

Working with ‘stayee’ communities: learning from Eritrea

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Better understanding of the perceptions and living conditions of the communities into which returnees will arrive may facilitate better integration of those returning from displacement.

In the Eritrean context international organisations, governments and academics have placed increasing emphasis on the importance of diaspora engagement in peace- and State-building operations, and on population return as a catalyst for development. The prevailing economic and political situation at the point of return is seen as a critical determinant of whether diaspora groups can return and successfully re-engage in home country politics. UN documents championing the return of qualified nationals to Eritrea, and as revealed by my own conversations with staff promoting such projects within the country, have thus prioritised approaches that maximise diaspora satisfaction and ensure that State-run institutions can absorb these individuals. What these documents rarely consider, however, are how the approaches they advocate might affect the population resident in Eritrea – or how the social landscapes into which individuals will arrive, and the nature of relations between citizens inside and outside Eritrea, might shape the efficacy of return operations.

These resident communities are often viewed in purely instrumental ways. How, for example, can they be encouraged to facilitate the smooth reintegration of returnees? How can they be incentivised to make space for returning refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs) to engage in processes of peace building, national reconstruction and reconciliation? And how can they be sensitised to see returnees’ success as positively correlated with their own?

Bringing this population back into the picture first requires the adoption of frameworks that acknowledge the full array of actors involved in return processes. Empirical work has highlighted that

returnees’ reintegration often rests on whether they successfully negotiate with ‘local power holders’ for legitimacy, rights, opportunities and acceptance.¹ The ability and willingness of all citizens to positively engage with this process are critical.

Furthermore, research on how and why to support refugee host communities indicates that humanitarian concerns around displacement and mobility must not be considered in isolation from broader development agendas, which have traditionally provided more space for social and societal perspectives. Within this sphere, host communities are a vital constituency in their own right.

Political, practical and ethical challenges

Eritrean ‘stayees’ did draw considerable attention in the 1990s and early 2000s when hundreds of thousands of refugees who had fled during the country’s liberation struggle and its 1998–2000 border conflict with Ethiopia returned, the majority without international assistance. They returned to areas where the violence and destruction had been most acute, and where the local population was surviving amid unexploded ordnance, razed farmland and decimated infrastructure. Nonetheless, the returnees’ reintegration progressed without significant tensions.² Key to this was that neither the returnees nor the stayees criticised the others’ conduct, either during the fighting or upon return. Mutual bonds of solidarity and goodwill were strong, as were perceptions of each group as bringing opportunity. There was also a strong focus on meeting the needs of the population that had remained in Eritrea, due to both the post-liberation government’s commitment to ensuring human security for all Eritreans

and an intellectual community whose work on Eritrea drew significant attention to this frequently overlooked dynamic.

Recent research with Eritreans in its capital Asmara and in the diaspora, however, reveals a host of factors that may complicate future return, and that highlight the political, practical and ethical reasons for placing greater emphasis on the situation of the 'stayee' communities.³ First, the population that now resides outside Eritrea is composed of groups with very different histories, including refugees and migrants who did not return to Eritrea when it gained independence, second- and third-generation Eritreans, and individuals who have claimed asylum in the post-independence period. Their differing political sympathies have a considerable impact on their relationship with Eritrea and its government, and on how the population within the country – in itself politically heterogeneous – relates to them.

The majority of people in Asmara harbour deep disappointment with the country's ruling party and those individuals who continue to support it. They consider that actions by members of the diaspora who support the government – actions such as staging international rallies in praise of the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), Eritrea's ruling political party, and sending money to the government through its diaspora tax⁴ – have helped to sustain this regime. Interviews in Asmara have revealed that individuals are concerned about the return of the pro-government diaspora because of the returnees' political views and the perceived inflexibility with which their views are held.

Second, although people in Asmara noted that the return of the diaspora might give rise to certain economic, political and emotional benefits, there was some trepidation that these would be at the expense of the country's current entrepreneurial class. Given restrictions on freedom of movement for those who remain in Eritrea (including difficulties in gaining the exit visas needed to capitalise on scholarships and jobs abroad), clear hierarchies of access exist between those within and outside the country. My

respondents felt that the opportunities and resources accorded to the diaspora – including savings, business connections, work experience and good-quality higher education – may allow the population in exile to monopolise the most lucrative jobs and opportunities in a liberalised Eritrea.

An opposing but parallel concern related to how the country will economically and socially assimilate some of the new generation of Eritrean refugees if they choose to return. Many left to avoid national service, which meant leaving Eritrea before completing school. Even those with professional skills have struggled to find work that has matched their qualifications due to restrictive migration and asylum policies in exile. It is unclear how the country will accommodate this population, whose wealth and educational profiles have been stunted by exile.

Peacebuilding and reconciliation

Additionally, opposition factions within the population in exile appear to have developed ideas about the country's political future that support but do not necessarily include the diverse views and experiences of those within the country. Following the 2018 peace deal between Eritrea and Ethiopia, and its failure to translate into substantive political reform, there has been a renewed fervour among the opposition diaspora to begin planning for a post-PFDJ Eritrea. These groups have discussed how to expedite the ruling party's decline and how to prepare for the period of political transition that would follow. Calls have been made to organise professional associations, to write legal codes to anchor the country during transition and then serve as antecedents for a new legal system, and to identify individuals in the diaspora who could assume leading roles in a post-PFDJ political system.

The challenge nonetheless lies in how to reconcile the aspirations of these diasporic opposition groups with those who remain inside the State's borders. Dominant representations of Eritrean citizens as being cut off from political debate and good-quality higher education have

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contributed to a sense that the population within the country can agitate politically but not necessarily articulate an alternative political programme. The result has been that certain diaspora initiatives appear distanced from the ideas and aspirations of citizens within Eritrea about political change and the parts they wish to play in that. Processes of return have tended to focus on supporting and ensuring the political enfranchisement of repatriating populations, while taking for granted that the 'stayees' enjoy a degree of political representation. In places like Eritrea, this approach may compound the marginalisation already experienced by those within the country.

Prioritising the views and experiences of returnees over those of the population who have remained does little to establish the conditions of dialogue, inclusion and mutual respect that are integral to successful peacebuilding and reconciliation. Programmes of return should ensure that they do not create hierarchies by assigning resources to either group based solely on institutionalised categories of vulnerability – such as refugee or returnee. Practically, 'whole-of-society' approaches are increasingly

embraced by international organisations and donors because of a recognition that the impacts of displacement are not only felt by those on the move. Assistance and support are therefore being made available to host communities as well as to displaced persons in the hope of boosting general development opportunities, reducing possible friction and expediting integration. Adopting such models in the country of origin may yield similar benefits at the point of return.

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3. For example, see Cole G (2019) 'Systemic ambivalence in authoritarian contexts: The case of opinion formation in Eritrea', *Political Geography*, 73, 28–37
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4. Eritreans outside the country are required to pay 2% of their incomes to the Eritrean government in order to access State services.