

Broadening the scope of scholarly research on the repatriation of refugees is a necessity #LSEreturn

Almost twenty years on from the decade of voluntary repatriation, Jolien Tegenbos and Koen Vlassenroot explore how scholarly understanding of the process of 'return' has evolved and how it has largely been determined by policy priorities.

This article is part of our #LSEReturn series, exploring themes around [Displacement and Return](#).

Every minute, 20 people are displaced worldwide. The most popular and internationally promoted sustainable solution to displacement is repatriation, or the facilitation of 'going home'. Given the scale of past and present repatriation efforts, it is ironic that we still know surprisingly little about what this 'return' means to those being displaced. The same can be said about governments and organisations involved in facilitating this process. Policies take the return process too much for granted, and misunderstand or simply ignore the different impacts, challenges and constraints.

This is particularly worrisome in cases where the return 'home' occurs in places affected by conflict or dealing with high levels of post-conflict violence. It turns 'return' into a challenging, complicated and long-term process. At the same time, it stresses the need to put the intimate relationship between cycles of violence, displacement and return high on the research agenda. In reality, however, this agenda tends to be dominated by direct policy priorities rather than informing these priorities, therefore considerably narrowing our scope and our understanding of return processes and their effect.

This is also the conclusion of a detailed review of existing literature on return, which was conducted as part of the [Politics of Return](#) research project. The aim was to explore how understandings of return have evolved since the 1990s, also known as the 'decade of voluntary repatriation'. The review shows how dominant scholarly debates on return have largely been inspired by the way UNHCR, and by extension the international community, started to define population return in terms of peacebuilding and economic recovery. The main policy focus also shifted from resettlement to voluntary repatriation as a durable solution, introducing an expansion of UNHCR's mandate to repatriation and reintegration operations.

These operations, however, repatriated a growing number of displaced people to areas still affected by conflict. This was a major cause of concern to the international community and forced policy makers to look for strategies that mitigated the impact of return processes on local conditions 'at home'. It eventually led to a re-definition of the 'rationale for international assistance to displaced people', which no longer was limited to humanitarian support but also included security-related issues. As a result, return processes are now also related to larger ambitions of peacebuilding, conflict resolution and the prevention of new cycles of violent conflict. In addition, return assistance has become linked to economic recovery, itself seen as a key factor contributing to peacebuilding.



A wall mural depicting refugees' cycles of return home

The literature review shows that these shifts in policy concerns and priorities have also set research agendas, resulting in an increasing number of studies looking at the 'afterlife' of refugees, once returned 'home'. This literature can be summarised into five major strands of research. A first strand focuses on the socio-economic dimensions of return and argues that a successful, sustainable repatriation should include reintegration induced by economic development. A second strand of literature looks at the connections between cycles of violence, displacement and return and is closely linked to policy priorities of conflict resolution and prevention. It is remarkable that about 20 per cent of the identified studies on return focuses on Demobilization, Disarmament and Reintegration (DDR) efforts.

Also the literature on the psychosocial effects of war on returnees has received increased attention mainly in relation to its relevance for peacebuilding, reconciliation and post-conflict reconstruction. A more recent strand of research, which presents itself as a corrective to socio-economic and aid-centric approaches to population return, looks into how returnees reconnect to their former political status. It is argued that these political dimensions of displacement and return need to be better understood in order to know how 'return' can bring about peace, security and democratic legitimacy. A final and most lively strand of research discusses the concept of return itself. Highly inspired by policy priorities, this part of the existing literature provides us with a number of critical lessons: in most cases, refugees and IDPs are not returning to economic prosperity; those returning are often not welcomed by those who stayed behind; and the 'homecoming' of returnees does not necessarily signify the end of a political process but induces new ones.

Despite the variety of topics in current literature, policy frameworks on return therefore tend to demarcate research areas and priorities on displacement and limit the focus to peacebuilding and economic recovery. While this should not be an issue of concern per se, this dominance of policy objectives, interventions and experiences on research priorities prevents us from getting a deeper understanding of how returning populations, receiving societies and humanitarian organisations experience, practice and give meaning to 'return'. We know little for instance about the lived experiences of returnees; about the connections between return processes and the larger political context; about the positions and aspirations of 'stayees' and returnees not being accommodated by international agencies; and about how displacement and refugee histories contribute to transforming societies in or emerging out of violent conflict.

So what do we take from this literature review as suggestions for further research? First of all, that research agendas on return need to be redefined and detached from policy frameworks and direct policy priorities. Secondly, that UNHCR's aid-centric approach to reintegration and its cautious and restrained position towards political issues linked with repatriation should not prevent researchers from moving beyond humanitarian concerns. Only when research focuses on realities on the ground related to return, even if far removed from internationally defined concerns and policy agendas, we will come to a better and much needed understanding of the complexities of return.

[Read the full literature review](#)

Find out more about the [Politics of Return](#) and our [Trajectories of Displacement](#) research projects, which are based at the Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa and funded by ESRC/AHRC.

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The views expressed in this post are those of the author and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog, the Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa or the London School of Economics and Political Science.