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EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF UNIDO'S TRAINING ON THE ECONOMIC REINTEGRATION OF REPATRIATED REFUGEES IN LIBERIA

RESEARCH, STATISTICS AND INDUSTRIAL POLICY BRANCH

WORKING PAPER 12/2015

**Examining the impact of UNIDO's training on the
economic reintegration of repatriated refugees in
Liberia**

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Abstract

Drawing upon research in Liberia, this paper explores the impact of UNIDO's vocational training programmes on promoting the economic integration of returnees. Between 2013 and 2014, UNIDO provided two training programmes in Liberia to help facilitate the process of reintegration of repatriates from neighbouring countries. The research team conducted a study with 74 beneficiaries of these programmes using survey questionnaires and interviews. The study presents mixed findings about the impact of UNIDO's programmes on these returnees. Even after completion of the training programmes, the majority of trainees remained jobless in an economy damaged by the devastating effects of the Ebola crisis, although most recognized the value of the vocational training provided by UNIDO. Given the multi-faceted nature of economic integration, the provision of training programmes alone may be limited in enabling meaningful integration of returnees into fragile post-crisis environments. The research also produced some concrete recommendations to assist UNIDO in its efforts to develop more effective programmes for the reintegration of returnees. Additional studies are required to better understand the conditions under which vocational training becomes most relevant to repatriating refugees who need to construct their economic foundation in a post-conflict country.

Keywords: Repatriation, economic reintegration, refugees, returnees, vocational training, Liberia, Ghana

1 Introduction

The economic reintegration of conflict-affected communities remains one of the most daunting challenges in post-crisis recovery. Among those affected by warfare, refugees who are repatriating to post-conflict environments deserve particular attention because of the number of difficulties they may be confronted with. Nowadays, the average length of refugees' exile is nearly 20 years. During protracted exile, most refugees lose the foundations of their life in their country of origin. For many returnees, their former homesteads no longer exist or have been occupied by unrelated strangers. Their key livelihood assets such as farmland and livestock have most likely been destroyed or stolen. Furthermore, during prolonged exile, most returnees lose their meaningful personal networks in their country of origin, which often act as a crucial safety net in the absence of state welfare provision in the global South (Schaffer, 1994).

In addition, in many cases, reintegration processes take place in extremely adverse environments (Zieck, 2004; Jacobsen, 2005). In war-devastated areas, roads and other transportation infrastructures are destroyed. High unemployment is a common symptom in war-torn countries. Many of the states that have experienced a destructive conflict have a very low capacity to fulfil the economic demands of society at large. Very often, returnees struggle to survive below the poverty line with very few livelihood options upon repatriation to their home country in the face of these onerous difficulties (Carr, 2014; Shanmugaratnam, 2010).

These daunting challenges call for international assistance to facilitate the economic reintegration of returning refugees. Against this backdrop, the United Nations Industrial Development Programme (UNIDO) has been increasingly active in providing integration support since the early 2000s. The Organization has implemented economic recovery programmes in many post-conflict countries such as Iraq, Sudan, Afghanistan, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire and Sri Lanka, including a number of projects targeted at refugees and IDPs.

Liberia is one of the countries UNIDO has provided assistance to for returning forced migrants. During the civil wars between 1989 and 2003, tens of thousands of Liberians fled their country. After a ceasefire agreement in 2003, a significant number of displaced Liberians chose to repatriate and reconstruct their life in their homeland. Although Liberia is on the way to recovery, the fragile post-conflict setting places a tremendous burden on the Liberian government. Whilst the Government of Liberia has assumed responsibility for the reintegration of the returnees, the extent of its assistance and support was extremely limited, mainly due to budgetary and capacity constraints. Against this backdrop, UNIDO assisted in the socio-

economic reintegration of returnees from the neighbouring countries through the provision of vocational skills training, entrepreneurship training and other related services.

In practical terms, between April 2013 and December 2014, UNIDO provided two training programmes with funding from the Japanese government. The first training programme, the *Entrepreneurship Development Programme* (hereafter EDP), was designed to provide 120 hours of training consisting of two modules. The first module was *Introduction to Entrepreneurship, Work and Life Skills* and the second was *How to Establish and Manage Your Business*. In total, the EDP trained 685 beneficiaries, including both returnees and non-returnees in Liberia from November 2013 to May 2014. The second training programme, the *Skills Training Programme* (hereafter Skills Training), offered a wide range of vocational skills and techniques such as plumbing, beauty care, catering, computer hardware servicing, auto mechanics, baking and hair braiding. In total, the project trained 327 beneficiaries, again including both returnees and non-returnees between March and July 2014.

The principal objective of this study is to explore the role these two training programmes played in facilitating the economic reintegration of the returnees. In addition, this study seeks to: 1) better understand the complexity of the reintegration process; and 2) draw some implications to assist UNIDO in its efforts to develop better programming for the reintegration of returnees in post-conflict settings. It is important to note that this study differs fundamentally from a simple monitoring and evaluation of these training programmes, which has already been undertaken by other external parties.

This research was carried out by an independent international consultant and two former national project staff of UNIDO Liberia between October and December 2014 under the guidance of the UNIDO project manager at headquarters. The research methods consisted of 1) interviews with project beneficiaries; 2) a survey questionnaire; 3) a review of secondary resources; and 4) a review of project documents. For the survey, we randomly selected 74 respondents, consisting of 37 former beneficiaries of the EDP and 37 former beneficiaries of the Skills Training programmes. To reflect the gender balance, of the total 74 respondents, 33 were male and 41 were female beneficiaries. During the initial planning stage, we aimed to interview returnees who had not benefited from any training as a control group. However, this turned out to be extremely difficult. We contacted repatriated refugees as our control group, who had applied to participate in UNIDO's projects but had unfortunately not been selected as beneficiaries. These non-beneficiaries turned out to be completely unwilling to participate in an interview.

We are acutely aware that this study was also plagued by a number of constraints. First, the research team lacked updated and reliable baseline data about the beneficiaries of the projects. The existing datasets in the possession of the UNIIDO project were generally stale, which made it difficult for the research team to track some of the project beneficiaries who had changed their mobile phone numbers, something that happens quite frequently in Liberia. Second, the limited budget severely constrained our data collection efforts. Given the very modest budget, it was not possible for the research team to employ a sufficient number of research assistants. The biggest problem was that the research work was conducted during the final stage of the Ebola epidemic in Liberia, which constrained the physical movements of the two research assistants as well as of the project beneficiaries. The other major obstacle was the limited time available to conduct extensive data collection due to the closure timing of UNIDO's interventions in Liberia. In addition to these challenges, one important caveat to note is the relatively short lead time between the completion of the two training programmes (May 2014 for EDP and July 2014 for Skills Training) and the point of data collection (December 2014), which might not have been sufficient to effectively capture the full impact of the training.

