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Local integration – How can it become a viable solution? A field study of Liberian refugees in Ghana



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ABSTRACT

This essay is the result of fieldwork conducted in the Buduburam refugee settlement outside of Accra, Ghana, in the spring of 2008. The aim of the study has been to examine whether local integration could be a viable solution to the plight of the Liberian refugees in Ghana in the aftermath of the repatriation programme terminated at the end of June 2007. The concepts of local integration and self-reliance will be analysed in relation to the protracted refugee situation of the refugees.

The fieldwork shows that the time for integration has passed for the Liberians: it wont be possible to integrate them after nearly two decades in Ghana. Issues like social interaction and training in local languages might have had a positive impact if they had been included as part of efforts to make the refugees self-reliant. Another conclusion drawn is that self-reliance within a (self-)separated community like the Buduburam refugee settlement can be counterproductive if the process of local integration is initialised too late.

Key words: Local integration, self-reliance, Liberian refugees, Buduburam, Ghana, protracted refugee situations (PRS), durable solutions.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

When refugees arrive in the Western world, it is assumed that they should and will eventually integrate into the new society they have reached. In Sweden, for example, this assumption is put in practice by sending asylum seekers to language classes to learn Swedish within the very first week of their arrival, whether or not they will ultimately be granted asylum. In other words, the situation they are in is treated as if it may last over a long period of time and the refugees are therefore prepared for this new life accordingly. Even if in reality the intention to integrate does not always succeed in practice, no other solution is sought. This approach prevented protracted refugee situation from developing in the industrialized part of the world (Standing Committee 2005: 137).

So the question is why this solution is not more widely sought in the global South, particularly in Africa. When the majority of the world's refugees under United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' protection are trapped in protracted refugee situations (Dick 2002b: 1), ought there not be more attention directed toward promoting local integration? More often than not, thinking about local integration seems to be underpinned by a discussion about burdens and costs for the host country. Is it not time to talk about benefits, for both the refugees and the country they temporarily reside in? If the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) would assist in the realization of local integration, would the costs not be reduced over time, as refugees managed on their own?

But are the refugees in the Third World interested in this solution? Should they even be given a choice or should local integration be required of them in the same way as in the Western world?

1.2 Aim and formulation of the problem

As mentioned above, the majority of the world's refugees (those cared for by UNHCR) are caught up in protracted refugee situations (Dick 2002b: 1). The countries hosting these refugee populations are "not just developing but poor" and "need to be encouraged and supported in their receptivity to refugees" (Standing Committee 2003: 180). There are three durable solutions that are promoted by UNHCR: repatriation, resettlement to a third country of asylum and local integration into first country of asylum. Local integration depends on the hosting state to allow the refugees access to its society, giving them the same rights and entitlements that the host nation is often unable to fulfil even for its own citizens. On the other hand, hosting large refugee populations over a long period of time has long-term economic and social impact that can create insecurity and conflict if not adequately addressed (*ibid.*).

When local integration is discussed, it is often as a concept rather than as an actual solution for a group of refugees living in the reality of a refugee camp. The aim of this essay is therefore to find out about the realities and wishes of those refugees, in relation to local integration as a durable solution. The essay will focus on the refugees' perceptions of local integration as a solution to their plight, as opposed to the academically defined solution often mentioned by UNHCR policy documents. The actual work of UNHCR Ghana will also be analysed in order to find out if they could have acted differently or if their efforts have had good results. The analysis will be based on the results of fieldwork conducted amongst Liberian refugees living in a refugee camp in Ghana, and secondary academic literature on the subjects of local integration, durable solutions and protracted refugee situations.

After almost two decades of refuge, the UNHCR has determined that the time has come for Liberians to return back to Liberia. In order to give the refugees a chance to go back under safe conditions, a program for voluntary repatriation was introduced. This program was officially closed in July 2007, but the turnout of returnees from Ghana was very low, and tens of thousands of Liberians remain in the country, mainly in the Buduburam Refugee Settlement. This development could have been assumed to have arisen because these refugees whished to stay in their new host country, making local integration the only durable solution for their future life in Ghana. The aim of this essay was to examine whether this assumption is correct, and if so, how could the integration be achieved?

Formulation of the problem:

How can local integration become a viable solution for the Liberian refugees in Ghana?

1.3 Methodology

This essay is the result of fieldwork undertaken in Buduburam Refugee Settlement, outside of Accra, Ghana. The research was carried out over a period of three months in 2008, from January 15th to March 14th.

The primary method of research was semi-structured interviews with Liberian refugees in Buduburam. The choice of semi-structured interviews was based on the desire to get the respondents to be able to speak freely and bring up issues of concern. The advantage of such a method is that the respondents can raise matters that could otherwise be unknown to the researcher. Many of the respondents conveyed their gratitude, saying that they were not used to official people (as I was perceived by many to be) taking an interest in them as individuals. On the other hand, the same personal connection gave rise to the major disadvantage of this method of gathering information: many of the subjects raised by the refugees were unrelated

to the research. While the refugees were open to answering my questions, matters concerning everyday life and survival were understandably of greater concern to them.

A fair amount of time was spent taking part in the everyday lives and happenings on the settlement, leading to observations and information being gathered under more informal circumstances. Impressions, observations and informal conversations were documented, often in retrospect. Material gathered in this way cannot be academically reviewed or verified in the same way as set questions in an interview, but is of no less of value to the findings of the fieldwork. The struggles mentioned in the interviews were observed first hand, but so were moments of joy and happiness.

A general understanding of the attitude of the host community was gained through a number of informal talks, both with Liberian refugees and Ghanaian locals. The fact that I lived among Ghanaians, but worked among Liberians, gave rise to many discussions about the “other” group, giving the opportunity to register what the two groups thought of each other. Additional information about the attitude towards the refugees was also collected from comment boards connected to news articles on the Internet about the refugee settlement.

In order to get additional information about local integration and work carried out on the settlement, several interviews were carried out with people of concern. Of particular importance were those involved with the issues of durable solutions, local integration and camp maintenance at the UNHCR. In spite of the fact that contact had been established with the agency – through Ms. Lisa Cudjoe – months prior to arrival in Ghana, getting in touch with the appropriate people proved to be difficult, and on occasion even impossible. An interview was carried out with Ms. Needa Jehu-Hoyah, the Public Relations Officer. The manner in which the interview was conducted was neither conducive nor productive; Ms. Jehu-Hoyah had decided ahead what she was going to say, much like a press briefing with little time for questions or dialogue. On several occasions, attempts to get information or interviews from the UNHCR staff resulted in similar dead ends. I always got the feeling that my requests were not taken seriously, exemplified by an incident where an interview was cancelled on the basis of the respondent at the UNHCR suddenly deciding that she had no information that could be of any use to my research.

Another example: much time and effort was put in to trying to arrange an interview with Mr. Senai Terrefe, the Durable Solutions Officer at UNHCR Ghana. I was told he would be the person who could inform me about what the UNHCR had done to promote local integration and about the dialogue about this with the Ghanaian government. When Mr. Terrefe was finally reached by phone – after weeks of promises from both Ms. Jehu-Hoyah and Ms. Cudjoe, that they would establish contact – he agreed to give an interview later the same week, but asked for the questions to be outlined to him in an e-mail in advance. Several e-mails and months later, there has still been no response or interview. As a result, no information about strategies promoting local integration and the UNHCR’s work with the Government of Ghana has been collected.

It is possible that the inability to get proper information from the UNHCR in Ghana stems from a failure on my behalf to convey the purpose of the research in a satisfactory manner. Still, my many attempts to communicate were met with a blatant disregard from their side. It seems safe to say that a refugee agency that is neither helpful nor cooperative with an independent researcher, is not likely to treat powerless refugees much better when they seek to get in touch with the officials – a fact that many of the respondents spoke of with desperation. The Liberians often mentioned the feeling of being left to manage in a hopeless situation due to inefficiency, incompetence and disinterest on the part of the UNHCR Ghana.

Before I left for Ghana, a permit for conducting research in Buduburam was sought from the Ghana Refugee Board (GRB). Upon my arrival, I visited the GRB office and interviewed the Program Officer, Mr. Tetteh Padi. Other people in positions of authority interviewed were the camp manager at Buduburam, Mr. Cal Afun and the Chairman of the Liberian Refugee Welfare Council (LRWC), Mr. Varney Bamoley Sambola III. Also, an important press briefing held by the Minister of Interior of Ghana was attended.¹ I also attended a big meeting on the settlement held by a delegation from the Liberian government, with the aim of informing the refugees about the situation in Liberia, and resolving the chaotic situations that had arisen on the settlement (more about this in chapter 3). These two meetings provided additional information about the responses of the two concerned governments and the UNHCR.

Secondary sources of information have been used to set the conceptual framework of this essay. Much of the information is gained from material connected to the work of the UNHCR. An article of particular interest to this essay has been Shelly Dick's "Responding to protracted refugee situations – case study of Liberian refugees in Ghana." Dick's article is the result of research undertaken in Buduburam over a total of eight weeks during the summers of 2000 and 2001. The report is one in a series of studies analysing the UNHCR's responses to protracted refugee situations. For the sake of this essay, the report has primarily provided background information about the Buduburam settlement and the lives of the refugees in their first decade in Ghana. Dick does touch upon the subjects of local integration and self-reliance, but with no in-depth discussions of the subjects.

