özerdem, 2004; Oyewo, 2016; Sany, 2006; Solomon & Ginifer, 2008), to the recovery of (in)formal livelihoods (Lamb, 2011; Verwimp & Verpoorten, 2004), and to the specific difficulties of reintegration for female ex-combatants, who cope with higher degrees of stigmatization and marginalization partly due to their ambiguous position in traditional gender roles (De Watteville 2002; Rhea 2016). It has been stated that this lack of attention can be mainly attributed to a rather generalised approach to ex-combatant reintegration, based on the restoration of security rather than focused on development. As is argued, this ironically risks heightening the risk of a return to violence rather than reducing it (Knight & Özerdem 2004; McMullin 2013). Other scholars have argued that it should be recognized that the post-conflict economic landscape is rather fragile, and offers 'very little to reintegrate into' (Jennings 2007; McMullin 2013; McMullin 2013: 3; Richards: 2016). As stated by some authors, DDR programmes, thus, would do well to be embedded in a more comprehensive approach to post-conflict development (Muggah & Krause 2009; Porto et al. 2007).

A second issue that has received increasing scholarly interest is the relationship between repatriation, land and conflict. Scholars have argued that land is a crucial aspect of socio-economic reintegration in agrarian societies, because it is a critical means of livelihood and includes an important socio-cultural and symbolic value (Kande' 2016; Unruh 2004). While its significance has been widely recognized, issues of housing, land and property (HLP) have only recently become a part of debates on post-conflict peacebuilding and refugee return. Scott Leckie's (edited) books on the linkages between violent conflict, HLP issues and post-conflict peacebuilding (Leckie 2003, 2007, 2009; Leckie & Huggins 2011) have set the scene for the incorporation of HLP in debates on population return. Since the early 2000s, scholars have pointed to the high frequency of land conflicts following population return, and the complexities involved in providing returnees with restitution or compensation for houses, land and properties they left behind. Returning populations often find their lands occupied by other people, sold their land before leaving home, experience difficulties in finding the boundaries of their properties or simply have no land to return to, especially after protracted displacement (Immanuel 2010; Leckie 2003; Leckie & Huggins 2011; Rugadya 2008; Vorrath 2008; Wood & Phelan 2006). Vorrath notes that in the case of Burundi almost 90% of reintegration challenges are assumed to be land-related, with refugees who fled in the seventies or nineties returning and claiming their land from new occupants, which has provoked countless land disputes (2008: 123). In northern Uganda, in the aftermath of the protracted conflict with the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and 25 years of forced displacement in IDP camps, a highly complex and problematic context related to access, use and ownership of land, caused considerable difficulties to returnees in reclaiming their properties and land rights (Immanuel 2010; Hopwood and Atkinson 2015; Rugadya 2008; Rugadya Nsamba-Gayiiya, & Kamusiime 2006; cf. *debating return in Uganda, South(ern) Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo and CAR*). In such conditions, a crucial challenge also includes "the mismatch between customary land tenure systems, which are undergoing changes related to modernization and globalization, and state-managed systems based on western models" (Huggins et al. 2004a). Also, it is argued that the dominant focus on the position and challenges of returnees obscures the broader structural dimensions of HLP challenges such as land scarcity, inadequate land laws and registration systems, affecting also non-displaced parts of society (Huggins 2009;



van Leeuwen 2010).

A third dominant theme in existing literature is centered around reconciliation and transitional justice.<sup>11</sup> In the reviewed literature, the linkages between population return and reconciliation have been mainly addressed from two perspectives: (1) social reintegration of ex-combatants, with a specific focus on former child soldiers; and (2) HLP restitution as a mechanism of transitional justice. Almost half of the publications in the literature on reconciliation focus on the social reintegration process of former (child) combatants. In particular, scholars have drawn attention to issues of stigmatization, marginalization and social exclusion of ex-combatants (Betancourt, Agnew-Blais, Gilman, Williams, & Ellis 2010; Denov & Marchard 2014; Derluyn, Vindevogel, & De Haene 2013; McMullin, 2013; Rhea 2016; Worthen, McKay, Veale, & Wessells 2012).

