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## Displaced communities and the reconstruction of livelihoods in Eritrea

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Discussion Paper No. 2001/23

## **Displaced Communities and the Reconstruction of Livelihoods in Eritrea**

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### **Abstract**

Since large-scale programmes of post-war resettlement and reintegration are costly, it is important to learn the lessons of the resettlement programme started after the end of Eritrea's liberation war in 1991. Eritrea's system of land tenure largely facilitated resettlement (although long-term environmental problems may emerge), social capital built during the war was a positive resource, and the state's legitimacy was another positive factor despite the shortage of skills, and fragmented help from the donors. Those who self-settled generally did better than those who settled under government schemes: this implies that helping self-settlement is more cost-effective than direct government help—an important lesson for the future. The success of returnees in reconstructing their livelihoods depends upon the resumption of sustainable development activities in settlement areas. Assistance is most effective and equitable when provided on a community-wide basis, bringing benefits to the entire population of areas where returnees settle.

Keywords: Sub-Saharan Africa, Eritrea, conflict, economic reform

JEL classification: O10, O55

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## **1 Introduction**

Successful resettlement and livelihood security are crucial to achieving post-conflict development. At the time of the overthrow of the Derg in May 1991, it was estimated that nearly 100,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) 95,000 ex-combatants and nearly 500,000 returnees would have to be resettled in Eritrea (ERREC 1995, ERREC 1996a). This process posed a major challenge to the fledgling Eritrean State. Many constraints existed, including a fragile environment, and the new state's limited administrative capacity and fiscal resources. Above all, Eritrea is one of the poorest countries in the world. The economy was relatively well advanced in comparison to the SSA average in the 1950s, but thirty years of war left the newly independent country with a per capita income of only US\$ 160-190 (World Bank 1996). About 50 per cent of the population was estimated to be poor just after independence, and about two-thirds of households were dependent upon food aid (World Bank 1996). Therefore, large-scale resettlement had to take place in difficult set of circumstances.

Nevertheless, Eritrea succeeded relatively well—given the constraints—in resettling its people and in helping them to resume old livelihoods or build new ones. This paper assesses the resettlement process. Section 2 sets out the basic features of the process, contrasting those who received help with those who settled themselves without much assistance. Section 3 then turns to the critical role of access to land and common property resources, while section 4 discusses the environmental dimensions of resettlement and government land-tenure interventions—key determinants of livelihood sustainability. Section 5 highlights the central role played by social capital developed during the 30-year liberation war in easing resettlement and section 6 focuses on state capacity in the resettlement process. The independence war raised expectations that the status of women would change in Eritrean society, and therefore resettlement's gender dimensions are explored in section 7. The paper concludes that resettlement was facilitated by effective public administration, unity of purpose and robust social capital, together with receptive communities and a system of property rights that was supportive (at least in the short-term).

We focus on the resettlement effort in the aftermath of the Derg's fall. Tragically, Eritrea and Ethiopia began a new war in May 1998 resulting in mass expulsions. Ethiopia has deported about 54,000 Ethiopian citizens of Eritrean origin together with Eritreans legally resident in Ethiopia (Kibreab 1999b). Although this paper does not discuss the resettlement of people displaced by the new war—the situation remains in flux at the present time (September 2000)—some of the lessons learned from the earlier resettlement period are of relevance to the new challenge that faces Eritrea.

## **2 Assisted settlement and self-settlement**

Between 1991 and 1997 some 188,924 people returned to Eritrea without assistance: 157,345 from Sudan, 22,471 from Ethiopia and the remainder from other African countries, the Middle East, Europe, North America and Asia. Between October 1994 and June 1995, 24,220 refugees returned under the Programme for Refugee Reintegration and Rehabilitation of Resettlement Areas in Eritrea (PROFERI) Pilot Project. The government ran this programme with donor assistance.

There are three discernible patterns in returnee settlement. These are self-settlement in rural areas, self-settlement in urban or semi-urban areas, and settlement in formal reintegration sites established by the government in collaboration with international donors. The overwhelming majority of the returnees have self-settled in the urban and semi-urban areas, the border towns receiving a lion's share. The proportion of those who have self-settled in rural areas is very small and there is little information on how they have fared.