One visit to another refugee camp, Krisan, was arranged by an acquaintance who also intended to visit the camp. Krisan camp, situated in the Western Region of Ghana, is home to a small number of Liberian refugees as well as refugees from about a dozen other countries. Our trip there was only intended as a social visit, but turned out to be an important piece in the puzzle to understanding Buduburam better, especially the factors influencing the prospect of local integration as a viable solution. The visit to Krisan also gave rise to another visit to Takoradi, where I met with three young self-integrated Liberian men. The material gathered

¹ The press briefing was held after representatives from the Government of Ghana, the GRB and the UNHCR had had a meeting with a group of representatives within the Liberian refugee community. The refugees claimed afterwards that the meeting had not been productive, since it lacked dialogue, mutual respect and understanding and was underlined with much hostility and threats from the Government of Ghana.

from these visits will be used as a contrast to the situation in Buduburam, particularly in relation to the question of the effect of self-reliance as a step towards local integration.

Considering the amount of time spent in Buduburam and with some of the refugees there, the fieldwork turned into a very personal experience. The objectivity and distance needed as an independent researcher was unfortunately sometimes lost when witnessing injustices and blatant human rights violations. Because of this active involvement in events on the settlement, I have chosen to on occasion include myself as an active participant in this essay, but I don't believe this involvement has compromised my academic findings.

1.4 Respondents

During my visits in Buduburam, I was accompanied by one of the refugees, a man who used to work as a journalist with the camp newspaper, the Vision. He was referred to me by an acquaintance who knew him from previous visits to the camp. He would help by taking me to respondents, some of whom he chose and some of whom he found when I requested refugees with certain characteristics (for example age, gender, duration of stay in camp, etc). On occasion, interviews were conducted with refugees who came across the research by chance and seemed appropriate for the purpose. Even though the respondents where chosen in a seemingly random manner, there was always a consciousness about diversifying the respondents to get a small sample of people that could represent the variety found in the settlement.

Often, the interviews were conducted in the homes of the refugees, and more than once there were multiple persons present to answer the questions. Some respondents have also been interviewed on more than one occasion. Thus, there are more respondents than interviews conducted. As mentioned above, the aim was to get as wide a variety of people as possible based on characteristics like age, gender, time in camp, position in the community, class and background. In spite of this, there is not a total balance in the number of women and men interviewed. Due to the fact that only women were involved in the protests staged by the Refugee Women for Refugee Concerns (more about this in chapter 3), more women than men were interviewed. Fifteen women were interviewed in Buduburam, none in Krisan, and the corresponding numbers for the men were seven in Buduburam and five in Krisan. Another three men from Krisan camp, living as self-integrated refugees in Takoradi were interviewed too. Besides the formal interviews, several informal conversations took place, and were later recorded as part of the research. The ages of the respondents ranged from 22 to 74, and the duration of their stays in Ghana varied from four years up to 18 years. Many of the refugees had been displaced more than once, and some had lived as refugees in countries like Guinea and the Ivory Coast.

Some of the interviews were recorded on tape, mainly those conducted with people in a position of power of some sort. The “average” refugee was not recorded on the basis of a conscious decision to make them comfortable and able to freely speak their mind. Those interviews were documented by handwritten notes, later transcribed and supplemented with additional mental notes. Refugees often perceive themselves to be in an exposed situation, making them careful about what they say and do. This feeling is often due to host countries attitudes, perceiving refugees as being temporarily on their territory and thus not entitled to the same civic and judicial rights as their citizens, leaving the refugees feeling that their rights could easily be violated. In the case of the Liberians in Ghana, risking this unstable situation by voicing their discontent soon turned out to be just as dangerous as they feared.

James (not his real name), the journalist mentioned, was often present in order to act as an “interpreter”. The official language of Liberia is English, and the interviews were conducted in this language, yet there was often a problem with communication – in both directions. Liberian English is difficult to understand for those who are unaccustomed to it, especially while talking to people from rural areas or with less educated persons, hence James’s involvement. But the refugees also seemed to have trouble understanding me; James often had to simplify the questions in order for the respondents to understand. James’ involvement lessened over time as I got used to the refugees’ way of speaking.

The interpretations and the fact that there were often more than one respondent per interview may have had some influence on the answers given. Yet the impact of a third person during the interviews should not be underestimated, although when James was present the respondents were acquainted with him and seemed comfortable with his presence. On occasion, though, he would mix his own opinions with those of the respondents, thus influencing the results. However, there seemed to be a general consensus about what was being said, and James often seemed to articulate their opinions for them. Other respondents later confirmed most of these opinions when James was not present.

The refugees will not be mentioned by their real names, except for those in a position of power or with representative roles amongst the refugees. I have chosen to keep their anonymity in order to indicate that the respondents’ answers could be perceived as fairly generalised opinions in the settlement. The chairman of the Liberian Refugee Welfare Council – himself a refugee – will be referred to by his real name, since he has been chosen to act and speak for the refugees in Buduburam. The three women in charge of the protests that took place during the fieldwork will also be mentioned by their real names when appropriate, since they were also in representative positions and have on more than one occasion given interviews in media stating their names.

1.5 Disposition of the essay

The first part of the essay, chapter 2, will be dedicated to defining terminology and concepts used as a theoretical base. This part will not venture into any in-depth discussions of the findings of the actual field study, but rather aim at giving a sense of how the definitions are used by the UNHCR and in the academic literature.

In the following part, Buduburam refugee settlement and Krisan refugee camp will be described. This is intended to give an understanding of the setting in which the fieldwork took place, as well a description of what the refugees' lives are like.

During the period when the fieldwork was undertaken the refugees were involved in events that dramatically changed their lives in Ghana. These events, starting with a sit-in demonstration, will be outlined and put in an explanatory context in chapter 4.

In chapter 5, the definitions of chapter 2 will be analysed in relation to the fieldwork. And finally in chapter 6, the conclusions will be outlined and discussed. There will also be a short discussion about whom the responsibility lies upon.

CHAPTER 2: DEFINITIONS

2.1 Protracted refugee situations

There is a tendency amongst humanitarian aid agencies to focus on delivering humanitarian assistance to refugee emergencies, whilst it is estimated that about 70 percent of the refugees are in fact trapped in protracted refugee situations (UNU 2007: 1). A protracted refugee situation (PRS) can be defined as:

“[...] a situation [...] in which refugees find themselves in a long-lasting and intractable state of limbo. Their lives may not be at risk, but their basic rights and essential economic, social and psychological needs remain unfulfilled after years in exile. A refugee in this situation is often unable to break free from enforced reliance on external assistance.

Protracted refugee situations stem from political impasses. They are not inevitable, but are rather the result of political action and inaction, both in the country of origin (the persecution or violence that led to flight) and in the country of asylum. They endure because of ongoing problems in the country of origin, and stagnate and become protracted as a result of responses to refugee inflows, typically involving restrictions on refugee movement and employment possibilities, and confinement to camps. The short-term nature of planning and funding modalities is a contributing factor.”

(Standing Committee 2004: 150-151)

There are also dimensional aspects to the abovementioned definition. The dimensions roughly outline criteria that need to be met in order for a refugee situation to be considered protracted. The criteria require there to be a refugee population that consists of more than 25,000 people who have lived in exile in a developing country for five or more years (*ibid.* p 151).

The average duration of major refugee situations, protracted or not, has been estimated to have increased from 9 years (1993) to 17 years (2003) (*ibid.*). The majority of PRSs are found in sub-Saharan Africa. There were 22 such situations recorded at the end of 2003 (*ibid.*). The severity of a PRS cannot be measured in numbers, however, but by the conditions in which the refugees live (*ibid.*). PRSs can maybe be better understood by this explanation:

“A protracted refugee situation is one where, over time, there have been considerable changes in refugees’ needs, which neither UNHCR nor the host country have been able to address in a meaningful manner, thus leaving refugees in a state of material dependency and often without adequate access to basic rights (e.g. employment, freedom of movement and education) even after many years spent in the host country.”

(EC/GC/02/6, 25 April 2002: section II, footnote 2)

In simpler terms, refugees in protracted situations find themselves trapped in a state of limbo: they cannot go back to their homeland, in most cases because it is not safe for them to do so. They are unable to settle permanently in their country of first asylum, because the host state

does not want them to remain indefinitely on its territory; and they do not have the option of moving on, as no third country has agreed to admit them and provide them with permanent residence rights (Crisp 2002: 3).

It has been determined that the presence of many of the PRSs in Africa can be linked to the fact that in the past two decades, little attention and effort has been directed towards local integration as the solution to the problem (Crisp 2002: 3).

2.2 Local integration

Local integration is one of the three durable solutions for refugees promoted by the UNHCR, alongside voluntary repatriation and resettlement to a third country. These three durable solutions are intended to “be considered simultaneously in a manner where they complement each other” (Resettlement handbook 2004: II/1). Local integration is particularly to be promoted as the solution in protracted refugee situations (UNHCR 2006: 137). Important to remember is that the promotion of local integration does not exclude repatriation as the final goal, but integration gives the refugees “some certainty about what to do with their lives in the meantime” (Dryden-Peterson & Hovil 2003: 2). The UNHCR is in charge of promoting and facilitating local integration, but the responsibility and choice to initiate the process is in the realm of the government of the host country.

The requirements for local integration to be feasible and possible to achieve, according to the UNHCR, are as follows:

“Local integration in the refugee context is the end product of a multifaceted and on-going process, of which self-reliance is but one part. Integration requires preparedness on the part of the refugees to adapt to the host society, without having to forego their own cultural identity. From the host society, it requires communities that are welcoming and responsive to refugees, and public institutions that are able to meet the needs of a diverse population. As a process leading to a durable solution for refugees in the country of asylum, local integration has three inter-related and quite specific dimensions.

