

# Introduction

## Buduburam

### An Exemplary Refugee Camp?

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Integration? NO!  
Repatriation? PLUS USD 1,000 YES!  
Resettlement? WHY NOT?

—Banner used during refugee protests in Buduburam camp

In early 2008, Liberian refugees in Buduburam refugee camp in Ghana attracted the attention of both the national and global media. Some 100 Liberian women refugees started protesting against the Office of United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) at the entrance of the camp to firmly reject a local integration plan for Liberian refugees in Ghana. Instead, refugees demanded either third-country resettlement in the industrialized North or repatriation to Liberia with \$1,000 for each individual (the repatriation cash grant from UNHCR before 2008 was \$5 per person).<sup>1</sup> As the refugee protests continued for nearly two months, the number of participants in the demonstrations grew to several hundred as more and more Liberian refugees supported the protestors' messages. The series of demonstrations provoked the Ghanaian government to describe the demonstrations as 'a threat to the security of the state', and there resulted about 630 arrests and sixteen cases of deportation to Liberia.

Depicted as a 'bustling African village', the thriving economy in Buduburam camp amazed first-time visitors. Owusu, for example, states: 'The camp community is lively ... Signs of commerce are evident everywhere, and the main street bustles with life as one walks through the "camp"' (Owusu 2000: 7; see also Antwi 2007; Codjoe et al. 2013; Dzeamesi 2008; Tete 2005). When I visited the camp for the first time in 2005, I was also struck by the vibrant commerce. There was a variety of economic activities inside and around the camp, such as fast-food

restaurants, mobile-phone shops, mini-kiosks selling daily goods, internet cafés, clubs and bars, beauty salons and so on.

Due to the presence of active refugee commerce, UNHCR often commended the refugees in Buduburam as ‘self-reliant’, and the camp as an exemplary model in which refugees sustained themselves through robust businesses, boasting that the organization had facilitated their economic success by gradually withdrawing its assistance over the period of exile. The reputation of Buduburam as a self-sufficient camp was also supported by external researchers. In particular, Dick (2002a, 2002b) has published two influential reports highlighting refugees’ robust businesses inside the camp.<sup>2</sup> In those reports, she argues that despite some challenges, on the whole, Liberian exiles in the camp had been able to assist themselves adequately in the face of UNHCR’s withdrawal of support.

When I embarked on field research in 2008, many UNHCR staff in Ghana still supported this perspective. A female UNHCR programme officer confidently said to me:

Refugees in Buduburam are doing very well. Many of them are running trading businesses. Between 2000 and 2002, UNHCR significantly reduced assistance for Liberians so they had to find a means of surviving on their own and of helping themselves ... Now Buduburam is the biggest economic hub in the camp area. Many refugees are having good life there.<sup>3</sup>

However, the economic vibrancy of the camp and the ‘good life’ claimed by UNHCR did not appear to correlate with the refugees’ desire to be locally integrated in Ghana. Despite the renowned reputation of the camp, why did hundreds of refugees protest so adamantly against UNHCR’s local integration plan? Didn’t these refugees enjoy decent living conditions? On the surface, there was indeed a wide range of economic activities visible in the camp. But did a variety of economic activities mean a correspondingly high level of economic well-being? Behind the façade of a vibrant economy, how were refugees living in this ‘successful’ refugee camp?

Several scholars have published insightful studies exploring different economic aspects of Liberian refugees in Buduburam camp (e.g. Dick 2002a, 2002b; Dzeamesi 2008; Hardgrove 2009; Porter et al. 2008). To date, however, the existing work has not presented convincing or sufficient data on the nature of refugee livelihoods and their socio-economic conditions. Therefore, the central aim of this book is to put the putative economic success of Buduburam camp under intensive scrutiny and to reveal the diversified realities of the refugees’ livelihood strategies and living conditions.

While this study probes into refugees’ economic lives inside the camp, it also demonstrates how different groups of refugees navigated various difficulties during their prolonged exile, as well as in the aftermath of

repatriation and following invocation of the Cessation Clause of refugee status. This book is based upon a decade work with Liberian refugees. My first visit to Buduburam camp dates back to 2005. I worked as a livelihood advisor for an NGO operating inside the camp until the end of 2007. In 2008 and 2009, I returned to Buduburam as a researcher and conducted research in Ghana and Liberia for thirteen months. At that point, the Buduburam refugee population was already entering the final phase of formal refugee life due to the intense pressure surrounding plans to repatriate the camp's inhabitants to Liberia. In 2012, UNHCR invoked the cessation of refugee status of Liberian refugees. Between 2012 and 2013, I conducted a follow-up study with my refugee interviewees in the face of the ending of their 'official' refugee life. By following the same refugee households over several years, this book sheds light on refugees' voices and lived experiences in protracted forced displacement, which rarely reach the main policy arenas of the international community.

