

***POST-RETURN RE-INTEGRATION  
IN ERITREA***

***R6836***

***Research Report***

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## **HIGHLIGHTS**

### ***Post-return Integration and Gender Equity in Eritrea***

**How are returnees integrating into the fabric of newly independent Eritrea, itself being defined and developed through the instrumentality of governmental social engineering? Government initiatives aim to transform deep-rooted customary traditions and practices, including land use and gender relations. This study indicates that stakeholder participation in post-return programmes has on occasion been insufficient to safeguard against potential and actual points of tension. Returnees' multitudinous experiences, expectations and needs have to become part of a process of negotiation, definition and participatory debate shaping the national polity. The perception of post-return activities as 're-integration' gives inadequate space to returnees and local populations alike to engage in dialogue and accommodation of views and interests.**

#### ***Context***

Eritrea became an independent nation on 24<sup>th</sup> May 1993, two years after the liberation of the capital Asmara by the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (the EPLF) from the forces of the Ethiopian *Dergue*. Liberation represented the successful conclusion of a thirty years' war. It saw the initiation of the enormous and continuing responsibility for the EPLF and its successor governments of the physical rehabilitation of a population and economic infrastructure virtually destroyed by conflict. In addition the consolidation of a national sense of integration and identity, in effect the creation of the nation, was instituted, incorporating the disparate groups resident and potentially to return.

#### ***Research Findings***

- The emphasis on the consolidation of a national sense of identity and belonging has repercussions for integration, gender equity and future development. The Eritrean government intends that long-held concepts of kinship and connection to land and locality will be permanently and radically altered.
- The government has embarked on sweeping transformations of customary practices; it might be more appropriate to use these as foundations on which to build sustainable development initiatives and post-return programmes.
- In its adherence to Modernisation theories of development with respect to the Land Proclamation, and its focus on settled agriculture, eventual privatisation of land and commercial farming, the Eritrean government is potentially limiting livelihood options. This is true not only for returnees, but for others who might wish to engage in either pastoralism or agro-pastoralism.
- At present in Eritrea there is a clear gender gap in terms of the divide between policy and practice, between the creation of legal instruments and implementation.
- Gender relations remain predicated upon profoundly patriarchal and unequal perceptions; this is as true for the great majority of returnees as for the general population.
- Supply-side exigencies and gender expectations, relations and rôles limit female returnees' access to education and health care, to land and other services.

### ***Policy-relevant Lessons***

- Post-return integration and the development of gender equity are processes of constant negotiation where stakeholder participation is essential.
- Both primary (returnees) and secondary stakeholders should be involved in pre-planning and continuous participatory monitoring and evaluation of relevant programmes.
- Such an approach becomes especially important when repatriation and post-return initiatives are undertaken in parallel with very considerable government-sponsored alteration to customary practice, as in Eritrea with land tenure and local identity.
- Such governmental policy directions and instruments should not exclude post-implementation flexibility.
- In Eritrea as elsewhere, post-return initiatives and support to increased gender equity should be developed and implemented in tandem.
- Unless government is pro-active and gives clear indications of its intentions and changes to legal instruments, the likelihood is that little sustainable change will occur in gender terms.

## ***BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES***

### ***Background***

This research report considers the experiences and lessons learnt with regard to the integration of returnees into the evolving entity of the Eritrean polity<sup>1</sup>. Central focus is given to 'the PROFERI returnees'<sup>2</sup>: a group of 24,220 people who benefited from the donor-funded programme of repatriation and post-return initiatives designed to assist speedy and sustainable self-sufficiency. Their post-return lives are compared to those of the vast majority of returnees, more than 160,000, who repatriated spontaneously up to the end of 1997 and who were not eligible for the PROFERI package of assistance. In addition the perceptions and responses of the local population of the Southwest lowlands of Eritrea, where most returnees have settled, are addressed.<sup>3</sup>

Consideration is given to the ways in which all sectors of the Eritrean population must come to terms not only with the aftermath of bitter conflict but also with the creation and development of a new social order, one in which integration requires dedicated negotiation and continuous re-appraisal. Gender aspects are addressed throughout. One finding is that unless the government as part of the same process of development and change promotes gender equity and integration, neither can have much hope of success.

### ***Research Objectives***

- To study the processes of re-integration of returnees into the community, with particular focus on the restoration of livelihood strategies in order to attain self-sufficiency in terms of generating income to meet basic needs and a degree of food security.
- To examine whether and how the repatriation and re-integration programmes of the Government of Eritrea, the donors and non-governmental organisations are appropriately gender-sensitive and responsive.

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<sup>1</sup> See Garcetti & Gruber (forthcoming) for an examination of the development of the post-independence Eritrean nation-state and its effect on integration. Kapferer (1988) provides an account of the forces at work in the creation of nations.

<sup>2</sup> PROFERI stands for The Programme for Refugee Re-integration and Rehabilitation of Resettlement Areas in Eritrea. Hadgu *et al* (1995), ERREC (1996 & 1997) and Sisay (1998) are key sources of information.

<sup>3</sup> The chapter proposal by Gruber (Appendix One) considers this subject in detail.

## ***METHODS***

Research was undertaken between September 1997 and May 1998. This took the form of both desk research and fieldwork. Initially secondary source material (published and unpublished) from various organisations was examined and analysed. Documentation was obtained from the following bodies: the Eritrean Relief & Refugee Commission; Eritrean government ministries (the MoE/the MoH/the Ministry of Foreign Affairs/the National Statistics' Office); the UNRISD War-torn Societies' Project; UNDP; UNICEF; UNFPA; GTZ; Oxfam (UK); Save the Children Fund (UK); ACORD. Informal discussions were held with staff members of many of those organisations.

