Chapter 6
'Hanging in the Air': The Experiences of Liberian Refugees in Ghana

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The civil wars that devastated Liberia between 1989 and 2003 displaced an estimated 800,000 people internally, with more than a million people travelling to neighbouring countries in West Africa in search of protection and the opportunity to rebuild their lives. More than 15 years after the *Accra Comprehensive Peace Agreement* was signed, tens of thousands of Liberians continue to be displaced in Liberia, Ghana, and Côte d'Ivoire. Whilst some have been resettled – primarily to Canada, the US, Australia, and European countries – most have been left 'hanging in the air', living in extreme poverty, marginalised from mainstream development policies and planning, and unable to either contribute to, or benefit from, efforts to rebuild peace and security in their home country. Their needs, interests and aspirations have been largely ignored by academics and policymakers in the Global North whose focus, particularly over recent years, has been primarily on the drivers of migration from West Africa across the Mediterranean to Europe. At a regional level, there have been efforts by the Economic Committee of West African States (ECOWAS) to provide alternative models of integration, particularly since the United Nations High Commissioner Refugees (UNHCR) announced the cessation of refugee status for Liberian refugees in Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire in June 2012. However, significant barriers to both local integration and Safe third-country resettlement remain. This chapter examines the experiences of Liberian refugees living in Ghana and their struggles to secure national and international protection in a context where returning to Liberia remains impossible for many.

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6.1 Introduction

Our lives are hanging in the air…no prospects, no peace, no hope.[1]

The overwhelming volume of voluntary and involuntary migration in or from West Africa is intra-regional (Awumbila et al., 2014; MMC, 2017). According to IOM, West Africa provides the strongest example of intraregional migration flows in sub-Saharan Africa, even in the context of increased migration to Europe, with 70% of migratory movements mainly linked to employment taking place within the sub-region.[2] Voluntary migrations within the sub-region are largely informed by real or perceived poverty, poor access to employment opportunities and the desire for better livelihoods, structured along a North-South movement from landlocked countries of the Sahel region of West Africa (i.e., Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad) to the relatively more prosperous plantations, mines, and cities of coastal West Africa (especially Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia, Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal, and the Gambia). Whilst refugee movements in West Africa are not a new phenomenon, there has been a major increase in forced migration in the last 40 years with violent conflicts displacing millions of people in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Cote d'Ivoire, Senegal, and Mauritania. The displacements arising from these conflicts are not always neatly aligned with specific countries but rather manifest in bi-directional ways. As a result, some countries are both source and destination for displaced persons. For instance, displaced Liberians live in Côte d'Ivoire and displaced Côte d'Ivorians live in Liberia.

For an increasing number of those forced to leave their homes, displacement has become protracted. The UNHCR (2020, 24) defines a protracted refugee situation as 'one in which 25,000 or more refugees from the same nationality have been in exile for at least five consecutive years in a given host country'. Based on this definition, it is estimated that some 15.7 million refugees (77% of the total global refugee population) were living in situations of protracted displacement at the end of 2019, with some populations displaced for several generations (UNHCR, 2020).[3] Protracted displacement among Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) is also a major phenomenon with at least 50% of IDPs displaced for more than three years (Crawford et al., 2015).[4] Protracted displacement creates profound challenges for displaced individuals and families who struggle to survive, contribute to the development of their host communities, or send money to their families (Crisp, 2003;

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[1] Words of a Liberian refugee living at Buduburam Refugee Settlement for more than 25 years during a meeting with Crawley and Fynn Bruey, March 2019.

[2] See https://www.iom.int/west-and-central-africa

[3] The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) defines a protracted refugee situation as one in which 25,000 or more refugees of the same nationality have been in exile for five or more years in a given country.

[4] Unlike refugees, IDPs are displaced *within* their own countries and do not cross an international border. There were an estimated 45.7m IDPs in 2019, almost twice the number of refugees (UNHCR, 2020).

Long, 2011; Hyndman & Giles, 2016; Crawford et al., 2015; OCHA et al., 2015; Huang et al., 2018). It also undermines delivery of Agenda 2030, particularly efforts to ensure that 'no-one is left behind'.[5]

Much of the academic and policy-orientated literature on the issues associated with protracted displacement emphasises the need for humanitarian assistance and/or 'durable solutions' – including through resettlement to the countries of Europe and North America. The focus has often been on those living in camp settings such as Dadaab and Kakuma in Kenya, where the refugee population is particularly large, or from countries such as Lebanon and Turkey which are proximate to Europe and where there are political concerns and interests in preventing onward migration (Gammeltoft-Hansen & Tan, 2017). There has been much less research into the needs and aspirations of displaced populations living in contexts of limited economic or political interest to the international community, and/or those in which there are no immediate pressing humanitarian needs. The experiences of IDPs have been particularly neglected (IDMC & NRC, 2006, 2017a, b; Wyndham, 2006). The situation facing Liberians displaced in West Africa constitutes one such example. More than 15 years after the conflict officially ended, tens of thousands of Liberians continue to be displaced within Liberia, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, and other countries in the region. Despite the peace agreements and arrangements for repatriation, a large proportion of Liberian refugees – including those living in Ghana – have been unwilling to repatriate or 'go home' (Essuman-Johnson, 2011). While the repatriation of Liberian refugees based in other West African countries have been relatively successful, the same cannot be said of Liberian refugees in Ghana (Dick, 2002). Whilst some have been resettled, primarily to the US – the country with whom the history of Liberia and the subsequent conflict in intricately entwined – most have been left 'hanging in the air', living in extreme poverty, marginalised from mainstream development policies and planning, increasingly dependent on remittances from those living elsewhere as humanitarian assistance has dwindled and ultimately been withdrawn. Those who remain in Ghana have been unable to either contribute to, or benefit from, efforts to rebuild peace and security in their home country. Those who have returned to Liberia have often struggled to re-establish their lives in one of the world's poorest nations.