Other literature, which mainly draws on experiences in Sierra Leone and Uganda, explores the potential for ‘traditional’ forms of social repair (such as taking part in forgiveness rituals and cleansing ceremonies) to enable a successful re-entering in the social community, with very mixed findings (Allen 2006; Baines 2007; Macdonald 2017; Kelsall 2009; Muldoon et al. 2014; Veale & Stavrou 2003; Williamson & Cripe 2002; Shaw 2007; Victor and Porter 2017). It has been suggested that “in Africa justice is essentially restorative rather than retributive” (Allen 2010: 244). However, scholars have also warned of the danger of ‘romanticizing’ and instrumentalising ‘traditional’ forms of justice (Allen 2006; Allen and Macdonald 2013; Branch 2011). Some advocate for more holistic transitional justice approaches that combine local forms of social repair with formal judicial mechanisms (Baines 2007; Stovel 2008). While others question the practice and performance of the internationally driven ‘toolbox approach’ to transitional justice and advocate for ‘transformative justice’, defined as: ‘transformative change that emphasizes local agency and resources, the prioritization of process rather than preconceived outcomes and the challenging of unequal and intersecting power relationships and structures of inclusion at both the local and the global level’ (Gready and Robins 2014: 340). Also HLP restitution as a mechanism of transitional justice has received increased attention in existing literature (cf. *supra*). Scholars have argued though that property restitution has its limitations as a strategy to promote social reconciliation. A case often referred to is Bosnia. While scholars have generally acknowledged that in this case the restitution process has been relatively successful (ethnic minorities were eventually allowed to reclaim their former lands and properties in the new mono-ethnic nations), social healing and ethnic reconciliation mechanisms were largely neglected (Black 2001; Ó Tuathail & Dahlman 2004; Sert 2011).

A final and recent stream of literature concerns the involvement of displaced persons in peace agreements. A growing group of scholars has addressed the need to include the particular challenges of displaced persons in peace negotiations with the aim of achieving lasting peace and facilitating sustainable return (Andersen-Rodgers 2015; Fagen 2009; Koser 2007; McHugh 2010). It is argued that while returning populations might challenge the security and stability of post-conflict nations, refugees and IDPs are rarely included as participants in such agreements. The Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement has played a pioneering role in addressing the specific position of IDPs in peace processes. This collaboration between the Brookings Institution in Washington and the University of Bern resulted in a number of studies that informed policy-makers, offering tools and suggestions on how to include IDP representation in peace negotiations (Fagen 2009; Koser 2007; McHugh 2010). These studies concluded that IDPs face particular challenges because of being displaced within their own country.

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<sup>11</sup> A more profound and elaborate discussion on reconciliation can be found in the PoR literature review on psycho-social support

It is argued that their vulnerability is significantly higher than that of refugees due to their lack of an international protection status, their presence closer to war context, and difficult access to humanitarian aid (Koser 2007: 13). Further, Patricia Fagen (2009: 33) states that IDPs are often at a 'disadvantage vis-à-vis refugees' as the last mentioned are generally represented by UNHCR and the host country at the negotiation table. Although Fagen also notes that the particular position of IDPs has received increasing international recognition, they are still rarely included and represented as genuine stakeholders during peace processes. Andersen-Rodgers (2015) add that although the inclusion of displaced people in peace accords produces a positive effect on the promotion of peace on a macro level, it does not necessarily succeed in resolving the issues voiced by the IDPs, including displacement.

### **Psycho-social Healing**

One strand of literature looks into issues of psycho-social health and mental wellbeing among returning populations. The reviewed literature mainly focuses on ex-combatants, with scholars expressing a strong interest in the psychological impact of being involved in combat. Former combatants, and child soldiers in particular, have been a dominant subject of research on trauma and Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and on social processes of stigmatization and its psychological effects (Ertl, Pfeiffer, Scauer, Elbert, & Neuner 2011; McMullen, O'Callaghan, Shannon, Black, & Eakin 2013).