This paper is structured as follows. Following this introductory section, the report summarizes the existing literature on the reintegration of returnees, especially in post-conflict settings. Next, it explains the background of Liberia and sets out the context in which the research took place. Then, the subsequent section presents the main research findings on returnees' economic readjustments in Liberia. Finally, drawing upon the findings of this study, the paper sets out the key implications and recommendations for UNIDO's programming on reintegration support for returnees.

2. Literature on the economic reintegration of returnees

2.1 The notion of economic reintegration

The UN refugee agency posits reintegration as '*the progressive establishment of conditions which enable returnees and their communities to exercise their social, economic, civil, political and cultural rights*' (UNHCR 2008). In accordance with this definition by UNHCR, reintegration ought to be perceived as a 'process' rather than a one-time event. According to Hovil (2010), reintegration should be conceptualized as a gradual transition starting with physical return, then moving on to gaining access to meaningful livelihoods and rights as citizens in the country, and eventually reaching reintegration. In a similar vein, Zieck highlights that the reintegration of returnees is a construction process of their lives in their country of origin (2004).

The reintegration of returnees is a multi-faceted concept. Among the various elements inherent in reintegration, many scholars have singled out the economic factor as the most important and challenging one for returnees (for example, see Schaffer, 1994; Tapscott, 1994). According to Jackson (1994), the hidden agenda of ‘successful’ reintegration is fundamentally whether a returnee can establish a meaningful economic foundation. Rogge refers to the primacy of economic integration by pointing out that whilst social adjustments are made by choice, all migrants must attempt to achieve economic adjustment and integration or put their very survival at risk (1994).

The existing studies paint a gloomy picture of the experiences of returning refugees in the process of socio-economic integration (Omata, 2012; Eastmond & Ojendal, 1999; Marsden, 1999; Rogge & Akol, 1989). According to Kaun’s study on Angolans’ repatriation, for instance, the lack of economic opportunities, including limited access to material, infrastructural and financial assets largely disrupted their efforts to integrate themselves into a new environment (2008). The survey of these returnees pointed to the deplorable fact that only about one quarter of them were deemed to have economically integrated in Angola. Similarly, Afghani returnees from neighbouring Iran and Pakistan struggled to obtain access to meaningful resources and establish decent livelihoods upon their repatriation (Bradley, 2013). The everyday lives of the majority of refugees who returned to Bosnia were dominated by efforts to establish sustainable livelihoods in their country of origin (Stefansson, 2004).

Whilst the existing body of studies mostly demonstrates onerous experiences of the economic integration of returnees, some report relatively auspicious cases. In Sorensen’s research on the repatriation of Eritrean refugees from Sudan (2000), the returnees managed to restore their livelihoods in a relatively short time, mainly because of the extensive range of coordinated support from refugee-assisting agencies as well as from the Eritrean government (see also Kibreab, 2001). According to Akol, a group of Sudanese returnees in the 1970s, so-called ‘white collar returnees’ (former politicians and ex-government officials and employees), were smoothly absorbed into various posts in the new government (1994).

2.2 The provision of training for returnees

As indicated by the examples given above, the degree of economic integration of returnees can be differentiated by certain factors. One of these factors is vocational skills or education acquired before and during their refugee years in the country of asylum. The provision of training programmes has become mainstreamed in refugee assistance during exile. Because of

these training programmes, refugee populations often include a high share of skilled individuals who may have obtained their qualifications before or during the asylum period (Coffie, 2014).

The newly acquired skills during exile such as tailoring, construction or thatching can be valuable assets that might facilitate returnees' integration. In the case of Namibian returnees from Angola, for instance, there was such a major shortage of qualified personnel in the home country that returnees with strong educational and vocational backgrounds were in great demand, whilst the converse applied to those without such qualifications (Tapscott, 1994). If these acquired skills can be transferred and adapted in the country of origin, they are often a positive force in the integration process.

2.3 Issues with training for returnees

Some, however, criticise the provision of vocational or entrepreneurial training for refugees or returnees. One notable feature of existing assistance for potential returnees is that support activities in the country of asylum and in the country of origin are rarely coordinated (Crisp, 1996). Many of the vocational training programmes offered in refugee camps do not provide viable economic opportunities for returnees because most of the training programmes for refugees are focused solely on increasing the supply of skilled labour without increasing market demand or employment options (Women's Refugee Commission, 2006).

Another criticism is that providing training alone can do little to promote the process of economic integration for returnees. In South Sudan, for instance, many returnees came back with new skills including welding, electrical and furniture making. However, there is often a dire lack of resources, especially initial capital, to enable these vocational skills to be put to use (Pantuliano et al., 2007). In such cases, the programmes trained beneficiaries, but did not necessarily enable them to achieve meaningful economic reintegration.

Furthermore, there is a scarcity of follow-up studies on the outcome of training for refugee returnees. According to research by the Women's Refugee Council (2007), numerous vocational training programmes have been implemented in Liberia. In particular, training courses in hair-dressing, baking, tailoring, carpentry, masonry and mechanics have been offered in location after location. Nonetheless, there is almost no effort or attempt to follow up on former trainees to better understand the challenges they face and their successes in socio-economic reintegration. This lack of studies may risk over-emphasizing the role of training programmes and give the impression that the provision of training alone enables returnees to economically reintegrate upon their return home.

3. Research context

Liberia is gradually recovering from the damage caused by a brutal and lengthy conflict. The Liberian civil war began in 1989 when Charles Taylor took up arms against Samuel Doe – the president of Liberia at the time (Ellis, 1995). In December 1989, Taylor’s army advanced into Liberia from Côte d’Ivoire to oust Doe from power. Taylor’s military incursion marked the start of the 14-year Liberian civil war in which approximately 750,000 refugees fled to other countries in the region including Cncludingeria, Ghana, Guinea, Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Gambia.

The Liberian civil war ended in 2003 with the final ceasefire agreement between the warring parties and Taylor’s step down from power (Levitt, 2005). Since then, Liberia has been the target of international efforts to build the capacity of the state and reintegrate war-affected populations, including refugee returnees. Given the restored stability and security in Liberia, the majority of those displaced to neighbouring countries have returned to their homeland since 2003.

The pace of repatriation of Liberian refugees has been spurred in recent years. In January 2012, the UN refugee agency announced its intention to invoke the Cessation Clause of refugee status for the remaining Liberians by the end of June 2012. As a consequence, 2012 witnessed a surge in the number of returnees as the following comments of the UNHCR Representative in Liberia show.