Qualitative fieldwork was carried out between March and early May 1998, in the towns and settlement sites of Tessenai, Alebu, Barentu, Hagas, Keren and Asmara. The sample was taken from the following groups of people: PROFERI returnees; spontaneous returnees; internally displaced persons; local residents; ERREC staff; line ministry officials; local government officials; NGO staff; UN staff.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted, where necessary using an interpreter: both in-depth individual interviews and group discussions took place. In addition, a variety of Participatory Learning & Action exercises were used to elicit views, understand priorities and evaluate responses. These included social mapping, transect walks, seasonal calendars, history lines, pair-wise and well-being ranking and matrix scoring.

## ***FINDINGS***

### ***The National Policy Environment***

The Government of Eritrea (the GoE) is in possession of very considerable and extremely valuable support from the general population in terms of a sense of national pride and commitment, and readiness to accept government decrees and directives. The onus upon the GoE is to ensure that such loyalty is maintained and strengthened as time passes and the immediate influence of the liberation war grows less. In order to do so it is essential that there continue to be a development of transparency in governance and in the mechanisms of civil society, both for dissemination of information and opportunities for debate.

Such commitment is especially relevant given that traditional beliefs and customary behaviour permeate all aspects of the construction of post-conflict Eritrea; these have enormous influence on grassroots' responses to government integration and rehabilitation initiatives. There is recognition by the GoE of the challenges presented by the durability of traditional social structures and the return of refugees in the context of the post-conflict nation.

The GoE has embarked upon a programme of social engineering to transform a multi-ethnic society into a coherent national polity through the instrumentality of the state. Its achievements since liberation in 1991 are wide-ranging and laudable regarding both national affairs and infrastructure rehabilitation. Nonetheless, this study indicates that certain past and current GoE initiatives, enormously influential in terms of integration and gender relations, might benefit from further consideration of how best to attain effective and sustainable implementation and development. This is especially true when such initiatives are examined in tandem with the government's stance on the creation of the national polity and the rôle and remit of the international development community.

In its development strategies the GoE has adopted a determinedly independent course, refusing to bow to what it perceives as the pervasively unequal relationship that prevails between the

industrialised and developing nations and current development approaches.<sup>4</sup> It is therefore somewhat surprising that Modernist paradigms of development retain a degree of influence, given widespread abandonment of such principles elsewhere in the developing world. Such tenets must in every context be viewed in the light of entrenched gender inequity, 90 percent female and 80 percent male illiteracy, and endemic food insecurity.

The Proclamation of Land Tenure (58/1994), which has profound implications for the livelihoods of the majority of returnees and the resident population of the lowlands, has been perceived as incorporating Modernist perceptions.<sup>5</sup> Its gender repercussions have yet to be fully considered. Lowland women (and especially female-headed households (FHHs)) have already been seen to be at a continued disadvantage with regard to accession to land and its use, despite specific GoE intentions to the contrary.

The GoE expectation is that the great majority of returnees will engage in settled agriculture. However, this study has revealed that a number at least would prefer to engage either in what they feel to be a more flexible combination of semi-settled farming cum pastoralism, or to retain the widest possible range of risk aversion livelihood strategies.

The GoE view is that most will settle permanently in the Southwest lowlands, while there are indications that both internal and external migration (the latter back to the Sudan) will be a dominant aspect of life for the foreseeable future.

Dependency is fiercely condemned; while entirely commendable in principle, strict adherence has had negative repercussions for both returnees and local residents in the lowlands. Food Monetisation (Legal Note 26/96) has had considerable negative impact on returnees, particularly vulnerable groups such as FHHs. Thus food security has been adversely affected to an extent, although subsequent initiatives by the GoE and ERREC have partially rectified matters.

While self-sufficiency is strongly promoted, the very clear objectives of the GoE cannot always be matched by returnees' actions, although they too share that aim. Although options concerning livelihood will always be constrained to an extent by the actual situation, greater flexibility of approach, including prior and continuing participation by stakeholders, might raise and clarify issues that otherwise could be disruptive.

### ***NGO and Donor Involvement***

The 1997 GoE Policy Statement on NGOs limited national and northern NGOs to funding development activities in the education and health sectors. The relationship between the GoE and NNGOs had previously become increasingly challenging, with the government seeking in all contexts to retain overall control of policy and programmes. Here as in other areas the desire is to avoid structural and policy dependency.<sup>6</sup>

While a number of NNGOs developed post-return re-integration initiatives with considerable independence, latterly these were somewhat constrained by uncertainty over future policy direction. By August 1998 very few NNGO-initiated programmes were still in operation and the presence of such organisations had virtually ceased. A few, e.g. ACORD in Alebu, have had success in implementing well-accepted and sustainable programmes with a specific gender element.

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<sup>4</sup> Garcetti & Gruber (op. cit.) consider the Eritrean challenge to the 'triple transition' and other principles of liberal economic development.

<sup>5</sup> See Fullerton-Joireman (1996) and Kibreab (1996).

<sup>6</sup> The situation in May 1999 is that due to the extreme need for emergency relief to IDPs, deportees from Ethiopia and local affected populations brought about by the border conflict with Ethiopia, NNGOs have been invited to return. These will have a ring-fenced remit, initially for six months, to provide emergency relief; development assistance is presently not on the agenda.

The National Unions of Eritrean Youth and Students and Eritrean Women have consistently worked with returnees in various settlement sites and lowland towns. While presently small in scale, their programmes have been fully inclusive of women and sensitive to gender issues. NUEYS has been especially pro-active in promoting change in traditional attitudes and practices (e.g. FGM).

The UN system in Eritrea has not escaped scrutiny by the government. It has minimal input into policy formulation; any infringement might be seen as interference in the ownership of the development process.

With particular regard to repatriation, UNHCR has been effectively sidelined since the expulsion of all expatriate staff on 6<sup>th</sup> May 1997.

Of the other UN agencies UNDP has been most consistently and closely involved in post-return initiatives in a wide range of sectors.<sup>7</sup> Other agencies have targeted the general population, e.g. UNICEF with its wide-ranging primary education projects.