Further, the complementary literature review on Psycho-Social Support (PSS) in the context of the Politics of Return research project (Torre 2018) found that PSS programs have gained increased attention in relation to their potential for peacebuilding, reconciliation and post-conflict reconstruction.<sup>12</sup> Baingana et al. (2005) for instance focus on the psycho-social effects of war and its relevance to conflict resolution and prevention. Also the research ordered by the World Bank (cf. Brookings process) includes an extensive review of post-conflict interventions in Afghanistan, Burundi and Uganda (among others), and produced a conceptual framework aimed at developing more effective psycho-social interventions in conflict-affected settings (Baingana et al. 2005: 21). Most studies have been conducted in a limited number of cases though, including Uganda and to a much lesser extent former Yugoslavia, Liberia, Sierra Leone and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The effects of child soldiering in northern Uganda have been studied extensively. Scholars have focused on the traumatic experiences of abducted children who were forced to commit atrocities, often targeting their own relatives and communities. Studies concentrating on the psychological effects of war have also documented the widespread presence of depression and psychiatric disorders such as PTSD (Derluyn, Broekaert, Schuyten, & De Temmerman 2004; Pfeiffer & Elbert 2011; Pham, Vinck, & Stover 2009) and conduct disorder (Ovuga & Amone-P'Olak 2017).

Other scholars have warned of the danger of presenting a one-sided image of the victimized and traumatized child soldier stripped of "agency, active choice or power in constructing its own frames of meaning" (Torre 2018; McMullin 2011; Summerfield 1999). In his analysis on former child soldiers in northern Uganda, Mergelsberg (2010) objects to the trauma discourse and introduces the notion of 'transition'. He argues that it is predominantly the transition from one world to another (or from civilian life to that of a soldier and back again), and the adjustment to a new moral and social reality, that prompt the biggest challenges. In doing so, Mergelsberg also echoes the critiques of Summerfield (1999) and others by moving away from the Western individualized notion of trauma to an analysis that is attentive to the collective social dimensions of experiences of war and violence.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> For a comprehensive overview of the historical background of PSS, see the literature review (Torre 2018)

<sup>13</sup> A more elaborate discussion of these critiques can be found in the literature review on PSS (Torre 2018)

Other literature looks into the social effects of being involved in combat, including issues of stigmatization. It is widely agreed that former combatants face a difficult re-entering into the social community and have to deal with large scale social exclusion and discrimination (Betancourt et al., 2010; Denov & Marchard, 2014; Derluyn et al., 2013; Rhea, 2016; Worthen et al., 2012), which further impacts on their mental wellbeing (Betancourt et al., 2010; Stott, 2009). In addition, Scholars highlight that this is very much a gendered process in which ‘child mothers’ in particular face rejection by their families, often transferring also the stigma to their children (Stott 2009). Looking at former child soldiers in Colombia, Denov and Marchard (2014) illustrate how returnees actively employ strategies and conceal their past in order to try to ‘manage their stigma’, thus facilitating their return into the social community.

As mentioned elsewhere, this literature has a strong emphasis on psycho-social processes of child soldiers compared to those of adult ex-combatants. McMullin (2011) critiques the ‘generic’ focus on child soldiers’ vulnerabilities in psycho-social interventions and on counseling and training in life skills, assuming that “children’s unique vulnerability results from war’s greater and long-lasting effects on children than on adults, regardless of the coping strategies, life experiences and positionality of the individual” (McMullin 2011: 751). He argues for a more concentrated effort to focus on child agency during reintegration processes and for more consideration for the shared experiences of adult and child soldiers. It is also remarkable that existing literature tends to neglect other groups of returnees, including former refugees or IDPs, in discussions of the psycho-social wellbeing.

### **The Return of the Political**

A final emerging theme in the literature on return can best be described as the ‘return of the political’. It focuses on the returning population’s reconnection with the political status they left behind when moving into exile. Remarkably, while refugee studies generally distinguish the humanitarian status of a refugee with the political status of a citizen, very little has been written on the return of political status once refugees repatriate to their countries of origin. Stepputat argues that “The process of how repatriation links up with the (re-)formation of states has rarely been examined” (210). Indeed, the strong focus on the socio-economic dimensions of return for a long time has left political processes largely unaddressed. Only recently, scholars have looked into the politics around return. Growing criticism has been expressed by scholars against existing socio-economic and aid-centric approaches to population return, which resulted in the image of returnees as a burden in need of humanitarian assistance and ex-combatants as a threat to post-conflict state-building rather than as beneficial contributors to state building (Daley 2013; Helling 2007; Söderström 2015; Vorrath 2008). Also the idea of ‘return’ as the end of a political process, rather than being an inherent part of it, has been questioned. Most of these analyses start from a top-down perspective of state-building, yet scholars are increasingly interested in more bottom-up approaches and are documenting citizenship issues of returning populations as well as their contribution to political transformations.