This chapter examines the experiences and prospects for Liberian refugees living in protracted displacement in Ghana. It draws upon a large body of research undertaken with Liberians living in Ghana for over three decades, much of which focuses on the Buduburam Refugee Camp, now the Buduburam Refugee Settlement (Dick, 2002; Omata, 2012, 2013, 2017). It was in Buduburam that one of the authors spent much of her childhood before being resettled with her family to Canada. Both authors subsequently made multiple visits to Buduburam during 2018/9 when they

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[5] The UN Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development – otherwise referred to as Agenda 30 – sets out 17 interconnected Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The aspiration is that the SDGs should be delivered by 2030. The principle of 'Leave no one behind' requires combating discrimination and rising inequalities, including those associated with forced migration.

met with members of the community to discuss the ongoing issues facing Liberians living in Ghana.

6.2   Conflict and the Protracted Displacement of Liberians in West Africa

The conflict that led Liberians to flee to Ghana and other West African countries began in December 1989 but had its roots in the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the formation of Liberia itself (Dick, 2002; Hampshire et al., 2008; Omata, 2012). The story begins in the early 1400s when the Portuguese erected the first European slave-trading post, Elmina Castle, in present-day Ghana (White, 1999). Between 1501 and 1875, an estimated 12.5 million Africans were forcibly migrated to Europe, the Caribbean, and the Americas.[6] Liberia itself was birthed out of the need to address the perceived 'problem' of freed slaves being placed on the same legal equality with white people in the US following the abolition of slavery in 1819. Between 1820 and 1904 nearly 15,000 former slaves were returned from the US to the Colony of Liberia, marking a period of forced migration *back to* West Africa from the Americas. In 1847, the settlers signed a declaration of independence marking Liberia as the oldest republic in Africa. However, this did not mean that all people in the republic enjoyed the same rights and privileges. On the contrary, the former slave returnees – the so-called Americo-Liberians – who comprised less than 1% of Liberia's population, ruled the nation as quasi-imperial masters until 1980, selectively manipulating the customs and traditions of the Indigenous Peoples to gain and reinforce their own control of Liberia's land, resources, and people.

The consequences of this colonial legacy ripple through into its more recent history of conflict and displacement. The two civil wars that devastated Liberia between 1989 and 2003 were rooted in a power struggle between former slave returnees from the US and various Indigenous groups, most of which had been excluded from participating in the state-building and development after the country was founded. In 1980, Samuel Doe, a junior level Indigenous military officer, led a successful military coup and overthrew the Americo-Liberian regime. During his presidency, Doe gave virtually all positions of power to people from his own Krahn language group and maltreated most other Indigenous groups (Frontani et al., 2009), and several further *coup d'état* attempts in the 1980s led to widespread civil conflict throughout the country. In 1989, Charles Taylor, an Americo-Liberian formerly in Doe's government, overthrew Doe from his base in Côte d'Ivoire. At the beginning of the civil war, Taylor's regime targeted the Krahn and Mandingo Peoples who were viewed as Doe-supporters. This resulted in a civil war which lasted until 1996 when there was temporary peace that allowed for the 1997 elections. The elections resulted in

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[6] More at http://www.slavevoyages.org

Taylor's victory but fighting continued until 2003 (Dick, 2002; Hampshire et al., 2008).

A peace agreement, Taylor's resignation and exile to Nigeria in 2003, led to the United Nations declaring Liberia safe in 2004 and the onset of repatriation initiatives. However, the consequences of the conflict, as well as the longer history of forced migration, the violence, and the widespread inequalities with which the civil war was associated, linger on. By the official end of Liberia's war in 2003, an estimated 250,000 people had been killed and around half of the country's population of 2.8 million had been displaced. Approximately 800,000 – 1 million people were displaced within the country (Dick, 2002; UNHCR, 2006; Wyndham, 2006) and over a million people became refugees (Nmoma, 1997; UNHCR, 2006). The scale of displacement in Liberia reflects its use as a deliberate tactic during the conflict (Dabo, 2012). But the Liberian conflict is not only notable for the scale of the violence and the fact that the casualties were often civilians: there were also particular impacts for specific groups of civilians. Whilst its extent is contested (Cohen & Green, 2012), there is evidence that rates of rape and sexual violence against women and girls were very high. This violence was perpetrated by soldiers and fighters against women accused of belonging to a particular language group or fighting faction, or who were forced to cook for a soldier or fighter and were at increased risk of physical and sexual violence (Swiss et al., 1998). In addition, women experienced rape and sexual violence from within their families and communities. Stripped of their ability to protect or even feed their families in the war, and feeling emasculated, men routinely turned on women and girls, reasserting their dominance through the use of force. The sexual violence associated with the conflict ripples through into present day Liberia which has some of the highest incidences of sexual violence against women in the world (Jones et al., 2014).[7]

