

A young woman with short dark hair and a serious expression stands on the left side of the frame. She is wearing a yellow dress with a black and white pattern of birds and foliage. To her right is a large blue banner with white text. The background is a plain, light brown wall. The overall tone is somber and documentary.

# **'They Don't Even Understand Why We Fled'** **The Difficult Path to Reintegration in Burundi**

February 2019

**UNHCR**  
The UN Refugee Agency





---

## ABOUT THE INTERNATIONAL REFUGEE RIGHTS INITIATIVE

The International Refugee Rights Initiative (IRRI) was founded in 2004 to inform and improve responses to the cycles of violence and displacement that are at the heart of large-scale human rights violations.

Over the last 14 years, we have developed a holistic approach to the protection of human rights before, during, and in the aftermath of displacement, by focusing on:

- identifying the violations that cause displacement and exile,
- protecting the rights of those who are displaced, and
- ensuring the solutions to their displacement are durable, rights respecting, safe and timely.

We work to ensure the voices of the displaced and conflict affected communities are not only heard but heeded at the international level through our evidence based advocacy that is built on solid field based research and analysis.

We are registered as a non-profit organization in the US, the UK, and Uganda.

[www.refugee-rights.org](http://www.refugee-rights.org)

---

*Cover Photograph: Woman in Kayogoro (Makamba province) who returned from Tanzania, with UNHCR canvas, anonymous, November 2018.*

The team would like to express their gratitude to the Fund for Global Human Rights for funding this research project, to the people who facilitated this research and to all those who gave their time and participated in the study.

# Introduction

Since 2015, hundreds of thousands of Burundians have fled to neighbouring countries following political unrest. This exodus more or less reversed a repatriation process that had been carried out between 2002 and 2010 in which approximately half a million refugees had returned to Burundi.<sup>1</sup>

The cyclical nature of conflict and displacement in Burundi has had terrible consequences for the quality of life of many Burundians. In particular, history has shown that the failures of previous return and reintegration processes have set the stage for the next round of displacement and ignited conflicts, including over land.

Breaking this cycle is crucial to the long-term stability of Burundi. It demands an integrated and equitable repatriation process that simultaneously recognises the humanitarian and development needs of returnees and the communities to which they are returning, and is supported by processes that grapple with underlying tensions that created the context for displacement in the first place.

In 2008, Burundians in Tanzania who had fled in the early 1970s were offered a choice between repatriation and local integration (and indeed were offered citizenship), and a small number were resettled to third countries.<sup>2</sup> By contrast, those who fled in the 1990s had little opportunity for local integration and only negligible opportunities for resettlement. Instead, they came under increased pressure to return.<sup>3</sup>

Likewise, for those who fled during and after the 2015 crisis, repatriation is seemingly the only “durable solution” on the table. This has effectively left those exiled in Tanzania with two options: returning to their homes or remaining in chronically under-resourced camps with little opportunity to integrate and serious restrictions to freedom of movement. While other durable solutions should also be offered and supported, it is particularly important that return is properly organised and funded if it is *de facto* the only option. Such support is undermined by underfunding, and international NGOs who had been offering critical services to returnees were temporarily suspended in late 2018.

It also demands that repatriation be seen as far more than the offer of free transport back over the border with a return package that does not even last the three months it is expected to cover. Instead, it needs to be seen as a long-term process in which those who return – who are highly vulnerable as a result of their flight and conditions in exile – are supported over a number of years to (re)gain their livelihoods and their place as citizens in their homeland.

Ultimately, in a global context in which there is increased rhetorical focus on the need for responsibility sharing, the situation currently facing refugees from, and returnees to, Burundi provides something of a test case as to whether or not international donors are willing to put their money and action where their mouths are. It is also an opportunity to learn from the mistakes of previous, insufficiently supported repatriation processes.

---

<sup>1</sup> See, IRRI, REMA and CSFM, “Two People Can’t Share the Same Pair of Shoes: Citizenship, Land and the Return of Refugees to Burundi.” 2009.

([http://citizenshiprightsafrika.org/wpcontent/uploads/2016/06/IRRI\\_TwoPeopleCantWeartheSamePairOfShoes\\_11-2009.pdf](http://citizenshiprightsafrika.org/wpcontent/uploads/2016/06/IRRI_TwoPeopleCantWeartheSamePairOfShoes_11-2009.pdf), accessed November 2018).

This number is in addition to hundreds of thousands more who were internally displaced and have either returned to their homes or remain in displacement.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Lucy Hovil and Theodore Mbazumutima, “Tanzania’s Mtabila Camp Finally Closed.” December 2012

(<https://www.pambazuka.org/governance/tanzania%E2%80%99s-mtabila-camp-finally-closed>, accessed 27 November 2018).