What happened on 30 June 2012 was the end of refugee status for Liberians. What is now happening is the end of voluntary repatriation of thousands of refugees who had registered to return home. In 2012, we facilitated the return of about 29,380 Liberian refugees, exceeding our initial planned figure of 15,000.
(UNHCR, 2013)

At the end of 2012, UNHCR announced the completion of the voluntary repatriation of more than 155,000 Liberians after 23 years from the onset of the civil war. The UN refugee agency proudly called this a remarkable achievement for humanitarian assistance and evidence of the restoration of peace and stability in Liberia.

Although a significant number of returnees returned to Liberia, the country’s accommodation capacity and economic foundation have been limited. According to official statistics, the country’s GDP per capita is estimated at USD 700. Approximately two-thirds of all Liberians live in poverty. Liberia’s economy still heavily relies on foreign assistance from donor states.

During the prolonged conflict, many international businesses fled Liberia, taking capital and expertise with them, although some of these global enterprises have returned to the country since the restoration of peace.

The population is dominated by young people; more than half of the population is below the age of 20 (Republic of Liberia Ministry of Labour, 2009). Unemployment, estimated at 85 per cent in 2003, is widespread, especially amongst young people in Monrovia, Liberia's capital. In the absence of any social security, the vast majority of residents depend entirely on work for their sustenance; this implies putting in long hours of hard work every day, but at very low levels of productivity and income (ibid).

Similar to other West African states, the main characteristic of Liberia's labour market is informality. In 2007, over 85 per cent of citizens were employed in informal sectors. Access to waged employment in the formal economy is largely reserved for the better educated. Many schools were destroyed during the conflict and training infrastructure is still sparse, especially in rural areas. With few educational facilities, about 45 per cent of the working population have never attended primary school, and fewer than 15 per cent have completed secondary education. Women have much lower levels of education than men across all age groups, and there are also large rural/urban differences in education for both sexes (Republic of Liberia Ministry of Labour, 2009).

During the period of this research in late 2014, Liberia, like Sierra Leone and Guinea, was severely hit by economic hardship due to the prevalence of the deadly Ebola virus. According to Jim Yong Kim, the President of the World Bank Group, *'Ebola is a humanitarian crisis first and foremost, but it's also an economic disaster for Liberia, Guinea, and Sierra Leone'*. (UN News Centre, 2014). The World Bank Group has estimated that the economic damage related to Ebola is projected to result in negative or contracting economic growth in Liberia throughout 2015, due to reduced economic activity and investor aversion. The devastating epidemic certainly disturbed the livelihood reconstruction and job-searching of repatriating refugees in Liberia, and this is addressed later in this paper.

Drawing from the study of Liberian returnees, the next section presents the main research findings on their experiences of exile and economic adjustment in post-war Liberia.

4. Research findings

4.1 Demographic information of the survey participants

This section presents the basic demographic profile of the survey participants. As described above, we interviewed a total of 74 returnees who had benefited from either of UNIDO’s two training programmes (see Table 1). The age range of the interviewees was between 18 and 57, with an average of 35 years old. As of December 2014, of the total of 74 interviewees, 54 respondents replied that they were single, 16 were married, one divorced, one widowed, and two had ‘other’ status. Of the respondents, 59 had responsibility for at least one dependent, and 15 survey participants were either a single-headed household or had no dependent(s). The 55 survey respondents – more than 70 per cent of all survey respondents – had lived in Monsterrado County before their exile; the rest came from Bong (6), Lofa (3), Margibi (3), Grand Gedeh (2), Sinoe (2), Bomi (1), Nimba (1) and River Gee (1).

Table 1 Breakdown of interviewees

	Male	Female	Total
EDP	17	20	37
Skills	16	21	37
Total	33	41	74

We asked each respondent about their last country of asylum. As summarized in Table 2, more than 60 per cent of participants returned from Ghana, followed by three countries bordering Liberia – Guinea, Côte d’Ivoire and Sierra Leone. For a few returnees, the last country of asylum was Nigeria or Burkina Faso, classified as ‘other countries’ in the table. The duration of exile varied significantly. In fact, some respondents could not even remember which year they fled from Liberia because they were children at the time. Of the 74 interviewees, 29 were below the age of eighteen years when they sought asylum. The longest exile between 1989 and 2012 was 23 years, but the average duration of exile is calculated to have been about ten years.

Table 2 Last country of asylum of respondents

Country	Number	Percent
Ghana	46	62%
Guinea	10	14%
Côte d'Ivoire	9	12%
Sierra Leone	5	7%
Other countries	4	5%
Total	74	100%

As the varied lengths of exile indicate, the survey participants repatriated to Liberia from their country of asylum at different times. As illustrated in Table 3, about one-third of the respondents returned to their homeland between 2006 and 2010, which is followed by more recent returnees who came back to Liberia between 2011 and 2013. On the other hand, a total of 29 respondents had returned to Liberia even before 2006. UNIDO's project did not apply any selection restrictions on when the beneficiaries had repatriated to Liberia from exile.

Table 3 The year of return to Liberia

Year	Number	Percent
Before 2000	11	15%
2001-2005	18	24%
2006-2010	26	35%
2011-2013	19	26%
Total	74	100%

4.2. Returnees' economic experiences during exile

Our survey questionnaire included some questions about returnees' economic experiences during their exile. Of the 74 interviewees, 35 had been involved in some form of income-generating activity in their last country of asylum. The types of business in which they were involved varied; the top three business activities of respondents were small-scale trading (7), food-related business (6) and beauty care such as beauticians and hair dressers (5). Other smaller numbers of refugees were involved in teaching and some worked for UNHCR and its partner agencies during exile. The 39 survey participants who were not involved in any income-generating activity explained the reasons for not working during exile. The most frequent reply was that they were being cared for by their parents who were the main breadwinners of the

household. Of these 39 respondents, 32 were under the age of 20 when they sought asylum. A small number of them were reliant on remittance support and humanitarian assistance from aid agencies while living in exile.

We also collected data on respondents' access to vocational training during their refugee life outside Liberia. Of the 74 respondents, only eight had received general entrepreneurship training during exile and seven of them had actually established their own businesses while residing in the country of asylum. Of the 74 survey participants, 28 answered that they had received some type of specific vocational skills training during exile. The most common types of training these 28 returnees received were beauty care/hair dressing (7); sewing and tailoring (6); computer skills (5) and catering and cooking (4). Other types of vocational training respondents received included masonry work, mechanics, security guarding, driving and interior decoration.

Of these 28 respondents who had received skills training during their exile, we asked a follow-up question about whether they had actually utilized the vocational skills acquired to earn an income during exile. The answers were divided; 16 had used these skills for income-generation whereas 12 had never used them. Their reasons for not using their acquired skills are presented in Table 4.