First, it is a legal process, whereby refugees are granted a progressively wider range of rights and entitlements by the host State that are broadly commensurate with those enjoyed by its citizens. These include freedom of movement, access to education and the labour market, access to public relief and assistance, including health facilities, the possibility of acquiring and disposing of property, and the capacity to travel with valid travel and identity documents. Realization of family unity is another important aspect of local integration. Over time the process should lead to permanent residence rights and in some cases the acquisition, in due course, of citizenship in the country of asylum.

Second, local integration is clearly an economic process. Refugees become progressively less reliant on State aid or humanitarian assistance, attaining a growing degree of self-reliance and becoming able to pursue sustainable livelihoods, thus contributing to the economic life of the host country.

Third, local integration is a social, cultural and political process of acclimatization by the refugees and accommodation by the local communities, that enables refugees to live amongst or alongside the host population, without discrimination or exploitation and contribute actively to the social life of their country of asylum. It is, in this sense, an interactive process involving both refugees and nationals of the host State, as well as its institutions. The result should be a society that is both diverse and open, where people can form a community, regardless of differences.”

(EC/GC/02/6, 2002: section III or Resettlement handbook 2004: II/7

Seemingly a very thorough explanation of what local integration is, but can this definition be realised in real life? In order to determine whether the definition is applicable to real refugee situations, the elements of this definition will be broken in to pieces and analysed in chapter 5, with the plight of the Liberians in Buduburam as the test case.

2.3 Self-reliance

In the UNHCR Handbook for self-reliance, the term is defined as follows:

“Self-reliance is the social and economic ability of an individual, a household or a community to meet essential needs (including protection, food, water, shelter, personal safety, health and education) in a sustainable manner and with dignity. Self-reliance, as a programme approach, refers to developing and strengthening livelihoods of persons of concern, and reducing their vulnerability and long-term reliance on humanitarian/external assistance.”

(Handbook for self-reliance 2005: 1)

The programme approach mentioned refers to the UNHCR’s active promotion and works towards making refugees become self-reliant. Promoting self-reliance is considered to contribute to the realization of the durable solutions, whatever the durable solution may ultimately be (EC/GC/02/6, 2002: section IV: 10). In relation to the process of local integration, self-reliant refugees are considered an asset, rather than a burden, to the host society, being able to better interact with the locals both economically and socially (*ibid.*).

Self-reliance can be achieved in different ways, and not always necessarily with the help of the UNHCR or other organisations. A UNHCR self-reliance strategy could address issues such as (*ibid.* section IV: 11, shortened):

- community-development activities;
- targeted assistance packages to enhance economic self-reliance;
- building/strengthening partnerships among stakeholders;
- full involvement of refugees and their communities, including host communities, in the design, development and monitoring of programmes.

CHAPTER 3: THE REFUGEE CAMPS

3.1 Buduburam Refugee Settlement

Buduburam refugee settlement is located in the Gomoa district, about an hour's drive west of the Ghanaian capital, Accra. According to the camp manager, Cal Afun, there are about 40,000 refugees living in the settlement, while only around 26,000 of them are registered with the UNHCR (interview January 28). The majority of the refugees are from Liberia, but there are also small groups of other nationalities. The Liberian refugees have been granted refugee status on *prima facie* basis.

The camp was established in 1990 when the first refugees came from Liberia, and has over time grown into a settlement attached to the surrounding villages as the number of refugees has risen, according to the camp manager (interview January 28). A governmental organisation, the National Mobilization Programme (NMP) has the administrative responsibility over the settlement and Ghanaian police are in charge of providing security on camp (Dick 2002b: 14). The settlement is currently around 150 acres (*ibid.*). The land is still mainly owned by Ghanaians and leased by the refugees (*ibid.* p. 13). Many refugees have managed to build their own houses and other structures on camp, but all of it will revert to the landowners once the refugees leave (*ibid.*). So the presence of the refugees has in many ways contributed to the economic growth of the surrounding area (*ibid.*). This growth was also confirmed by the camp manager, who mentioned that several banks had opened in the area, something he says would most likely not have happened without the presence of the settlement (interview January 28).

The refugees have the right to work in Ghana if they apply for a work permit (Dick 2002b: 16), but most of the refugees work in the informal sector, since jobs are scarce in Ghana, especially for non-Ghanaians. According to many of the respondents, the biggest obstacle to the Liberians is that most Ghanaians are inclined to hire a fellow countryman rather than a foreigner. The UNHCR has in the past years determined that "economically integrated refugees contribute to development of the host country, rather than constituting a 'burden'" (Low 2006: 64). With the many small enterprises, markets and a variety of social facilities, Buduburam is like a microcosm of Liberia, according to the camp manager (interview January 28). The economic activities are plentiful, yet it would not be accurate to describe the refugees as economically integrated. It is rather a micro-economy operating separately from the Ghanaian economy, as the refugees do not pay taxes. The Program Officer at the Ghana Refugee Board stated that this situation is made possible by the Government turning a blind eye to the businesses conducted in Buduburam (interview January 22). The activities contribute to the refugees being partly economically self-reliant. That, in turn, makes the refugees less of a burden to their host society. The Government of Ghana does not offer any material assistance to the refugees (Dick 2002b: 14).

While on the surface life in Buduburam seems to be self-sustaining and the refugees seem to manage well, it is actually a constant struggle to make ends meet for the majority of the refugees. About 7000 refugees deemed vulnerable are given food rations (UNHCR Global

Report 2007), but the majority of the refugee population in Buduburam has to manage everyday life on their own, without assistance from UNHCR or the Government of Ghana. The refugees are even using their own resources to run the schools and churches on the settlement (*ibid.* p 7).² And as one of the respondents noted: “What are the UNHCR using to identify who is vulnerable? We are all vulnerable here in the camp!” (conversation March 17).

As Shelly Dick has correctly noted: “Liberian refugees, displaying a great deal of ingenuity and resourcefulness, have proven that they are capable of surviving without aid in Ghana due in large part to their own coping mechanisms and not as a direct result of UNHCR programmes.” (*ibid.* p 9). It is also worth mentioning that the self-reliance of the Liberians has been inevitable: in 1997 the UNHCR started to gradually decrease their assistance until it was officially cancelled in 2000. The aim was to encourage the refugees to repatriate (Dick 2002a: 1).

Labelling Buduburam a refugee camp can be misleading; it is rather a settlement that can easily be mistaken for a permanent town. Almost everything is available; it is easy enough getting to and from the settlement, and access to news and information is fairly easy too. Yet there are aspects obviously malfunctioning, reminders that this is in fact a refugee camp. The most obvious problems are:

1. Overcrowding – to describe the buildings the refugees live in as houses is an overstatement, they are rather structures without toilets, kitchens or any extra space, with very few conveniences and too many inhabitants. The houses are built so closely that sometimes it is impossible to pass in between them.
2. Bad sanitation – most houses in the camp lack toilets, so the refugees have to choose between paying to go to one of the dozen indescribably filthy public toilets or wandering off to the bushes at the outskirts of the settlement. Garbage is often thrown freely around and the dirt roads put a coat of dust on everything.
3. Lack of running water – there is no running water in Buduburam, so diseases spread easily and quickly.
4. Lack of flow of electricity – few houses have electricity and the ones that do cannot trust it to be available constantly.

All of the abovementioned problems can be found in poorer areas of Ghanaian society too, and especially the garbage handling is appalling in the entire country. Yet there is a major difference between the poor Ghanaians and the refugees: the former have at least the theoretical possibility of changing their situation while most of the refugees have no option but to stay where they are. The refugees are allowed complete freedom of movement in the

² There are a number of NGOs working in Buduburam, assisting with schooling-, feeding-, and self-reliancy programmes. Some of them are implementing partners to the UNHCR. There are also community- or camp-based organisations (CBOs) that are involved in different relief projects, and are initiated and run by Liberian refugees.

country (Dick 2002b: 14), so their inability is based on factors like difficulty securing employment and/or housing outside camp.

3.2 A sharp contrast: Krisan refugee camp

Close to the border of the Ivory Coast in western Ghana lies the small refugee camp named Krisan. This camp is in many ways the opposite of Buduburam. The camp can be described as a village composed of a couple of thousand refugees. The camp was initially opened in 1996 to house almost 2,000 Liberians who had fled their country onboard a Nigerian freighter (Kpatindé 2006). Since then there has been a change in the population, with people from about a dozen countries now inhabiting the camp, making it cosmopolitan in its character.

Krisan is located in a beautiful landscape, but far from any larger community. Takoradi is the closest city, but there is a lack of means of transportation, even for going to the closest village. The advantage of Krisan's location is that there is plenty of space for the refugees to live and farm on. The major disadvantage is that work opportunities are scarce, even more than in general for Liberians and refugees. Even possibilities to become self-reliant, except in farming, are practically nonexistent. A UNHCR representative has noted: "Krisan's lack of vitality shows it is difficult to turn townspeople and intellectuals into farmers" (*ibid.*). The people in Krisan are in a much higher degree dependent on assistance from the agency than those refugees living in Buduburam. Unfortunately the aid and assistance is being distributed unevenly amongst the different nationalities in camp, according to the Liberian refugees in the camp (interview February 6).

The isolation of Krisan is almost total. Upon arrival, after our long and bumpy journey, the Liberian refugees who had taken it upon themselves to show us around the camp told us that we could not reveal the true intentions of our visit. Going in and out of Krisan camp is much more difficult than in Buduburam: everyone is requested to go through the main entrance where the watch team, refugees themselves, keep track of all visitors by keeping a log book. Getting in and out without passing by the entrance is possible: there is no fence surrounding the camp – but it is not advisable to try to circumvent the rules.

Except for the location and surveillance isolating the inhabitants of Krisan, there is also an obvious lack of access to information and communication with the outside world. Electricity is scarce; radio is the main medium of getting news. No newspapers exist; a community television is available but mainly used for watching videos. No Internet is available. Coverage for mobile phones is very limited in the area and only one phone booth exists. These factors have had an obvious effect on the refugees' ability to live approximately normal lives.