## Current refugee returns to Burundi

In August 2017, the governments of Tanzania, Burundi, and UNHCR held a tripartite meeting to discuss assistance to refugees who wished to voluntarily repatriate from Tanzania to Burundi.<sup>4</sup> In February 2018, however, the Tanzanian president withdrew from the regional response plan, citing lack of funding. An agreement was concluded in March 2018 between Burundi, Tanzania and UNHCR on repatriation of Burundian refugees.<sup>5</sup> While the Burundian and Tanzanian governments have promoted returns, driven by respective national goals to prove that all is well in Burundi and that the Tanzanian government is prioritising its own citizens over “foreigners”, UNHCR has been more reluctant, emphasising the “importance of all refugees having the opportunity to make a free and informed choice without undue pressure.”<sup>6</sup>

Many have taken the decision to return: since September 2017, UNHCR reports that it has assisted more than 48,930 refugees to return to Burundi from Tanzania.<sup>7</sup> The Burundian ministry of interior says it had repatriated 58,262 people by January 2019 and plans to repatriate 116,000 in 2019.<sup>8</sup> So far, other host countries, in particular Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Uganda, have not signed tripartite agreements, and returns from those countries have been more limited. Some have returned from Kenya. Close to more than 347,000 Burundians remain in exile.<sup>9</sup> Arrivals in neighbouring countries have reduced significantly from the height of the crisis, but continue.<sup>10</sup>

In August and November 2018, IRRI and partners in Burundi carried out interviews in southern Burundi in order to better understand the ongoing return process. Seventy-five interviews were carried out in Makamba and Rutana provinces with returnees, those that stayed and local authorities. Of the 52 returnees interviewed for this report, 29 were women, and 23 were men. Respondents were between 18 and 70 years old. Most fled in 2015 and 2016, and a smaller number did so in 2017. They returned mostly in the second half of 2017 and the first half of 2018, with the notable exception of some who returned earlier, in 2016. Many of those who were interviewed in August were interviewed again in November to see if there was any discernible change in their situation. This report draws on those interviews, a workshop organised with local and national officials in January 2019, as well as previous research conducted by IRRI in Burundi and Tanzania since 2008.

---

<sup>4</sup> UNHCR, “Voluntary Repatriation of Burundian refugees to Tanzania,” 27 June 2018, (<http://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/UNHCR%20Burundi%20Situation%20-%20Voluntary%20Repatriation%20of%20Burundian%20Refugees%20-%2027JUN18.pdf>, accessed 27 November 2018).

<sup>5</sup> UN Commission of Inquiry on Burundi, ‘Rapport final détaillé de la Commission d’enquête sur le Burundi’, 12 September 2018, ([https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/CoIBurundi/ReportHRC39/A\\_HRC\\_39\\_CRP\\_1\\_FR.docx](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/CoIBurundi/ReportHRC39/A_HRC_39_CRP_1_FR.docx), accessed 28 January 2019).

<sup>6</sup> UNHCR, “In Tanzania visit, UNHCR official stresses freedom of choice is crucial for refugee returns”, 16 August 2018 (<https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/08/1017252>, accessed 27 November 2018).

<sup>7</sup> “Voluntary Repatriation of Burundian refugees to Tanzania. UNHCR, 20 September 2018 (<https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/65988>, accessed 27 November 2018)

<sup>8</sup> Information provided by local government official during workshop, 21 January 2019, Muzye.

<sup>9</sup> UNHCR, “Burundi situation”. 31 December 2018 (<https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/burundi>, accessed 28 January 2019).

<sup>10</sup> Many cite Imbonerakure abuses. See International Refugee Rights Initiative, “I Fled Because I was afraid to die”, August 2017 (<http://refugee-rights.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Causes-of-exile-Burundi-2017.pdf>, accessed 28 January 2019).

## Key research findings

**While all returnees said that they wanted to return to Burundi and most were assisted by UNHCR to do so, the process was slow and unclear.**

In interviews conducted both in August and November 2018, returnees described how they signed up for repatriation in the camps in Tanzania. However, while many appreciated the official exercise, they often complained about the slow pace of the process and the lack of information on what kind of assistance they would receive. As one woman said, “We learned from people that there is a return package for returnees. But the UNHCR has never made this announcement. It was the returnees who had arrived in the country before us who gave us this information.”<sup>11</sup>

Six returnees who were interviewed were “spontaneous returnees”, meaning that they stayed outside of the official process and used their own resources to return. A small number spoke of how they had made unofficial visits before deciding to repatriate officially: “Before I decided to return definitely, I sneaked into Burundi to cultivate and check on my dad to see if he was still alive; and I profited from cultivating in preparation for my final repatriation.”<sup>12</sup> However, most did not have the means to pay for such self-organised “go-and-see visits”<sup>13</sup> and registered for repatriation on the basis of minimal information. While several systems were put in place by UNHCR in Tanzania to inform refugees about the situation in their country of origin and about the return procedure, this seemed not to have been perceived as sufficient by most returnees interviewed for this report.

Refugees in the camps in Tanzania use a variety of sources to inform themselves about the situation in Burundi, including phone conversations with friends or family members who stayed behind, social media, radio shows, conversations with other refugees and statements from Tanzanian government officials. However, those who had returned were concerned about the reliability of this information, not least given the fact that rumour had played a part in driving displacement for many in the first place.<sup>14</sup> As one returnee said, “We have never been properly informed about the repatriation procedures. We considered the information conveyed as rumours. Everyone could tell anything that went through their minds.”<sup>15</sup>

While the official repatriation process was reportedly slow in August, by November a number of interviewees said it appeared to have stopped altogether. The main reason for this was the suspension of international NGOs working in Burundi, some of whom were responsible for providing essential services to returnees, including transport and the management of the reception centres. Since then, some NGO activities and the repatriation process have resumed, but a number of international NGOs decided to close their offices in Burundi as they disagreed with new government regulations, particularly the demand to provide an ethnic breakdown of their personnel.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Interview with returnee woman, November 2018, Makamba Province.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with returnee woman, November 2018, Rutana Province.