Ironically, the most frequent reason for not using the acquired vocational skills was repatriation, which implies the fluidity inherent in refugees' decision to return. This being said, this finding might also be interpreted that the acquisition of skills encouraged the repatriation of Liberian refugees. Another prevalent reason for not using the skills acquired was lack of access to initial capital in order to embark on a new business. It is widely known that, in general, refugees have very little access to loans from formal financial institutions in their country of asylum due to their lack of legal status and the perceptions of these institutions towards refugees as 'transient' people who might disappear at any time. The presented data add another layer of empirical evidence to these observations.

Table 4 Reasons for not using learned vocational skills

Types of skills training	Reasons why the vocational skills were not utilized
Computer	I decided to repatriate to Liberia right after I received the training.
Soap making	Our house did not have any place to store the chemicals for soap making and I was concerned that my children might accidentally swallow these chemicals.
Driving	I did not have access to a car. I could not afford it.
Beauty care	I did not have enough initial capital to establish my own business.
Typing	I attempted to use the skills acquired, but did not find a job.
Mechanic	I decided to repatriate to Liberia right after I received the training.
Computer	I did not complete the required courses.
Tailoring	Right after the training, UNHCR's repatriation started and I chose to repatriate.
Interior Decoration	During the training, I decided to repatriate to Liberia so I did not have an opportunity to use this skill in exile.
Sewing	The training did not enable me to acquire adequate skills to make money by tailoring.
Sewing & Baking	I did not have enough initial capital to establish my own business.
Computer	I had no opportunity to work. Refugees could not get work easily.

4.3 Transition in the main livelihood strategies

Existing literature highlights that the economic reintegration of returnees is a gradual process that requires building up a new economic base from scratch. In order to capture this process, we asked the 74 participants about their livelihood trajectory from their last country of asylum to Liberia. As already described above, of the total 74 respondents, 35 were engaged in some type of income-generating activity during their exile. Table 5 shows their main means of subsistence in their last country of asylum and three immediate income-generating activities (IGA) upon repatriation to Liberia.

Table 5 Transition of main livelihood strategies

IGA during exile	1st IGA in Liberia	2nd IGA in Liberia	3rd IGA in Liberia
Nurse aid	Selling food items	used clothes	selling of medicines
Working for a NGO in the refugee camp	Charcoal business		
Baby sitting	used clothes	Selling food items	
commercial farming	used clothes		
Petty trading	Beauty care/salon		
Beauty care/salon	Clerk at the port	Beauty care/salon	
Beauty care/salon	Beauty care/salon	Selling food items	
Petty trading	used clothes	Selling food items	
Teaching	Counseling for war victims	Health visitor	
Selling food items	Never worked since repatriation		
Selling food items	Selling food items		
Teaching	Internet café' and computer school		
Petty trading	Money Exchange business	Restaurant	Security Guard
Housemaid	used clothes		
Selling food items	NHPC Enumerator	Selling food items	
Selling food items	Selling food items		
Selling food items	Selling food items		
Selling food items	Selling food items		
Petty trading	Selling food items	used clothes	
Working for a NGO in the refugee camp	Working for an NGO	Running a vocational school	
Teaching	Never worked since repatriation		
Working for an internet café	Never worked since repatriation		
Working for an internet café	Teaching		
Bar and restaurant	Bar and restaurant		
Selling food items	Nurse aid	Cleaner	
Beauty care/salon	Beauty care/salon		
Petty trading	Petty trading		
Doing HH chore for other	Never worked since repatriation		
Petty trading	Teaching	Running an internet space	
Mobile phone transfer business	Construction work.		
Working for an internet café	Never worked since repatriation		
Housemaid	Petty trading		
Beauty care/salon	Beauty care/salon	used clothes	
Making bricks	Working at a supermarket		
Beauty care/salon	Beauty care/salon		

The transferability of livelihoods built up during exile to post-repatriation life constitutes a crucial factor for the economic integration of returnees (Rogge, 1994). As shown in Table 5, roughly one-third of those who had independent livelihoods in their country of asylum continued with either the same or similar activity after their return from exile. The remaining two-thirds changed their main income-generating activity upon their return, regardless of whether they wanted to or not. As Table 5 demonstrates, it is difficult to find any links between their previous livelihood activity in their last country of asylum and that upon their return to Liberia. A previous study of Liberian returnees also clearly shows that a considerable number of repatriated refugees had to change their principal livelihood upon repatriation to Liberia (Omata, 2012). It is worthwhile noting that 5 out of 35 returnees who pursued some type of income-generating activity during their exile have not worked since repatriation.

During the transition period, access to external support such as remittances becomes a key supplementary resource for returnees. According to the survey results, however, only nine of the 74 respondents were receiving overseas remittances, with an average of USD 50-100 per month. Assistance from the government of the home country can be another asset for repatriating refugees. Nonetheless, the survey data show that no one received any material assistance from the Liberian government for their socio-economic reintegration upon repatriation (see also Omata, 2012 for similar findings).

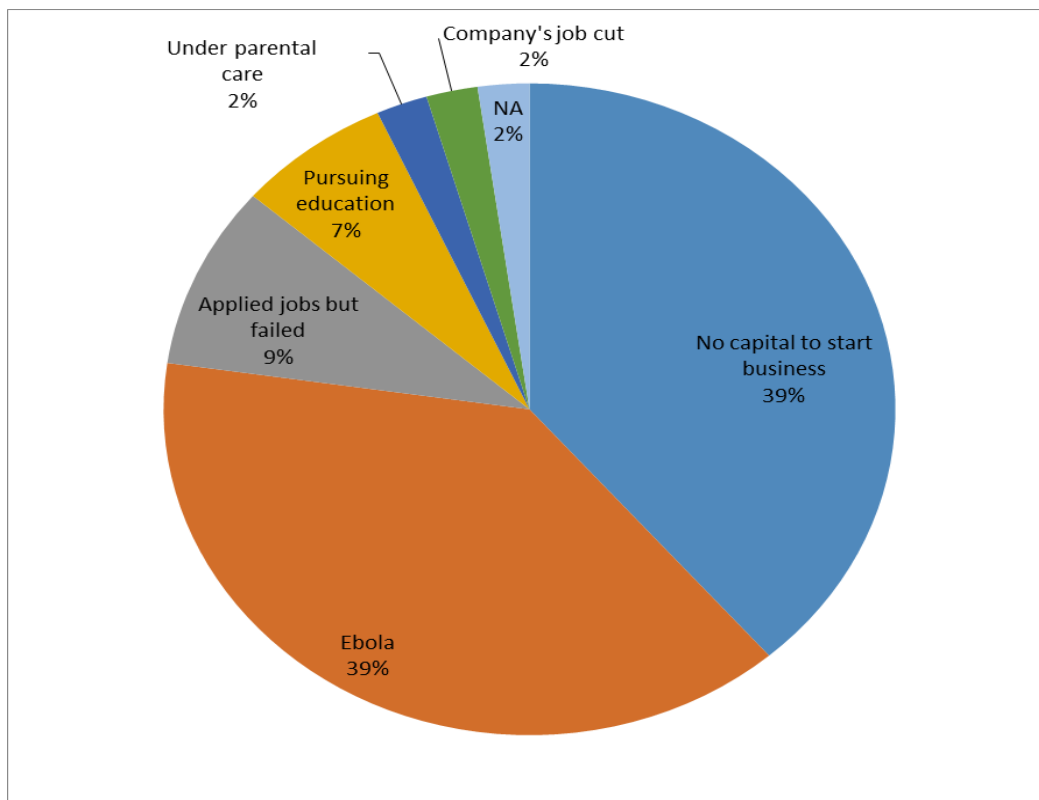
The sheer lack of government support for returnees in post-crisis countries is not uncommon. For example, returned refugees in Angola hardly benefited from any assistance from the Ministry of Assistance and Social Reintegration – UNHCR’s counterpart in the return and reintegration programmes (Crisp *et al.*, 2008). The absence of government services in the context of a fragile economy has particularly negative consequences for returnees.