CHAPTER 4: TURBULENT TIMES

4.1 The information campaign

In order to better understand some of the answers given by the respondents, it crucial to have a general idea about the climate in Ghana during the period of research. In the interview with the GRB Program Officer, Mr Tetteh Padi, I was told about an information campaign that should have been launched in November of 2007. The campaign was aimed at the Liberian refugees and would be administered by the GRB in cooperation with the UNHCR, the Ghana Immigration Service, the National Identification Service and a number of employment officials, according to Mr. Padi. He stated that the two-week campaign had been delayed due to circumstances that prevented the UNHCR from participating at the time (interview January 22). According to Mr Padi, there was still an intention to go through with the project when we spoke at the end of January, but no new date had been set.

When the information campaign was brought up during the interview with Ms. Jehu-Hoyah, she denied that anything of the sort had existed, neither on the initiative of the UNHCR nor by the initiative of any other authority. However, in the UNHCR Global appeal for 2008-2009, it is stated that: “As it would be premature for UNHCR to invoke the cessation clause and withdraw protection for the Liberian refugees, the Office is promoting local integration as the preferred durable solution for these groups, both in Ghana and the wider region. Funds are needed for self-reliance programmes to help these refugees integrate locally.” So whether an actual information campaign existed or not, the agency had a stated intention to proceed with the process of local integration.

Mr. Padi described the aim of the campaign as informing the refugees about the durable solutions: large-scale resettlement was at that point no longer an option for the Liberians; voluntary repatriation was encouraged even though the repatriation program had official been closed; and the process of local integration would be explained and discussed, but would not at this time not include an integration program (interview January 22). The participation of the National Identification Service was intended to inform about the upcoming launch of a national biometric identification card, which would also be given to the refugees. However, possession of the card would not entitle the refugees to the same rights as Ghanaian citizens (*ibid.*).

The most important part of this campaign, in relation to this fieldwork, would have been the participation of the Immigration Service. Their task would have been to determine which refugees were in a position to be considered for local integration. This determination would have been based on their ability to support themselves and on skills they possessed which could make them employable on the job market in Ghana. This also explains why the employment officials were involved (*ibid.*). The refugees would have had to prove that they could support themselves in order to be able to be considered for local integration, according to Mr Padi. He could not answer what the fate would be of those refugees who could not be considered for integration but would not be able to go back to Liberia either.

4.2 Background

A full historic background of the Liberian civil war will not be given, but a short summary will follow. After a decade of brutal military dictatorship under Samuel Doe, an ethnically based civil war broke out in December 1989. The war ended in 1996, followed by a presidential election, in July 1997, won by Charles Taylor, Doe's primary opponent in the civil war and already in charge of around 90 percent of the country (Dick 2002b: 12). But the conflicts lingered and civil war broke out once again in 2002. A Peace Accord was finally signed in 2003, finally ending 14 years of conflict in Liberia. About half the 3 million inhabitants had been displaced and another 750,000 had fled the country (*ibid.*). The situation in the country gradually calmed down, and in 2005 presidential elections were held and the first female president of the African continent, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, was elected to lead Liberia.

As a consequence of the progress in the country, many refugees in the West African subregion started to return to Liberia on their own initiative, but in unsafe ways, according to Ms. Jehu-Hoyah (interview March 12). In order to help the refugees to return safely to their country of origin, the UNHCR started facilitating voluntary repatriation, in October of 2004. Following the elections in Liberia, the High Commissioner decided in January 2006 that there should be a shift into actively promoting this solution (*ibid.*).

A repatriation package was introduced, offering the refugees free transport to Liberia (mainly by boat), enabling them to take all of their belongings with them. Once in Liberia, the refugees would be assisted in getting to designated drop-off points in their home county. Upon arrival, the refugees were given a reintegration package containing some basic utensils and four months' worth of food rations (divided into two cycles). They were also given the opportunity to attend skills training for a number of vocations, but only at a Resource Centre in Monrovia. Of importance to note is that the package was only offered to refugees registered with the UNHCR (*ibid.*).

The turnout of the repatriation program was not very successful among the Liberians in Buduburam. It was estimated that about 22,500 Liberians (circa 50% of the population in Buduburam) would choose to repatriate (UNHCR Country Operations Plan 2006), but in the end fewer than 7,000 repatriated between October 1, 2004, and December 1, 2007 (the program was officially closed in July 2007). The reasons, according to Ms. Jehu-Hoyah, were manifold: the refugees from the largely rural Liberia had become urbanized due to the proximity to Accra; they had achieved a certain degree of self-sufficiency and economic status in Ghana; and many of the refugees had already been displaced multiple times making them reluctant to move yet another time, sacrificing their current stability (interview March 12).

4.3 The sit-in demonstration

Three women leading a recently started organisation called Liberian Refugee Women with Refugee Concerns stated that rumours about the information campaign was the reason for the group's formation (interview February 14). Of main concern to them was the issue of local integration. On the same day as the interview with the three women, a large group of women from the organisation had gathered outside one of the leaders' houses to pray together. Similar gatherings had been going on for a couple of days by then. By gathering, the women were making a statement that they would not accept being left out of the decision-making, and at the same time protest against local integration as a durable solution. The women leading the organisation stated that the women in Buduburam were not interested in this solution, but instead wanted the repatriation program to reopen with an improved repatriation package (interview February 14).

On February 19th, hundreds of refugee women (and children) extended the protests by gathering for a sit-in on the football field facing the passing highway. The initiative had once again come from the Liberian Refugee Women with Refugee Concerns. The women stated that the intention of the action was to get the attention of the UNHCR to find a solution to the plight of the Liberian refugees (interview February 26). Earlier the same year, the same intention had motivated the sending of an eight-page letter to the UNHCR (dated January 8, 2008). In it the women had outlined their position in recommendations and requests about how to make the durable solutions more effective in Buduburam.

The protest was thus primarily directed at the UNHCR Ghana, although letters explaining the demands were also sent to the UNHCR in Geneva and to the Ghana Refugee Board. In an UNHCR press release (March 11) entitled "UNHCR condemns disturbances at Buduburam refugee settlement", the demands of the women were summarised as follows: "Issues raised in that communication centred mainly on a repatriation allowance of \$1000 as grant to rebuild their homes and restart their lives upon return to Liberia, resettlement to a Western country and opposition to local integration."

Further, the press release stated that UNHCR Ghana was concerned that the refugees did not have adequate information about the agency's work and had therefore: "initiated a series of meetings to inform and explain the various aspects of its programmes." The various attempts to spread information had unfortunately failed, due to hostility from the refugee community, according to the UNHCR. And the sit-in initiated by the Liberian Refugee Women with Refugee Concerns was, as far as the UNHCR was concerned, accomplished through coercion, manipulation, threats and intimidation.

It is worth mentioning that the male population of the camp had collectively been banned from participating in the sit-in. This was a conscious decision taken to avoid problems and misunderstandings based on prior experiences where Liberian men had been accused of being rebels and troublemakers, according to Cecelia Garlo, one of the women in charge of the protests (interview February 26). Unfortunately, this decision seemed to have no effect on the response to the situation from the Ghanaian government (more about this later).

The protests continued for about five weeks, until March 24. About one week after the protests began, the women once again extended their protests by remaining on the field 24 hours a day, in order to make a more obvious statement. This was followed by a decision in the community to try to make an even bigger impact by reducing activities in camp – in many ways an action resembling a boycott – especially those related to the work of UNHCR. This resulted in the market being open fewer hours per day, children staying home from school, vulnerable people not collecting their food rations and people not participating in the self-reliance programmes set up for them, thus disrupting the work of UNHCR. The refugees claimed that any participation in the sit-in or the subsequent actions were on a voluntary and individual basis, while the UNHCR and the Interior Minister of Ghana claimed that they had reports of force, threats and coercion being used against both refugees and people working in camp. In a speech on April 1 – after the protests had stopped – the Interior minister stated in a press briefing that:

“[...] these Refugees [sic] had in the last month succeeded in physically preventing Children [sic] from going to school at the Settlement and thereby forcing the closure of all schools in the Camp.

[...] They had prevented the National Catholic Secretariat and other NGO's from distributing food to the vulnerable which include the elderly, sick, and Children [sic] most of whom rely heavily on the food distribution. These refugees had physically, and also by intimidation prevented the elderly from going to collect their rations.”³

The only threats noted by the researcher were directed at the Chairman of the Liberian Refugee Welfare Council (LRWC), Mr. Varney Bamoley Sambola III, after he issued a public statement that was perceived by many of the refugees as not being in favour of the community and their interests. None of the respondents who were actively involved in the protests had any knowledge of people being forced, coerced or physically stopped from doing anything. Some said that they thought that these allegations were brought forward to discredit the refugees and their cause, an idea that is understandable considering the amount of misinformation that was floating around in the camp. Others were of the opinion that statements by the Interior Minister were lies fabricated to make the situation in the settlement seem out of control and making the responses from the Ghanaian government look proportionate. In light of the false allegations brought forward by the Interior Minister of Ghana, about the women protesting naked, made public worldwide by the BBC⁴, it is not totally surprising that this was the perception of many refugees.