Meanwhile the UN has estimated that up to 20,000 children, some as young as six years old, were among both government and opposition forces during Liberia's civil conflict (Child Soldiers International, 2001). Both opposition groups, the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) and the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL), as well as government forces which include militias and paramilitary groups, widely used children as soldiers. The use and abuse of children was a deliberate policy on the part of the highest levels of leadership in all warring factions (Human Rights Watch, 2004). Despite an extensive demobilization programme which began in 2004, the use of child soldiers has had long lasting impacts on the Liberian population, including refugees living outside the country for whom rehabilitation programmes are rarely available. These children, now adults, have ongoing fear, confusion and concern about their future, underlining the need for psychological and practical support to help them readjust to civilian life (Human Rights Watch, 2004). We return to these issues later in the chapter.

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[7] See also http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2017/11/feature-reversing-the-tide-of-rising-violence-against-women-in-liberia

Liberians began entering Ghana as refugees in mid- to late-1990, shortly after the outbreak of the civil war, choosing Ghana for its general stability, reasonable economy, and the widespread use of English. Others fled to different countries in the region including neighbouring Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Côte d'Ivoire, all of which experienced significant internal and external displacement due to conflicts occurring between 1991–2002, 2002–2004 and 2010–11. Liberians were initially brought to Ghana by air and sea, with navy ships and merchant vessels cooperating with the military branch of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to bring refugees *en masse* (Dick, 2002). As noted by Dick (2002), the majority of refugees represented the average Liberian, but a substantial number of the initial arrivals were younger, well-educated, urban-based professionals from Liberia's capital of Monrovia or surrounding communities. By August 1990, the Ghanaian government had set up an ad hoc Committee on Refugees in response to the arrival of an increasing number of Liberian refugees, and agreed to use the abandoned church premises of Gomoa Buduburam in the Central Region of Ghana. Located in an agricultural settlement about an hour's drive east of Accra, the Buduburam Refugee Camp served as a reception centre for accommodating the arrival of Liberian refugees. In September 1990, there were around 7,000 Liberians at Buduburam with a further 2,000 leaving the facility and self-settling in and around the Greater Accra region or communities nearby in the Central Region (Dick, 2002). A decade later, the number of Liberians living in Ghana had increased to around 42,000 living in three major refugee camps, the biggest of which was at Buduburam (Dick, 2002; Agblorti, 2011; Dako-Gyeke & Adu, 2017).

As noted above, the Liberian war ended in 2003 with the final ceasefire agreement between the warring parties and Taylor's step down from power. Elections were held in October 2005 and, in January 2006, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf was sworn in as Liberia's new president (and Africa's first woman president). Since then, Liberia has been relatively peaceful but the task of reconstruction and the reintegration of refugees and IDPs remains considerable. The reluctance of Liberians displaced in West Africa to return to their home country needs to be situated within the wider context of peace-building in the region. This situational perspective includes the failure of civil society actors and international organisations to meaningfully engage displaced women and youth – for whom the war had particularly devastating consequences – into development and peace-building processes. Many Liberians living in Ghana simply to not believe it is safe for them to return (Agblorti, 2011; Dick, 2002; Omata, 2012). Other reasons given by Liberians for the decision to stay in Ghana include an unwillingness to leave their businesses or quit their studies in Ghana, a lack of capital to start life all over in Liberia, and the possibility of resettlement in US (Dick, 2002).

Moreover, despite the need for a multifaceted approach to protracted refugee situations, the overall response of policy makers remains compartmentalised with security, development and humanitarian issues approached in isolation. For example, when the *Accra Peace Accord* was signed in 2003, the Liberian government decided to close the IDP camps and to begin a national process of reconstruction and reconciliation. However, rather than considering the particular needs of IDPs

and returning refugees (many of whom became IDPs), the government prioritized issues of youth employment and rural development (Shilue & Fagen, 2014). The challenge of protracted refugee situations is therefore rooted in the dynamics of fragile states: the prolonged exile of refugees is a manifestation of failures to end conflict and promote peace-building whilst the prolonged presence of displaced populations can itself frustrate peace-building efforts (Loescher et al., 2007). 'Solving' the problem of protracted displacement is therefore closely linked to effective peace-building, yet those who are most directly affected by conflict – refugees and IDPs – are often excluded from this process. The role of young people is particularly neglected (Jones & Flemming, 2016).

6.3   Local Integration

A number of factors have undermined the local integration of Liberian refugees in Ghana and help to explain why many still feel that their lives are 'hanging in the air' even after spending decades in the country. Firstly, and perhaps most importantly, the Ghanaian government has never fully supported the local integration of Liberian refugees, and indeed has actively encouraged and facilitated their return to Liberia since the conflict ended, including forced repatriation in some cases (Agblorti & Grant, 2019). According to Omata (2012), the Ghanaian administration believes that any attempt by the government to integrate refugees will generate strong resentment among the local population, especially if this involves the commitment of resources from the host country. Because of these concerns, the Ghanaian Government has been cautious about discussing the local integration of Liberian refugees. Indeed, when refugees in Buduburam demonstrated against being compelled to integrate locally against their wishes, the Minister of the Interior stated that the 'Government has not decided to integrate them [refugees] nor does it have any intention to do so' (Agblorti & Grant, 2019). UNHCR has also noted that 'the main challenges in Ghana are the absence hitherto of strong or indeed any government support for local integration as a solution' (Omata, 2012).