## **Growing Interest in Refugees' Livelihoods and Self-Reliance**

The issue of refugees' economic autonomy in Buduburam is of wider significance for the global refugee regime. Interest in promoting the livelihoods of refugees and their 'self-reliance' began to emerge as a pressing agenda in forced-migration policy and the academic arena around the beginning of this century (see Crisp 2003a; Milner 2014). This emergence is largely due to the failure of UNHCR to provide effective solutions for the numerous protracted refugee situations in which refugees have been in exile for at least five years.

One of the essential mandates of UNHCR is to find durable solutions for refugees, usually glossed as voluntary repatriation, local integration or third-country resettlement. Despite some large-scale repatriation programmes in the 1990s, significant numbers of refugees throughout the world did not return home because of continuing insecurity and instability in their country of origin (Crisp 2006: 11–12). Their integration in a host country did not take place either. The majority of refugees have not been granted permanent residential status in their first asylum country as their host state perceives refugees as a burden on the country (USCRI 2004: 44).

Meanwhile, the chance of being resettled in a third country in the developed world has remained extremely limited for the world's refugee population. Especially after the terrorist attack in New York on 11 September 2001, the pressure on asylum in the industrialized North has been reinforced and has further slimmed down resettlement opportunities for refugees (Koser 2007: 235; Van Hear 2011: 8). At the end of 2015, at least half of the world's refugee population was estimated to be in

protracted exile, with the average length of time spent in exile estimated to be approximately twenty-six years (UNHCR 2016).

What is worse, as refugee situations become protracted, levels of international relief are normally reduced or entirely cut off (Jacobsen 2005: 2) because UNHCR and donor communities tend to focus on high-profile refugee crises in which people are either fleeing or repatriating in large numbers (Crisp 2003b: 9). As a result, assistance programmes for long-term refugee situations are frequently deprived of adequate funding. With the declining financial commitment of international donors, UNHCR is increasingly unable to provide essential needs for prolonged refugee populations (Jamal 2000: 3). In the face of mounting budgetary shortfalls, UNHCR has been required to find a remedy for these trapped exiles in long-term ‘care-and-maintenance’ circumstances (Crisp 2003a).

Due to these systemic pressures, there has been growing interest within the international refugee regime in promoting the development of livelihoods for long-term refugees so as to encourage economic ‘self-reliance’.<sup>4</sup> UNHCR broadly defines self-reliance as ‘the social and economic ability of an individual, a household or a community to meet essential needs in a sustainable manner’ (UNHCR 2005a). Its guiding philosophy can be summarized as: refugees have the skills, capacity and agency to stand on their own and be able to sustain themselves without depending on external humanitarian aid (Jacobsen 2005). This concept has become an increasingly visible part of UNHCR’s approach and rhetoric towards refugee assistance and protection (Crisp 2004). For example, UNHCR’s ‘Handbook for Self-Reliance’ states that self-reliance is ‘an integral and underpinning part of any durable solutions’ (UNHCR 2005a), which should be promoted in all phases of refugee assistance.

However, the promotion of refugees’ self-reliance is fraught with some fundamental problems. As non-citizens of the host country, refugees in developing regions are confronted by a number of survival challenges in often inhospitable environments. According to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, refugees must be accorded the same status as nationals with regard to the right to engage in wage-earning employment. Typically, however, refugees’ right to work is significantly constrained by various bureaucratic or regulatory impediments imposed on refugees by the host government, including lack of access to work permits and restrictions on the freedom of movement (see Horst 2006a; Jacobsen 2014; Kaiser 2007; Kibreab 2003; Werker 2007). In addition to formal regulations, ample evidence indicates that refugees’ access to economic resources such as land, rivers, lakes, and forests is constrained through informal regulation by local host populations (Bakewell 2014; Bascom 1993; Rogge and Akol 1989).

Furthermore, the majority of protracted refugee situations in the world are located in countries with impoverished populations, where even local

host communities themselves are often unable to satisfy their fundamental needs (Meyer 2006: 11). Existing studies pose a fundamental question concerning whether it is feasible to expect refugees to be able to economically sustain themselves within exceptionally constrained environments.

Despite these fundamental challenges for refugees, UNHCR and its partner agencies have traditionally approached the issue of livelihoods and self-reliance from a technical perspective, primarily focusing on the provision of income-generating projects, micro-finance programmes and vocational training (Crisp 2003a).<sup>5</sup> While this technical perspective is important, provision of such support makes sense only when refugees are given an enabling environment to pursue economic autonomy in a host state.