### ***Gender Issues***

Despite impressive initiatives both during the liberation struggle and post-war, Eritrea remains a profoundly patriarchal and hierarchical society.

*De facto* top-down government approaches prevail in the context of gender equity initiatives. There is potential for the already extreme gender gap to be exacerbated. The GoE position is that changes in gender relations must derive from communal perceptions and wishes. While such an approach has merit, it presupposes not only general will in the absence of pro-active government initiatives, but also echoes the concept of women as 'change agents', now largely discredited.<sup>8</sup>

In effect there is a central discrepancy in GoE policies and approaches to gender issues: while there is overall determination to retain possession of the shaping of the post-conflict nation, in specific relation to gender rôles and relations, there is a stepping back from active implementation. In the overall context of nation building and the GoE's intent to bring about fundamental alteration of traditional practices, this study indicates that there should be a concerted and combined effort to implement both processes of integration and gender equity. Each demands often very considerable change in people's outlook and lives; neither can be fully sustained without the other. Neither is in fact feasible without the other.

If there is piecemeal and/or intermittent attention to the many ways in which these are interrelated, the outcome may well be that many Eritreans fail fully to acknowledge the reasons why change is necessary. Research has shown that since liberation there has been a degree of re-assertion of traditional practices and attitudes. Thus instances of female genital mutilation are again on the increase.

There is a possibility that unless there is clear direction entrenched positions will retain force and might indeed intensify. This is as true for equity writ large, within which integration is to be included, as it is for specific directed initiatives concerning gender issues. The over-arching goal of the attainment of a just civil society must encompass equity. Within Eritrea there are clear directions from government as to intent and instruments; the challenge is to convert theory into practice.

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<sup>7</sup> Sisay (1998) provides a thorough account of UNDP's participation in the Pilot and Phase One PROFERI initiatives.

<sup>8</sup> von Braunmühl (1996), Tekle (1996) and Tadria (1997) critically discuss various aspects of GoE gender policy.

Gender inequity influences all aspects of life.<sup>9</sup> This is true as much for the majority of returnees as for the general population. This study has not found evidence of sustained widespread change in returnee gender relations and rôles other than those brought about by absolute necessity. Exile has not resulted in a general radicalisation of refugees; in fact many have adopted the more restrictive practices prevalent in northern, Muslim, Sudan.<sup>10</sup>

Most returnee women and girls' opportunities for health care and education remain partly shaped by supply side exigencies and socio-cultural norms. In this they are at one with the great majority of female Eritreans. Access and entitlement are predominantly retained within the control of men. While a minority of returnees has become accustomed to health and education services, and considers these necessary for all, others have experienced little or no change, and consider this inessential.

Responsiveness to specific and different needs among the female returnee population has not always been forthcoming. Thus FHHs have sometimes been subsumed within the larger female or general population.

PROFERI did not include a component specifically targeted at women.<sup>11</sup>

### ***Lessons Learnt from PROFERI***

PROFERI was extremely limited by a shortfall in donor funding; had matters been otherwise, far more returnees and locals would have benefited. Whenever the outcome of the programme is discussed, this has to be borne in mind. Nonetheless, this study indicates that the PROFERI programme was additionally hampered in terms of general acceptability by insufficient dissemination and debate, both prior to and during implementation. It is impossible to judge whether there would have been more dissemination of information had it been possible to involve larger numbers of both primary and secondary stakeholders.

Stakeholder participation was insufficiently promoted or integrated into overall pre-planning, implementation and ongoing evaluation of programme components. As a result, there are indications of a certain amount of confusion and occasional perceptions of preferential treatment among various sectors of the population, both other returnees and local residents.

In a situation of general and extreme poverty it is important that any initiatives that favour certain groups of people are explained and discussed by those on whom these will have an impact, whether positive, negative or broadly neutral. Otherwise resentment can develop.

ERREC has been transparent in its acknowledgement of shortcomings pertaining to specific sectoral components. Thus important lessons were learnt from the provision of shelter; it has been recognised that access to natural resources, and concomitant environmental protection measures, require attention.

The agricultural component, where land and livestock were provided, represented the linchpin of PROFERI. This research has shown that certain preconceptions on the part of government were not borne out.<sup>12</sup> Intrinsic to the component was the expectation on the part of implementing bodies that the majority of all returnees would wish to become settled farmers post-return, in line with the perspective of the Land Proclamation. This imposes both constraints and future direction. In fact, returnees' attitudes concerning livelihood strategies are far more varied and responsive to realities such as the situation on the ground and family capabilities.

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<sup>9</sup> Gruber (1998) discusses gender inequity in the national context.

<sup>10</sup> The paper (abstract in Appendix Two) by Gruber will address these issues.

<sup>11</sup> Rosso (1996) provides background to this decision from the viewpoint of a former senior ERREC official. See p. 33.

<sup>12</sup> Hadgu *et al* (op. cit.) provides the most complete examination and critique of this component.



While considerable attention was given to gender issues and gender-related initiatives, both during PROFERI and subsequently, the research indicates that many PROFERI-assisted women, particularly in female-headed households but also in other circumstances, feel that insufficient aid was given in relation to the implementation of the various components.

Those women in FHHs who repatriated spontaneously have often been unaware of targeted programmes, whether undertaken by line ministries or NGOs. Dissemination of information regarding access and entitlement has on occasion been insufficiently focused.

The PROFERI agricultural component is considered by a number of female returnees as insufficiently gender-aware and gender-focused. Many women are culturally proscribed from working on the land. In addition, large numbers are entirely inexperienced in either agriculture or livestock management; many are either physically incapable of the tasks needed to derive benefit from the allocation of these resources, or cannot combine such work with other aspects of their gender rôle.

Thus there has in effect been some unintentional governmental and institutional gender inequity in terms of the agricultural component implementation. This might have considerable repercussions regarding women's accession to independent livelihood restoration and development.