This approach is reflected in an emphasis on policies of repatriation and return. Although the gradual process of reducing humanitarian assistance to Liberians began in 1997, UNHCR officially withdrew all assistance to Liberian refugees in Ghana in 2000 (i.e., even before the end of the conflict) in the hope that this would encourage Liberians to repatriate (Dick, 2002). Between 2004 and 2007, UNHCR organised a large-scale repatriation promotion programme for remaining Liberians. However, many Liberian refugees were unwilling to return to what was viewed as a precarious political and economic situation in Liberia (also see Dick, 2002; Agblorti, 2011). Moreover, the resources on offer for the return to Liberia were very low.[8] As

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[8] According to Holzer (2012), the repatriation package included a flight to Monrovia (the capital city), a luggage allowance, some food and basic household goods and US$5 for transportation in Liberia. Importantly, it did not include housing or substantial cash grants which would enable refu-

a result, the number of repatriates from Ghana reached only 7,000 during this three-year repatriation programme. Following threats to close down the Buduburam, again to 'encourage' return, a series of protests took place led by a group called Refugee Women with Refugee Concerns (Holzer, 2012). The movement grew over a five-month period, culminating in a sit-down protest and boycotts that closed the schools, food distribution centres and nightclubs across the camp. In March 2008, there were a series of raids and arrests by the Ghanaian police resulting in the deportation of 16 men to Liberia and produced a marked rise in tensions between Liberians and Ghanaians in both Ghana and Liberia (Essuman-Johnson, 2011; Holzer, 2012). Between 2008 and 2009 UNHCR launched another one-year repatriation programme for Liberians remaining in Ghana,[9] followed by a further programme in 2012, this time coupled with the application of the cessation clause which meant that refugees who remained in Ghana lost their refugee status, the protection of UNHCR, and other privileges associated with being a refugee (Omata, 2012). Despite these efforts the pace of return has been slow and there are still thousands of Liberians living in the camp as well as smaller numbers from Côte d'Ivoire, Sierra Leone, Togo, Chad, Rwanda, Eritrea, Sudan and the Congo.[10]

It is against this policy backdrop that Liberian refugees living in Buduburam have attempted to rebuild their lives. Due to the presence of commercial activities undertaken by refugees, most notably small shops, and petty trading, UNHCR has described the Buduburam Refugee Settlement as an exemplary 'self-reliant' model (Easton-Calabria & Omata, 2018). The reality however is very different (Omata, 2017). Similar to other refugee-hosting countries in developing regions, Ghana virtually excluded refugees from formal labour markets and limited their engagement in commercial activities outside the camp (Hampshire et al., 2008). With little access to meaningful economic opportunities, refugees have survived by relying on mutual support networks and remittances from other refugees, in particular those who have been resettled to the US (Omata, 2012, 2017; Teye & Kai-doz, 2015; Easton-Calabria & Omata, 2018; Agblorti & Grant, 2019). Research by Codjoe et al. (2013) found that about 42% of the refugees interviewed receive remittances, mainly in the form of cash, from siblings, friends, and parents in the US, within Ghana, Germany, and Liberia. Around 20% of those interviewed by Hampshire et al. (2008) were receiving regular remittances from family abroad, particularly the US. In other words, refugee 'self-reliance' is completely dependent upon

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gees to re-establish themselves in Liberia having left everything behind when they fled during the war.

[9] This time the refugees were promised a support package of US$300 for adults and US$200 for children upon repatriation, however there was an agreement among the refugees that the money was not enough to cover the costs associated with their return (Omata, 2012)

[10] It is difficult to know exactly how many Liberians are living in Ghana because refugee status ended for Liberians in 2012 and the numbers are no longer recorded in the same way as previously. According to UNHCR, in 2020 around 2,000 Liberians were in the process of locally integrating in Ghana supported with renewal of passports and residence permits, however a much larger number have decided not to take this option for reasons explained in this chapter. More information at https://reporting.unhcr.org/ghana

remittances and has nothing to do with UNHCR's initiatives to foster refugee self-reliance by withdrawing aid (Omata, 2017).

The consequences of this dependence on remittances are twofold. On the one hand there is a strong belief among Liberian refugees, particularly the young, that the only solution to their situation is resettlement elsewhere, the implications of which are discussed below. Secondly, the dependence on remittances have resulted in significant economic inequality *between* refugee households in the Buduburam Refugee Settlement (Omata, 2012, 2013, 2017). Whilst some have been able to eke out a precarious livelihood drawing on long-standing and highly developed social networks, there is evidence of deprivation and hardship emanating from high rates of unemployment and a lack of material support (Dick, 2002; Teye & Kai-doz, 2015; Omata, 2017; Dako-Gyeke & Adu, 2017). The situation has been exacerbated by the various repatriation exercises outlined above: the drastic reduction in the refugee population resulted in low sales of the household items that were the principal economic activities at the settlement (Hampshire et al., 2008). Those lacking access to remittances are therefore more likely to be pushed into risky and illegal livelihood strategies (Dako-Gyeke & Adu, 2017).