In the repatriation literature and discourse, the return of a displaced population has often been depicted “as an indicator of the well-being and maturity of a state signaling the success of a political process” (McDowell & Eastmond 2002: 2–3). However, similar to the critiques on the equation of return with peace (*cf. section on cycles of violence, displacement and return*), the idea of return as an evidence base for post-conflict political stability and legitimacy is widely criticized among scholars. Macrae (1999) has argued for example that, while population return is generally framed as taking place in ‘post-conflict’ situations, displaced people actually return more often to

politically unstable ‘chronic political emergencies’ than to stable environments. Moreover, while voluntary repatriation in safety and dignity is considered paramount for ‘just returns’, circumstances of so-called ‘imposed returns’ have cast serious doubt to the political legitimacy of the receiving state (Bradley 2013; Chimni 1999; Shutzer 2012). Building on this criticism, scholars have approached population return as an intricate political process that aims to bring peace, security and democratic legitimacy. In this respect, Katy Long (2008, 2013) argues for repatriation to be understood as a ‘political act’, related to and concerned with the rapprochement between citizen, nation and state (*cf. section on the concept of return*).

In top-down state-building analyses, re-establishing human security for returning populations is considered a crucial node of this renewed ‘rapprochement’. Literature on Security Sector Reform (SSR) has argued for more integrated approaches, embedding DDR programmes and reconciliation efforts into the broader transformation of security sector institutions, thus increasing state stability and legitimacy, and enhancing a more ‘sustainable’ return.

Starting from a state-perspective, some scholars looked into new dynamics of inclusion/exclusion following the ‘reunion’ of different stayee and returnee groups within the borders of the nation-state (Metsola 2010; Stepputat 1999; Turner 2015). Both Turner (2015) and Metsola (2010) analyse how state narratives of post-war national unity have cast citizens into new socio-political categories and realities. In post-genocide Rwanda, for example, different social groups were turned into different citizen categories, based on their histories of mobility and their supposed ‘roles’ during the genocide. Turner argues that the ‘survivors’ of the genocide (mainly Tutsi), the saviors of the nation (mainly Tutsi refugees from Uganda) and the ‘suspects’ of ‘genocidal mentalities’ (mainly Hutu) were subjected to different governmental practices, creating different and inclusion/exclusionary forms of citizenship and membership.

Other literature on state-formation and population return looks into interference by international external actors. A well-researched case is the Dayton peace agreement of 1995. Scholars have argued that the international community forcefully imposed the newly mono-ethnic nations in the Balkans to welcome the return of now ethnic minority groups, and thus ‘reverse ethnic cleansing’ by recreating former Yugoslavia’s multi-ethnic character (Black 2001; Bougarel et al. 2008; Dahlman & Tuathail 2005a, 2005b; Jansen 2006; Ó Tuathail & Dahlman 2004; Sert 2011; Toal & Dahlman 2011). Other research has connected the involvement of UNHCR and UN peace operations in the repatriation and reintegration of refugees and IDPs to state-building efforts (McDowell & Eastmond 2002; Scalettaris 2013; Stepputat 1999). Scalettaris (2013), for example, argues that UNHCR’s interference in the Afghan Land Allocation Scheme (turning isolated areas into settlements for returning refugees) helped to transform landless returnees into Afghan citizens, and in this process, also contributed to the transformation of the Afghan state and its relationship with its citizens. Daley (2013) has stated that scholars should be much more attentive to the reconfiguration of state-civil relationships as a result of humanitarianism.

Researchers also recently advocated for a research agenda that incorporates the political agency of returning populations (Alfieri 2016; Baines 2015; Helling 2007; Long 2008, 2013; McMullin 2013; Marjoke Anika Oosterom 2014; Söderström, 2015). As of yet, political reintegration has hardly been articulated in UNHCR policy-frameworks. According to Fransen for UNHCR ‘effective reintegration’ is accomplished when returnees achieve the same socio-economic conditions and security as stayees (UNHCR 1997: 2, cited in Fransen 2017: 1), thus largely neglecting political conditions. Oosterom’s research in northern Uganda, looks into how experiences of war and displacement

(re)shaped people's understanding and practices of citizenship (2011; 2016; 2014) and argues that "protracted conflict diminished their sense of citizenship and radically changed the social environment in which active citizenship is learnt" (2014: 283). In this case, feelings of belonging and trust in the Ugandan state eroded significantly, which can partly be attributed to an increased securitization of their position during widespread government-led encampment.