The complex issue of access to land and its effective use has ramifications beyond PROFERI, in that while the Land Proclamation intends to usher in greater equity, certain of its elements do not appear to address women's entitlements within the customary social fabric of Eritrea.

## ***APPLICATIONS***

While PROFERI repatriation and subsequent (re) integration programmes are unique to the Eritrean situation and the perceptual concerns of the GoE, there are certain lessons that can be more broadly applied in terms of conceptual approaches and implementation of similar initiatives elsewhere.

The focus of many repatriation initiatives has been on 're-integration': this study indicates there is a paramount need to recognise and acknowledge that the process in fact necessitates negotiation of what will often be fundamentally new social structures. This finding corroborates those from other post-conflict and post-return contexts. It is increasingly recognised that repatriation ushers in often entirely new socio-cultural challenges and developments.<sup>13</sup> It is counter-productive and developmentally unsustainable to presume that those communities and areas affected by repatriation will simply absorb returnees and continue as before.

It is more appropriate and more inclusive of stakeholders' varying experiences to focus on 'integration'. However, integration cannot presuppose a return to the *status quo ante*. The process must accommodate diverse and potentially divisive attitudes, behaviour and needs; it must also genuinely promote transparency and equity at the communal level. Negotiation of what may be profoundly altered ways of life and familial and communal structures should be recognised as intrinsic to any repatriation initiative.

It is not only those who went into exile but those who remained behind who will need to address what may be extremely complex issues striking at the core of deep-rooted socio-cultural mores. In a situation of post-conflict reconstruction and integration, where there are potentially opposed

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<sup>13</sup> Allen & Turton (1996); Malkki (1992); Refslund-Sørensen (1997) address various aspects of this subject.

perceptions of society and general conduct, as well as gender relations, there may be opportunity for specific attention to alteration of traditional precepts. Such initiatives require considerable and pro-active definition and continuous support from national, regional and local administrations, line ministries and other involved bodies.

As PROFERI has shown, where there is endemic gender inequity, pervasive food insecurity and economic and environmental fragility, it is preferable that all sectors of the population can see tangible benefits arising from any post-return programmes.

Stakeholder participation at all stages of planning and implementation is essential to maximise the potential for sustainable programmes of integration. Participatory monitoring and evaluation should be intrinsic to all post-return integration programmes. Such PM&E must include all stakeholders, not merely returnees, and must be gender-balanced. It is important that dedicated channels of both communication and debate with regard to post-return integration initiatives are set up and sustained. These should initially disseminate information, elicit responses and subsequently give room for discussion; recommendations for change should be made possible. They should also exist well before returnees arrive, so that both this group and others likely to be affected are informed and involved.

### ***DISCLAIMER***

The UK Department for International Development (DFID) supports policies, programmes and projects to promote international development. DFID provided funds for this study as part of that objective but the views and opinions expressed are those of the author alone.

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### ***Documentation***

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Gruber J. Chapter proposal entitled 'Integration in Eritrea: The Case of Returnees'. Submitted to Dr Olufemi Akinola, FAS, Harvard University, for inclusion in a book proposal.

Gruber J. Draft paper entitled 'Issues of Gender, Return and the Creation of the Nation'. Submitted to the African Studies Association for inclusion in the 42<sup>nd</sup> annual conference 11<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> November 1999.

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## **APPENDIX ONE**

### **INTEGRATION IN POST-WAR ERITREA: THE CASE OF RETURNEES**

**Chapter submitted in May 1999 to Dr Olufemi Akinola, Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Harvard University, for inclusion in a book proposal.**

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#### **INTRODUCTION**

Eritrea became an independent nation on 24<sup>th</sup> May 1993, two years to the day after the liberation of the capital Asmara by the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (the EPLF) from the forces of the Ethiopian *Dergue*. Liberation represented the successful conclusion of a thirty years' war. It also initiated the enormous and continuing responsibility for the EPLF and its successor governments of both the physical rehabilitation of a population and economic infrastructure virtually destroyed by conflict, and the consolidation of a national sense of identity, incorporating all the disparate groups either resident or potentially to return.

This chapter focuses on the returnee population, and considers the experiences and lessons learnt with regard to their integration into the fabric of the Eritrean polity, itself an evolving entity. Central focus is given to 'the PROFERI returnees'<sup>1</sup>: a group of 24,220 people who benefited from the donor-funded programme of repatriation and post-return initiatives designed to assist speedy and sustainable self sufficiency. Their post-return lives are compared to those of the vast majority of returnees, more than 160,000, who repatriated spontaneously and who were not eligible for the PROFERI package of assistance. In addition the perceptions and responses of the local population of the Southwest lowlands of Eritrea, where most returnees have settled, are addressed. Consideration is given to the ways in which all sectors of the lowland population must come to terms not only with the aftermath of bitter conflict but also with the creation and development of a new social order, one in which 'integration' may require dedicated negotiation and continuous re-appraisal. Gender aspects are also examined: it is proposed that unless gender equity and integration are promoted by the government as parts of the same process of development and change, the latter cannot hope to succeed.

In definitional terms, 'integration' cannot presuppose a return to the *status quo ante*; rather it must accommodate diverse and potentially divisive attitudes and responses. At the core of the issue of integration is the question of equity.

#### **The Returnee Population**

##### *Returnee Numbers*<sup>2</sup>

In the years 1989-1995, over 84% (139,452 individuals) of all returnees (165,390) had sought refuge in the Sudan; 25,938 returned from elsewhere, predominantly Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States. A very small minority in all years repatriated from asylum in Europe and North America. It was in 1993 that the hitherto greatest number of repatriations occurred: in that year 39,769 people returned to Eritrea, the large majority (in excess of 80%) from the Sudan. Both

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<sup>1</sup> PROFERI stands for the Programme for Refugee Re-integration and Rehabilitation of Resettlement Areas in Eritrea.