In addition to these economic inequalities, there are also inequalities between Liberian refugees associated with gender and age. These inequalities mirror the experiences of women and youth during the Liberian civil war outlined above. Gender-related violence and discrimination associated with conflict can undermine the ability of women to secure access to education, employment, and training and, in turn, their ability to integrate. As noted above, there is evidence of escalating violence against women and girls in Liberia (Jones et al., 2014). Rape, along with other forms of sexual violence, was often used during the war to terrorise, punish, and control the civilian population, thereby destroying the fabric of society and leaving its victims with enduring physical, emotional and social scars (Liebling-Kalifani et al., 2011). But rape and sexual violence preceded the conflict and continues beyond it. It reflects the use of violence within Liberian society as a means of sustaining patriarchy, reflected in an intricate network of normative systems that reinforce the marginalisation of Liberian women, including those who now live in Ghana. In this context, it is critically important to understand how displacement transforms, or reinforces, existing gendered roles and identities and, in turn, the implications for access to education, training and employment for displaced Liberian women and girls (Boeteng, 2009, 2010; Yacob-Haliso, 2011; Omata, 2012, 2013).

Research on children and youth meanwhile suggests, in addition to the mental health impacts of the war on children forced to participate as soldiers, intergenerational relationships within the Liberian refugee community have been fundamentally ruptured by both the conflict and the experience of being displaced. Research by Hampshire et al. (2008) includes accounts of inter-generational role reversals within the household, in which children were now providing for parents, rather than the other way round, with elders becoming increasingly dependent on youth incomes for their own survival. According to the authors, it is not just perceived economic role reversals that have led, in the refugees' view, to a breakdown of inter-generational relations of authority and respect. Experience of the conflict itself has

played an important role. Involvement of young people in the war (as described above) is seen to have contributed to changes in their relations with elders. 'This has happened because of the war,' said one old man, 'The younger people don't respect the older people. In the war, there were child soldiers commanding adults.' This theme was echoed by other older people. 'During the war, children had guns, so they had power over older people,' explained one elderly man (Hampshire et al., 2008, 31).

Among Liberians living in Buduburam then, there is a sense that life is not as it should be, that the disruption and violence, poverty and marginalisation associated with the war in their home country continues even in Ghana. Liberians' feelings of belonging and certainties about their future are further undermined by media framing of the issues, tensions with the local population and xenophobia (Frontani et al., 2009). The initial response of Ghanaians to the plight of the relatively well-educated Liberians was, according to Dick (2002), 'quite warm and welcoming', with Ghanaian churches, families, and concerned individuals offered food, clothing, transportation or rented rooms or leased properties for reduced fees to assist refugees. Over time, however, the ways in which the impacts of the arrival of the Liberians have come to be viewed by the host community in Buduburam is mixed (Codjoe et al., 2013). On the one hand, some people contend that refugees have increased the costs of goods and services, brought pressure on facilities, increased social vices and deteriorated environmental resources. At the same time however, refugees are viewed as a source of income and market, and trade partners, who have brought considerable infrastructural developments to the area which was previously remote from Accra and primarily agricultural.

That said, some Ghanaian sellers view Liberian traders as competitors and therefore do not allow them to trade without paying entry fees (Agblorti, 2011; Dick, 2002). Even refugees who manage to meet this condition are discriminated against as many Ghanaians do not buy from them (Omata, 2012). Additionally, the perception among some Ghanaians that the refugees are better-off than Ghanaians in the camp neighbourhood as a result of remittances sent from abroad has stimulated reluctance among the locals to purchase from the refugees (Omata, 2012). In this context it is perhaps not surprising that many Liberian refugees do not view local integration as a solution for their future, actively opposing it or refusing to engage with it, for example by not learning one of the main local languages (Twi) or developing relationships with Ghanaians. Moreover, according to Byrne (2013), the composition of Liberian identity also appears to play a prominent role in fostering opposition to local integration. Many Liberians define their identity in ethnocultural terms, placing heavy emphasis on nativity, bloodlines, and cultural practices as central to being a Liberian. These very exclusive conceptions of identity make it difficult for them to imagine how they would adapt to a different society, even with the proper legal documents and language skills, and lead many Liberians to believe that they can only rebuild their lives elsewhere.

6.4   Resettlement to the United States

The resettlement regime, a complex international framework which provides differential protection to individuals based on various categories, is rooted in the aftermath of the Second World War (Karatani, 2005). Like many United Nations agencies, the primary goal of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) created in 1943, which later transformed into the UNHCR in 1950, was to respond to displacement in Europe caused by the war (Elie, 2010). Thus, with the US taking the lead with the *Displacement Act* 1948, more than a million refugees were resettled from Europe (UNHCR, 2019). Yet, the challenges to the resettlement of displaced peoples remain visibly persistent with anything but durable solutions (Asgary, 2018; Esses et al., 2017). Over the years, the Bureau of Population Resettlement and the Office of Refugee Resettlement has expanded refugee resettlement to the US well beyond the boundaries of Europe to include Liberian refugees even with these challenges (Hadley & Sellen, 2006).