Scholars have also challenged one-sided image of ex-combatants as being a threat to post-conflict state-reconstruction and have looked into their political agency and their political participation in elections, protests, etc. (Blattman, 2009b; McMullin, 2013; Söderström, 2015). It is argued that ex-combatants' participation in political processes is crucial to peacebuilding and state building and must thus be incorporated into reintegration approaches and programmes. Citing Mats Berdal, McMullin (2013) states that reintegration "is an 'intensely political process' and cannot 'be treated simply as a set of managerial and administrative challenges'" (Berdal 1996: 5, quoted in McMullin 2013, p. 34). It is illustrated in literature that ex-combatants demonstrate a higher (need for) political engagement than other groups in society. Blattman (2009) found in northern Uganda that former child soldiers were comparatively more active in community mobilization, joining political groups, and leadership activities than their peers who had not been involved in combat, thus demonstrating a higher political engagement.

## **Debating Return in Uganda, South(ern) Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Central African Republic (CAR)**

### **Uganda**

Next to former Yugoslavia, Uganda stands out as the country that is comparatively most discussed by scholars in existing literature on processes of return. The end of a protracted war between the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the Ugandan government (1986-2007) has left a significant mark on the topics discussed. Despite some exceptions,<sup>14</sup> most publications focus on the LRA conflict. The vast majority are concerned with issues of psycho-social healing and re-integration of formerly abducted persons and children born of war, reconciliation and transitional justice, and emerging land conflicts following IDPs return home.

When it comes to the psycho-social effects of forced abduction and child soldiering, the returning populations in northern Uganda are arguably the most researched communities (*cf. also section on psycho-social health*). While Scholars often emphasize the traumatic experiences and psychological effects of being abducted and being forced to commit atrocities at a young age (Derluyn et al. 2004; Ovuga & Amone-P'Olak 2017; Pfeiffer & Elbert 2011; Winkler et al. 2015), some have also explored their relation to social reintegration challenges, stigma and social exclusion (Amone-P'Olak et al. 2016; Denov & Lakor 2017; Pham et al. 2009; Veale & Stavrou 2003; Mergelsberg 2010; Victor and Porter 2017). There is a growing literature on the multiple social, economic and political challenges preventing the successful reintegration of girls and women who were abducted by the LRA, 'forced to carry marry commanders and to bear their children', as well as on the 'children born of war' themselves (Apio 2016; Atim and Mazurana 2017; Baines 2016; Kiconco and Nthakomwa 2017).

In addition, studies concerned with social reintegration have explored the

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<sup>14</sup> Return processes to Luweero following the Ugandan Bush War (book chapters of Kabera & Muyanja in Allen & Morsink 1994; and book chapters of E.A. Brett, Amelia Brett and Allen, in Allen 1996), and in the aftermath of more specific conflict dynamics in Teso region (de Berry 2004).

dynamics of broader societal reconciliation in this context (Alipanga, De Schryver, Neema, Broekaert, & Derluyn 2014; Veale & Stavrou 2003). One example is the analysis on the social reintegration processes of formerly abducted children (FAPs). Annan and Blattman (2011) and Veale and Stavrou (2003) find that traditional methods and ritual forms of cleansing facilitated the re-entering of these individuals into their community and facilitated ‘personal and collective peace’. Other ethnographic and qualitative studies reach very different conclusions and emphasise the highly complex nature of ‘reconciliation’ and social acceptance in the aftermath of the conflict, emphasizing a range of ceaseless issues from cosmological insecurity to gender relations to competition over land (Macdonald 2017; Victor and Porter 2017; Hopwood and Atkinson 2015).

As the site of the International Criminal Court’s (ICC) first investigation and arrest warrants, northern Uganda has also been widely researched as case study of the apparent tensions between ‘retributive’ versus ‘restorative’ forms of transitional justice. Soon after the investigation was publically announced in 2004, this fierce debate centered on the relationship between ‘peace’ and ‘justice’ and the peacebuilding and reconciliation benefits of amnesties and ‘traditional’ justice over ‘international’ forms of criminal prosecution (Allen 2006; Baines 2007; Branch 2011). More recent research has argued that, amongst returning populations, there is no dichotomy between ‘restorative’ and ‘retributive’ justice highlighting the importance of considering war crimes and available options for redress and reconciliation in the political, socio-economic and institutional contexts in which they occur (Macdonald and Porter 2016; Macdonald 2017; Porter 2017).