Returnees under the PROFERI Pilot Project—24,220 individuals or 6,386 households—were settled by the government with support from international donors. In addition to infrastructure services such as basic administration, health care, primary education, water supplies and food aid, PROFERI provided packages of agricultural inputs. PROFERI returnees who settled in Gash Setit and Barka received two hectares of cultivable land, seed for the first year, tools (ploughs, axes, hoes, spades, sickles), and livestock of their choice up to a value of US\$ 400 (together with vaccination of livestock at the time of purchase and free treatment for the first year). Each reintegration site was also allocated common grazing land accessible to community members (see Kibreab 1996a).

The self-returning refugees did not have access to such entitlements. They shared whatever services and opportunities were available in their settlement area. However, large public investments have been made in the provision of social and economic infrastructure and services in areas receiving returnees—otherwise the border towns would have been overwhelmed.

A key question is: how do the self-settled returnees make ends meet when they received no outside support? The border towns where the majority of the returnees have settled were either sparsely populated or deserted during the war, especially after the second half of the 1970s. The return of a large number of refugees from the Sudan has dramatically changed the economic and cultural landscape of the Gash Setit area. In particular, the social and ethnic composition of the population as well as their economic activities have changed from the pre-war patterns. Since the arrival of the returnees, border towns such as Goluj, Um Hajer, Telata Asher, Tessenei, Barentu, and Ali Gidir, have grown from stagnant and insignificant villages to thriving regional markets. Among the self-settled returnees, there are a large number of casual labourers who work in construction, agriculture and services. Many supplement their incomes from rain-fed or irrigated agriculture. The latter are mainly people who rent land either from local residents or the government. Micro-enterprises are a lifeline for a large number of returnees, especially women, in towns such as Tessenei. Remittances from abroad are important as well (on the scale of remittances see Hansson 2001).

The majority of households combine a diversity of income-generating activities. Most are seasonal activities. During the slack season in agriculture, people work in construction or collect and sell water, firewood, building materials and thatch grass as well as petty trade. Cross-border trade still plays an important role in the livelihoods of many returnees, especially in the border towns, despite the Eritrea's uneasy relations with Sudan.

Although it is too early to reach definitive conclusions, there is little doubt that those who settled themselves seem to be more content with their lives than those who live in government reintegration sites. However, outcomes do vary across the government

reintegration sites. Those who settled in Fanco, Goluj, Gergef and Tebeldia have done better because they are settled in higher rainfall areas. Those who are settled in Alebu (which in Tigre literally means ‘a site with nothing’), Tekreret and Ad Ibrahim are worse off because the government wrongly selected these reintegration sites. The average annual rainfall in these areas cannot support rain-fed agriculture. During the last four years, the returnees have only harvested crops once (1998). This implies that resources are better used in facilitating self-settlement than in the government itself resettling people. It also highlights the importance of the environment and land to livelihoods, an issue that we now turn to.

### 3 Land tenure and resettlement

Agriculture dominates Eritrea’s economy: over 80 per cent of the population depends for its subsistence on agriculture and related activities. Conditions are harsh—either arid or semi-arid—and the decline in crop yields and vegetation cover is of major concern in both Eritrea and neighbouring Sudan.<sup>1</sup> The intensification of agriculture has not progressed very far since investment in irrigation and water conservation has been limited, and input markets remain underdeveloped. Extensive cultivation and grazing predominate, and land and other common property resources together with labour and cattle are therefore the key productive assets. The importance of land to rural people is aptly summarized by a comment of S. F. Nadel who studied land use in the 1940s (Nadel 1946: 1):

‘It has been said of the African that he does not possess his land but is possessed by it. The attitude of the Eritrean peasant towards his land cannot be more aptly described. Indeed, his preoccupation with his landed possessions shows a depth and passion not often paralleled among African races.’

This is as true today as it was fifty years ago. Therefore, we now discuss recent changes in land tenure and their implications for resettlement.