The history of the resettlement of Liberians to the US is incomplete without returning to the contextual twists and turns observed within the forced migration of Africans during the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the consequential transition of Liberia from a colonised nation to an independent state. Liberia, derived from the word Liberty, set out to be an asylum for refugees from the United States '…debarred by law from all rights and privileges…of a country which gave [them] no protection.'[11] On the contrary, the aim of the *Liberia Declaration of Independence* 1847 to welcome Africans fleeing prosecution from slave owners in the US is still thwarted by on-going challenges of violent conflict, political rift, and socio-economic problems.

As noted above, for nearly 400 years, a total of 34,087 deadly voyages forcibly displaced 12.5 million Africans to the Americas, Europe and the Caribbean (Fynn Bruey, 2016). This infamous migratory path provides the basis for the founding of the Republic of Liberia and subsequently influences the state of Liberian refugee resettlement to the US today. Since the creation of the Liberian state in 1847, Liberians have come to conceptualise and practicalise their existence as 'small America' or America's stepchild (Bright, 2002). In the past 30 years, Liberian refugees in Ghana crystallised their protracted 'hanging in the air' displacement by believing that their resettlement to the US is their God-given right because of the unique historical connection between the two countries (Holzer, 2012; Fee, 2021). The harsh reality however, is that both the annual refugee resettlement ceiling in the US and actual refugee admissions have fallen drastically over the last four decades (UNHCR, 2021; Rosenberg, 2018; Times, 2017; Goździak, 2021; Elacretaz et al., 2016).

For instance, the number of refugees admitted to the US in 1980 (i.e., 207,116) was 18 times higher than those granted admission in 2020 (i.e. 11,841) (Migration

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[11] Liberia, Declaration of Independence: In Convention, Town of Monrovia, June and July 1847 (Monrovia, 1847).

Policy Institute, 2013). For the year 2021, the refugee resettlement ceiling was set at 15,000, the lowest since the US refugee admissions program began in 1980 (Migration Policy Institute, 2013). With this reduction, it is only logical to see a corresponding decrease in the number of Liberian refugees resettled to the US within the same time. Between 1992 and 2004, an estimated 23,500 Liberian refugees who fled the civil war were resettled in the US (Weine et al., 2011; Browne, 2006). Although a meagre 2% of the approximately one million that were displaced in neighbouring countries across West Africa between 1990 and 2003, the number of Liberians resettled in the US in this time frame is nearly twice as much as the 14,996 African American settler-colonist returnees who sought asylum on the Grain Coast between 1807 and 1866 (Brown, 1980; Murdza Jr., 1975; Shick, 1971).

Tens of thousands of Liberians already living in the US prior to the inception of the civil war in 1989 who had temporary status (e.g. students and visitors) still do not have permanent status today (Kerwin & Nicholson, 2020). On 20 December 2019, the US Congress enacted the *Liberian Refugee Immigration Fairness Act*, which provides an opportunity for Liberians with temporary status to obtain lawful permanent resident status (US Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2021). That being said, the sticky situation for displaced Liberians currently residing in Ghana, some without any legal protection, is that the chances of being resettled in the US are slimmer than ever (Ludwig, 2016). As such, the last 30 years of precarity accentuates the suspension of those 'hanging in the air', which compels them to either locally integrate or return to Liberia.

6.5   Returning to Liberia

For those displaced within, or returning to, Liberia, life is equally difficult. Whilst the situation has improved considerably since the peace agreement was signed in 2003, Liberia remains fragile (Essuman-Johnson, 2011; UNHCR, 2019). Many Liberian refugees do not believe that they will be economically secure in Liberia even whilst living in relative poverty and marginalisation in Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire. According to the World Food Programme, Liberia ranks 182nd of 187 countries in the Human Development Index (UNDP, 2015). The country's national infrastructure and basic social services were destroyed during the conflict and have not been rebuilt. An estimated 64% of Liberians live below the poverty line, of whom 1.3 million live in extreme poverty (Omata & Takahashi, 2016). Social safety nets are poorly developed. Agricultural production has improved since the end of the war, but the country still depends on food imports and is vulnerable to economic shocks. Agricultural markets are poorly integrated, especially in rural areas, exacerbating food insecurity, which affects 41% of the population.

At the same time, rural-urban displacement is on the rise. More than half of the country's population lives in Monrovia with associated overcrowding. The high density of Monrovia's population, in part, explains the disproportionate focus of a century-old, centralised government on public and private socio-political

development of the country's urban capital whilst neglecting and depriving the remaining rural communities of similar investment. Access to basic amenities including health education, housing, and employment is limited for at least 60% of the population. Data compiled from the Liberia Population and Housing Census in 2008 shows that for the entire population of 4.3 million people at that time there were just 117 licensed medical doctors (upgraded to 298 for a 4.5 million population in 2016) (Fynn Bruey, 2019a) and 375 registered nurses, 24 hospitals, and 316 community health clinics (Fynn Bruey, 2019b).