<sup>13</sup> In other situations, UNHCR has organised “go-and-see” visits that allow refugees to assess the situation in their countries of origin themselves. In this context, however, this option has not been made available.

<sup>14</sup> See International Refugee Rights Initiative, “I Know the Consequences of War: Understanding the dynamics of displacement in Burundi,” December 2016 (<http://refugee-rights.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Burundi-FINAL.pdf>, accessed 27 November 2018).

<sup>15</sup> Interview with returnee man, November 2018, Rutana Province.

<sup>16</sup> Vince Chadwick & Christin Roby, “Turmoil for international aid groups in Burundi over ethnic quotas”, *Devex*, 21 January 2019 (<https://www.devex.com/news/turmoil-for-international-aid-groups-in-burundi-over-ethnic-quotas-94125>, accessed 28 January 2019).

**Repatriation is being driven primarily by insufficient humanitarian assistance and rights violations in the camps.**

The findings demonstrate that most who left Tanzania and returned to Burundi did so as a result of push factors rather than faith in improving conditions in Burundi. As one woman said, “In exile I became poor in the way I had never been before since my birth.”<sup>17</sup> Another returnee described how he had watched five children die of hunger in the camp.<sup>18</sup> Most of our respondents lived in Nduta refugee camp, but IRRI also interviewed individuals living in Mtendeli and Nyarugusu refugee camps.

In particular, it was apparent that the humanitarian situation in the camps in Tanzania – which was always precarious – had only worsened. The majority of respondents complained about the insufficiency and lack of variety of food assistance – which has since improved – as well as problems with shelter and a reduction in access to health care.

Further, many complained about abuses committed against them. Refugees leaving the camps to look for firewood or menial jobs to supplement the insufficient humanitarian assistance were particularly vulnerable. Several said Tanzanian citizens had attacked them, police had beaten or detained them, and many complained of the high risk of sexual abuse against refugee women found outside of the camp perimeter.

One returnee described the situation:

There was a time UNHCR reduced the food ration and, as a consequence, some refugees decided to repatriate on foot, and others dared to venture out of the camp to work for money to supplement the insufficient food they were getting. They did this even though they knew they could easily be killed, arrested, beaten up, raped, tortured, imprisoned, and many other things... It was like a suicidal action to take.<sup>19</sup>

While no returnees reported that they had been forced to return, living in underfunded and neglected camps with no freedom of movement and no prospects for integration had left most feeling pressured to return to Burundi, even though their return was clouded with uncertainty. While a significant number of those interviewed also mentioned personal reasons or improvements in Burundi as reasons to return, this was generally secondary to conditions in the camps.

The situation in Tanzania appears to have deteriorated in the second half of 2018, after most of our interviewees had already returned to Burundi. In addition to its strict encampment policy, the Tanzanian government has also restricted economic activity inside the camps, reducing market days and banning various economic activities.<sup>20</sup> These restrictions are symptomatic of the fact that refugees are hostage to national, regional and international political interests.

At a national level, Tanzanian government officials have visited the camps to persuade refugees to sign up for return, stating that Burundi is now peaceful and that there is no future for Burundian refugees in Tanzania. The Burundian and Tanzanian governments are close allies, and Burundian government officials, as well as Tanzanian President Magufuli, have visited refugees in Tanzania to convince them to return.<sup>21</sup> Some officials mentioned the previous experience of the closing of

---

<sup>17</sup> Interview with returnee woman, November 2018, Rutana Province.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with returnee man, November 2018, Makamba Province.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with returnee woman, November 2018, Rutana Province.

<sup>20</sup> Thijs Van Laer, “There is pressure on us; Burundian refugees in Tanzania pushed to return,” 21 August 2018 (<https://africanarguments.org/2018/08/21/pressure-burundi-refugees-tanzania-pushed-return/>, accessed 28 November 2018).

<sup>21</sup> Samuel Okiror, “Tanzania president under fire for urging refugees to return to ‘stable’ Burundi,” (<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2017/jul/29/tanzania-president-under-fire-for-urging-refugees-return-stable-burundi-john-magufuli>, accessed 28 November 2018).

Mtabila refugee camp in 2012, when the Tanzanian government forced Burundian refugees to return.<sup>22</sup> The majority of those interviewed had previously been in exile, and included several who had previously returned from Mtabila.

At the same time, the interaction between the Tanzanian government and international donors is fraught, with refugees caught in the middle. The failure of international actors to deliver on past promises of assistance, particularly funding for local integration of former Burundian refugees, which has metamorphosed into World Bank loans, coupled with the fact that the Tanzanian refugee response is only funded at 27%,<sup>23</sup> has led to serious tensions between the Tanzanian government and international donors and agencies. The Tanzanian government's withdrawal from the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) is symptomatic of current global failures around responsibility sharing and of the deterioration of Tanzania's human rights climate. Tensions between the Burundian government and UNHCR have also cast a shadow over the repatriation process.