More problematically, there are to date no systematic and rigorous criteria for measuring refugees' self-reliance in the international refugee regime. UNHCR often perceives refugees as 'self-reliant' when they are managing their lives without external assistance. But what requires careful scrutiny is whether refugees living without aid are necessarily 'meeting their basic needs in a sustainable manner and with dignity', as defined by UNHCR (UNHCR 2005a). Additionally, the absence of assessment criteria means that there is a risk that the promotion of self-reliance could be abused to justify a reduction in external support for refugees. Among refugee-policy makers, the notion of self-reliance is very often positioned in polar opposition to 'dependency' – a state in which people rely heavily on and expect continued assistance, consequently undermining people's own initiatives (Harvey and Lind 2005). If dependency is induced by continuous provision of aid, the promotion of self-reliance is assumed to be automatically achieved by decreasing assistance for refugees. However, the relationship between dependency and self-reliance vis-à-vis external aid is not an inverse correlation. As noted above, when refugees' basic rights are severely restricted, self-reliance may not be attainable in the first place, regardless of whether refugees receive external support or not.

Given the ubiquity of protracted displacement and the dwindling availability of aid, enhancing economic independence for refugees is undoubtedly a critical issue of concern. Yet it remains unclear to what extent refugees can build sustainable livelihoods and achieve economic autonomy in the face of identified challenges. Drawing on both qualitative and quantitative research, this in-depth study of Liberian refugees in Buduburam camp seeks to shed light on this question and the fundamental problems outlined above.

## **Key Concepts of the Book**

This section provides an overview of the principal concepts that the book draws upon: namely, refugee livelihoods, the role of social networks in

refugees' economic strategies, and their repatriation and economic reintegration. While this book mainly focuses on refugees' economic survival inside the camp, it also explores the lived experiences of refugees' return and economic readjustments. These are pivotal experiences that refugees inevitably confront after extended displacement. While surveying the literature, the section highlights important analytical and empirical gaps.

### *Livelihoods in Forced Migration*

The analysis of livelihoods in general has been enriched by a range of institutions and scholars in development studies, poverty alleviation and agricultural economies (see Ellis 2000; Francis 2000; Helmore and Singh 2001; Scoones 1998, 2007). Among various livelihood-oriented analytical frameworks, perhaps the most widely known is the sustainable livelihoods framework (SLF) of the UK Department for International Development. Drawing upon Chambers and Conway's definition of livelihoods, the SLF presents five types of livelihood assets, and illustrates how they are shaped and mediated by external vulnerabilities and structural and procedural factors such as law and regulations (DFID 1999). The essence of this framework is its focus on the strengths and potential of poor people and the strategies that they employ to make a living – rather than highlighting their vulnerabilities and needs (Farrington et al. 2002: 2).

The development of the SLF and the ensuing emergence of similar livelihood analytical frameworks has influenced researchers dealing with refugees' economic activities (see de Vriese 2006; Horst 2006a; Korf 2004; WRC 2011; Young et al. 2007). The SLF has also substantially influenced UNHCR's livelihood policy and programming. According to its 'Livelihood Operational Guidelines' (UNHCR 2012a), UNHCR employs the SLF as its organizational central framework to understand the livelihoods of displaced populations.

The research drawn from the SLF and similar analytical approaches has given some useful insight into refugee livelihoods, but critical gaps remain. For instance, the majority of existing studies gloss over socio-economic diversity among refugee populations, and thus fail to elucidate or draw attention to important differences in refugees' economic statuses and strategies. In any community or population, different people suffer, survive or prosper in diverse ways, adapting to the environment in which they find themselves (Le Sage and Majid 2002). Personal characteristics, such as displacement history, family background, education, language skills and social networks, can have an effect on refugees' livelihoods (Horst 2006a: 9). As this book shows, among refugees living in Buduburam camp, different individual or household characteristics had significant consequences for the degree of access to livelihood assets and

subsequent formulation of economic coping strategies. Research on refugee livelihoods should aim to disaggregate the target population to account for such variance.

Also, research drawing upon the SLF and other models often does not sufficiently address the impacts of political and power dynamics on refugees' economic strategies and outcomes (see Ashley and Carney 1999; de Haan 2006; de Haan and Zoomers 2006; Murray 2001). People's livelihoods do not exist within a vacuum, but rather interact within a wider context of political, social, historical and economic conditions. In the case of refugee livelihoods, this complexity is amplified by their specific vulnerabilities and by the political economy of the various stakeholders (Jacobsen 2002; Lindley 2010). Shifts in refugee policy lead to significant changes in refugees' existing subsistence, but this is an overlooked analytical and empirical gap in the literature. Over the duration of this study, Liberian refugees in Buduburam camp confronted changing circumstances that were imposed by external authorities, including the tightening of refugee policies by the host government, intense repatriation pressure and the cessation of their refugee status. Incorporating the impacts of these pivotal incidents on the economic lives of refugees was essential for the current research project.

Moreover, the SLF model does not adequately capture the complex web of social connections that are inherent and indispensable for the refugees' economic activities. In the face of often challenging situations, refugees are reliant on their personal and social ties, and must constantly mobilize these contacts in order to achieve better access to resources (Amisi 2006; Andrews 2006; Doron 2005; Hamid 1992; Hammar 2014). As previous research on Liberian refugees in Buduburam camp has also indicated the particular importance of various types of network for subsistence (see Dick 2002a, 2002b; Porter et al. 2008; Tanle 2013), the analytical point of departure in this book is to look into the livelihood strategies of refugees through the lens of their social networks.