The traditional Eritrean land tenure system, although not uniform throughout the country, was based on guaranteed access by individual families to cultivable land—this was controlled collectively by a group of villages associated by common descent or common residence or by kindred groups called *enda* (Nadel 1946, Kibreab 1996c). This strong legacy of attachment to land notwithstanding, a land law was passed in 1994, which vested ownership of all land on the government (GOE 1994a). The new law classifies land into two categories. The first, consists of land allotted to Eritrean citizens previously held communally or on an extended family basis. Surplus land within this category comes under the control of the government which then allocates it to the landless. Eritrean citizens who have attained the age of majority and who intend to become farmers are entitled to lifelong rights of usufruct (GOE 1994a). The second

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<sup>1</sup> The respective roles of climate change versus man-made land degradation in causing declining yields is much debated and the issue is difficult to resolve definitively given the complexity of the processes and the sparseness of the data—especially for Eritrea (see Helldèn 1991, Ibrahim 1984, and Kibreab 1996c among others).

category, consists of land directly controlled by the government, including land previously held by the state, surplus land remaining after allocations to the landless, expropriated land, and land reserved for mines, forests and investments.<sup>2</sup>

Usufruct rights can neither be sold nor bequeathed. However, a deceased person's land passes to his or her children if they are under-age with an open option to retain such land upon attainment of 18 years. A deceased's offspring, including those who have attained majority age, also have pre-emptive rights to their parents' holdings provided that they relinquish their own allotments. This provision is intended to encourage landholders to invest and improve the productivity of their holdings. Land held in usufruct can be leased provided that the government's ownership rights are not affected. Those with usufruct rights are also entitled to change their lifelong usufruct to a lease. This is also designed to encourage investment. Although the village or the local community has lost collective ownership and control over cultivable land, it still retains collective control over its own grazing areas, woodlands, roads and water resources. These rights are subject to government review and intervention whenever the latter feels there is need to do so.

This property rights regime has been instrumental in facilitating the integration of the displaced population. The majority of returnees from the Sudan have settled in the Gash Setit sub-region where there is a relative abundance of surplus land and therefore more opportunities for self-employment than in many other regions. Although the land law (58/94) is not yet formally in force, people seem to accept the new situation in which all land formally belongs to the State.<sup>3</sup> All surplus land is government land and, according to the new law, all Eritrean citizens who intend to make agricultural livelihoods are entitled to cultivable land wherever it is in surplus, and regardless of their place or origin. Hence, most returnees in the Gash Barka region have been allotted surplus land by the government.

Returnees have been able to settle with little resistance from local communities (see section 5). If the public did not acquiesce to the government ownership of land, then some local residents would probably have resisted the establishment of reintegration sites accommodating people with no previous links to the area based on common descent or residence. But the social cohesion and other social capital developed during

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<sup>2</sup> The Derg nationalized all land and renewable resources, including those in Eritrea, but this did not affect the overall land tenure system in most parts of Eritrea mainly because of the war (on land tenure issues in Ethiopia see Daniel Ayalew et al. 1999).

<sup>3</sup> Hitherto, there has been no official explanation as to why the Land Act (Legs.58/94) has not been formally enforced. However, *de facto*, it is in force in all the rural areas and in cities outside the capital, Asmara. The land question is extremely complex and politically sensitive in the centuries-old villages in the vicinity of Asmara. The capital cannot expand unless it swallows the villages surrounding it. This would mean that tens of thousands of households would lose their land and therefore the main source of their livelihood. Since the formal sector is small and is growing only slowly, most of the displaced would find it difficult to obtain alternative employment. More fundamentally, land is a source of social identity in Eritrean society as well as being a source of livelihood. In most of highland Eritrea, there is a strong sense of close interdependence between an individual, his or her descent group, and the land with which that group is traditionally associated. The traditions, customs, beliefs, values and institutions of these communities are deeply rooted in their ancestral lands. Expropriation of such land for public use is something which they may not understand or accommodate. The government is quite aware of this problem.

the war years played a part in easing the resettlement, as did the tangible benefits for locals that returnees brought with them (see section 5).