4.4 The role of UNIDO’s training for reintegration

As noted in the Introduction, the principal objective of this study is to explore the value of and the role played by UNIDO’s training programmes in the economic reintegration of Liberian returnees. Whether a returnee has some form of income source or not after receiving UNIDO’s training is a point of departure to examine the role of its assistance for returnees. We asked all survey participants whether they were currently engaged in any livelihood activities. Of the 74 survey participants, 44 – nevertheless, about 60 per cent – were not involved in any income-generating activities during the period of this research, despite having completed UNIDO’s

training. In this section, we shall first investigate these 44 returnees¹. In our survey questionnaire, we asked about the main reasons for why the respondents were currently not engaged in any income-generating activities. As the Figure below illustrates, the vast majority attributed the reasons to either lack of access to capital to start up a business or the economic downturn in Liberia caused by Ebola.

Figure 1 Reasons for not working



Lack of access to finance is not surprising. In fact, the absence of lending services has been a long-standing challenge in Liberia for many repatriates. UNIDO did not engage in the direct provision of financial support.² A noticeable number of respondents strongly complained about the lack of financial support after having received the training, as the following comment shows:

¹ According to a survey conducted by the World Bank at the time of research, nearly half of the working population was no longer working since the crisis began.

² UNIDO tried to link the beneficiaries with some type of existing credit scheme. However, most of the project beneficiaries did not meet the requirements for such schemes due to lack of collateral. Instead, UNIDO encouraged savings, establishing learning circles that promoted the setting up of a common credit fund which does not require collateral and provided toolkits for those who took skills training to reduce their initial financial needs in starting up a business.

UNIDO built our capacity but did not empower us financially to start up our own businesses. Though we have the knowledge, it cannot be put into practice. What is UNIDO going to do to help us get financial support in order to avoid the dependency syndrome? (Greg, 34-year old returnee from Ghana).

Another reason – the impact of the Ebola crisis³ – was more frequently mentioned than we initially anticipated. We interviewed those who raised Ebola as a main reason for not working at the time. As their comments below highlight, some types of businesses were particularly affected by the outbreak of this fatal epidemic.

I received beauty care training [from UNIDO] but the hair care business includes a lot of physical contact with customers ... the Ebola virus spreads through physical contact from sweat and other bodily fluids. This business just became a no-go area. (Marina, 27-year old returnee from Ghana).

I had thought of going into the baking business but could not do it. During the Ebola situation, people were afraid to eat food from another person because they did not know the status of that person. (Kevin, 44-year old returnee from Guinea).

Although the spread of the Ebola virus definitely disrupted the returnees' economic reintegration, it remains debatable whether the repatriated refugees were more affected by this infectious disease compared with non-returnees. Although it is difficult to verify, in general, those who repatriated to Liberia over the last few years seem to have suffered more severely from the Ebola crisis. According to the observations of the research assistants, many of these recent repatriates had not yet constructed informal support networks to sustain themselves during the Ebola crisis – for instance, they had little access to job information or to temporary material assistance from relatives or neighbours.⁴

If recent arrivals suffered more severely from the impacts of Ebola due to their limited informal safety nets, the duration of their post-repatriation life in Liberia might be a crucial factor in the process of economic integration. We therefore classified working and non-working groups into

³ According to the World Bank assessment, Ebola has substantially impacted employment activities especially in urban areas and for those previously engaged in non-agricultural self-employment. Self-employed persons experienced the largest decline in work with their usual place of business closed (60%), could not travel/transport goods for trade (18%), and could not get inputs (12%). On the contrary, rural areas in which the main livelihood is agriculture were less impacted by Ebola.

⁴ It is also important to note that although most of them blamed Ebola for the lack of jobs or businesses, they expressed optimism for better chances of survival, job or business opportunities, and improved living conditions because of the vocational and entrepreneurship skills they had obtained from UNIDO.

different periods of return to Liberia. As shown in Table 6, the ratio of working to non-working groups is, in general, roughly equal for those who returned before 2010. For the recent returnees between 2011 and 2013, nonetheless, about 80 per cent were currently not engaged in any economic activity. These data imply that recent Liberian repatriates may be facing more challenges in their reintegration process in terms of finding or starting a livelihood activity as a source of income. The table shows that, for whatever reason, returnees who have spent more years in Liberia appear to be more engaged in some type of economic activity compared with those who have spent fewer years there.

Table 6 The year of return to Liberia and working status

Year of return	Total number	Working		Non-working	
Before 2000	11	5	45%	6	55%
2001-2005	18	7	39%	11	61%
2006-2010	26	14	54%	12	46%
2011-2013	19	4	21%	15	79%
Total	74	30	-	44	-

These results, in turn, posed a question about how these 44 respondents, who were not involved in any livelihood, were coping with their daily life in Liberia. According to our survey results, the vast majority were dependent on charitable support from their family members or close friends, as indicated by the following comment:

I am currently being assisted by friends and family members, especially by my mother. My girlfriend is also an important source of my survival for now.
(George, 21-year old returnee from Ghana)

The harsh economic climate exacerbated by Ebola, in turn, accentuates the other 30 people who were currently engaged in some form of income-generation. How did UNIDO's assistance contribute to the economic readjustment of these 30 respondents? The role played by UNIDO's training remains somewhat ambiguous. In the first place, two-thirds of these 30 respondents had been engaged in the same livelihood activity which they were already involved in before participating in the training programme. In a way, these returnees had already established stable income-generating strategies before becoming beneficiaries of UNIDO's reintegration support.