<sup>2</sup> Refugee/returnee figures throughout are taken from either the *Synoptic Report on Returnees (Refugees) Information 1989-end 1995* (ERREC 1996) or the *Report on Eritrean Returnees: Data Information 1996* (ERREC 1997). These documents currently represent the most complete set of statistical data on movement and residence post-return.

1994 and 1995 saw the return of close on 30,000: as before, the bulk of these people had been in exile in the Sudan, and the majority of those who had been elsewhere returned from Ethiopia. By the end of 1997 it is estimated that very close on 190,000 people had repatriated.

Numbers of returnees have dwindled in the past three years. This is due to various causes, including the present severe breakdown in diplomatic relations between Eritrea and the Sudan. This has been exacerbated still further since the summer of 1998 by the Eritrea-Ethiopia war and claims from the Sudanese government of increased military incursions into its territory by the Eritrean armed forces. The related closure of borders has clearly been another factor.

#### *Female-headed Households (FHHs) among Returnees*

Household security or insecurity is intrinsic to, and instrumental in, the degree of vulnerability experienced. Household needs, capacity and capability have direct and continuous influence on people's opportunities for integration and individual development. Women in FHHs are described as among the poorest in society.<sup>3</sup> A number of returnee women consider themselves to be lacking in even the minimum of means to make ends meet for themselves and their children. For many, education of, and proper health care for, their children are unattainable luxuries.<sup>4</sup>

In the course of this research FHHs have frequently been revealed as lacking capacity for involvement in any communal structures where the needs and views of their members might be given space. As such their integration into wider society must be considered limited at best. Such restricted access and entitlement is far from exclusive to returnee FHHs. A number of PROFERI and other FHHs have become closely linked to households that offer a degree of support and protection, sometimes in return for access to and/or control of land and other assets. Thus these FHHs have had to enter into client relationships, where the opportunities for negotiation of more gender equal approaches to post-return life have been found to be extremely limited. 'Integration' also becomes something of a debatable, often contestable, proposition in such environments.

In the hitherto nine years (1989-1997) of dedicated returnee data collection, a total of 70,403 individuals were registered as belonging to FHHs. This represents almost 37.3% of the overall returnee population (both PROFERI and spontaneous.) The number of returnee FHHs has increased quite significantly in the past few years. A reason mentioned by female heads of household in both Hagas and Keren is that a decision was taken (invariably by the adult male members of the household) that the security situation had deteriorated so considerably in the Sudan that the women and children should return to Eritrea. This practice was described as additionally enabling maximum access to potential resources: the women and children would benefit from any available GoE assistance, while the adult males could continue to take advantage of greater economic opportunities in the Sudan.

### ***The National Policy Environment***

#### *The Government Position*

An initial examination of the position of the Government of Eritrea (hereafter the GoE), with regard to participation of international organisations in relief and development assistance to returnees, is essential to any discussion of post-return integration and post-war reconstruction. This is a contentious topic, with strong views being expressed by the various parties involved. While the GoE stresses the sovereign right of Eritrea to have control over its own development, a number of interested parties have accused it of pursuing a potentially all too inflexible approach to the whole concept of development. This impasse has developed over time, as a report written

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<sup>3</sup> See UNICEF (1996)

<sup>4</sup> See von Braunmühl (1996) for further discussion

in 1995 indicates. 'Having concluded that it is not in the interest of the country for international humanitarian agency personnel to play a significant rôle in reconstruction, Eritrea seeks to cover the needs with its own human resources. These, by common agreement [undefined], are still inadequate to the enormous tasks of reconstruction...In effect, the Eritrean government has decided that it is better to reach goals through a sustainable approach in which it maintains overall control, and its own people learn to manage the tasks.'<sup>5</sup>

Somewhat different opinions have been put forward from within other quarters of the development community as to the validity of the GoE's stance and the degree of potential genuine unilateral action it can take, given the enormous task of post-war rehabilitation. '[T]he Eritrean government continues to assert its ownership and leadership rôle in economic reconstruction, general development policies and other aspects of national life.. [Its] policies are in direct conflict with developed countries' twin agendas of unregulated markets and multi-party politics... The government [has] said [in its Policy Statement on NGOs, February 1997] that one of the primary pitfalls it must avoid is the problem of structural dependency that may be nurtured through permanent or self-perpetuating external assistance'.<sup>6</sup>

#### *The GoE Stance on Integration of Returnees*

The successful repatriation and eventual integration of refugees is seen as an essential aspect of post-conflict reconstruction in Eritrea by the national government. In the thirty years of the liberation struggle (1961-1991), forced migrants ultimately constituted upwards of 25% of the entire population: 700,000 from an estimated total of 3 million people.<sup>7</sup> It has been suggested that almost 40% of the Eritrean population were either refugees or internally displaced during this time. The intention of the GoE is to integrate returnees fully and equally into the fabric of post-conflict society. While certain returnees have received specific, dedicated assistance and have been able to participate in programmes created to address the needs of their community in terms of livelihood creation/restoration, the goal has always been to minimise dependency and to incorporate returnees into the collective project of Eritrean national development. Thus integration in effect equates to the absence of perceived dependency.

In the Draft Constitution and the Macro-Policy Document, as in other GoE policy initiatives and constitutional and legislative measures, the emphasis is on the creation and perpetuation of national self-reliance and unified, equal development for all, irrespective of gender, ethnicity or religion. In line with this perspective, there is no specific policy instrument for the (re-) integration of refugees. Self-reliance and mobilisation of individuals and communities are the watchwords in this respect as within the wider national context.