The peaceful protests gave rise to a disproportionate response from the Ghanaian government. According to Cecilia Garlo, one of the leaders in the women's organisation, the camp manager had brought police to the field on January 25, accusing the participants in the sit-in of destruction. When the police had noted that nothing of the sort was going on, they left

³http://www.ghana.gov.gh/ghana/press_briefing_ministry_interior_demonstration_liberian_refugees_buduburam_settlement.jsp

⁴<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/7302243.stm> This article has been revised. The earlier version did not mention that these were accusations directed at the women by the Interior Minister.

without any intervention (interview January 26). It was later made known to the women that they were required by the Public Order Law (Act 491) to inform the police in advance about their demonstration. Yet at the time of the visit by the police, there had been no mention of this requirement to the women in charge, according to Cecelia Garlo (*ibid*).

Early on the morning of March 17, armed police surrounded the football field. They gathered the women and asked them repeatedly to leave the field, according to eyewitness reports, but the women refused. This lead to the women being forced onto several buses and taken away without explanation or any charges brought against them. According to local news media the women were arrested because of “[t]he blatant disregard of the Minister’s directive”, i.e. not ending the protest and therefore having to “face the full rigors of Ghanaian laws.”⁵

For hours, no one knew where the women and children had been taken. Later it was established that about 670 women and children were taken to a place that was referred to as a youth camp, in Kordeabe. One of the abducted women told me in an interview over the phone the following day that the conditions in Kordeabe were terrible: they had not been given food until late the previous night, and they had slept on mats in tents without sufficient cover from the ground resulting in scorpion bites. She also said that they had been told to sign a form without knowing its contents (phone interview March 18). All of this was later confirmed by a number of women interviewed after the late night-release on March 21 of about 90 women and children deemed too vulnerable to be kept in Kordeabe.

The Ghanaian attitude towards the refugees changed drastically as the protests continued. Some key events need to be highlighted to put subsequent events in perspective. First of all, on the morning of March 11, a meeting was held in Accra with representatives from the Government of Ghana, the UNHCR and the refugees⁶, with the stated aim of creating dialogue. It was followed by a press conference at which the Interior Minister of Ghana, Kwamena Bartels, gave a speech⁷ about the activities in camp as the Government of Ghana perceived them.

When the speech was finished, no questions by the press were allowed. The atmosphere was very hostile: one of the refugees was surrounded by uniformed men and taken outside when he insisted on asking a question (the previous meeting held between the refugees and the officials had not quite finished when the members of the press, and I, were let in). The Interior Minister stated that the refugees refusal to locally integrate was “an insult to Ghana” that showed “crass ingratitude to a country that has protected them, fed them [an overstatement, if not a lie] and given them and their children free education [again, not true]”. Mr. Bartels also stated that his government were of the opinion that almost all of the Liberians could return home without fear of persecution, and therefore a consultative process had been initiated to invoke the Cessation Clause of the OAU Refugee Convention.

⁵ <http://www.myjoyonline.com/news/200803/14506.asp>

⁶ I asked the chairman of the GRB, Mr. Bawumiah, for permission to attend the meeting and was refused entry. On top of that, I was ridiculed and scorned with comments like: “If you are a researcher, you will get the right information from elsewhere, without having to attend the meeting. This is none of your business anyway!”

⁷ A written copy of the speech is available with the researcher.

The joy resulting from the few women and children being released on the evening on March 21 was soon exchanged for anger, frustration and fear the following morning when the settlement was yet again stormed by armed police who randomly arrested another 70 or so refugees, both men and women. The news stated that these people included “neighbourhood leaders within the community who, according to the Government, had a duty to stop the demonstrations”.⁸ The press briefing from the Ministry of Interior stated that: “[...] the Security Agencies [were directed] to enter the Buduburam Settlement to arrest a number of identified ringleaders of the demonstration and some of the people whose activities posed a threat to the security of the State.”⁹ Accusing the refugees of posing a security threat to Ghana was a way of legitimising the following events. It is however very difficult to remove refugee status on *prima facie* basis (Dick 2002a: 5) and their status have not changed in relation to the UNHCR.

Within 48 hours of the arrests, 16 of the refugees – mainly men – were deported back to Liberia, without being brought to trial or having any charges brought against them (*ibid.*). According to UNHCR, thirteen of the deported Liberians were registered as refugees with the agency.¹⁰ Several refugees, especially those who had been in representative positions fled the settlement or went into hiding. Cecelia Garlo – by now the only woman in charge of the Liberian Refugee Women with Refugee Concerns – said in a conversation that police had been looking for her at her house on more than occasion, so for days after she hid and stayed away from her home (March 26).

On Easter Monday, March 24, a delegation from the Liberian government met with the protesting women in Buduburam, and managed to persuade them to stop the sit-in with promises of looking into finding solutions to the problems raised by the women and negotiate with the Government of Ghana about the release of the women still kept at Kordeabe. Three days later the delegation returned to camp to hold a public meeting on the very same field as the sit-in had taken place. They informed the refugees about a Tripartite Committee – with representatives from the Ghanaian and the Liberian governments and the UNHCR – that had been set up to oversee repatriation to Liberia. Thousands of refugees attended the meeting and the attitude was generally friendly towards the delegation and their messages. The crowd cheered and even chanted “we want to go home!” on more than one occasion.

The refugees pleaded to the delegation to find solutions to two issues they considered big obstacles in the way of successful repatriation. First of all, they brought up the issue of the small amount of luggage (20 or so kilos, depending on which airline company they are flown back with) the refugees can bring along when they repatriate. Secondly, they made the delegation aware of the fact that many of the refugees were not registered with the UNHCR – and thus considered to be illegally in the country and therefore not included in the

⁸ <http://www.myjoyonline.com/news/200803/14678.asp>

⁹ http://www.ghanagov.gh/ghana/press_briefing_ministry_interior_demonstration_liberian_refugees_buduburam_settlement.jsp

¹⁰ <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home/opendoc.htm?page=news&tbl=NEWS&id=47e8f5722>

delegation's mandate to help with the repatriation – since refugee registration had been interrupted back in 2003 and never resumed.

The delegation also informed the refugees of the Ghanaian government's decision to revoke the refugee status of the Liberians. The Government of Ghana had by now come to the conclusion that the Liberians had no reasons to fear persecution. So in a press briefing by the Minister of Interior, Mr. Bartels, the Ghanaian public was informed that the government had requested for the invocation of the Cessation clause of the 1969 OAU Refugee Convention.¹¹ In article 1(4)e of the Convention governing the specific aspects of refugee problems in Africa (also known as the 1969 OAU Refugee Convention), it is determined that the convention shall cease to apply to any refugee when: "he can no longer, because the circumstances in connection with which he was recognized as a refugee have ceased to exist, continue to refuse to avail himself of the protection of the country of his nationality."¹²

In the following weeks life in the settlement seemed to go back to its normal routine, but it was very much an illusion. People were petrified of being deported back to Liberia without any prior notice or being relocated out into the Ghanaian society awaiting their repatriation (as had been decided by the government by now)¹³, thus losing the little stability they had managed to secure for their lives in Ghana. When the registration for repatriation reopened on April 14, hundreds of refugees soon signed up. Several refugees told me that this sudden change of attitude towards the existing repatriation package was due to fear of being deported and not even getting the insufficient assistance offered by the repatriation package.

4.4 Rumours and misinformation

The information campaign never took place (possibly partly due to the events described), but the rumour of it spread throughout Buduburam, and gave rise to a lot of speculation, which often resulted in misunderstandings and misinformation circulating amongst the refugees. In an interview on February 14, the three women leading the organisation Liberian Refugee Women with Refugee Concerns stated that the rumours about the information campaign were the reason for the group's formation. The camp manager had told the women that local integration was not yet an option being offered Liberian refugees, while a UNHCR representative had claimed that the only alternative to repatriation was local integration (*ibid.*). The mixed messages troubled them and they felt that – as always – the refugees were left out of the decision-making, and that it would lead to them being pushed into something that they had not opted for (*ibid.*).

¹¹ http://www.ghana.gov.gh/ghana/press_briefing_ministry_interior_demonstration_liberian_refugees_buduburam_settlement.jsp

¹² http://www.africa-union.org/root/au/Documents/Treaties/Text/Refugee_Convention.pdf

¹³ <http://www.myjoyonline.com/news/200804/14947.asp> The desicion to disperse the refugees into smaller communities was intended to make it easier to monitor and manage them.

It is interesting to note how the spread of information in Buduburam malfunctioned, with the refugees receiving misinformation, rumours and pure lies on a daily basis. A very telling example is how I was awoken on the morning of March 1 by phone calls from camp telling me that the President of Liberia was due there any minute. After rushing to camp, it was obvious that the information was based on a very well spread rumour that no one could confirm, and in the end turned out to be utterly false. In the interview with the three women in charge of the women protesting local integration, they admitted that they had no proper understanding of what local integration entailed, but they (and every other refugee interviewed) still opposed being integrated based on the incomplete information they had available (interview January 14). A 74-year-old man said that during his eight years in camp, he never got any information from the LRWC or UNHCR, but from other refugees (interview March 5), a totally unacceptable situation.

During the interview with the UNHCR Public Relations Officer, Ms. Jehu-Hoyah, she kept repeating that all necessary information was available to the refugees on the bulletin boards in camp (interview March 12), yet she did not seem to take into consideration the factors that might prevent the information to reach all the refugees: illiteracy, lack of time to read the information posted or trouble understanding the contents. More than one example was encountered pointing to UNHCR's efforts to spread information through their bulletin boards to have failed miserably.

The information problem should not be taken lightly by the UNHCR. The success of their work is dependent on the right information being spread among the entire community, not only to the community leaders. Many of the refugees were under the impression that they were not allowed to work in Ghana, a misconception that had grave effects on their lives. A young woman in her 20s, who had been trained in computer networking by benefiting from a UNHCR scholarship said that she could not work because she was under the impression that she would need a residence permit, which she did not possess (interview March 3).