### *The Role of Social Capital in Refugees' Economic Lives*

According to Halpern (2005), the birth of mainstream academic interest in the concept of social capital dates back to the 1980s, but the notion of social capital gained particular ascendancy in the mid 1990s with Putnam's work. In his study of civic associations in Italy, Putnam (1993a) approaches social capital in terms of community cohesion and argues that denser amounts of social capital are the essential differentiating factor of regional governments' and communities' success.

Although the concepts of social capital and social network remain popular in social science research, these terms are often criticized as being

nebulously defined. For instance, Putnam conceptualizes social capital as ‘features of social life – networks, norms, and trust – that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives’ (Putnam 1996: 1). Coleman broadly defines social capital by its function as ‘a variety of different entities, with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors within the structure’ (Coleman 1988: S98). This vagueness has generated confusion and criticism around the use of these concepts (see e.g. Fine 2001: 11–12; Portes 1998: 5). In particular, equating social capital with the resources acquired through it can gloss over a difference between possessors, sources and resources of capital, and may lead to a tautological explanation. Portes highlights the risk of obscuring this difference:

Saying, for example, that student A has social capital because he obtained access to a large tuition loan from his kin and that student B does not because she failed to do so neglects the possibility that B’s kin network is equally or more motivated to come to her aid but simply lacks the means to do so. Defining social capital as equivalent with the resources thus obtained is tantamount to saying that the successful succeeded. (Portes 1998: 5)

Among various definitions of social capital in the academic arena, perhaps the most durable one was presented by the French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu. He posited this elusive concept as ‘the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group’ (Bourdieu 1986: 51). This definition makes it clear that social capital is decomposable into two elements: first, the sum and quality of resources; and second, the social relationships that allow individuals to access these resources (Portes 1998; Siisiainen 2000). Bourdieu’s original definition emphasizes that the volume and quality of assets are dependent on the very potency of the social networks that one can effectively mobilize (Bourdieu 2005: 2, 198).

Due to refugees’ specific vulnerabilities as non-citizens in the host country and little access to relief aid, social networks play a vital role in their economic lives in protracted contexts. As ample evidence shows, mutual assistance between different refugee households constitutes one of the principal livelihood strategies in prolonged refugee settings (Golooba-Mutebi 2004; Grabska 2005; Palmgren 2014). These examples of support within refugee populations are often referred to as a sign of refugees’ communal resilience to survive effectively in times of stress, crisis and emergencies (Doron 2005: 184).

Refugees’ networks also often go beyond national borders. In the recent literature on forced migration there has been a number of studies

that have highlighted the role of transnational connections and, *inter alia*, the significance of access to remittances for refugees' economic survival (Al-Sharmani 2004; Doocy et al. 2011; Jacobsen et al. 2014; Lindley 2006, 2008, 2010; Monsutti 2005). These financial transfers from abroad are often viewed as not only a source of additional income for the recipient household but also a potential resource for contributing to poverty reduction in the recipient communities.

Despite the increasing focus on the role of social capital in refugees' livelihoods, the existing literature alarmingly obscures some important aspects of this capital. For example, as Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler (2004: 14) warn, there is a 'dark side' to informal assistance networks. It is widely acknowledged that charitable help sometimes causes a sense of defeat and shame in recipients of such aid (Davies 1996: 37; Devereux 2003: 16). In addition, some scholars see the formation of mutual support in deprived communities as an inescapable response to crisis and social breakdown (Griffiths et al. 2005; Zetter et al. 2005). Especially during times of severe scarcity of resources, the burden of assisting others can result in tension or resentment between members (Mosoetsa 2011). Without understanding these negative aspects entrenched in internal assistance practices, researchers can end up painting overly positive pictures of resilience, cohesion and benevolence among refugees.

More importantly, the elusive and intangible nature of social networks is often turned into a 'catch-all' concept. Since everyone has some form of social capital, it is very likely that researchers will come up with evidence that social networks play a role in refugees' economic activities. But it is necessary to differentiate the effects and roles of social capital for refugees with different socio-economic statuses and different institutional contexts. In his development of the original concept of social capital, Bourdieu aimed to highlight how different social classes form and reproduce themselves in relation to one another, with corresponding implications for different types of privilege, inequality and oppression (see also Fine 2006).

Over a protracted period of exile, each household in Buduburam constructed their own portfolio of resource networks, which played an essential role in sustaining their survival in the camp. Nevertheless, there was considerable internal differentiation in the extent and potency of social networks among households. While some had privileged access to socio-economic assets through their personal connections, others could draw upon only limited resources from their contacts. Crucially, internal differentiation in their social capital was often related to their lives prior to displacement. Drawing upon detailed analysis, I elucidate the differences inherent in the relational networks of households, and draw attention to the importance of historical inequalities and privileges from the

pre-displacement period vis-à-vis refugees' socio-economic status during exile.