The complexities of integration have been recognised by a number of commentators, not least the GoE and its refugee organisation, ERREC. 'The refugee issue is one of the major challenges facing the government... The government of Eritrea [is] committed to repatriating all its citizens who fled...and to rehabilitate and rebuild the areas to which they will return as well as to improve the lives of the local population, as an integral part of the national reconstruction and rehabilitation programme'.<sup>8</sup> 'The repatriation and settlement of returning refugees... pose potential dangers for peace and stability if post-war realities fail to meet their expectations... The process of re-integration is changing the demography and ethnic balance in some parts of the country...The different sets of programmes and projects, moreover, potentially place the affected

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<sup>5</sup> UNRISD (1996: 23-24)

<sup>6</sup> Sisay (1998: 3-4)

<sup>7</sup> ERREC (1996: 3)

Ibid: 4

UNRISD 1996: 11

groups at an advantage over local populations that also suffered during the war, but remained in their homes'.<sup>9</sup>

### *The Challenges of Returnee Integration*

The GoE intends that all returnees should be integrated into the fabric of post-conflict society. In fact the premise is that returnees will re-integrate, in other words that repatriation and post-return life represent the reconstitution of social and cultural constructs as these existed prior to flight. There is a growing body of literature that discusses the challenges of such an approach, and the ways in which it places very considerable, frequently untenable, expectations on heterogeneous populations.<sup>10</sup> Certain post-return initiatives do seem to have minimised the inexorable reality of a great number of different situations, and responses to these, faced by Eritreans who became refugees. In addition the potential post-return effects of such diverse refugee experiences have not been fully acknowledged.

One central finding of this piece of research is that the ethos prevalent in government circles with regard to (re-) integration is frequently interpreted in a particular way by returnees. Many take it to mean that in effect they should put aside their lives while in exile. They should attempt to take up again wherever they had left off when they became forced migrants. Yet to do so would be to ignore, and ultimately to repudiate, exilic experiences as somehow less significant than the fact of repatriation. Thus the very use of 're-integration' was felt by a number of returnees to belittle the multitudinous effects of exile, and to propel people towards a blank slate type of response: in other words, to view as important only pre and post-flight experiences. It was considered that this would cause resentment, not only among returnees but also among those that remained in Eritrea and faced different but often equally horrendous situations. The ever-continuing relevance of recent history was described on many an occasion.

Within Eritrea there is very much a government-derived discourse of collective ideology, one in which differences are ultimately to be subsumed in order to create 'diversity in harmony', and an entity in which the nine ethnic groups (or 'nationalities') defined by the GoE as resident will co-exist on equal terms. In this context it has of course to be borne in mind that there may in fact exist several collective ideologies, and that these may come into play for refugees/returnees in various permutations both during exile and after repatriation. Those who remained in Eritrea will also have to integrate their own perceptions into the wider, national scheme, and to accommodate those of other groups. The potential for either preserving or reconstituting a sense of continuity of purpose and a common goal may vary enormously between different people and communities. Continuity *per se* does not necessitate stasis and an absence of change, but rather an ability to absorb changes and to act on these in a culturally consonant fashion.

The situation in lowland Eritrea is that sectors of the resident population (now including returnees) perceive, interpret and reify the social construction of post-return life and potential integration in a variety of ways. Thus the GoE and its regional and local structures must balance an acknowledgement of such difference with the intention to create and develop a nationally coherent and cohesive identity.

### ***The Resident Population's Response to Settlement of Returnees***

'The PROFERI mandate was to do more than simply resettle and rehabilitate refugees. [It]... was intended also to rehabilitate the region affected by the resettlement of refugees'<sup>11</sup>. 'All PROFERI's activities should be seen in the light of the various rehabilitation programmes that are

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<sup>10</sup> See e.g. Alonso 1988; Kapferer 1988; Malkki 1992; Refslund Sørensen 1997

<sup>11</sup> Hansen 1996: 19

already taking place in the region [the Southwest lowlands]. These are addressed to all the residents in a locality. The Agricultural Rehabilitation Programme, for instance, tries to supply agricultural inputs to local peasants, while the Rural Water Supply Programme attempts to solve the acute water shortages that are to be found in so many places... Except for the initial, gap-filling assistance for specific target groups, most aid given to returnees... is designed to be shared by the whole community in the settlement areas'.<sup>12</sup>

There is no doubt that the PROFERI programme has provided an impetus: its components, and various governmental initiatives, have contributed significantly to the rehabilitation of the Southwest lowlands. Local residents were quick to describe the ways in which new schools and clinics had improved their lives; reconstruction of roads was also frequently mentioned with considerable approval. People additionally spoke of how the arrival of returnees has revitalised a flagging local economy; when doing so they referred not only to the relatively few PROFERI beneficiaries, but also, and more often, to the far greater numbers of spontaneous returnees whose arrival had stimulated a degree of growth.

Nonetheless, research has consistently found indications of local concern regarding the effects of the settlement of large numbers of people in a region with sparse capacity, environmental fragility, minimal infrastructure and limited economic development. There has on occasion been outright resistance to various governmental initiatives, as was the case in Hagas when locals argued successfully against the allocation of nearby land to returnees. With reference to general concerns about social equilibrium, several local residents talked about their worries over being swamped by returnees.

Townspeople in Hagas and Keren said they occasionally felt overwhelmed by the returnees, however much these might contribute to the local economy. Some also stated their opinion that there was a degree of 'us and them' developing. Villagers in Adi Bidho (adjacent to Fanco) and Adi Fryul (Alebu) considered it appropriate they should have such perceptions. For example, Alebu now numbers more than 6,000 inhabitants, while Adi Fryul is far smaller. The two are now merged into one *baito*, the office for which is in Alebu.

There is widespread disquiet voiced regarding both access to, and appropriate use of, finite natural resources. Water and fuel wood resources are clearly the issues of most concern. A number of local residents described the advent of the returnee population as initiating large-scale competition, which they themselves would be likely to lose. There was a definite sense of preferential treatment being given to returnees; this was sometimes coupled to discussion of the government and the Ministry of Agriculture's longer-term environmental strategy. The view was quite forcefully expressed on a couple of occasions that clearer guidelines and tighter controls were necessary now, not later. These would benefit the entirety of the resident population, while possibly limiting some returnees' currently perceived ease of access.