A man in his late 20s, volunteering with the LRWC, said in an conversation that it is not just the dysfunctional access to information that is the problem, but also the lack of flow in the spreading of information, giving cause to a feeling among the refugees that they were given information "by surprise" (February 28). According to the same volunteer, the fact that many refugees felt that they were not included in decision-making, that decisions were taken over their heads, was one of the problems that contributed to the protests (*ibid.*). He also said that if UNHCR staff had spent more time amongst the refugees in camp, situations like the sit-in could have been avoided (*ibid.*). He, among many others, was critical of the inability of the UNHCR staff to relate to the refugees. "They sit in their offices and decide what should be in the different programmes, but they would need to be on the ground to know what really goes on." (conversation March 17).

CHAPTER 5: ANALYSIS

5.1 Protracted refugee situations

It is important to remember that it is not necessary for a refugee situation to be protracted for local integration to be applicable as a durable solution. Yet these situations show the need for local integration to be introduced at an earlier stage in order to avoid keeping the refugees in the state of limbo that inevitably develops from life in a refugee camp.

Whether the situation for the Liberian refugees in Ghana can be classified as a protracted refugee situation is debatable. On the one hand, the number of refugees and the period of time they have spent in Ghana coincide with the dimensions required. On the other hand, many would argue that the situation in Liberia is not good enough for the refugees to be able to return home in order to emerge from the state of limbo they currently live in. Shelly Dick captures the problem very well (2002a: 5):

Issues of legal status can become complicated when peace and security are restored in the refugees' country of origin, especially when that peace is tenuous a [sic] best and a cover for ongoing turmoil at worst. In Africa, refugee status is often granted on a *prima facie*, or collective, basis when large numbers cross international borders at the same time. When conditions at home improve *prima facie* refugees may still feel they have a legitimate claim to asylum while the host government may disagree as is the case for Liberians in Ghana.

The definition of PRS also states that refugees are often dependent on external assistance, something that holds practically no truth in relation to the Liberians in Buduburam. Beside the fact that most of the refugees in camp are left to survive on their own, not getting any material assistance from the UNHCR, this survival is often achieved in ways that show the desperate situation they are in. Two young women, one in her early 20s, the other in her early 30s, shared – both explicitly and implicitly – that they were forced to work as prostitutes in order for them to be able to afford to raise their children (interview March 5).

5.2 Local integration

In order to analyse whether local integration is a viable solution for the Liberian refugees, it is important to break the definition into pieces and then compare the pieces to the answers given by the respondents to see if theory coincides with reality in Ghana. For the sake of this analysis' theoretical framework, some parts of the essay will be based on the information given by Mr. Padi at the GRB (interview January 22) concerning Ghana's intentions to initiate the process leading to local integration, even if the subsequent reality – deportations, withdrawal of refugee status, threats of relocation, unlawful detentions, etc. – made it obvious that any such intentions were officially abandoned. It is important to note that “[...] without the host county's acquiescence and active involvement it will be much more difficult to help

refugees” (Jacobsen 2001: 3) no matter what the final goal is. After the events that started in the middle of January, the position of the Ghanaian government changed towards the refugees and their future in Ghana. The question is whether the possibilities for the Liberian refugees to locally integrate, prior to these events, were mainly dependent on the Government’s acquiescence or if it was rather the work of UNHCR and the willingness of the refugees to participate in the process of integration that were of greater importance.

The first part of the definition to analyse is the statement: “Integration requires a preparedness on the part of the refugees to adapt to the host society [...].” Before analysing whether the Liberians had this preparedness, it is advisable to take a closer look into what this statement means. Is preparedness the same as being given time to adjust in to the new society and then choose to integrate or is preparedness the same as having the willingness to adapt? No answer to this is to be found in the literature, so let us turn to what is practiced. In the Western world, this preparedness is of course as much of a prerequisite for integration to be successful, but as mentioned earlier, no government awaits for the moment this preparedness to occur. Integration is basically forced upon those who seek asylum in the West, so why should the same not be done in the developing world?

It has been established that in situations where refugees share language, culture or ethnic origin with the host society, there is a good potential for local integration to succeed (EC/GC/02/6, 2002 section V: 22). Even if it is far too presumptuous to assume that all refugees in the developing world have one or more of these criteria in common with their new host society, it is fair to say that generally the similarities are far more than in the cases where refugees from the global South seek refugee in the industrialised world. Yet in the developing world, where local integration is supposed to be promoted by the UNHCR, integration seems to be the exception rather than the rule, and successful examples mainly happen on an individual basis, as a result of the refugees’ own efforts without having received those additional rights mentioned in the definition for local integration.

So does there exist any preparedness amongst the Liberian refugees? The answer is that after eighteen years any preparedness that might have existed when the refugees arrived in Ghana is gone. All the respondents claimed to oppose local integration as a solution to their plight. I even asked around in Buduburam to find someone who might consider local integration to be a good solution, but to no avail. One woman even wanted to know: “Why would they want to integrate us when they [the Ghanaians] don’t even like us?” (interview March 5).

Many of the respondents made it clear that Liberia is home, even those who came as young children or who have lived in Buduburam for almost two decades now. One woman in her late 20s who was among the first batch of refugees, put things in perspective: “It’s a matter of making a better life for ourselves, and how can we do that when the Ghanaians themselves can’t find jobs or food for the day in their own country?” (interview March 5). There seems to be a belief amongst the refugees, that they are more likely to make this “better life” in Liberia. “We just came from war, but things are getting better there. There are jobs and education there,” says the same woman (*ibid.*).

Another blatant example of the Liberians unpreparedness to integrate into Ghana comes up when the issue of food rations is touched upon. In line with their ability to survive without material assistance, only the poorest and worst-off respondents expressed a wish to receive food rations or get a bigger ration for their families. Still the issue concerning food rations made many refugees upset, the problem being that they were given corn. Rice is the staple food of Liberians, while corn is the staple food of Ghanaians, and this issue resulted in a lot of grievances among the Liberians. In addition to the fact that quite a few of them mentioned this in the interviews, it was also one of the issues brought up by the Liberian Refugee Women with Refugee Concerns' letter to the UNHCR (dated January 8). In the letter they asked for rice to be substituted for the maize because “[w]e do not have enough experience in the preparation of maize dishes to make effective use of the food, nor money to process the maize, and so most people resell their rations to Ghanaians at whatever rate they are willing to pay to buy small quantity of rice.” (page 5).

The refugees in Krisan camp also brought up the subject of corn. They claimed that they used to get rice but that it had been substituted for corn now. The Liberians would then try to sell their corn on the “discriminating Ghanaian market”, rarely profiting enough to buy sufficient amounts of rice (interview February 2). It is not more than fair to assume that after so many years in Ghana, enough time and opportunities have existed for the Liberians to learn how to prepare the maize. Their failure to do so shows their lack of preparedness to adapt to their new society.

The definition of local integration continues to state that adaptation should be achieved “without [the refugees] having to forego their own cultural identity”. One could argue that the Liberians refusal to incorporate maize into their food habits is their prerogative as a way to preserve their cultural identity. Of greater significance though, is that the UNHCR has chosen to disregard their own guidelines, by handing out maize to the vulnerable refugees receiving food rations. Liberian refugees from the other refugee camp in Ghana, Krisan camp, explained that they were especially upset since the food rations previously used to contain rice (interview March 13).

For local integration to be possible a “community that [is] welcoming and responsive to refugees” is required. According to Shelly Dick’s report, the Liberians generally coexisted peacefully with their new neighbours in the district during their first decade in Buduburam (2002b: 13). On a guided tour around the settlement, this notion was confirmed by a young volunteer with the LRWC, but with the addition that the Liberians needed to be careful about their doings to not arouse discontent (conversation January 28). It is also a fact that the Ghanaian government has generously provided the refugees with a piece of land and many crucial rights and freedoms, yet it might be an overstatement to call the community welcoming and responsive.

During the fieldwork, a less than positive attitude was registered: the average Ghanaian has a rather hostile and xenophobic attitude towards (black) foreigners, particularly Liberians and Nigerians. During a conversation with a well-educated Ghanaian man in his late 20s, he

managed in less than fifteen minutes to tell me that Liberians are thieves, rebels, murderers and rapists, and that whatever my respondents had told me were lies (March 5th). Another young, well-educated man seemed to have the impression that the Liberians would not take jobs if they were not well paid enough, and they could afford to refuse work because they were given assistance from the UN (conversation January 25).

On comment boards attached to news articles online, the public could have a say about the ongoing turmoil in Buduburam. The remarks posted against the refugees and their causes were remarkably hostile and unwelcoming. A few examples¹⁴: “I am glad that these criminals calling themselves refugees are to be sent home at last”¹⁵ or “Please deport them all!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”¹⁶ Or “No way for UNHCR we shall continue to deport them until they are finished”¹⁷ or “we do not wnat [sic] any war like they have in thier [sic] country and we must kick them out before they polute [sic] our people with it.”¹⁸ A word that seemed to appear frequently was “ungrateful”, insinuating that the Liberians are not grateful for life in Ghana.

Almost every one of the respondents shared personal experiences of discrimination, xenophobia or negative and unwelcoming attitudes towards them in the Ghanaian society. Chairman Sambola stated that xenophobia was a major obstacle preventing the Liberians from integrating, since it would not cease by the time the UNHCR withdrew their protection (interview January 28). One of the refugee women, a 27-year old who has been in Buduburam ever since it was established, said that Ghanaians had on more than one occasion told her to go back to her country (interview March 5th). And even though she had been educated and trained in computer networking in Ghana, she had not been able to get a job, any job, since she had graduated several years previously (*ibid.*).