**Repatriation is failing as a durable solution as it is being viewed as a short-term endeavour rather than a long-term process demanding sufficient investment.**

Those who have returned under the UNHCR scheme reported receiving assistance in the form of a return package, which included food intended to last for three months, non-food items and cash. One woman described her experience of return:

I registered [for voluntary return], and when after three months my name appeared on the notice board, I was called to go and sign. When we came to Burundi, we were given assistance. We were given 70,000 Burundian francs [approximately 40 USD], and every child was given 35,000 Burundian francs [approximately 20 USD]. We were given utensils and food, but it was not sufficient. I appreciate it, as it supported us for a little while, but now it is over.<sup>24</sup>

Those who returned with the assistance of UNHCR told similar stories. Many returnees said this assistance was too little.<sup>25</sup> The packages – which were even less than those given during previous return processes, which had at the time been criticised for being inadequate, were quickly used up to cover immediate needs, to secure a plot of land (for those without land or unable to access it on return), or even to settle debts contracted before their flight, leaving people without further assistance. By November, the situation facing many returnees had become extremely precarious as their rations had run out before they were able to harvest any crops. With limited additional assistance, many have been left destitute.<sup>26</sup> Displacement, therefore, has only made them poorer and many expressed deep regret about leaving Burundi in the first place.

Their vulnerability is worsened by the fact that most returnees interviewed were already among the most vulnerable in Burundian society before their exile. Indeed, their poverty had been a key factor in driving them to flee in 2015. As one returnee said, “We did not flee the war. In fact, we fled because of hunger.”<sup>27</sup> He went on, “Before we fled, we worked for other people. Nothing has changed so far,

<sup>22</sup> Lucy Hovil and Theodore Mbazumutima, “Tanzania’s Mtabila Camp Finally Closed.” December 2012 (<https://www.pambazuka.org/governance/tanzania%E2%80%99s-mtabila-camp-finally-closed>, accessed 27 November 2018).

<sup>23</sup> UNHCR, “2018 Burundi regional refugee response plan Funding snapshot,” 7 November 2018, (<https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/66731>, accessed 26 November 2018).

<sup>24</sup> Interview with returnee woman, August 2018, Makamba Province.

<sup>25</sup> This was confirmed by several people knowledgeable of the situation. Interview with government official, 23 October 2018; and with NGO worker, 25 October 2018, Bujumbura.

<sup>26</sup> The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) has supported some quick impact projects based on community priorities in several areas of heavy return.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with returnee man, November 2018, Makamba Province.



even today we are still working for other people in order to live, and if we do not get these small menial jobs, we starve.”<sup>28</sup>

Many of those interviewed were landless before going into exile<sup>29</sup> and had to use their return package and whatever meagre capital they had to secure a plot of land or housing.<sup>30</sup> Most of the limited support that was provided to returnees aside from the initial package focussed on agricultural activities, including distribution of seeds and agricultural tools to those who could show a return certificate (see below) and had land. This not only increased the pressure on land in a country with one of the most intense demands on land in the world, but also ignored the fact that some returnees had other skills, acquired in the refugee camps or before fleeing Burundi, and could more effectively use equivalent support through loans or skill support.

Returnees, therefore, had received support to *return* in the short-term, but not to *reintegrate* inasmuch as their ability to continue to support themselves beyond the period covered by the return package was extremely limited. Likewise, there was minimal follow-up:

Returnees get assistance when they repatriate, just for a little while. After that, no authorities come back to check on the progress or do a follow-up mission to the situation [...] UNHCR or the authorities should do follow-up missions to check on the integration of the repatriated in the local system and to see if their repatriation did not create any imbalances in the community.<sup>31</sup>

**Those who did not flee are showing considerable solidarity in assisting returnees as first-line responders, but are already exhausted by the current economic crisis which has limited their resources and resilience.**

Most of those who stayed in Burundi have seen the poverty in which many returnees are living. As one man said, “If I compare myself to the returnees, I am better off than them, because what they were given would only last for three months, and they will not be in position to harvest yet what they would have cultivated. During that interim period, they suffer a lot.”<sup>32</sup> This was echoed by a local official:

Residents are not jealous of their return package, since most of us who did not flee have had opportunity to cultivate our lands. We depend on what we have cultivated and harvested, we are much better off than them. Most of the time we give them what they do not have like cassava flour, cassava, sweet potatoes, crops we have cultivated while they were away.<sup>33</sup>

Many of those that stayed supported returnees by giving them food or other items to survive, as the latter were already vulnerable and had missed the planting season, further increasing their economic and food insecurity.

However, inevitably, given the high levels of poverty, the return process has been marred by frictions between returnees and those who stayed in Burundi. Some complained that returnees are receiving (limited) assistance while those who “looked after the country” – and are equally vulnerable – are not being assisted. As one local government official said, “There are complaints from the residents that the returnees are more favoured. [...] Returnees are looked at differently to the residents, and this is caused by the assistance they are given.”<sup>34</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Interview with returnee man, November 2018, Makamba Province.

<sup>29</sup> According to one local official, 100 of the returnees in his area were landless.