This situation was exacerbated by the 2014–2015 Ebola epidemic, which forced the Liberian government to divert scarce resources to combat the spread of the virus. Liberia was the Ebola outbreak's hardest hit country with 10,666 cases and 4,806 deaths. There is evidence that women face additional hardships (Yacob-Haliso, 2011). The Global Fund for Women suggests 75% of those who died from Ebola were women, with past studies revealing that a mortality rate among pregnant women was probably as high as 93.3%. Of the 184 health workers who died, nurses and nursing aids (mostly females) accounted for the highest proportion (35%) of the 810 Ebola health worker cases reported by mid-August 2014 (Fynn Bruey, 2019a). For a country with relatively low number of health professionals, 35% is brutally high.

In addition to economic concerns, many Liberians do not feel that it is safe to return: the history of the conflict and the deep underlying tensions between different groups cannot easily be addressed and the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission have yet to be implemented (Fynn Bruey, 2016, 2017). Other forms of violence and insecurity are also prevalent. As noted earlier in this chapter, women and girls were subject to gender-specific violations during the conflict (Liebling-Kalifani et al., 2011), and there is ongoing – and escalating – violence and discrimination against girls and women both within Liberia and within Liberian communities living elsewhere (Government of Liberia, 2011; Jones et al., 2014; Fynn Bruey, 2016).

Liberia is still in its post-war recovery state where, until 2017, there was no comprehensive mental health program established for survivors including hundreds of thousands of ex-combatants (Fynn Bruey, 2019b). Ex-combatants, many of whom were children when they were recruited into armed groups, have not been properly rehabilitated as the country has no mental or psychological institutions to deal with the trauma caused by the war, and the part they played within it. Warlords and alleged war criminals have not been prosecuted, with some having key roles in the national government, the judiciary, and the legislature. All of this continues to undermine genuine peace and stability in Liberia.

Whilst reintegration programmes were introduced in Liberia as early as 2004 in an effort to address these challenges, several studies point to underfunding, lack of sustainability, and limited impact (Yacob-Haliso, 2011). For example, a 2015 World Bank study underlines the failure to provide continued support to Liberian returnees after their repatriation (Harild et al., 2015). According to the authors, the level of support was already being phased out even as the number of returnees was increasing. An assessment of the economic reintegration of returnees in Liberia through

two training programmes in 2016 shows that the interventions were inadequate for enabling them to build successful economic livelihoods, mainly due to the limited access to financial capital (Omata & Takahashi, 2016). In practice, the process of reintegration, including the construction of new livelihoods, is largely influenced by returnees' asset conditions, and in particular, access to social networks in Liberia (Omata, 2011).

Despite this, Liberia is one of the countries that has received a significant number of refugee returnees in recent years: 2012 witnessed a surge in the number of returnees with more than 155,000 Liberians returning through UNHCR's voluntary repatriation programme after the cessation clause was invoked (Palmisano & Momodu, 2013, Omata, 2017; Omata & Takahashi, 2016). Since that time, however, the pace of return has slowed considerably, in part because the level of assistance to returnees has been extremely limited, mainly due to budgetary and capacity constraints. In addition to the limited capacity of the Liberian government and its economy noted above, returnees faced specific challenges in their economic reintegration. For example, while some returnees benefited from vocational training provided by aid organisations during their exile, these programmes were not necessarily designed for the demands of labour markets in Liberia (Omata & Takahashi, 2016). Meanwhile tens of thousands of Liberians continue to be internally displaced, many living in slums around Monrovia, a capital city built to house only a third of the country's population.

These difficult living conditions for returnees to Liberia have now been compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic (Grant, 2020; World Health Organization, 2020). Despite this, as the old adage goes, 'home is home' (Antwi-Boeteng & Braimah, 2020). It is seldom mentioned but is worth noting that Liberia is a country of immigrants. The three major linguistic groups found on the western coast of Africa, which now includes present day Liberia, migrated from the Niger River and Sudan at different times, prior to Europeans arrival (Beyan, 1995). Today, Liberia's population is a mélange of indigenous Liberians originating from it three major linguistic groups; former slave settler-colonist returnees who sought refuge from the US in the 1800–1900s, Congo-recaptives (or Congoes) rescued by the American navy ships when they were *en route* from Africa to be sold as slaves (Fynn Bruey, 2016) and a host of other foreign nationals which make up 20% of the population, including refugees and undocumented migrants (Liberia Institute of Statistics and Geo-Information Services, 2017).

6.6   Conclusions

It is clear from the evidence presented in this chapter that more than 15 years after the *Accra Comprehensive Peace Agreement* was signed, tens of thousands of Liberians continue to be left 'hanging in the air' in Ghana and other countries of West Africa. Whilst some have been resettled – primarily to Canada, the US, Australia and European countries – most live in extreme poverty, marginalised from

mainstream development policies and planning, and unable to either contribute to, or benefit from, efforts to rebuild peace and security in their home country. Local integration and return in the context of protracted displacement are often conceptualised as mutually exclusive. In reality, the ability of displaced populations to integrate into their host communities – or reintegrate in the context of return – is contingent upon the existence of opportunities for refugees to develop skills and capabilities to build sustainable livelihoods and deal with the emotional 'fall out' of conflict and displacement.