I have been selling dried fish for the last several years ... I received catering training from UNIDO. But I can make enough profit from the fish business, so I keep running the same business [even after the UNIDO training]. (Comfort, 44-year old returnee from Côte d'Ivoire).

On the other hand, of these 30 repatriates who were economically active, 27 replied that they had used the skills, lessons and techniques they acquired through UNIDO's training programme. While continuing with the same livelihood, some returnees capitalized on the general business skills taught by EDP. For example, Martha, the owner of a provision shop in Monrovia, described the improvements achieved in her business:

My business is immensely improving since I completed the UNIDO training. I am making use of the EDP lessons on stock taking. I am also making use of the lesson on promotion to increase sales revenue. (Martha, 57-year old female returnee from Guinea).

With respect to the beneficiaries of Skills Training, only a small number capitalized on their newly acquired vocational techniques. According to the survey data, of the 30 returnees who were engaged in livelihoods at the time of this study, 13 were beneficiaries of UNIDO's Skills Training. When we asked these 13 respondents about whether they were using the learned skills in their current income-generating activities, eleven responded 'No'. Julius returned to Liberia from Côte d'Ivoire in 2006. Although he acquired plumbing skills through UNIDO's programme, he never had the opportunity to use his new vocational competencies:

I completed plumbing skills training in July 2014. But since then, I have never used what I learned because I have not found a good plumbing job. Now I am working as a commercial motorbike driver to survive. One day, I want to stop the bike business and concentrate on plumbing. (Julius, 30-year old returnee from Côte d'Ivoire).

The absence of access to start-up capital impeded the establishment of an enterprise by some beneficiaries who had acquired new vocational skills. The following comment illustrates this:

I took a training course in visual graphics. But it is very hard to find employment in graphic design so I wanted to start my own company. But [the cost] of establishing a visual graphics business is very high ... I am now selling cold water and drinks but cannot make any savings from such a small business. (Joseph, 32-year old returnee from Guinea).

Whether returnees are able to earn an adequate income to cover their basic needs such as food, clothing and medicines is an essential factor in the achievement of economic integration. Their income-generating capacity is fragile, however. Of these 30 respondents, only four replied that they were earning enough money to satisfy their and their household members' daily necessities. Their monthly average income varied between USD 20 and USD 250. These survey results imply that even for those engaged in an income-generating activity, it might be premature to say that they have built sustainable livelihoods and have economically integrated into Monrovia's economy, at least at the time when the interviews were being conducted.

4.5 Challenges in the reintegration process

The Liberian returnees experienced a number of difficulties in their reintegration. Table 7 summarizes the variety of challenges, which were identified by all 74 survey participants (multiple answers were accepted, so the total exceeds 74). Regardless of the demographics of the respondents and whether they were currently engaged in any economic activity or not, the issues identified were largely the same.

Table 7 Challenges in the reintegration process

Types of challenges	Number
housing	22
finance	19
lack of employment	16
education	14
no challenges	7
food	5
job contact	2
insecurity	2
low salary	1
water	1
health services	1
electricity	1
reclaiming property	1
Total	92

The most frequent challenge raised by respondents related to housing, including the shortage of decent housing, expensive rents and the limited amount of affordable housing in Monrovia. Some of the interviewees' complaints about the poor housing situation in Monrovia were as follows:

The biggest challenge for our family is housing. We have to pack twelve people, both men and women, in the same room! ... There is no peace, composure and happiness in such a [congested] house. (Martha, 57-year old returnee from Ghana).

Our house was burnt down during the civil war. So when I returned to Liberia, my immediate problem was how to find a place to stay. I had to share a room with nine other [non-related] people. (Julia, 26-year old returnee from Côte d'Ivoire).

According to Omata (2012), as of 2009, Monrovia was already over-loaded, as more than one million people out of a national population of 3.4 million resided in the capital, where socio-economic opportunities are concentrated. It is not difficult to understand that the additional influxes of returnees from West African neighbouring countries since then have fuelled the congestion and deteriorated the shortage of proper housing for returnees.

Another common difficulty the repatriated refugees experienced was limited access to financial services, especially loans to be used as start-up capital for enterprises, which has already been discussed above. Lack of access to financial loans for returnees is not uncommon in conflict-affected countries. In Angola, for instance, returnees have consistently expressed their frustration about the absence of financial instruments to set up their own businesses (Kaun, 2008). Limited access to loans can become a major obstacle to the economic reintegration and development of self-reliance of returning displaced people, as many of them return with little savings (see also Cohen, 2000).

The third most frequent problem for returnees was the dearth of employment opportunities in Liberia. As explained above, a high unemployment rate is one of the notorious features of Liberia's economy. For those seeking employment in the private and public sectors, the limited job market poses a critical challenge, as one of the respondents commented:

I found it extremely difficult to get a job in Monrovia ... Yes, I completed [UNIDO's] vocational training programme. But even with the training, it is so hard to get a job. I am so frustrated! (Chris, 32-year old returnee from Ghana).

Little access to education was also frequently identified as a challenge to reintegration. This challenge has two dimensions; first, many returnees were not able to afford tuition or fees for schooling, especially for higher education, due to a lack of finance; and second, many repatriated refugees complained that the number of good public schools in Liberia was very

small because the prolonged war had destroyed many educational facilities. Whilst the first dimension is largely related to access to finance, the second is more or less considered a challenge shared by many developing countries, especially those that have experienced prolonged conflict.

Interestingly, several interviewees responded that they had not experienced any challenges in their adjustment process in Liberia. Most of these respondents were in their twenties and had been assisted by family members, particularly by their parents, as demonstrated in the following remark:

I can't remember any challenges since my return. When I returned, I was young and dependent on my parents. They [my parents] took care of my needs and helped me to settle in. (Gloria, 26-year old returnee from Ghana).

Although their number is small, other survey participants highlighted difficulties specific to countries that have witnessed lengthy internal fighting, such as the continued existence of former combatants and the problem of reclaiming property now occupied by others. One male respondent commented as follows:

I feel fear to live with many former fighters in the same community. Every time I see them misbehaving, I get reminded of how I was maltreated by the rebels who dragged me during war time. (Allen, 49-year old returnee from Guinea).