<sup>30</sup> IOM has provided rental support and shelter rehabilitation for about 6% of the returnees, targeted at about 6% of the returnee population.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with local official, November 2018, Rutana Province.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with man, stayee, November 2018, Rutana Province,

<sup>33</sup> Interview with local official, November 2018, Rutana Province.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with man, stayee, November 2018, Rutana Province.



Both returnees and residents confirmed that this disparity caused some tension. As one woman who did not go into exile put it: “There are no conflicts between us, we share whatever we have. [But] sometimes, we envy the returnees, for at least they got the return kit which we do not have. It is as if they are the only ones that are vulnerable.”<sup>35</sup> She added that often returnees were seen as better off when they arrived, but that the return package was often depleted in a few weeks, while residents had crops they could eat and sell. In this context, some returnees said they were labelled as opportunists or opponents. Some who did not flee were concerned that the returnees looked on them suspiciously: “The returnees see us as followers of the ruling party.”<sup>36</sup>

However, as the same informant went on to say, “In the community the returnees are not segregated, or looked at differently.”<sup>37</sup> For the most part, therefore, relations between returnees and those that stayed were not seen as problematic.

It is clear, however, that sufficient attention needs to be paid to the wider context in which return and reintegration takes place. While support for returnees is vital, it should take place alongside support to the wider communities into which they are returning.<sup>38</sup> A 2017 strategy for socio-economic integration of vulnerable people included returnees and focussed on their durable solutions and community-level resilience.<sup>39</sup> In particular, vulnerable individuals and families within the communities receiving returnees need to be given specific assistance. As one local government official suggested: “My advice is that if 15 returnees are given assistance, there should be at least five vulnerable people among those who did not flee who get such assistance as well in order to reduce imbalance and suspicion as well as favouritism.”<sup>40</sup> A government official responsible for repatriation said that when handing out food or other support, they would dedicate a percentage to vulnerable people that did not go into exile. This was confirmed by a local official, who nonetheless said that imbalances remained, as there were many more vulnerable people in his area.<sup>41</sup> Others claimed there was corruption involved when such hand-outs took place.

**It was clear that there was insufficient coordination between national and local officials in return sites, creating considerable frustration.**

The findings make it clear that there has been insufficient coordination and communication with local officials around the repatriation process. While local actors clearly want to support returnees – not least because they are all too aware that they will become a burden on already over-stretched local resources if their needs are not promptly addressed – they were frustrated that they were not sufficiently included in the planning process and not informed early enough about impending returns.

As one local official said:

The only problem we encounter is that we as local authorities are not informed of what is happening in the central administration. The central administration is aware of the number of returnees, the area where they are coming from and all the logistics that are required to integrate them. It is sad that we are not informed of all the processes yet we are at the receiving end of all the problems the returnees encounter once back in the country. There is

<sup>35</sup> Interview with woman, stayee, August 2018, Makamba Province.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with man, stayee, November 2018, Rutana Province.

<sup>37</sup> Interview with man, stayee, November 2018, Rutana Province.

<sup>38</sup> Interview with government official, Bujumbura, October 2018. This recommendation was also supported during a workshop organised on 21 January 2019 in Muzye.

<sup>39</sup> UNDP Burundi, ‘La nouvelle Stratégie de réintégration vise l’ensemble des sinistrés’, 21 November 2017, available at <http://www.bi.undp.org/content/burundi/fr/home/presscenter/articles/2017/11/21/la-nouvelle-strategie-de-reintegration-vise-l-ensemble-des-sinistres0.html> (accessed on 1 February 2019). UNHCR has also developed a joint response plan, but the most recent plan was not available yet at the time of writing.

<sup>40</sup> Interview with local official, November 2018, Rutana Province.

<sup>41</sup> Interview with local official, November 2018, Rutana Province.

a lack of flow of information from top to down. At local level, materially, we do not have means to support the returnees.<sup>42</sup>

There was frustration that a lack of preparedness had reduced the effectiveness of local authorities, for instance because they were not able to sensitise the local community prior to the arrival of the returnees. As another official said, “Repatriation should be well prepared, otherwise returnees are brought to be dumped in the open.”<sup>43</sup> A government official responsible for repatriation confirmed to IRRI that they only inform local administrators about the impending return once returnees from that area are identified in transit centres. While the ministry is aware of movements prior to return, they said they could not share such information with local authorities due to “security”. When they were transported to their areas of origin, the same local administrators had to confirm receiving the returnees.<sup>44</sup>

At the same time, most returnees said that they had normal relations with local authorities, although some feel neglected or ostracised. In particular, those who have “returned” to areas other than where they had previously been living – for example those who had previously been internally displaced due to difficulty in accessing land, for other economic reasons or due to the 2015 unrest in Bujumbura – felt that they were being marginalised by local authorities on account of not being “indigenous” to the area. Local authorities have been instructed to counter such internal movements, despite the legal freedom for Burundians to move and settle freely within the country.<sup>45</sup> One woman said:

The people who make life difficult for us are those local authorities who exclude us from their lists so that we cannot benefit from help. They ridicule us by saying that they do not even understand why we fled. There are two categories of returnees: the natives and immigrants. The former are privileged to the detriment of the latter.<sup>46</sup>

Other returnees described how local administrators in their area had labelled them “cowards” or “opponents” because they had been in exile. A man, for example, described a situation he witnessed:

One day I was at the commune when I met about 70 returnees. The administrator of the commune did not treat them well, labelling them cowards and bad people. She said that she was not ready to assist them. [...] Although the residents and the returnees may say the same bad thing about an authority, this authority would be more severe towards the returnee for she believes the returnee has a different ideology from the mainstream grassroots people.<sup>47</sup>

**Most said that they now feel safer than before they fled, but concerns were raised about the political situation, including the 2020 elections, and a small number reported abuses.**

Most returnees said that they feel safer than they did before they left. As one woman who had recently returned said, “What changed since the time I left is that there are no rumours of war any more, there are no threats as there used to be before I fled, and there is enough food compared to before I fled.”<sup>48</sup>

Others also said previous tensions, for example between the ruling party and the opposition *Forces Nationales de Libération* (FNL) had decreased.<sup>49</sup> However, some interviewees described the

<sup>42</sup> Interview with local official, November 2018, Makamba Province.

<sup>43</sup> Interview with local official, November 2018, Rutana Province.

<sup>44</sup> Interview with government official, October 2018, Bujumbura; Information provided by local government official during workshop, 21 January 2019, Muzye.

<sup>45</sup> Information provided by national and local government officials during workshop, 21 January 2019, Muzye.

<sup>46</sup> Interview with woman returnee, November 2018, Makamba Province.

<sup>47</sup> Interview with man stayee, November 2018, Rutana Province.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with returnee woman, November 2018, Makamba Province.

<sup>49</sup> Although recent reports of arrests of FNL members by Imbonerakure in Rutana province indicate that political tensions remain. See SOS Media Burundi, “*Giharo : 19 Militants du FNL Pro-Rwasa interpellés par des Imbonerakure,*” 27

increasing boldness of the *Imbonerakure*, the youth league affiliated with the ruling party, who reportedly even beat up returnees until authorities intervened. Such abuses were also reported by the UN Commission of Inquiry on Burundi.<sup>50</sup> As another man said, “I feel safe here but it is clear that you cannot criticise the ruling party the way you want... But I think this is a problem for the elite. For us we cultivate our land and all we need is peace from them.”<sup>51</sup>

People were also wary of the situation given that many of the prior political tensions have not been resolved. As a man who had recently returned said, “Since 2015, a lot has changed. There are no conflicts, no one is saying that there is war and there is no tension in Burundi. Everybody that comes back from exile is busy doing his own business. However, as we are nearing the 2020 elections, there are fears that tensions and conflicts may erupt.”<sup>52</sup> As another man said, “Election campaigns always send adrenaline in the minds of people.”<sup>53</sup> Some were asked to contribute to the financing of the next elections, despite their meagre financial resources.

While most returnees we spoke to left predominantly because of the economic situation (which has deteriorated in relation to the political crisis), other respondents fled because they were afraid the situation would escalate, or because they had been victims of abuses related to their real or perceived political affiliation.<sup>54</sup> Several returnees also said that after their return, they had been accused of supporting Godefroid Niyombare, the former general who attempted a failed coup d’état in May 2015, but that local authorities had intervened to end such accusations. One of them, a woman, said she was afraid of creating an association with fellow returnees, as it might be seen to create divisions or disorder.<sup>55</sup> Such accusations leave a serious mark on people and could effectively deter them from claiming their rights on the local level or engaging in legitimate political activities.

Many respondents who had recently returned had also fled violence in the early seventies or in the nineties. However, most respondents said that regardless of what happens, they will not flee into exile again after their recent experience. Some said they would only flee within Burundi, while others said they would stay where they are. As one woman who had recently returned said, “I will never flee again even if it means death. I will die and be buried here in Burundi. If things go wrong and sour, I will hide myself within the country, but never outside again. I am traumatised by all this fleeing.”<sup>56</sup>

**While many of those returnees interviewed were landless when they left Burundi and therefore had no land to re-claim, some were struggling to re-claim their land.**

Reclaiming or gaining access to land has repeatedly been one of the greatest challenges of previous repatriation processes. As one local leader said, “Regarding land disputes, I can say that they are the most devastating.”<sup>57</sup>

The length of time in exile is crucial in this regard: reclaiming land should be more straightforward after only two to three years in exile as opposed to three decades, as was the case for those who fled in the early 1970s and returned in the 2000s). In practice, however, the situation is still highly concerning. UNHCR, for instance, has said that 33% of returnees have found their agricultural land

---

November 2018, (available at <https://www.facebook.com/sosmediasburundi/posts/2104301606298534>, accessed 3 December 2018).

<sup>50</sup> ‘Rapport final détaillé de la Commission d’enquête sur le Burundi’, 12 September 2018, available at [https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColBurundi/ReportHRC39/A\\_HRC\\_39\\_CRP\\_1\\_FR.docx](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColBurundi/ReportHRC39/A_HRC_39_CRP_1_FR.docx) (accessed on 28 January 2019).

<sup>51</sup> Interview with returnee man, August 2018, Rutana Province.

<sup>52</sup> Interview with local official, November 2018, Rutana Province.

<sup>53</sup> Interview with man returnee, November 2018, Rutana Province.

<sup>54</sup> IRRI 2016.