The nature of the ‘war in the north’, including the massive settlement of the local population in IDP camps, has disrupted and complicated existing patterns of land access, land use and land ownership. Although most IDPs envisaged to return to their original homes, scholars have documented different resettlement patterns, with IDP camps gaining a semi-urban afterlife (S.R. Whyte, Babiha, Mukyala, & Meinert 2014; Susan Reynolds Whyte, Babiha, Mukyala, & Meinert 2012) or people clustering in denser groupings or closer to major roads (Joireman et al. 2012). It has been argued that the Ugandan government has failed to prioritize the settlement of land conflicts in its policy framework for population return and reconstruction, known as the Peace, Recovery and Development Plan (PRDP) (Immanuel 2010; Rugadya 2008). Reports commissioned by the World Bank revealed ‘high levels of distrust of the Ugandan government’s intentions towards land’ and collected numerous complaints about the difficulties returning IDPs are faced with in finding or reclaiming their land after years of absence (Rugadya 2008: 33; Rugadya et al. 2006). While some argued that customary practices of land tenure have added to these challenges and have contributed to the marginalization of vulnerable populations such as women, orphans and widows (Immanuel 2010; Rugadya 2008), others find that customary landholding authorities have ‘regained a degree of effectiveness in managing their land, indicated by a steep decline in numbers of local land conflicts’ (Hopwood 2015; Hopwood and Atkinson 2015).

### **South(ern) Sudan**

This section focuses on population return to South Sudan, and to the southern part of Sudan before its independence in 2011. South(ern) Sudan is relatively well represented in the literature on return. Two significant moments of population return have sparked researchers’ interest. The first moment is the return of Sudanese following the 1972 Addis Ababa Agreement, which ended the first civil war and established an autonomous ‘Southern Sudan’ within Sudan. Akol describes it as “one of the largest repatriation operations on the African continent” (1994: 78). Existing literature includes (technical) evaluations of the repatriation operation, and mostly in terms of returnee assistance (Akol 1994; Johnson 1996; Salih 1996). The second moment of return followed the 2005

Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), which paved the way to the independence of South Sudan in 2011.

Based on fieldwork experiences, scholars have been able to engage in detailed analyses on the socio-economic and political challenges of population return. Various studies have focused on the socio-economic impact of return after the CPA. While refugees were understood as carrying an immense potential for ‘reviving their country’ (due to better learning and livelihood opportunities in exile), their return also increased competition and conflict over (minimal) resources (land, water, education, employment opportunities) as limited return assistance produced increased pressure on receiving communities to provide the necessary support (Barasa & Waswa 2015; Wood & Phelan 2006: 9). Taking gender as a lens to analyze emplacement strategies upon return, Grabska (2012; 2013; 2014) further examines how the encounter between Nuer refugee returnees from Kenya and stayees challenged and reconfigured both the social and economic fabric in Ler (Unity County). In her analysis on the custom of marriage, masculinities and gender relations, she demonstrates how ‘displacement and forced migration are part of wider processes of social transformation’ (Grabska & Fanjoy 2015: 91).

Scholars have pointed to the blurring of socio-legal categories ‘refugee’, ‘returnee’, ‘ex-combatant’, ‘stayee’ and ‘IDP’ (Sluga 2011: 9; Wood & Phelan 2006) in relation to the complex situation of large-scale and continuous displacement and replacement during decades of violent conflict. Authors have for example examined how Southern Sudanese successfully alternated their refugee positions in Uganda with return visits across the border (Kaiser 2010; Hovil 2010). Others have documented how refugees were forced back from DRC, Uganda and Kenya as part of local conflict dynamics and settled as IDPs in Western and Central Equatoria (Wood & Phelan 2006; Sluga 2011). The many complex histories of conflict mobility help to explain why scholars have paid relatively more attention to societies receiving the returnees than in other settings.