Almost none of the refugees had personal relations with Ghanaians; a great social gap existed between the two communities. Social connections could have fostered mutual understanding, but instead most respondents noted that their relationship with the Ghanaians was only amicable if the latter had something to gain from it. A nursing-school teacher stated that “Ghanaians will only interact with Liberians if they want something from you!” (interview February 12). Another refugee, a woman in her 30s but with no higher education, said: “The relationship with the Ghanaians is only good if you have something to offer!” (interview January 31st). She also insinuated that the Ghanaians’ welcoming attitude towards me was only based on the colour of my skin (white, at least in the eyes of Ghanaians). Being white is seen to indicate money, so the woman was telling me that Ghanaians only act friendly to bring about a situation where they have something to gain – not an entirely false accusation about the attitude towards “white” people, in my experience.¹⁹

¹⁴ Some of the worst comments, the really xenophobic, negative or hateful ones, (comments that I have personally read) were removed from the comment boards, so upon writing this essay the most “useful” material had disappeared.

¹⁵ <http://www.myjoyonline.com/news/comments.asp?contentid=14947&offset=20>

¹⁶ <http://www.myjoyonline.com/news/comments.asp?contentid=14678>

¹⁷ <http://www.myjoyonline.com/news/comments.asp?contentid=14678&offset=20>

¹⁸ <http://www.myjoyonline.com/news/comments.asp?contentid=14678&offset=30>

¹⁹ Unfortunately, this attitude can be expected to be found anywhere where there is poverty.

The next criteria for local integration to be viable are “public institutions that are able to meet the needs of a diverse population”. On a general note, one could observe that the public institutions of Ghana are barely functioning well enough for its own people, and the likelihood of these institutions to be able to meet the needs of a diverse population is unlikely. One of the refugees, a middle-aged man, claimed that one of the reasons he opposed integration was that he did not think that he would be able to get help from the right institutions once it happened (interview January 12). Chairman Sambola mentioned more than once that Liberians got falsely charged with crimes, jailed without trial, and had trouble getting free trials and fair treatment in the legal system (interview January 28). However, fieldwork conducted for this essay did not closely examine criteria related to this, and thus will not make any conclusions as to whether the institutions in Ghana are prepared for this task or not.

5.2.1 Legal dimension

Now, let's turn to the three “inter-related and quite specific” dimensions that are the end result of the process leading to local integration. First (and maybe foremost) is the legal process that over time should lead to permanent residence rights, and eventually the right to acquire citizenship in the country of asylum. Some parts of this process had been achieved in Ghana. Firstly and of great advantage to the refugees has been that they were granted complete freedom of movement (Dick 2002b: 14), making everyday life easier, as a lot of the refugees go to church or to the market outside the settlement. However, they do not have any travel or identity documents valid in Ghana, a problem that could have been resolved for many of the refugees by the launch of the biometric identification cards, which will unfortunately not benefit the refugees anymore.

Secondly, the refugees already have access to primary education and the labour market, at least in theory. Although this is a step in the right direction, there are also many obstacles in the way of the Liberians’ full access to these sectors. For example, today, as well as back when Shelly Dick visited Buduburam, most of the refugees do not have the means to pay the fees for their children to attend school. For higher education, this situation becomes even harder since the refugees have to pay international tuition fees (Dick 2002b: 22). The three women leaders also mentioned that there is an age limit (maximum 30 years old) for those who can apply for a stipend to attend university (interview February 14). Many of the refugees fled their country when they were in an age when they were about to pursue higher education. This age limit prevents those refugees from accessing a better education and – in the long run – a better life.

When it comes to the labour market, the discrimination against the Liberian refugees has already been discussed. Of higher importance, had the process of local integration been initialised, would have been for the Liberians to prove themselves useful. As Mr. Padi at the

GRB informed, the participation of the Immigration Service would have been aimed at determining which refugees could be considered for integration based on employability and ability to sustain themselves (interview January 22).

While it seems like the Liberians have already made good advances in the legal dimension, how the other criteria would have been achieved has now become a question impossible to answer. It is the responsibility of the host state, through legislation, to give the refugees extended rights and access to institutions, but legislation does not necessarily change ingrown attitudes of the population.

5.2.2 Economic dimension

The second dimension in the process of local integration is economic. The refugees in Buduburam have already become less dependent on humanitarian assistance, and no State aid has ever been given. As such, the goal of the second dimension has been achieved. The refugees in Buduburam are fairly self-reliant and in some ways contributing to the economic life of the host country. Yet there is a factor in the Liberians' ability to sustain themselves that is neither dependent on aid from international agencies nor the host state: remittances from family and friends abroad. According to Mr. Sambola, the Chairman of the Liberian Refugee Welfare Council, about 10 to 15 percent of the refugees get remittances (interview January 28).

Shelly Dick noted during her visit that most of the remittances were received from relatives in the United States (2002b: 16). And even though the remittances do not benefit everyone to the same extent, they indirectly benefit all the refugees since they fuel the camp economy (*ibid.* p. 17). Very few of the respondents interviewed received remittances, but many would tell about the how those who do, or those who have a little extra, will always share and help those who do not have enough. A young, poor mother of four children pinpointed it: "Liberians are generous, we always share with each other. If we hadn't done so, we would not have been able to survive. It is the reason we are still here [in Ghana]" (interview January 31).

The Liberians' degree of self-reliance and chances of sustainable livelihoods will be discussed more later. The presence of the refugees in Buduburam has contributed to the economic growth of the local area, even if the widespread informal sector in Buduburam does not contribute with taxes to the government.²⁰

²⁰ Then again, neither does a large part of the informal sector within the Ghanaian society.

5.2.3 Social, cultural and political dimension

The third and last dimension of local integration is social, cultural and political. This “process of acclimatization” is intended to be “an interactive process involving both refugees and nationals of the host state.” The acclimatization process is intended to enable the refugees to live amongst and alongside the host population. The refugees in Buduburam are living alongside their Ghanaian neighbours, while the refugees at Krisan are far from any interaction with their host country.

As argued in the introduction, integration is imposed upon asylum seekers in the West. This integration is more accurately described under this third dimension, with focus mainly put upon the social aspects. With this in mind, the assumption was that any effort to introduce the process of local integration in Ghana should be achieved in the same way. I would like to argue that the two above-mentioned dimensions can be achieved by governmental actions and amendments of the refugee’s rights, but without actions directed at social integration no acceptance from the citizens of the host society will be achieved, thus making life difficult for the newcomers.

In a country like Ghana, with its many local languages (at least 46 languages and another 79 dialects, according to the Bradt travel guide) competing amongst each other, it might seem reasonable to leave the refugees to manage with the official language, English. On the other hand, some refugees felt that their inability to speak the local language of their district was a hindrance when going to the market place to sell their goods. So some women suggested to camp management that they would like to get lessons in Twi – the dominant language of the area (interview with Mr. Afun, January 28). Once the news about the classes got out, some refugees deemed it to be an attempt at “local integration in disguise” (*ibid.*). The three women in charge of the sit-in demonstration denied the charges that refugees had interrupted classes, but admitted that they wanted to stop them since they were only open for the disabled, and would not have had any greater beneficial effect on the community. The action was misdirected, as far as they were concerned (interview February 14).

When Ms. Jehu-Hoyah was asked about why language lessons had not been introduced to the refugees at an earlier stage, her answer was that the UNHCR responds to what the refugees ask for. They hold annual planning programmes with elected leaders from within the refugee community, and since they have not asked for language classes in the past, nothing of the sort has been initialised. “Nothing is imposed on the refugees, since there is no point in doing things that the community does not want”, said Ms. Jehu-Hoyah (interview March 12). Two objections can be made against this type of reasoning: firstly, the refugees have most likely asked for a number of things that the UNHCR has not agreed to. Secondly and more importantly, UNHCR is the agency in charge of devising and implementing responses to refugee situations around the world. Surely, this would give them the right to impose any actions that would be beneficial for the refugees. Language skills could – and should – be regarded as a step towards self-reliancy, thus not something that the refugees could choose to decline.

All this said, the majority of the respondents were not in favour of learning Twi. As one woman in her 30s who has lived in Buduburam since its opening said: “What would I do with Twi?” (interview March 5). And maybe she is right; maybe it is too late to introduce language classes as the negative pattern of discrimination has already been established. Still, two of the more well-educated men working at two nursing schools – both closed down under dramatic circumstances in the beginning of February – admitted that that Twi lessons at an earlier stage of the Liberians’ stay in Ghana would most likely have resulted in less discrimination (interview February 12). Tenneh Kamara, one of the female leaders, stated very frankly: “They [the UNHCR] should have started Twi classes in 1990 if they wanted local integration to be a durable solution!” (interview February 14). The three women all agreed that the UNHCR should have strategised earlier (*ibid.*).

The refugees in Krisan were of the opinion that there was a language barrier in front of successful integration (interview February 6). The attitude of the self-settled Liberians in the city of Takoradi was also different from the one in Buduburam. Two of the three men had started to learn Fanti (the local language of that area) in order to be able to get by better. One of them stated it had been helpful to learn the language, and that it made the Ghanaians more welcoming when they realised he knew some Fanti (interview March 13). But the advantages of knowing Fanti was also put in perspective: “Language skills will only make some difference, but in the long run it wont make life easier when even the locals [people who per definition speak the language] suffer here” (*ibid.*).

5.3 Self-reliance

One of the ways the UNHCR uses to make refugees self-reliant is to put them through vocational training. The UNHCR Global Appeal 2006 for Ghana states that the vocational training programme introduced in 2004 would continue to teach the Liberian refugees in information technology, masonry, carpentry/joinery and road construction. The vocational schools visited in Buduburam taught in subjects like sewing, baking, interior design (or so it was called), catering, hairdressing and mechanics. Exactly how many people have benefited from these vocational schools is unknown to me. In any case, one of the female leaders of the women’s organisation, Tenneh Kamara, made this point: “What is the point of being given vocational training in professions that already have too many going it in Ghana? Why not offer us education in professions that will give us the possibility to make a living in the future?” (interview February 14). Still, many have used the knowledge gained to open up businesses in the settlement.