<sup>55</sup> Interview with woman returnee, August 2018, Makamba Province.

<sup>56</sup> Interview with woman returnee, November 2018, Rutana Province.

<sup>57</sup> Interview with former Head of Centre I, November 2018, Rutana Province.



temporarily occupied by others.<sup>58</sup> A judge told researchers that there were several ongoing lawsuits involving returnees, who face difficulties accessing courts. A policeman added: “Land disputes begin automatically between these residents and returnees, as they have to feed and house their families. They do not have a field to cultivate and feed their families. As a result, there are land conflicts.”<sup>59</sup>

In addition, those involved in unresolved land disputes in 2015 were more likely to flee, and these disputes have been carried over into this current repatriation process.<sup>60</sup> A woman who returned in September 2017, for example, said that several family members had been attacked by someone who had lost a land dispute against them.<sup>61</sup>

Many of the returnees interviewed were landless when they fled, which was both a factor that contributed to their decision to flee and which complicated their socio-economic reintegration upon return. As one woman said, “In 2016, I went into exile because I did not have anywhere to live for I was living in a borrowed house and the owner had threatened to eject me.”<sup>62</sup>

Many returnees who do own land return to find their houses, plots and crops damaged, either because of the lack of maintenance or malevolent acts. As one woman said:

When I repatriated, I went back to my home and to my house. The house was like I left it except that all my personal property such as beds, utensils and food had been stolen. My field of cassava had been ravaged; people had come and harvested it.<sup>63</sup>

Others had family members, neighbours or authorities looking after their properties during their exile. Shortly after the start of the exodus, the president instructed authorities at all levels to secure the land and property of Burundian refugees during their exile until their return. A local official said that he had confiscated iron sheets that were stolen by neighbours of refugees, and stored them in his office awaiting the return.<sup>64</sup>

Women appear to be particularly vulnerable in this regard as their access to land and decent housing is even more limited:

The situation is most serious for single women with their children. The administrators say we are unable to rent a house. They demand that these women go live with their parents as if we are not adults. They think they are unable to have their own plots.<sup>65</sup>

Sometimes, women returnees are stigmatised as prostitutes. In a context in which the majority of returnees are women and children (in one commune, of the 901 returnees listed, fewer than 100 were adult men),<sup>66</sup> access to land and housing for women is inevitably a huge issue. A local official recounted how he intervened when problems arose after one refugee had sold part of his land to another refugee when in Tanzania, but the family of the seller opposed this transaction upon their return. The complaints of the buyer at the local authorities and at court level were rejected, but the seller was told to repay the sum.<sup>67</sup>

---

<sup>58</sup> UNHCR, “Voluntary Repatriation of Burundian Refugees from Tanzania to Burundi”, 20 September 2018 (<https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/65988>, accessed 27 November 2018).

<sup>59</sup> Interview with policeman, November 2018, Rutana Province.

<sup>60</sup> IRRI 2016.

<sup>61</sup> Interview with returnee woman, November 2018, Makamba Province.

<sup>62</sup> Interview with returnee woman, November 2018, Makamba Province.

<sup>63</sup> Interview with woman returnee, November 2018, Rutana Province.

<sup>64</sup> Information provided by national and local government official during workshop, 21 January 2019, Muzye.

<sup>65</sup> Interview with woman, returnee, November 2018, Makamba Province.

<sup>66</sup> Interview with member of Returnee Reception Committee, November 2018, Rutana Province.

<sup>67</sup> Information provided by local government official, January 2019, Muzye.

**Other problems include access to healthcare, education and legal documentation.**

While it is clear that most Burundians struggle with access to healthcare and education, specific problems were highlighted around the impact of exile. The poor quality and variation in the system of education in the camps in Tanzania has meant that many returnees have fallen behind their peers. As one woman said, “For people recently repatriated, we realise that their children have not been to school. Children cannot read or write. We hardly have to believe that there are now schools in the refugee camps. The level of students has dropped dramatically.”<sup>68</sup>

One education official interviewed told of how he is working to ensure sensitisation in schools receiving returnees. He also mentioned that there is sometimes discrimination against returnees: “There was a returnee who had asked for a place in the second year but after a week, the headmaster refused him... When we got wind of the information, he was constrained to offer him the place.”<sup>69</sup> While the outcome for this returnee was positive, it is likely that many are not so fortunate. UNHCR findings suggest that 79% of primary-school-age child returnees were not in school.<sup>70</sup>

In order to ensure access to legal documentation, returnees are given a repatriation card (“*attestation de reconnaissance*”) in the transit centres, which certifies that they are a Burundian citizen.<sup>71</sup> This in theory allows returnees to obtain the necessary documentation, but according to UNHCR, 72% of returnees did not have a birth certificate; and 73% did not have a national ID card.<sup>72</sup> In some localities, local authorities charge administrative fees for the documents, which can impede access, especially in poor communities. Some were concerned that this might hamper their ability to vote in the 2020 elections. One man said, “When we left, voting cards were issued, and so we do not know if we will be allowed to vote in 2020 for the papers to be allowed to vote are those that were issued when we were away. Many things changed since the time we left.”<sup>73</sup>

Again, according to UNHCR, 29% of returnees do not have access to health systems.<sup>74</sup> Many returnees told IRRI that they were unable to buy a health insurance card and struggled to pay the bills upfront when someone in their family fell sick. Some said they were not able to access healthcare as a consequence. IRRI was informed that while in theory the Ministry of Solidarity can pay the health care bills of returnees, in practice almost none of the returnees or service providers were aware of this arrangement.<sup>75</sup>

---

<sup>68</sup> Interview with local official, November 2018, Rutana Province.