Land and access to resources and properties constitute another main theme in research on return. Similar to other country cases, it is documented how refugees returning after the CPA often find their properties occupied by self-resettled IDPs who are sometimes unwilling to leave these properties (Branch & Mampilly 2004; Sluga 2011; Badiy 2013). Further, Badiy (2013) demonstrates how the recognition of ‘customary rights to land historically held by southern Sudan’s ethnic communities’ in the CPA and different wartime experiences sparked conflict over Juba’s position in the newly independent state, with various groups expressing competing claims over land, jurisdiction and authority. Interestingly, according to archival research conducted by Kindersley (2017), the significance that was given to these customary land rights in the CPA can be seen as a continuation of ideas of governance and citizenship prioritizing ‘primordial ethnic homelands’ that have guided (post-)colonial efforts to control population movements, including the repatriation operation after the first civil war in the 1970s. Badiy (2013) argues that the ‘determination of control over land’ may be the biggest challenge to post-war state-building efforts.

Since 2013, renewed outbreaks of large-scale violence again force millions of people to seek refuge abroad or in other parts of the country. By the end of March 2018, it was estimated that approximately two and a half million refugees reside in Uganda, Sudan and Ethiopia and add to almost two million IDPs; two-thirds of the population in the country is also experiencing serious food insecurity (OCHA 2018)<sup>15</sup>. With no lasting signs of decreasing violence, the current situation will likely prompt new questions about the meaning of previous returns as well as about the politics and possibilities of future returns.

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<sup>15</sup> [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/SS\\_180323\\_Humanitarian%20Bulletin\\_3%20final.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/SS_180323_Humanitarian%20Bulletin_3%20final.pdf)

## **Democratic Republic of Congo**

Existing literature on return processes in the Democratic Republic of Congo is rather modest, and, with few exceptions, mainly concentrates on youth and adult DDR programmes (e.g. Muggah 2004; Muggah, Maughan, & Bugnion 2003), and on the psycho-social effects of child soldiering. Research on returning IDPs and refugees is nearly non-existent. While some authors remark that spontaneous returns have taken place in various times and places<sup>16</sup>, the lived experiences are yet to be examined and understood.

In eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, several DDR programmes have been introduced in volatile situations with regular outbreaks of violent conflict. de Vries and Wiegink state that “in such cases of a society in arms (...) the potential for mobilization is ever present” (2011: 41). Evidently, this poses significant challenges to the success of these DDR programmes. With insufficient attention for reintegration after demobilization, and the continuous proliferation and fragmentation of armed groups, both children and adults are continuously susceptible for remobilization, creating a context of ‘circular mobilisation’ (Nduwimana 2013; Richards 2016).

Studies on the psycho-social effects of child soldiering in the Democratic Republic of Congo have valued culturally adapted Trauma-Focused Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CT-FCBT) (McMullen et al. 2013), and investigated trauma-related suffering in combination with appetitive aggression (Hecker, Hermenau, Maedl, Elbert, & Schauer 2012; Hermenau, Hecker, Maedl, Schauer, & Elbert 2013; Koebach, Nandi, et al. 2015; Koebach, Schaal, & Elbert 2015). These last studies found appetitive aggression (the perception of committing violence as appealing, fascinating and exciting) and psychological distress to be more prevalent among former child soldiers than adult ex-combatants, which is attributed to the young age of recruitment. Although they found ‘no direct relationship between appetitive aggression and PTSD (Hermenau et al., 2013: 1–2), the authors point to other studies that have highlighted the protective effect of appetitive aggression on trauma symptoms. On the relevance of social/psychological PSS interventions (cf. section on psycho-social healing), Stott (2009) advocates for the need to transcend this dichotomy and focus on holistic approaches. While documenting challenges of community acceptance, Stott also found the former child soldiers in Beni and Lubero express significant psychological distress, which in turn, affects their social reintegration.

## **Central African Republic (CAR)**

In the reviewed literature, studies on return processes in the CAR are nearly absent. The literature search did not generate any relevant publications, with the exception of some observations on ongoing DDR operations, and a comment on the ‘notably weak mention of internal displacement in the peace agreement’ of 2007 (McHugh 2010: 67). Two publications focus on DDR operations in several countries, including yet not exclusively the CAR. Both Lamb (2011) and Caraméz & Sanz (2009) analyse the DDR programme ‘Ex-Combatant Reintegration and Community Support Project’ (PRAC). The PRAC ran from 2004 to 2008 and aimed at continuing demobilization efforts of the National Programme on Disarmament and Reinsertion (PRDR) that had been interrupted by the coup that replaced president Ange-Félix Patassé by François Bozizé. The evaluations by Lamb (2011) and Caraméz & Sanz (2009) on the programme’s effectiveness correspond to more general critiques on DDR in other settings: the PRAC failed to help ex-combatants establish viable livelihoods and suffered from a lack of community participation. Since 2012, the CAR is undergoing new outbreaks of violence and displacement.