Those who returned to their villages of origin were supposed to receive land from their relatives, villages or to regain the land they left behind when they fled to Sudan. Many were able to regain their land or, when it had been allocated to others, their relatives or villages replaced their land. However, this was dependent firstly, on whether they are settled in the district of their origin and secondly on whether there is unallocated surplus land. At a policy level, all returnees, including those who choose to return to areas where there is land shortage are entitled to cultivable land provided that land is the major source of livelihood in the area. Nevertheless, if no surplus land is available, returnees have to wait until a land-holding member of the village/s concerned either dies or emigrates elsewhere. In most cases, this problem does not arise because returnees being rational and knowledgeable about local conditions seldom return to areas where there is a problem of land shortage. The overwhelming majority of the returnees have not returned to their villages or places of habitual residence. One of the key elements that influences the choice of destination is access to cultivable land or to non-farm income-generating opportunities. That is why the large majority of the returnees have chosen to settle where access to actual or perceived opportunities for land and employment/self-employment opportunities are greater regardless of whether these are within or outside their areas of origin.

In Gash Barka where there is so far no scarcity of cultivable land, returnees have not experienced any problem in regaining their old possessions or in getting replacements. The same is not, however, true in the areas where cultivable land is in very short supply. The findings of a recent study by the author (Kibreab 1998b) clearly suggest that whether returnees regain their land in their villages of origin or habitual residence is to a large extent determined by land availability. It is also interesting to note that in most (if not all) cases, refugees do not return to their villages of origin when they know that livelihood prospects are uncertain (due to lack of land or off-farm employment). Moreover, the changes in lifestyle that most refugees underwent during their exile have reduced the attractiveness of old lifestyles. Very few of the people who repatriated themselves and went to live in urban areas depend on agriculture for their livelihood, despite being allotted land either by the government or by their villages (in the Gash Barka region for example). They have preferred to develop micro-enterprises.

In summary, the government's intervention in the property rights regime through state ownership has eased the resettlement problem. However, the environmental impact of this intervention may prove to be problematic unless it is handled very carefully. If it is not, then progress in solving the short-term (but urgent) problem of resettlement may come at the cost of long-term problems. It is therefore to the environmental impact of state land-ownership that we now turn.

#### **4 Resettlement and the environmental impact of state land-ownership**

Shortly after independence, the government drew up a national environmental management plan (NEMP) which was adopted after a national conference in 1995 (EEA 1996). An institutional structure was set up and environmental legislation is due. In the meantime, the Ministry of Agriculture issued two directives. The first, 'Clearing



Procedures and Utilization of Trees in Agricultural Areas' (1992) prohibits the cutting of plant species of 'outstanding importance', trees along river courses and springs for a distance of 50-100 metres from the stream-banks, as well as on slopes greater than 35 degrees. (EEA 1996). The second, 'Regulation of Land Clearance for Agricultural Concessions' (1994) spells out the environmental rules that should be followed by concessionaires, including the provision of windbreaks, native species conservation, and the spacing of large farms at intervals of at least 500 metres to allow passage of livestock (EEA 1996). This is designed to protect the ability of communities to drive their livestock to rivers which are fronted by commercial farm concessions.

Prior to their displacement, sizeable numbers of refugees were either pastoralists or agro-pastoralists. Exile forced them to diversify their livelihoods and they took up more sedentary occupations including cultivation and micro-enterprises. Nevertheless, the majority of returnees, including those who have settled in towns, still depend directly or indirectly on agriculture. They have cleared large tracts of land (which had reverted to savannah forest during the war) for cultivation, construction material and fuelwood. Since no modern inputs such as fertilizers are used, productivity is relatively low and consequently extensive- rather than intensive- farming is dominant leading to the clearance of large areas. During fieldwork in 1997 and 1998, the author observed that neither concessionaires (commercial farmers) nor smallholders (including returnees) were complying with the directives. This threatens the sustainability of rural livelihoods.

In-depth discussion with key informants revealed that whereas the majority are aware of the relationship between trees and environmental sustainability, many nevertheless left their plots devoid of trees. Asked why they did so, most responded that trees compete with crops for space and moisture, cast shade on cropped land, harbour destructive birds, and provide sanctuary to insect pests. This suggests that the ministerial directives are not properly enforced. Even in reintegration sites such as Gergef, grazing and arable lands were not demarcated and as a result livestock routes are blocked during the cultivation seasons—contrary to the ministerial directives. This has caused tension between herders and cultivators (Kibreab 1998a).