### *Repatriation and Economic Reintegration after Prolonged Exile*

My field research overlapped with a period involving the large-scale repatriation of refugees from Ghana to Liberia, enabling me to expand the scope of the study and follow refugee returnees to their homeland in order to gather data on their economic reintegration back in Liberia.

Refugees' repatriation and reintegration have been under-theorized areas in forced migration. This limited theoretical attention is largely due to both a lack of data and some common myths or tropes within forced-migration policy that assume that return to the homeland is always the best solution for refugees. This belief is predicated on the assumption that post-repatriation life in the country of origin will necessarily be better than a life in exile (Hammond 1999: 230). Previous studies, however, paint less positive experiences for returning refugees undergoing processes of reintegration (Eastmond and Ojendal 1999; Lindley 2011; Marsden 1999; Omata 2013a; Rogge and Akol 1989). Among various difficulties, establishing a new economic base after lengthy exile is a particularly onerous challenge (see Jackson 1994; Kaun 2008; Stefansson 2004; Tapscott 1994).

On the other hand, some researchers have reported relatively auspicious cases. Sorensen (2000: 197), for example, in his discussion of the repatriation of Eritrean refugees from Sudan, reports that returnees managed to restore their livelihoods and improved their living conditions in a relatively short time, mainly because of an extensive range of coordinated support from refugee-assisting agencies as well as from the Eritrean government.

Although the current scholarship suggests considerable variations in levels of economic integration among returnees, the causes of these differences remain poorly understood. By drawing on the wider migration literature, however, some plausible hypotheses can be formed. For instance, if the nature of repatriation, especially after decades of exile, does not lead to a 'homecoming' in a familiar setting, but rather leads to 'a new life cycle in an unfamiliar environment' (Black and Koser 1999: 11–12), this implies a significant role for social networks in facilitating transitions following repatriation. In migration literature, the importance of personal or ethnic ties in arrival destinations is extensively documented; these linkages facilitate migrants in adjusting to a new place by helping them to find accommodation and employment opportunities, and to access social and economic information (Koser 1997: 600; Massey et al. 2008: 43; Poros 2001: 245; Vertovec 2009: 39). This book thus looks into

refugees' repatriation through a social network lens and attempts to account for variations in levels of economic integration among returnees.

Also, in the existing literature, refugees' repatriation and reintegration are rarely investigated in relation to their exilic experiences. However, refugees' return decisions, and even the process of their economic reintegration, are deeply linked to their socio-economic conditions during exile and their livelihood networks (Omata 2013a, 2013b). Therefore, it is essential to examine repatriation and economic readjustment as a continuation of their experiences and resources during protracted displacement, rather than as an event that is independent from previous asylum experiences. Because I followed Liberian returnees from Ghana, I was able to observe and contextualize their economic transition upon return in relation to their socio-economic lives during exile.

Having obtained the 'best' durable solution, how did returnees perceive their post-repatriation life in Liberia compared to their experiences during exile? Upon return, were they able to construct meaningful economic foundations and ties in a new environment? Did the returnees improve their degree of 'self-reliance' upon repatriation? Were there any observable differences in the degree of economic reintegration? If so, what factors differentiated their economic adjustments? Did their personal networks, as I hypothesized, play a crucial role in their economic reintegration? I had a privileged opportunity to explore these compelling questions with returnees to Liberia from Buduburam, and discuss these research findings more extensively in Chapter 5.

## **A Note on Research Approaches and Methods**

### *The Impact of the 2008 Refugee Protests in Buduburam*

I commenced fieldwork for this study in 2008 during a period in which the Ghanaian government was tightening its refugee policy against the remaining Liberians in Ghana. This policy shift was triggered by the refugees' large-scale demonstrations against the UNHCR's promotion of local integration as a solution for Liberian refugees in Ghana, as explained above.

The consequences of these protests did not end with the arrest and deportation of demonstrators by the host government. The Ghanaian authorities took Liberians' refusal to be integrated into the country as an unacceptable insult to the hospitality of the government, which had accommodated them for nearly two decades. Incensed by the demonstrations, the minister of the interior, Kwamena Bartels, made an official statement on 1 April 2008 that all Liberian refugees should go back to

Liberia (MoI 2008). The government of Ghana subsequently expressed its intention to significantly reduce the residual number of Liberians in the country, as well as to break up Buduburam camp into more manageable, smaller pieces and to disperse the refugees to other parts of Ghana. The Ghanaian government also asked the UNHCR to apply the Cessation Clause to the refugee status of the residual Liberians in the country. Apparently, the protracted life of Liberian refugees in Buduburam was entering its final phase.