In its PROFERI plan, in addition to attention being given to use of wood for fuel and for shelter construction, the GoE envisaged that focus would be given to on-farm soil conservation; riverbank and spate-irrigated land erosion protection; and water and sanitation health issues. Returnees and locals have raised concerns that sufficiently tight management is not in place, with resultant degradation. Gash Barka is 'drought-prone and susceptible to large-scale invasions of locusts and other endemic pests. These will occur again... It is important to note that local people [are] losing resources that usually support or buffer them during bad times. The continuing influx of people into the province [has] put more stress on land, water and other natural resources. Some specific activities, such as cutting down doum palms while clearing new gardens along the

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<sup>12</sup> Rosso 1996: 11 & 17



Gash River, reduced resources that were critical for people's survival during bad years'.<sup>13</sup> Future points of contention might conceivably include herders' access to the riverbank. Due to the planned expansion of agricultural and horticultural schemes, this may become less easy. The use of finite and very often owned resources such as trees could lead to disputes. Such issues will have to be addressed soon, unless present and future settlement, migration and pastoralists' activities are not to become potential sources of tension.

A major consideration shaping the sustainable development of post-conflict and post-return integration are the ways in which returnee communities initiate, develop and maintain relationships with other groups, both locally and more widely. It is relevant to note that several of the sites deemed most lacking in community spirit for all elements of the population are those where residents of neighbouring villages demonstrated a certain sensation of being swamped. These include Fanco, where Adi Badar land was 'granted' to PROFERI returnees, and Golluj, where the virtually completely destroyed village began to be repopulated by spontaneous returnees in 1991, to be joined by PROFERI returnees in 1995.

One indication of this piece of research is that there is often surprisingly little contact. Thus returnees in Alebu referred to the village which had existed prior to their arrival as 'over there; quite a way away', when in fact it was within very easy walking distance. While this study focuses on the returnee perspective, it would be inappropriate to ignore the views of the wider community, and their perceptions of the present and future integration of returnees. It is not only returnees who have been and are dislocated. In perhaps less immediately apparent ways similar experiences can occur for those who may not have left their own village. The creation of new settlements and the arrival of large numbers of people whose recent history, expectations and behaviour may be markedly different from that of the local population can be profoundly dislocating. So too can events such as the re-allocation of land to the newcomers. Local people may begin to wonder about their place in the new scheme of things.

Thus it might be fairly stated that for many local residents the jury is still out on the question of the impact of returnee settlement. People recognise the good and the bad aspects of this enormous programme of social engineering; at present there remains a very considerable fund of good will, in the context of the creation of the nation and strong feelings of communal solidarity.

### ***Post-return relations between returnees***

Quite marked differences were noted in the course of research. One factor appears to be the relative preponderance of returnees within the overall population. Thus in Tessenai, a town on the Sudanese border which was virtually depopulated until returnees and internal migrants began to settle after liberation (here in 1989), indications were of the creation of a more or less new community from scratch, where people were starting again from a position of broad similarity. No PROFERI returnees were settled in Tessenai; returnees mentioned they had a relatively equal chance of participation in various NGO and GoE schemes.

Several returnees spoke with sadness of a reduction in everyday help from neighbours and extended kin. Some were of the view that while people had not always been better off in the Sudan, the war and the community spirit that engendered, along with the EPLF support activities in which many participated, brought them close. Now refugees are back home, the war is over and some have become focused on individual and household development. Others in the wider community have had to take second place, a long way down the list in some cases. This is an important issue in the context of integration: if returnee groups, whose members repatriated together, are unable to sustain their previously close-knit mutual support networks due to the

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<sup>13</sup> Hansen 1994: 21

exigencies of life in Eritrea, it can be argued that wider, initially more impersonal relationships may be slow in developing.

Such findings echo those of a survey of PROFERI sites in 1996. This demonstrated evidence of a distinct lack of community feeling and cohesion. Several villages were likened to mere collections of households. 'The newly forming returnee settlements lack a strong social base; the social organisations that are integral to traditional communities (the family, the neighbourhood, informal men's and women's groups, and religious organisations) are absent'<sup>13</sup>. It is relevant to point out that many refugee groups repatriated *en bloc*, i.e. as communities. If such groups with a common history of exile are experiencing a degree, however localised and partial this might be, of disintegration, the question must be how then might they build firm bridges to other communities? Integration might not be the paramount issue in people's minds.

Changes on a communal level that have been noted include the considerable alteration in refugees' livelihood patterns, from subsistence agriculture and agro-pastoralism to commoditised production. '[L]and, labour, livestock and grazing rights [have been transformed] into monetised commodities'.<sup>14</sup> Many formerly rural people have become urban dwellers. Refugee households have been enormously affected by such developments. Social links that previously provided close co-operation in *nafirs*, work parties, where members of a community worked together have apparently been very significantly weakened. The traditional hierarchical structure of authority among many refugee groups has changed, with a proliferation of *sheikhs*, each individually less in command than before. Extended families have become rare, as individuals went where work was available.

Thus while some returnee communities, most notably Tessenai and Alebu, demonstrate greater co-operation and seeming unity, it is unrealistic to assume that a uniform response among all sectors of a heterogeneous population would ever be likely. Research indicates certain factors that contribute towards potentially greater cohesion. These include the presence of an efficient, participatory and pro-active NGO programme (here ACORD) that brings people together in an active environment of supported self-help. Alebu is the prime example of this. The indications from this research are that once a certain infrastructure is in place, other elements of community co-operation, and potential eventual integration, may become easier to implement. This may not, however, be permanent. The rôle of ex-fighters seems to be another key criterion: many of those interviewed in the course of the DFID research demonstrated dedication and enthusiasm for their contribution to development. Ex-fighters are perceived as having strong links with the local administration. Indeed, many are the administration. Moreover, ex-fighters are seen as tapping especially directly into the national programme of development. They are not people whose leadership should be questioned or gainsaid without a strong case.