There are a few commercial farmers among the returnees. They have brought large tracts of land under cultivation and are major employers of seasonal labour—thereby benefiting both returnees and local communities more generally. But unless their activities are regulated, substantial environmental damage will occur. Expansion of mechanized agriculture may also displace smallholders and pastoralists. Commercial farmers have lobbied energetically to maximize their interests—even at the risk of environmental damage. The government is in a dilemma. On the one hand, it recognizes the potential environmental danger that horizontal expansion of mechanized rain-fed agriculture entails. But at the same time it also values mechanization's contribution to national food security.

The harvesting of fuelwood and construction materials constitute further sources of environmental pressure. Inevitably, demands on forest resources are high in the early years of post-war reconstruction. Most of the returnees in towns consume fuelwood and building materials. Off-farm employment is limited and the poor depend on selling firewood and construction materials. However, a plan to promote the use of non biomass sources of energy and building materials was abandoned due to lack of donor interest.

The reintegration programme budgeted US\$ 8 million for an environmental component to undertake reforestation and soil conservation measures to control the ‘severe degradation of land in the areas of resettlement, especially those areas where the major economic activity of the returnees is agriculture based’ (ERREC 1996b). Although the government is determined to strictly enforce forestry laws, its means of doing so—and its ability to offer the poor alternative livelihoods—are both limited. Moreover, experience elsewhere highlights the challenge facing the Eritrean government.

State intervention in the management of land and common property resources has been widespread in Africa’s socialist countries, as in much of the developing world (see Addison 2001b). Unfortunately, this has been a recipe for natural-resource depletion in much of SSA (see Ghai 1992, and Shepherd 1989, among others). The state may not be an innately bad manager of natural resources, but the record of state ownership has certainly been dismal. The literature highlights two major problems.

First, short-term revenue maximization—without due regard to long-term sustainability of land and common property resources—is common under state management. Governments that are desperate to earn foreign exchange—particularly in war-torn economies—find that the exploitation of land, forests and water resources is an easy option. Second, the end of traditional ownership-rights and mechanisms for the regulation of resource-use—customs, kinship relations, and so forth—has required the establishment of new mechanisms to monitor and police state property rights. But for governments with limited revenues, these costs have become prohibitive. As a result, no effective control is exercised, and land and common property resources become *de facto* open-access resources (Ghai 1992). Moreover, state intervention has often encouraged powerful community members and outsiders to illegally seize the land and other resources traditionally managed by communities (Kibreab 1996c). The problem is particularly acute in Africa, especially among conflict/post-conflict countries such as Angola, Guinea-Bissau, and Mozambique (see Addison 2001a and Wuyts 2001).

Despite this dismal experience, the Eritrean government has vested upon itself the right of ownership of all land in the country. The euphoria characterizing the post-independence period has generated much support for government policies, including its forestry laws, but this support cannot be counted upon forever. Unless efficient and cost-effective enforcement mechanisms are put in place, Eritrea is likely to face the problems encountered by other poor countries that have nationalized land and common property resources. These could hold back successful longer-term rural development.

## **5 The role of social capital in resettlement**

During the war’s early years, it was mainly people from the western lowlands who fled to Sudan. As the war escalated, no part of Eritrea was spared and the exodus became nationwide. For many rural Eritreans this represented a turning point in their lives. Many had lost all their property but they met fellow Eritreans from distant regions for the first time. Overcoming hardship and social disorientation necessitated collective and co-operative effort, as did dealing with aid agencies and the Sudanese authorities and population. Hence, new social organizations and networks transcending the old kinship networks or ethnic affiliations arose. The powers of traditional leaders declined, new

leaders emerged with strong links to the liberation movement, and a new organizational culture was created.