<sup>69</sup> Interview with education official, November 2018, Rutana Province.

<sup>70</sup> UNHCR, “Voluntary Repatriation of Burundian Refugees from Tanzania to Burundi,” September 2018 (<https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/65988> accessed 27 November 2018).

<sup>71</sup> Information provided by national government official, January 2019, Muzye.

<sup>72</sup> UNHCR, “Voluntary Repatriation of Burundian Refugees from Tanzania to Burundi,” September 2018 (<https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/65988> accessed 27 November 2018).

<sup>73</sup> Interview with man returnee, November 2018, Rutana Province.

<sup>74</sup> UNHCR 2018.

<sup>75</sup> Interview with government official, October 2018, Bujumbura.

## Conclusion

In a context in which repatriation is being pushed globally as the most desirable – and often, in practice, the only – durable solution, it is vital that the international community *at the very least* make sure that repatriation is not only voluntary, but sufficiently supported to promote effective reintegration.

While many of the challenges faced by those interviewed are more broadly related to the interlinked challenges of poverty and mismanagement by those in power, it is clear that exile and return has added a layer of vulnerability for many individuals and families.

Managing this process of return and reintegration is crucial. Previous research has shown that poor reintegration of returnees creates the context for human suffering, possible tensions within and between communities and future displacement.<sup>76</sup> There is an urgent need to invest in efforts to prevent such consequences, through investments in re-integration, co-existence and monitoring of the conditions of returnees. Ultimately, taking short-cuts in reintegration has proved disastrous in the past and it is vital that history not repeat itself. As many more refugees are expected to arrive in 2019 and 2020, years that will also be characterised by electoral fever, it is important to ensure that the challenges around the return process are not hijacked by politicians.

Furthermore, while reintegration costs money, there are other things that can be done without a huge financial investment such as sensitising local communities and better supporting local authorities. Return and reintegration needs to be viewed as a community endeavour rather than an individual process. While individual returnees and returnee families might require specific assistance, the process needs to be cognisant of the wider context of return in which whole communities are struggling, not least from the aftermath of decades of instability. Any intervention has to ensure that no harm is done in relations between returnees, those that stayed and local authorities.

Finally, the deeper structural issues that have led to multiple rounds of displacement also need to be addressed. Resilience of families and communities in Burundi has been worn down by years of war and political uncertainty that has forced people to take decisions to improve their physical safety but jeopardise their ability to provide for their families. Only when these deeper issues are addressed will the cycles of instability and exile be broken. Anything less will remain palliative.

---

<sup>76</sup> Lucy Hovil, "Preventing re-displacement through genuine reintegration in Burundi." Forced Migration Review 41, December 2012 (<https://www.fmreview.org/preventing/hovil> accessed 30 November 2018).



## Recommendations

- Donors should **increase their funding** for return processes, to decrease the backlog, improve the return packages and ensure sufficient, longer term integration and support to livelihoods. Specifically, funding needs to be multi-year and needs to be targeted at whole communities.
- Refugees should be provided with accurate, accessible and independent **information** on the socio-economic, security and humanitarian situation in Burundi. UNHCR's promise to develop municipal profiles to provide information to refugees on the situation in areas of return and to guide the development of reintegration programmes is welcome in this regard.
- There is a need to increase in-depth **monitoring** of returns, including on reintegration, the returnees' socio-economic situation and relations with host community and authorities. Donors should earmark funds to this effect.
- There is an urgent need to drastically increase **programming** for sustainable reintegration of refugees and for support to livelihoods. This requires both resources and national political will to allow NGOs to operate. Particular attention should be put on vulnerable groups, including landless people, women-headed households and people with disabilities. Such programming should be done in a conflict-sensitive manner, by including both returnees and those who stayed, and by being attentive to land and other possible flash points. Programmes should be diversified and adapted to people's situations, including by supporting alternative income-generating activities that could decrease pressure on land.
- Land disputes need to be resolved quickly and equitably. There is also a need to increase support for efforts to avoid refugees being dispossessed of their **land** as well as to mediate land conflicts that may arise after return. Wider programmes that promote **peaceful co-existence** and community dialogue could be key in addressing some of the current tensions and to prevent escalation and (re)displacement.
- Given the likelihood of more return movements in the near future, there should be an urgent effort to do contingency planning and **preparation** for such movements. Efforts should be made to better inform **local authorities** about returns to their areas and about any support that could be available for them, for returnees and for other community members.
- Burundian authorities should ensure that returnees and those who stayed are able to **access** services and legal documents without discrimination and that any allegations of **abuse** or ostracism against returnees are swiftly investigated and addressed.
- The Tanzanian government should end abuses against refugees and **restrictions** on freedom of movement and on economic activities in the refugee camps, while donors should increase their funding for the refugee response in Tanzania. UNHCR should continue to monitor and speak out about pressure on refugees to return.