Concurrently, a tripartite committee comprising the governments of Ghana and Liberia and the UNHCR was formed in April 2008. By agreement, the UNHCR commenced the orderly voluntary repatriation of camp residents to Liberia in April 2008, involving an increase in the financial incentive offered to returnees, which went from \$5 to \$100 (for a person below the age of 18, the amount was \$50).

Liberian refugees in Buduburam had been unwilling to repatriate to Liberia despite the UNHCR's previous efforts to promote a repatriation programme (Essuman-Johnson 2011: 117). This time, in 2008, the reaction of the refugees changed after seeing the deployment of much tougher measures by the Ghanaians. Under strong pressure from the national authorities and international refugee regime to repatriate, many Liberian refugees decided to leave Ghana for Liberia. According to UNHCR internal statistics, more than 9,000 Liberians, about 40 per cent of the Buduburam refugee population, returned to Liberia between April 2008 and March 2009 under the UNHCR's repatriation package (UNHCR 2009).

These policy shifts had an important impact on my research. At the outset of my fieldwork in Ghana, this latest repatriation programme was ongoing, and many of my interviewees were choosing to repatriate. Given the magnitude of repatriation, as noted above, I extended my fieldwork period so as to follow repatriating refugees from Buduburam back to Liberia, allowing me to study their post-return economic reintegration.

### *My Life as a Researcher in Buduburam*

During thirteen months of research between 2008 and 2009, in order to obtain a better understanding of Buduburam refugee life, I lived inside the camp with two male Liberian refugees for over ten months. My co-residents were Philip and Sam. Philip was in his mid thirties and Sam was in his early twenties. Philip ran his own camp-based organization (CBO), providing school education for refugees in Buduburam camp, and also worked as a pastor. Initially I thought that both Philip and Sam were unmarried. Sam was, but later I found out that Philip had a wife and son, even though they had never lived in Ghana as refugees. He had met his

wife in Liberia and had got married there before he left the country in 1999. His wife and son had stayed in Liberia throughout the country's civil war, which lasted from 1989 to 2003.

The relationship between Philip and Sam was not clear to me at first. Due to their hierarchical relation, I first assumed that they were related. There was, however, no biological tie between them. Sam had at one time been a student at Philip's school, but he had had to stop his schooling as he was unable to afford to pay his tuition fees. Impressed by Sam's school performance, Philip had personally helped him continue his schooling. In exchange, Sam had started working for Philip as a housekeeper. When I started fieldwork in 2008, Sam had finished his high-school education in the camp some years earlier, but had continued working for Philip.

During the research, I attempted to adopt a similar lifestyle to that of camp residents. For instance, I always bought daily necessities and food such as vegetables, fish, meat and pasta from shops owned by Liberian refugees. I frequently ate out at canteens and fast-food stands and enjoyed (warm) beer at bars inside the camp. I shared the latrines and open shower space used by refugee residents. I purchased prepaid mobile-phone cards from refugee sellers, and used internet cafés in the camp whenever I needed to access my e-mail. In early 2009, our house faced a shortage of water when the tank we were using ran dry. I could perhaps have purchased water from other tanks but I did not do so. Instead, as my co-residents did, I minimized water usage and only took a bath once in a while.

In addition, I tried to become familiar with the Liberian refugee community as an external researcher. In particular, I did a lot of 'hanging out' (Rodgers 2004: 48) with refugees, which was not necessarily directly related to the research project. I participated in a youth football team as an assistant coach. Whenever the team played a game, I went to watch and cheered them on. Together with other football coaches, I occasionally went to a 'theatre' in the camp to see international football matches. Watching football was for my personal interest. Nevertheless, as football was undoubtedly the most popular sport for Liberians, I came to meet many refugees there. Also, I joined church prayers on Sundays whenever I was invited by refugees. There was always a moment when new churchgoers were introduced to those gathered at the beginning of prayer meetings, and social hours after the meeting. Church visiting was thus a useful way to introduce myself and to explain what I was doing to many refugees at the same time.

Although I encountered numerous inconveniences, living with refugees in the camp returned tremendous rewards. For example, I could expand my contacts with refugees through my co-resident, Philip. Owing to his activities in the camp through his CBO and church, Philip had wide

networks including other Liberian residents, and he put me in touch with other key refugee informants. Also, I was able to garner a clear sense of living costs in the camp as I understood the exact prices of household items and services, including food, water, clothing, transportation, internet access and pre-paid phone credit. This local knowledge proved to be essential, especially when I started to gather quantitative data from refugee households.

### *Data Collection*

The main empirical data, including both qualitative and quantitative data, was collected during thirteen months of research in Ghana and Liberia between 2008 and 2009. During this period of fieldwork in West Africa, I conducted a total of some 400 interviews with refugee households and non-refugee stakeholders, including staff members of the UNHCR, government officials in charge of refugee issues and Ghanaian villagers living in the area of the camp.