Eritrean experience therefore differs from that of many other conflict countries. The term ‘war-torn’ commonly describes societies whose fabric is fragmented with low levels of trust—increasing the likelihood of conflict resuming. The label might be suitable for societies such as Liberia, Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia—to name just three countries in which opposing groups defined themselves by ethnicity, tribe, religion or language. But wars that are successful in expelling colonial powers and foreign invaders can build social cohesion. Therefore ‘war-torn’ is not an accurate description of Eritrean society: the sharing of suffering cemented national cohesion and created a new stock of social capital which facilitates cooperation. This is a substantial resource for returnees to access when reconstructing their livelihoods.

In general, one of the major constraints on reintegrating a displaced population is hostility between those who left during the conflict and those who stay behind (Rogge 1994, Kibreab 1998b). Each group may accuse the other of betrayal and cowardice. Those who stayed may see the returning refugees as more competition for scarce resources and jobs. When land and natural resources are scarce, population displacement may represent a blessing in disguise for those who stayed on during war.

Eritrea’s experience is different to most other war-torn societies—very little resentment appears to exist. In three reintegration sites, namely, Alebu (Gash Setit), Tekreret (Barka) and Hagaz (Anseba), the local population did initially resent the establishment of reintegration sites adjacent to their villages. They feared that this would increase competition for land, water, firewood, building materials and pasture. Some protests occurred. For example in Hagaz—where there is a shortage of cultivable land—local residents thwarted the government’s plan to allocate land to returnees. The latter were unable to get land unless they had past links to the local community. But these cases are mostly few in number in Eritrea.

When returnees have settled in populated areas, conflicts with locals have been minimal. First, a recently completed study of Gash Setit—which has a large number of returnees—found that receiving communities harbour little resentment (Kibreab 1998b). Aside from the popular commitment to working together, the government’s policy that assistance to returnees should also be made accessible to the receiving communities has reduced any latent tensions (World Bank 1996). Second, as noted in section 2, most of the border towns were almost completely depopulated during the war. Most of the people now living in these towns are returnees, IDPs and demobilized ex-combatants who share similar war-time experiences and have forged social relationships based on common past hardships. Third, in Alebu, Tekreret and elsewhere, resentment quickly receded partly because resettlement benefited locals. These were some of the most neglected communities prior to independence; villages had no schools, clinics, or water. These facilities have now been established and are highly valued by communities. Finally, the reintegration sites provide a bigger market for local farmers and micro-entrepreneurs, and the large-scale and horticultural farms operated by returnees also provide badly needed wage-employment.

In summary, Eritrea is fortunate in having accumulated a large stock of social capital—one of the positive aspects of the otherwise extreme hardship of war. There is much evidence that social capital is a positive force for development (see for example, Putman

1993, Widner and Mundt 1998) and certainly the social capital found in Eritrea gives the country a head start in reconstruction as compared with such fractured societies as Angola and Guinea-Bissau (see Adauta et al. 2001 and Kovsted and Tarp 1999). But social capital—as with all forms of capital—depreciates over time. Therefore Eritrea must work hard to preserve its initial advantage.

## **6 State capacity to manage resettlement**

Although communities themselves can do much to resettle, state assistance is crucial—especially for poorer households who may otherwise be left behind as others successfully rebuild (on this problem see de Sousa 1999). In this regard, Eritrea enjoyed one major advantage compared to other conflict countries: the government has broad legitimacy as the product of a national independence war (see Hansson 2001). Moreover, it is committed to establishing a transparent public administration free of corruption.

During fieldwork in south-western Eritrea where the majority of the returnees are concentrated, the author encountered complaints about inefficiency and lack of participation in decision-making processes, but no allegations of corruption. For example, in an evaluation of a restocking project for returnees, their representatives and a random sample of household heads were frank about mistakes in the project's design and implementation (Kibreab 1999a). But they also reported that every penny in the project was accounted for. In contrast, when the author undertook fieldwork in Eritrean refugee settlements and camps in Sudan, he was told of considerable corruption and embezzlement among Sudanese officials (Kibreab 1996c). This has augmented the confidence of the returnees that they can invest their scarce resources productively.

However, national capacity to manage resettlement was (and is) constrained by the country's desperate skills shortage. Many skilled and professional Eritreans either fled the country during the war or died in the independence struggle. Some professionals have returned, but their number is not large enough to fill the shortages in the private and public sectors (see Hansson 2001). However, it is unclear whether the country would benefit more from the return of technical expertise than from the remittances provided by the Diaspora—which financed much of the liberation war and is partly financing the reconstruction effort. It may be better to accelerate the training of new skilled and professional labour.