4.6 Returnees' self-rating of their experiences of reintegration

The 'success' of economic reintegration is highly subjective because there are no fixed sets of indicators to measure the degree of economic adjustment. Even without currently holding a job, if some repatriates, for instance, feel that their economic conditions have ameliorated compared with their time in exile, it might well still be possible to call their reintegration a 'success' or an 'achievement'.

In this study, we asked all beneficiaries some scaling questions. In one of these questions, we asked whether their overall socio-economic status had improved compared with that during exile. As Table 8 shows, more than 70 per cent of survey participants thought that their socio-economic condition had improved upon returning to Liberia. At the same time, it is not negligible that 20 per cent of respondents told us that their socio-economic status had deteriorated since their repatriation. To further investigate this outcome, we divided the respondents into 1) a group that was currently working and 2) a group that was currently not working. Interestingly, there were no distinct differences in the patterns of responses between

these two groups, except that there were more respondents who answered ‘worse’ in the group that was currently not working, which is understandable.

Table 8 Current socio-economic status compared to that during exile

	Total		working		non-working	
much better	31	42%	14	47%	17	39%
better	22	30%	11	37%	11	25%
the same	4	5%	0	0%	4	9%
worse	15	20%	4	13%	11	25%
much worse	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Don't know	2	3%	1	3%	1	2%
Total	74	100%	30	100%	44	100%

We also asked whether their overall socio-economic condition had improved compared with that before participating in UNIDO’s training. The majority of interviewees responded that their socio-economic status had improved since receiving training. Again, we divided the respondents into 1) a group that was currently working, and 2) a group that was currently not working, but there were no observable differences between them in the patterns of their responses.

Table 9 Current socio-economic status compared to the period before UNIDO training

	Total		working		non-working	
much better	30	41%	14	47%	16	36%
better	31	42%	12	40%	19	43%
the same	11	15%	4	13%	7	16%
worse	2	3%	0	0%	2	5%
much worse	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Total	74	100%	30	100%	44	100%

It is important to note that their improved socio-economic status does not necessarily mean that these respondents have decent living standards. As summarized in Table 10, a significant percentage of survey participants were struggling to meet their daily basic needs such as food, clothing, medicines and primary education for their family and themselves. Whether they were currently working or not really did not make any difference, as their patterns of responses look

very much alike.⁵

Table 10 Ability to meet basic needs of your family and yourself

	Total		working		non-working	
Able to meet all needs	1	1%	1	3%	0	0%
Able to meet most needs	16	22%	7	23%	9	20%
Not able to meet most needs	54	73%	22	73%	32	73%
Not able to meet the needs at all	3	4%	0	0%	3	7%
Total	74	100%	30	100%	44	100%

Despite the large number of beneficiaries who were not engaged in any income-generating activity even after having received UNIDO training, many of the respondents gave a positive answer about the role of UNIDO’s interventions, summarized in the following three tables. In total, 97 per cent of the interviewees stated that UNIDO’s training programmes had increased their competitiveness to find a job or to establish their own business (see Table 11). Similarly, the majority of beneficiaries asserted that participation in UNIDO training had made it possible for them to access better income and also increased their overall coping capacities, as shown in Tables 12 and 13.

Table 11 Has UNIDO training increased your competitiveness in the job market?

	Number	%
strongly agree	27	36%
agree	45	61%
neither agree nor disagree	2	3%
disagree	0	0%
strongly disagree	0	0%
Total	74	100%

⁵ It is also important to note that a number of respondents seem to have understated this due to their anticipation of future support from UNIDO.

Table 12 Has UNIDO training contributed to your ability to access a higher income?

	Number	%
strongly agree	27	36%
agree	45	61%
neither agree nor disagree	1	1%
disagree	0	0%
strongly disagree	0	0%
refused to answer	1	1%
Total	74	100%

Table 13 Has UNIDO training increased your overall coping capacities?

	Number	%
strongly agree	21	28%
agree	50	68%
neither agree nor disagree	1	1%
disagree	0	0%
strongly disagree	0	0%
don't know	2	3%
Total	74	100%

The outcomes of these scaling questions are intriguing, as we anticipated far more negative responses from the survey participants. In Angola, according to Crisp et al. (2008:24), many repatriated refugees experienced a ‘failure of expectations’ in their reintegration process. Many returnees deplored the fact that the conditions they had encountered in Angola were far more difficult than they had envisaged when they made the journey home. In this study of Liberian returnees, many described the daunting challenges they faced in terms of economic adjustments in Liberia but they were not completely desperate – at least, a failure of expectation was not observed in these Liberian returnees.

As noted throughout this paper, there were 44 respondents who were not engaged in any income-generating activity as of December 2014. Given the generally positive response to UNIDO’s programmes, these beneficiaries might have been thinking that they could perhaps gain meaningful employment or build a profitable business after a specific period (especially once the negative impact of Ebola on the Liberian economy has been completely removed). Or, as described above, this result may be interpreted as showing that the social and economic

conditions during exile were so extremely harsh that their expectation was very low. Also, since the training was offered at no cost to participants with poor macro-economic conditions coupled with very low opportunity cost, most of the training participants had little expectation from attending the training programmes.

5. Research implications

Drawing upon the findings of this study, this section presents some important implications on the economic integration of refugees vis-à-vis the role of training.

First, the research elucidates the considerable impact of the Ebola crisis on the process of returnees' reintegration. In order to 'prove' causality between this epidemic and the difficulties the returnees have faced, a follow-up study needs to be carried out once the negative causes and consequences of the Ebola crisis have been removed from the Liberian economy. Nevertheless, it is difficult to deny that a devastating external economic shock such as Ebola largely cripples the effectiveness of training programmes run by aid and development agencies. Regardless of how well-designed or prepared they are, these interventions alone cannot reverse an acute macro-economic downturn.

Second, related to the first point, assistance for restoring meaningful livelihoods for returnees ought to be approached both from the micro- and the macro-context. A starting point for sustainable reintegration should consist of up-streaming the conditions for creating an enabling environment to boost job creation while simultaneously down-streaming more specific support for providing concrete livelihood options (ILO, 2009). It is apparent that a focus of UNIDO's interventions in this particular project entailed the latter; this, in turn, means that the organization needs to closely look into the up-streaming side, an issue we will return to later in this paper.

Third, repatriation often severs the continuity of people's livelihoods from exile to their country of origin. A considerable number of Liberian returnees had to start constructing their new economic foundations from scratch. Due to the disruptions in their livelihoods, their economic assets were undermined or at least not fully utilized during their adjustment process in Liberia. Importantly, this in turn implies a loss for Liberia. The new skills returnees acquired during their exile have significant economic potential for their country of origin. Yet this potential has not been systematically capitalized on in Liberia.