In addition to a large volume of qualitative data, in the later stages of fieldwork I gathered a significant volume of quantitative data on sources of income and food, and on patterns of expenditure from sample households. As few previous studies of Liberians in Buduburam provide any convincing quantitative data on their economic status and living conditions, I considered it important to complement my qualitative data with numerical evidence.

After my departure from West Africa in late 2009, I maintained regular communication with my refugee interviewees. Especially after the announcement of the Cessation Clause for Liberian refugees, I conducted intensive follow-up interviews by telephone and Skype with residual households in Ghana between 2012 and 2013.

During data collection, I faced myriad ethical dilemmas. Provision of financial reward for interviewees was one of these challenges. Before beginning the fieldwork, I made a clear decision not to give financial compensation to any interviewees for their participation in the study, regardless of their living conditions. At a first interview, I articulated this rule to my interviewees and asked whether they were still comfortable about being interviewed by me. When I explained this no-financial-compensation rule to interviewees, several refugees asked me what benefit my research would bring to them if I was not financially compensating them. In response to such an inquiry, I explained that my research project would in the end aim to generate a better understanding of the present refugee population among external stakeholders, and would eventually contribute to better policies for forced migrants in the future.

As the research progressed, however, I began to feel less comfortable with this prepared explanation. Extended interaction and participation in the daily life of the community deepened my understanding of the imminent and daunting challenges faced by refugees on a day-to-day basis. Importantly, for some households in the poorest economic category, their main concern was how to cope with the day at hand and the next few days. What they needed was immediate access to some material assistance such as cash and food, not vague hints about potential benefits which might in the future be brought to them or others like them as a consequence of my research. This dilemma continued to afflict me throughout fieldwork. In fact, I breached this rule several times with some interviewees. I made charitable donations to some refugees when I saw the urgency of their situation, such as when their children were suffering from severe malaria or typhoid but they did not have money for medical treatment.

Another ethical dilemma I confronted was how to deal with people's traumatic experiences during interviews. As I collected oral histories from refugees about their pre-flight life in Liberia, my questions had the potential to trigger some painful and negative memories and experiences. This moment often abruptly popped up during an interview; my interviewee's facial expression would suddenly turn gloomy and the tone of their voice lowered. Whenever I realized that an informant was uncomfortable or in distress, I immediately told interviewees that they did not have to say anything if it was uncomfortable for them. I also knew that I was in no position and had no capacity to assist them with the possible consequences of remembering such traumatic events.

In some cases, however, they continued to speak with long periods of silence, and sometimes tears. For example, Daniel, a thirty-five-year-old male refugee, spoke to me for nearly three hours about his and his family's traumatic experiences in Liberia; he was severely tortured by rebel soldiers, and his wife was raped by insurgents. He showed me his wounded knees because the rebel soldiers had hit his knees with their guns repeatedly. While he was talking, I listened to him without interruption. After listening to these bitter and graphic episodes, I was lost for words and remained speechless. At the end of his talk, he said: 'Thank you for listening and for your time and patience ... I haven't shared this story for many years. You are the first person in Ghana who sacrificed such long hours with me'.<sup>6</sup>

Paying attention to these negative signs often enables researchers to discover the different layers of refugees' experiences, which are not expressed in words. When 'negative evidence' (Ghorashi 2007: 126) such as a moment of silence or crying surfaced during an interview, I patiently tried to understand what was behind it. These unexpectedly long interviews consequently changed my daily interview schedule because it was so difficult for me to cut them short. At the same time, I felt a moral

obligation to accept people's negative experiences as part of my research. As a consequence, I stopped viewing the interviews I conducted as simply a source of data from which I could extract a specific piece of information that I needed for my research.

## **Outline of the Book**

This book consists of seven chapters. Chapter 1 sets out the research context of the book. It begins by providing general information about Buduburam camp and the demographics of the camp population, as well as distinctive features of Buduburam life. It moves to a brief explanation of Liberia's ethno-political landscape during the pre-civil war period, and the entrenched monopoly of economic and political power among Americo-Liberians – descendants of former liberated American slaves. This historical inequality is significant for understanding refugees' current socio-economic conditions in exile. The chapter also summarizes the root causes which brought about the forced displacement of Liberian refugees to Ghana, and finally highlights the increasingly inhospitable environment in which Liberian refugees have found themselves in their prolonged exile.

Chapter 2 presents an overview of livelihood activities employed by the Liberian refugee population in Buduburam camp. As my research progressed, the idealized image of Buduburam as an exemplary economic model sustained by refugee businesses started to fall apart. The research revealed that a key livelihood resource for refugees in the camp was not their commercial activities; instead, refugees highlighted the significance of access to overseas remittances as a main determinant of economic well-being. The chapter elucidates how remittances have contributed to sustaining the Buduburam refugee economy by introducing the concept of 'remittance clusters' to illustrate systematically how remittances 'trickle down' to non-recipients of remittances. Crucially, however, not all refugees had access to these social networks, and about half of the camp residents lived hand-to-mouth, relying on various types of mutual or charitable support from other refugees. By illustrating livelihood strategies employed by different groups of refugees, the chapter demonstrates the diverse realities of refugees' survival strategies and indicates the economic stratification behind the façade of a thriving economy.