The shortage of skills is to some extent exacerbated by the government's policy on technical assistance which is guided by the concept of 'national execution'. This confines external actors to filling the gaps created by the lack of national resources and capabilities (UNRISD 1996: 7). This reflects the country's much admired aim to avoid long-run dependence on programme aid (MPIEC 1997). National execution is fine in principle but its application has been problematic: even in areas where there is a definite lack of local skills, the policy on technical assistance is applied restrictively.

The state's fiscal resources are limited, despite its efforts to mobilize more public revenue. This inhibits its ability to adopt a comprehensive resettlement programme. In a poor country such as Eritrea, returnees may be unsuccessful in re-establishing

themselves unless a comprehensive development programme is in place to ease their absorption. Unfortunately, the donor response to this need was slow and limited.

The traditional UNHCR assistance package comprises a food grant, cash to meet travel costs, seeds, basic farming tools, materials for shelter, and cooking utensils. While obviously helpful, it is increasingly recognized that this does not go far enough (UNHCR 1992). Specifically, the gap between the humanitarian and development objectives of donors must be bridged. This implies greater co-ordination among donors (and between donors and national actors) so that basic integration assistance and longer-term development focused on the areas of return are brought together—by including areas of return into national plans for reconstruction and development for example (Kibreab 1998b, Ogata 1994, UNHCR 1992).

The available data suggests that despite this rhetoric, the response of the international community to the reconstruction and resettlement programmes in Eritrea has been quite slow and fragmented. (PROFERI 1993, Kibreab 1996a, 1996b). This is one of the major constraints that have slowed down the process of reintegration of displaced populations. A similar fragmented response is found in other war-torn countries—see for instance Kovsted and Tarp 1999 on Guinea-Bissau.

## **7 The gender dimensions of the resettlement process**

It is generally assumed that the liberation war left Eritrea with a larger share of female-headed households than would otherwise have been the case. The World Bank estimates that 45 per cent of households are female-headed (World Bank 1996). However, this figure is the product of guesswork and cannot be taken seriously. The majority of the 200,000 casualties were civilians and there is nothing to suggest that more men than women perished among civilians. Moreover, since women comprised one-third of the liberation army's fighting force, it is probably reasonable to assume that women constituted one-third of the 65,000 fighters who died.

Although it is unclear whether the proportion of female-headed households is unduly large, it is certainly necessary to incorporate the principle of gender equality into economic and social policy, particularly in the areas of land, agricultural assistance, training and education—to name just three. Education and training are especially important (the adult illiteracy rate is 80 per cent, and the female illiteracy rate is 90 per cent) so that women can become self-employed and compete in the labour market for skilled jobs (World Bank 1996: 31). However, the prevailing gender ideology also influences women's chances in the labour market: skills are not enough when discrimination exists. Among the demobilized female ex-fighters and returnee females there were a few who trained as bricklayers, mechanics, and electricians during the war. They face open discrimination in the job market, especially in the western lowlands (where Islamic culture is dominant) simply because such skills are considered to be the exclusive domain of men. The communities' perception of the division of labour is strongly gendered.

The EPLF tried to promote gender equality during the liberation war including equal pay for equal work and the provision of gender sensitive services in health care and education. (NUEW 1995) and the government has remained committed to this objective

since independence. Guaranteeing equal access to productive resources is one critical measure. During the liberation struggle, the EPLF tried to distribute land to men and women equally in the liberated areas. During the struggle, the EPLF's National Democratic Programme proclaimed that all laws, customary or religious that discriminated against women would be repealed and replaced by laws which treat women as equal citizens. Consistent with this commitment, the Land Proclamation enacted in 1994 guarantees women equality of rights of use to land as equal members of society (Proclamation No. 58/1994). The land policy recognizes the rights of married women, divorcees, widows (and their dependants), childless women, unmarried women, and mentally or physically disabled women (25 years or older).