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<sup>16</sup> Morris (2005) mentions a massive return movement of about 900,000 IDPs between 2003 and 2005 (p.28). Pottier (2008) records thousands of short-lived IDP returns in Ituri.



## Conclusions and Recommendations

From the review of existing literature on return, it can be concluded that there is the strong tendency whereby policy frameworks orient research towards peacebuilding and economic recovery; that there is a considerable shift in the understanding of 'return', both conceptually and in practice; that most literature remains largely embedded in specific case-studies mainly focusing on returnees and their reconnection to the national context; and that there is an emerging debate on political processes of return.

First, studies looking at issues of return have maintained a strong link with the discourse of repatriation and reintegration in terms of peacebuilding and economic development. This has resulted in an academic field led to policy concerns. Most of the literature is policy oriented, with many studies zooming in on specific repatriation operations. This results in a narrowing of focus of research to the very rationale that guides operations of return. Not only has this prevented an analytical approach to repatriation and reintegration operations, but also a deeper understanding of how (spontaneous) returning populations, receiving societies and humanitarian organizations experience, practice and give meaning to 'return'. Research, thus, should take a step back from policy frameworks and operations, and look into return experiences 'from the ground up'.

Second, as a result of an increase in 'unsettling returns' (or a decrease in voluntary, safe and dignified repatriations) and a growing body of empirical 'evidence', critiques have mounted on policies and popular understandings of return processes. Researchers have attempted to disconnect the idea of return from simple notions such as homecoming, the consolidation of peace, the advent of state stability and legitimacy, and the end of 'movement' as such. Scholars generally agree that return is a very problematic concept and a long-term process (rather than an event) that carries many challenges. Return is no longer perceived as the end of the refugee cycle or as a largely post-conflict issue. Rather, it can be an inherent part of conflict dynamics and displacement itself. However, scholars still struggle to understand and conceptualize the actual practices, experiences and meanings of people who (re-)enter a country of origin. Despite existing studies on cross-border practices and 'split return', there remains a need to include populations that do not engage in continued mobility after returning, or benefit from others who do.

Third, return processes are often examined on a case-by-case basis, mainly concentrating on the returnees themselves, and on how returnees (re)connect to the national context. As a consequence, 'return' is often detached from its broader context. Already in 1994, Warner argued that "discussions of return to home seem oblivious to questions of time and changes that can take place for the refugee, in the country of origin, and the relationship between the two" (169). Many analyses fail to include stayees (and by extend entire societies), and importantly also the refugee in the returnee. Displacement is mostly addressed insofar as it disrupts people's place in national society, but rarely as a process that creates and transforms societies in or emerging out of violent conflict. Addressing the transformative impact of population return, therefore would require a greater consideration for refugee histories and their interaction with societal changes during their absence yet affecting the positions, views and strategies of those who stayed behind.

Fourth, although the political dimension may not yet be a dominant debate in existing literature, an increasing number of publications addresses the post-conflict relationship between the state and returning citizens. Further, amid growing criticism on the 'aid-centric analysis of the problem of repatriation and reintegration' (Macrae 1999: 25), and the humanitarian depoliticized approach to refugees, IDPs and returnees

alike (Daley 2013), attention for political processes defining or influencing return seems critical. While “the return of a displaced population is often presented as a necessary component for any successful state rebuilding process” (Long 2010: 10), how returnees themselves contribute to this process remains unaddressed in existing literature. Research should equally be concerned with much more localized forms of governance, especially in regions where state-structures are largely absent. Also the long-term impact of humanitarian presence in situations of population return deserves more attention. While there is a lot of literature on repatriation and reintegration strategies, these are generally approached from the benefits (or failures) they bring in terms of assistance and development funding. The larger, political role, impact or consequences remain largely unaddressed and, thus, more research on how organizations enter, integrate and navigate the national space would be useful.

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