Ideally, the Liberian refugees who have chosen to stay in Ghana will eventually integrate into Ghanaian society. Indeed, many have already done so. Their arrival rapidly transformed Buduburam into an urban centre, with booming informal economic activities albeit with an inadequate socio-economic infrastructure, a key feature of urban slums. The boundary of the settlement has never been defined clearly. Over time, and especially with the end of formal service provision by UNHCR in 2012, refugees have moved beyond the original site and now co-exist with local villagers in these extended areas (Agblorti & Grant, 2019). Those visiting or travelling through Buduburam would not know it was a refugee camp were it not for the occasional faded UNHCR signs.

But the Liberians with whom we spoke, and whose views and perspectives have been captured by numerous research projects over the years, do not feel integrated. Many of them told us that they feel different from the communities among whom they live – culturally, linguistically and in terms of their shared history of conflict and violence. And, they are still waiting, for something, anything, that will improve the day-to-day quality of their lives and the longer-term prospects for them and their children. For some, the enduring hope remains resettlement to the US, even though that hope flies in the face or what is likely or possible given the reluctance on the part of the international community to step up to their obligations, despite deep and enduring connections between countries of origin and resettlement, in this case Liberia and the US. In this context, we conclude with three policy suggestions which we believe would go some way towards ensuring that Liberians are not left 'hanging in the air' for even longer than they have been already.

Firstly, and most importantly, Ghana government's official policy on non-recognition of Liberian refugees requires reconsideration (Antwi-Boeteng & Braimah, 2020). To date, the Ghanaian government and the Liberian government have not developed a clear strategy or joint force in dealing with the situation (Dako-Gyeke & Adu, 2015). In June 2012, nearly a decade after the ceasefire agreement in Liberia, the Cessation Clause was invoked for Liberian refugees which meant that they were effectively no longer able to avail themselves of international protection or access humanitarian assistance provided by UNHCR and other international organisations. Liberian refugees living in Ghana were left with two options: either to repatriate by the end of June 2012 before the invocation of the Cessation Clause, or to remain in Ghana through an agreement that existed among the member countries of ECOWAS to allowing them to live and work in the ECOWAS region, initially on a two-year basis (Omata, 2016). However, as Omata (2016, 11) suggests, '[s]ubstituting the label of "economic migrant" for that of "refugee" is not a real

alternative to a durable solution. It is a "quasi-solution" that serves to conceal the failure of the global refugee regime to deal with the challenges of former refugees who have been left with ambiguous migrant status and little attention from the international community'. Not only have Liberians been unable to take full advantage of the opportunities provided by the ECOWAS passport because of their limited resources, but the structural barriers to their integration, including xenophobia, remain. Since it is apparent that many Liberian refugees will continue to live in Ghana, a new approach is needed (Antwi-Boeteng & Braimah, 2020). This should focus on ensuring that Liberians have the option of permanent residency or citizenship in order that they feel part of Ghanaian society. Whilst some may be unwilling to take this up because they wish to preserve their national identity (Byrne, 2013), or do not want to give up the possibility of resettlement, it should none the less be offered. This would reduce the perception of Liberian refugees that they have less opportunities than Ghanaians and help counter negative public attitudes by providing access to rights.

Secondly, it is important to develop a holistic assessment of the needs, interests and aspirations of displaced Liberians which includes an understanding of the cultural, emotional, and mental health consequences of both the Liberian civil war and the experience of protracted displacement. This assessment should be based on participatory research using innovative methods and engaging with issues of cultural heritage and identity. It should aim to build and strengthen partnerships between a broad range of local public and private actors able to provide a range of training, mentoring and development opportunities that are oriented towards building the resilience of Liberian refugees for example, through improving access to mental health support, providing mentoring support and leadership development opportunities. The Ghanaian government via the Ghana Refugee Board should also help to bridge and link social capital by implementing long-term vocational and educational projects within camps such as Buduburam and by providing capital for small scale investment (Boeteng, 2009, 2010). This would go a long way in preparing Liberians for jobs in Ghana, which would, in turn, contribute to both their self-sufficiency and sense of well-being. These approaches to self-reliance would not be driven by problematic linkages to neoliberalism and the notion of 'dependency' (Easton-Calabria & Omata, 2018). Nor would they be instrumentally orientated towards return. Rather they would be orientated towards providing refugees with the skills, opportunities and confidences needed to rebuild their lives in ways that are meaningful, however, and wherever that eventually takes place. Ideally such a strategy would take place within a broader developmental approach in which the needs of refugees and their host communities are dealt with together. This reduces the potential for such initiatives creating conflict between refugees and the host community, particularly where the host community is poor, as is the case in Buduburam.

Finally, it is important to situate solutions to the situation of Liberians living in Ghana within long term development and peace-building strategies which ensure that 'no one is left behind'. This includes refugees and, in particular, women and young people for whom the conflict in Liberia has had consequences including

ongoing sexual violence, mental health issues and marginalisation. Addressing these issues requires co-ordination and collective thinking, both across policy domains and between the countries of West Africa. One option would be the creation of a joint Ghanaian and Liberian government task force to permanently resolve the issue (Antwi-Boeteng & Braimah, 2020). In the absence of a coordinated and holistic approach such as this, Liberian refugees living in Ghana will continue to feel that their lives are 'hanging in the air'.

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