With a wealth of quantitative evidence, Chapter 3 shows how refugees with different economic statuses made ends meet in the camp. Using an adaptation of the household economy approach, it presents a detailed analysis of the income sources, food consumption and patterns of expenditure of refugee households. The numerical data confirm that there is considerable economic inequality induced by access to remittances, and demonstrate

which refugee households are managing and which are not, at what cost and under what conditions. The research also illustrates the ways in which refugees in the camp share and transfer resources to assist each other through various forms of relational networks. While the refugees' informal support is often painted as a sign of communal resilience or solidarity, mutual assistance among the poverty-stricken refugees in Buduburam was better characterized as 'shared destitution' (Leliveld 1991). Throughout the chapter, the quantitative data is brought to life by compelling narrative accounts describing how a 'decent life' exists alongside the grinding poverty in Buduburam camp.

Given the significant economic divisions within the Buduburam refugee population, Chapter 4 probes into the roots of inequality by employing a historical approach. Drawing upon life-history analysis, it first focuses on the wealthiest refugee groups and demonstrates the ways in which their social and economic privileges in Liberia have contributed to bringing them large sums of money through remittances. The chapter also investigates the difficult prewar life of indigent refugees in the camp, and illustrates the structural inequalities between richer and poorer refugees within the same refugee population. By situating refugees' current economic differences in the specific historical contexts of Liberia, the chapter unveils the hidden implications of class and privilege that are reflected in refugees' socio-economic status and livelihood strategies during exile.

Chapter 5 turns to refugees' experiences of repatriation and economic reintegration in Liberia. The chapter begins by looking into the dilemma of decision making about repatriation. For the majority of Liberians, the decision to repatriate after their protracted sojourn in Ghana was a much more complicated task than the original decision to seek asylum. Drawing from the study of returnees from Buduburam, the research shows the continuity of inequality from exile into post-repatriation life. In particular, the chapter looks into the different degrees of economic reintegration in the country of origin, and analyses what the factors are that underlay these variations. By 'following the people' on their repatriation journey, the findings reveal the relationship between people's economic status in exile and the level of reintegration upon repatriation, and they further challenge the idealization of repatriation as the 'best' solution for all refugees.

Returning the focus to Buduburam camp, Chapter 6 sheds light on how the remaining Liberian refugees in Ghana responded to the ending of their refugee status. In January 2012, the UNHCR announced the cessation of the refugee status of remaining Liberian refugees globally, given the restored peace and stability in Liberia. The remaining 11,000 Liberian refugees in Ghana were left with two options: either repatriate before the invocation of the Cessation Clause by the end of June 2012, or stay in Ghana to be locally integrated as citizens of the member countries of

the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Again, depending largely on their socio-economic resources, the refugees responded differently to the sudden closure of their formal refugee status. Whereas some wealthier refugee households had more options and finally decided to repatriate to Liberia, those with scarce resources were often ‘forcibly immobilised’ (Lubkemann 2008a) in exile. Drawing upon follow-up interviews in 2012 and 2013, the chapter highlights the diverse reactions of refugees and sheds light on their dilemma, unfixedness and uncertainty in the face of the ending of their official refugee life. It also looks into ECOWAS-based integration and poses some crucial questions about the sustainability of this sub-regional ‘solution’.

The concluding chapter revisits the feasibility of the self-reliant camp model in prolonged displacement. It unveils the role of UNHCR politics and interests behind the promotion of the self-reliant image of Buduburam. The chapter also addresses the neoliberal discourses that underpin and support the sector-wide promotion of refugees’ self-reliance and the interest in the role of social networks. By integrating the findings, the final chapter offers a theoretically and empirically informed understanding of refugees’ livelihoods, remittances, social capital and return migration in protracted contexts.

## Notes

1. All dollar amounts are in US dollars.
2. Dick (2002b) is a report commissioned by UNHCR as part of its Protracted Refugee Situations Initiative. Therefore, to a certain extent, it is reasonable to think that the views presented in the article might have been influenced by staff members of the funding agency.
3. Interview, Accra, September 2008.
4. Related to the concept of self-reliance, some scholars explore the notion of ‘self-sufficiency’. For instance, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2015) argues that there are diverse understandings of self-sufficiency. In the present book, I will use both self-reliance and self-sufficiency interchangeably.
5. Elsewhere, UNHCR’s assistance programmes for refugee self-reliance tend in practice to be reduced to professional qualifications and income-generating techniques without taking the condition of refugees’ rights and entitlements into consideration (see e.g. UNHCR 2007).
6. Interview, Buduburam, October 2008.