Another way to promote self-reliance is to give refugees the opportunity to borrow money to start up businesses or other activities that are income generating. In 1993 UNHCR initiated a micro-loan programme, but it was terminated in 1998 due to mismanagement and misuse of

the funds (Dick 2002b: 15). All parties involved agreed that the programme had little impact on the community (*ibid.*).

There are no vocational schools in Krisan refugee camp and the opportunities to become self-reliant are limited. The opportunities to find employment or temporary jobs outside of camp are highly limited. Some of the refugee men sometimes go to the villages in the area to help haul fishnets, but complained that they get paid far less than the locals (interview February 6). Because of this lack of possibilities to make a living, in combination with the lack of things to busy themselves with, many Liberians (mainly men) have left the camp to seek a better life in Takoradi. One of the three men interviewed said that as opposed to in the camp, life in Takoradi moved forward. “Being here where life goes on somehow makes us feel like we are back home.” (interview March 13).

The men also said that they preferred to struggle for survival in Takoradi rather than to stay in Krisan and be handed food rations. “In camp you get traumatized since there is nothing to do.” The oldest of the three, a man in his 30s, had lived in Takoradi for almost three years. When asked if he felt that he had been integrated during these years, his answer was: “Integration is a process, but this is my own effort!” (*ibid.*). And he was probably right; the men’s lives in Takoradi are not the same as if they had been integrated. They are – just as the Liberians in Buduburam – partly self-reliant, but within the Ghanaian society, as opposed from the refugees in Buduburam.

One of the men claimed that he had moved to Takoradi, not in order to integrate, but to find something to learn. “I wanted to come and advance myself, in order to be able to go back to rebuild my country” (*ibid.*). Becoming partly self-integrated was just a side effect, but one that would most likely not have occurred if the opportunities to become self-reliant had been the same in Krisan as in Buduburam.

Liberian refugees in the Buduburam settlement do not feel the need to integrate into Ghanaian society in the same way that their fellow countrymen in the Krisan refugee camp. The reason is that even though life can be hard, it moves forward in the settlement. And the refugees living in Buduburam can to a large extent survive in the settlement without much interaction with the surrounding area²¹. It is fair to assume that if no external action were to be taken towards integrating or otherwise removing the Liberians in Buduburam, the settlement could linger on for as long as required by its inhabitants. While in Krisan, the refugees might be more inclined to want integration, but lack the skills and knowledge to become self-reliant once they are.

The problem in Buduburam is that some of the refugees have been trained in vocational schools, but they lack the opportunities to do anything with their knowledge. What the refugee women deemed lacking in the settlement was empowerment. They wanted to know how they were supposed to survive in Ghana if they were not empowered. For them

²¹ It is important to note that the refugees living in Buduburam are not all self-reliant. Most of them are in fact only surviving without assistance, while not necessarily being self-reliant in the true sense of the word.

empowerment meant being able to use their skills to live a normal life, not only being taught skills that would keep them occupied for the duration of the training (interview February 14).

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

6.1 Conclusion

So, could local integration become a viable solution for the Liberians in Ghana? As one of the respondents, a middle-aged pastor, correctly observed: “If integration was possible, you would not have had anything to ask about, since we [the Liberians] would have been self-integrated by now!” (interview February 12). So what is it that has stopped them from being integrated, on their own or with the assistance of the UNHCR and the Ghanaian government?

The fieldwork shows that there are several major obstacles to local integration becoming a durable solution for the Liberians in Ghana. First of all is the fact that too much time has passed since the Liberians first came to Ghana. For local integration to be successful the process has to be initiated as soon as possible, before the host society starts viewing the refugees as a burden, but also before the refugees start creating a life that can be upheld separately from the society surrounding them. Time is a crucial factor in the process of local integration. As one of the refugees in Krisan camp noted in a conversation: “The time for integration has passed or they [Ghana] would have made it happen a long time ago.” (February 6).

An alternative definition of integration states it to be “a situation in which host and refugee communities are able to co-exist, sharing the same resources – both economic and social – with no greater mutual conflict than that which exists within the host society” (Dryden-Peterson & Hovil 2003: 3). So more effort should have been put into bringing the two groups closer to mutual understanding.

The second obstacle is thus the social gap between the two societies living next to each other. It would have been beneficial if this social connection had been created as soon as possible after the Liberians arrived in Ghana. A good start would have been to offer – or rather impose – language classes to the refugees, as the effort to learn a language is often perceived positively by the host society. Drawing experiences from my own family’s integration into the Swedish society over two decades ago, it would have been good to establish social connections by creating “friendship programmes”. This is a way of creating social associations between the two groups as well as a way to help the newcomers into the society unknown to them.

The most surprising conclusion of the fieldwork has been that self-reliance is not necessarily favourable if the goal is integration into the host society. On the one hand, self-reliance is the key to refugees living a normal life without having to depend on aid and assistance from the UNHCR and other organisations. On the other hand, many refugees that become self-reliant within a community where it is possible to live separate from the host society will subsequently not desire nor need to integrate. Integration efforts will then most likely be in vain, as the refugees often feel they can manage on their own even if their lives are limited in terms of rights and opportunities. Integration becomes a non-solution, a solution not wanted. Other solutions gain prominence as the only solutions. In the case of the Liberians in Ghana,

resettlement was the most desired solution and an enhanced repatriation package the alternative.

The conclusion is that local integration can only be a durable solution if it is initialised at an early stage of the refugee situation. It is important to help refugees become self-reliant, enabling them to live their lives independent of international aid and assistance. But once self-reliance and/or survival has been achieved in a community that can manage itself separate from the host society, the chances to succeed with the process of local integration are reduced drastically.

6.2 Discussion: Who is to blame?

In any refugee situation, it is important to have the host country's acquiescence and active involvement, or it will be very difficult to help the refugees (Jacobsen 2001:3), maybe even more so when local integration is to be considered as a viable solution. It is the responsibility of the host state to initialise the process of local integration. With this knowledge, it would be easy to blame the Government of Ghana for the failure to integrate the Liberians into their society. Of course, they are not entirely free from blame. Their response to the situation that arose in early 2008 was disproportionate considering that they had not actually initiated any integration process. Becoming offended when the refugees renounced integration as a solution only shows that the political will was never even there to begin with. The Government of Ghana has during these past two decades not shown much interest in integrating the Liberians, so when the opportunity arose to rid them of their "burden", they took their chance. Deeming the refugees' actions as a threat to national security, gave them legitimacy to act fast and brutal. The Government of Ghana had the responsibility to respect the rights of the refugees, but did not do so. At the same time they managed to disguise their own inability to integrate the Liberians by putting the blame on the refugees, and accusing them of ingratitude for not wanting to be integrated, while in reality the government never had the intention to initiate the process in the first place.

So does the refugees have any blamed for not being integrated after nearly two decades in Ghana? Again, they are not totally without blame. The refugee leaders could have sent a stronger and clearer message about what their community wanted and needed in order to lead more sustainable lives. They could also have voiced their fellow refugees' fears about local integration, so that the misunderstandings could have been corrected by the agency at an earlier stage. But in the long run, the refugees are the victims; putting too much responsibility upon them to find durable solutions for their plight is to underestimate their vulnerability and their general powerlessness.

With the knowledge of this fieldwork at hand, it seems far more appropriate to put the most blame and responsibility on the UNHCR for their inability to promote and prepare for local

integration to actually become a durable solution in reality, not only in theory. First of all, the UNHCR seems to have the tendency to treat refugee situations as temporary situations, not only in Ghana. There is plenty of literature on protracted refugee situations, but the agency does not seem to have found a solution to their own inability to avoid these situations. And the reason for this is most likely due to the fact that local integration is not sought at an earlier stage. That in turn is due to the fact that there is little political backing for this solution.

Secondly, it is the agency's main responsibility to find durable solutions to refugee plights. They cannot – like Ms. Jehu-Hoyah did – renounce this responsibility based on arguments about refugee wishes. They are supposed to know what the best course of action is and act accordingly, even if that means imposing unpopular activities upon the refugee community at hand. And in the end it is a matter of three preparatory actions to succeed: making the refugees feel that they have been allowed to participate in formulating the course of action in relation to their community; timing the event; and making sure the information has spread widely and correctly, well before it is time to make the programme or event to start.

And lastly, local integration is a solution that will only be achieved by strategizing in time, again as early as possible. It is obvious that it cannot be taken for granted that refugees who refuse repatriation will automatically opt for integration, but they will probably be more likely to do so if they are aware from the beginning that this solution is possible. My belief is that the disproportionate resistance among the Liberians against local integration was due to the fact that they felt that they were once again given information about their future “by surprise”.

It seems that the time has come to revise the understanding of the concepts of local integration and self-reliance. An extended understanding of the two concepts should include social empowerment, language training and closer connections between the refugees and their new host society at an earlier stage. This revised understanding will most likely be met with scepticism and arguments about lack of financial resources to act upon such a definition. Beside the fact that human lives should not be assessed in terms of money, I would also like to argue that the sooner the process of local integration is initiated, the sooner the refugees can become individuals contributing to the host society, and no longer in need of long-term assistance from the UNHCR or their new government. It is unlikely that the agency will ever be out of work, so ending the human suffering as soon as possible should always be their goal. With what I witnessed in Ghana, I am not so sure this is the guiding principle of all their staff.

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