Other measures to promote gender equality have also been undertaken. The government's commitment to gender equality at a policy level is clear from the principles enshrined in the country's National Charter, Macro Policy and Constitution (on the creation of these key documents see Hansson 2001). The National Charter, for example, proclaims that: 'The issue of women is a major social issue. A society that does not respect the rights and equality of women cannot be a truly liberated society' (PFDJ 1994: 35). It is further declared that the objectives for equal rights are, *inter alia*, 'To respect the equality of women and to strive for equal participation of women in all areas, and to encourage women to protect their rights by organizing themselves' (1994: 36-7). The Macro Policy also states that: all efforts will be made to make society aware of women's role; equal rights will be upheld and laws accordingly changed; female participation in education and employment will expand; appropriate labour-saving technologies will be encouraged to reduce female time-burdens; and mother and child-care services will be expanded (GOE 1994b: 43). Most formal laws that discriminate against women are repealed, especially in the areas of property, marriage, divorce and inheritance.

Formal legal equality alone may not, however, significantly change the position of the majority of women. Rights that impinge on gender relations in Eritrea are still governed by three sets of laws, namely, customary, Sharia and civil laws pertaining to family law governing marriage, divorce, inheritance, child custody, and post-marital residence. Despite the widely held view that the customary laws do not accord women any economic, cultural and social rights, there are some safeguards which prohibit excessive forms of inequality in terms of access to land, residence, inheritance, and marriage. However, these safeguards are insufficient and customary and Sharia laws do, on balance, discriminate against women. The single most important obstacle to gender equality is the patriarchal traditional culture which, on the one hand generates the conventions and the codes of behaviour that justify the subordination of women to men and, on the other, undervalues the critical contributions of women in the spheres of production and reproduction.

Since Eritrean society is predominantly rural and traditional, only a small—mainly urban—section of the population will seek redress through the formal legislation. Indeed, the efficacy of the legal reforms and the principle of gender equality (as enshrined in the Constitution, the National Charter and the Macro Policy) are compromised (and even nullified in some cases) by the government's respect and sensitivity for the country's religious and cultural diversity. Therefore, for the majority of women the commitment to gender equality will remain well-meaning rhetoric.

The Government therefore faces a dilemma: its principal laws declare that gender discrimination is not permitted but it also accepts that issues relating to marriage and inheritance fall within the domain of the rights of religious and culture groups. As long as these contradictions are not addressed, a uniform civil code that guarantees gender equality regardless of religious or culture affinity may be impossible to achieve.

## **8 Conclusions**

This paper has focused on the resettlement of people displaced by Eritrea's thirty-year liberation war. However, Eritrea's 1998-2000 war with Ethiopia poses new reconstruction problems—which are only now emerging. Since large-scale programmes of post-war resettlement and reintegration are costly, it is important to learn the lessons of the previous resettlement programme started after the end of the liberation war in 1991.

We have seen that land tenure largely facilitated resettlement (although long-term environmental problems may emerge), social capital built during the war has been a positive resource, and the state's legitimacy has been another positive factor despite the shortage of skills, and fragmented help from the donors. Three policy implications stand out. First, those who self-settled generally did better than those who settled under government schemes: this implies that helping self-settlement is more cost-effective than direct government help—an important lesson for the future. Second, the success of returnees in reconstructing their livelihoods depends upon the resumption of sustainable development activities in settlement areas—therefore a multifaceted development programme should be implemented in the areas of return. This does, however, require more donor support given the limited resources of a poor country such as Eritrea. Third, assistance is most effective and equitable when provided on a community-wide basis, bringing benefits to the entire population of areas where returnees settle (see UNHCR 1995). Again, further donor resources are needed to reinforce government efforts.

Longstanding problems remain. One of the most important is food-security; much of the population relies on food aid except in years of exceptional rainfall. The capacity of many rural areas to absorb additional populations will be limited unless Eritrea's dependence on rainfall is reduced through the construction of dams, micro-dams and the spread of water conservation practices. But such investment must also be combined with supportive land-tenure policies, so that communities have an incentive to sustainably manage land and common property resources. Hence, urgent consideration must be given to further tenure reform, another illustration of the importance of reform to equitable reconstruction. Many challenges therefore remain.

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