Relatedly, fourth, better coordination between aid agencies in the country of asylum and the country of origin deserves more attention. During the asylum of refugees, many organizations

provide skills training but these skills are often not used during the years in exile or following repatriation. As Crisp (1996) observes, if aid agencies pursued an integrated continuum approach bridging the country of asylum and the country of origin, vocational training for refugees in exile would be linked to market demands in the country of origin. Such coordination certainly entails a number of practical challenges, such as unpredictable timing of repatriation by refugees, but new innovative approaches are definitely worth considering. Since 2007, UNIDO has implemented three projects based on this approach, assisting Liberian refugees in Ghana, the country of asylum with the largest number of Liberian refugees in the region, and returnees in Liberia with vocational and entrepreneurship training. However, UNIDO cannot carry out this type of work on its own. It is crucial for a development agency, including UNIDO, to systematically work hand in hand with other organizations such as the UNHCR.

Fifth, as reiterated throughout this paper, economic reintegration, especially after a protracted period of exile, must be understood as a long-term process. In a country like Liberia, which has experienced extremely high levels of devastation, it is not realistic to expect that the reintegration process can be completed within one or two years. As the data illustrate, in particular, the cohort of recent returnees are struggling greatly to establish an economic foothold. This study was conducted immediately after the ravages of the fatal Ebola outbreak. To better understand the role UNIDO training played, an additional study is necessary after the impact of the Ebola crisis has subsided, of non-trainees as a control group.

Finally, one important practical implication from this study is that vocational training programmes should ideally be coupled with a subsequent provision of start-up capital. This is essential for those who aim to build their own business using their newly acquired skills. Put differently, unless trained beneficiaries are able to use their livelihood skills in a viable business, UNIDO's investments will remain latent or largely wasted. As described above, many respondents were positive about the overall quality of training they had received and believed that access to financial capital was the missing piece. As some survey respondents rightly put it, these programme beneficiaries were trained but not necessarily economically empowered to be able to achieve meaningful economic reintegration. We shall return to this point in the next section.

6. Recommendations for UNIDO

Drawing upon the findings of this study, we highlight the following recommendations for UNIDO's reintegration support for returnees in future programming and policymaking.

The immediate recommendation for UNIDO is to set up solid baseline data of training beneficiaries before the implementation of any project. Although UNIDO had some pre-existing data sets of programme beneficiaries in Liberia, in many respects, they did not serve as a baseline for this study. Our research team discovered a number of flaws in the existing data sets of beneficiaries; for instance, their telephone numbers were not accurately recorded, which made it impossible to reach some beneficiaries. Also, the pre-existing data sets were largely demographic and lacked fundamental information such as current income level. In order to facilitate the effective collection of baseline data, a uniform set of data should be standardized across countries. In turn, this universal data set will enable the organization to make more far-reaching systematic comparisons of the impact of interventions on returnees' economic reintegration.

The second recommendation for UNIDO is investment in research – not mere monitoring and evaluation – on returnees' integration process. As described above, according to the Women's Refugee Council (2007), many vocational training programmes have been implemented in Liberia, but there has been almost no attempt to 'follow up' on former trainees to better understand the challenges they face and their successes in terms of reintegration. For example, during this study, a significant number of respondents blamed the Ebola crisis for their current unemployment. But was their current unemployment really attributable to Ebola's temporary damage? To answer this question, UNIDO needs to study the situation after the impact of the Ebola crisis has subsided. To this end, this study serves as an initial stepping stone towards advancing UNIDO knowledge in terms of assessing reintegration needs to restore jobs and livelihoods.

To achieve meaningful support for the economic integration of returnees in crisis-affected areas, UNIDO needs to strengthen partnerships with a wider range of key stakeholders. For instance, the partnership with UNHCR or other aid agencies operating in the country of asylum is invaluable; this enables UNIDO to better coordinate and prepare reintegration support measures by sharing information on returning refugees. This, in turn, will save significant time and costs for UNIDO because it can use the existing data collected by these institutions in the country of asylum. Also, partnership with the government and private sector in the country of origin is indispensable for UNIDO's future programming. In post-conflict economies, it is the small- and medium-sized enterprises that are often an engine of growth. However, these companies frequently lack human capital with well-trained business skills and management knowledge. Effective matching between returnees equipped with training and these private sector companies can generate a potential 'win-win' situation.

Furthermore, partnerships with specialized agencies could enable UNIDO to fill in identified gaps in its current reintegration modality. In particular, because a large number of Liberian returnees requested financial support as start-up capital, the provision of lending services is a prerequisite for these future entrepreneurs. These financial services need not be provided by UNIDO; micro-finance institutions or local banks or development agencies may be better suited to provide such assistance for returnees.

7. Conclusion

This study has primarily investigated the value and role of UNIDO's two training programmes in facilitating the economic reintegration of returnees to Liberia. Given the research findings, it is more than evident that the provision of training is not a panacea for refugees' reintegration challenges in post-war contexts. Given the multi-faceted nature of (economic) reintegration, it is not realistic that skills training programmes alone can enable tens of thousands of repatriates to achieve meaningful integration in adverse economic environments. What is crucial is to nurture a better understanding of the macroeconomic conditions and business environment, including access to finance under which vocational training becomes most relevant to those who have returned to a post-conflict country. Such knowledge building will eventually enable UNIDO and other development agencies to provide more refined measures and has practical lessons for future programming.

Importantly, the need to better understand the role of training for returnees is likely to remain extremely high. According to UNHCR's Global Appeal, as of 2014, there were more than 11 million refugees across the world. Once the political situation in their countries of origin is deemed stable by the international community, mass scale repatriation of refugees can occur at any time. It is essential for UNIDO and other development agencies to build knowledge of how returned refugees reinstate themselves into the economy of their home country with the support of vocational and entrepreneurial training.

In the dearth of follow-up research on the impact of training on reintegration, this study of Liberian returnees represents a meaningful pioneering attempt for UNIDO. The findings in the paper might not necessarily demonstrate the full potential of vocational training programmes due to the external shock of the Ebola crisis. As suggested above, a follow-up study is indispensable for capturing the impact of UNIDO's training in promoting the reintegration of repatriates in post-Ebola Liberia. On that note, we would like to conclude the paper with a comment from one of the Liberian research assistants [former national staff of UNIDO Liberia] who had also experienced refugee life and returned to post-conflict Liberia:

Socio-economic reintegration is still very challenging for most of the returnees but with the training they received, more time and the absence of Ebola, the impact on their lives will be great. As a returnee myself, who spent eight years in Ghana, not only do I understand their plight, I also understand their confidence in the training and their prospects because my present position is a testimony to the impact of training.

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