One remark made by a woman in the town of Hagas where PROFERI and spontaneous returnees are resident, indicates the complexities of integration of a heterogeneous population. She spoke of 'first and second nationalities', i.e. PROFERI and other returnees; she herself belonged to the latter group, and clearly felt discriminated against.

### ***The Proclamation of Land Tenure (58/1994): its potential effects on integration***

The Proclamation derives from the agrarian and land reforms instituted in the liberated areas during the war by the EPLF, now reconstituted as the People's Front for Democracy and Justice, the sole party of government. In 1994 all land became the property of the state; usufructory rights are to be granted to all Eritreans, male and female, aged 18 and over. This is a genuinely

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<sup>13</sup> Sullivan-Owomoyela 1996: ii

<sup>14</sup> Bascom 1996: 68

revolutionary move, in that the traditions of centuries of customary laws of tenure, access and entitlement are abolished. The Proclamation removes the opportunity of ownership of land by individuals, households or villages. Its possible effect on people's lives, returnees and others, is extraordinarily complex; certain repercussions may take years to emerge.

This government policy instrument can be seen to have already had considerable impact on the returnee population; it has in addition influenced the response of local people, both in terms of their relationships with returnees and in the context of their own ways of coping with post-war reconstruction and rehabilitation. As such it has the potential to affect the lives of all for the foreseeable future, and to have at present incalculable impact on the process of integration. The Proclamation ushers in the necessity for very wide-ranging (re) negotiation of people's livelihood strategies, and by so doing strikes at the core of individuals' and communities' room for manoeuvre, in terms of creation and maintenance of genuinely integrated ways of living. It has brought people face to face with the realities of addressing integration in the context of inevitable inequity.

It can be argued that the Land Proclamation introduces such potentially sweeping changes to the fabric of people's existence that the question of 'integration' becomes subsumed within a wider context of negotiation of profoundly altered precepts of possession, access, entitlement and use. Returnees may in fact in some instances be less challenged by the implications of the Proclamation, having had to accept exilic relations to land access and use that were in sharp contrast to those they had known before flight.

There are a number of issues linked to the Land Proclamation that have a direct and potentially critical bearing on people's lives – not only returnees, but others too. The Proclamation has been criticised for its approach to land use, in terms of its apparent adherence to the *'tragedy of the commons'* thesis, which views (agro) pastoralists as less inherently likely to have a long-term stake in the land, and to have a so-called 'free rider' attitude. There have been growing challenges in recent years to this influential model, and increasing research on how tightly structured and regulated pastoralists' access to, and use of, the land can be.<sup>15</sup> Thus in this instance the GoE appears to have devised policy more according to its plans for future development than to the reality literally on the ground. At present there simply does not seem to be the scope to turn the majority of Eritrean returnees into settled farmers; the gap here between policy and desired practice is especially noticeable.

During the *Dergue* years (1974-1991, when the Ethiopian régime of Mengistu Haile Mariam fought its losing battle against the EPLF and the ELF), the Southwest lowlands became relatively depopulated. A certain amount of both land and property was taken over by people other than the original owners or members of their extended families. This practice continued and probably expanded in the few years between 1989 and 1993 when much of Gash Setit and Barka were liberated but relatively few internally displaced persons (IDPs) and/or refugees had returned. In other words, it is undoubtedly the case that some Eritreans benefited quite significantly from the war and resultant population. Such developments are only too well known to later returnees; those who now hold title to land and property originally belonging to others are seen by some as forming a distinct and more privileged group when compared to the broad mass of returnees. While the GoE has set up a Commission to adjudicate on cases of land alienation and restitution, the fact remains that many returnees are unable to retrieve land and property.

#### *Gender issues related to the Land Proclamation*

A premise central to the Land Proclamation, that adult women now have equal usufructory rights to men, is likely to meet with stiff resistance. Customary laws among many ethnic groups in

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<sup>15</sup> See Fullerton-Joireman 1996 and Kibreab 1996 for discussions of this subject.

Eritrea do not allow women either to inherit land or to undertake many agricultural tasks. The clauses in the Land Proclamation that deal with restitution of property also have potential gender dimensions. Many women are simply either not allowed to make representations in public, or would be mortified if called upon to do so. Certain ethnic groups do not allow women to play any part in agricultural activities; this is the case among Christian and Muslim, highland and lowland, groups. Thus even if a woman were first to claim and second to have land allocated, she would invariably have to rely on male labour, either from her own household or hired hands. She herself might very well not be allowed to have dealings with those who worked her land. Such issues might become more acute when female claimants are part of FHHs. A number of women, returnees and local residents, have described their concerns on these issues; they feel the need for far greater clarification and support from local government and community bodies.

### ***PROFERI: The Programme for Refugee Re-integration and Rehabilitation of Resettlement Areas in Eritrea***

It is relevant to discuss the ramifications and repercussions of PROFERI in some detail, as its programme represents a dedicated focus upon a small group of people within the broader, specified context of (re) integration and development of the Southwest lowlands. Lessons may be drawn from the implementation of PROFERI with regard to future initiatives, both within Eritrea and wherever there are large-scale return movements of refugees and related intentions and dedicated programmes to promote and achieve integration of returnees.

#### *The PROFERI remit*

In 1993 the then provisional government of Eritrea requested the assistance of UNDP and UN-DHA in order to obtain funding for the PROFERI project. The joint PGoE and UN Appeal for Eritrea put forward its proposal at a pledging conference in July 1993. A three-phase PROFERI programme was envisaged (July 1993-January 1997): '[The budget was estimated at] US\$262.26 million and eleven components. During Phase One, up to 150,000 refugees were to be repatriated from the Sudan, together with assistance to approximately 110,000 spontaneous returnees and the communities around the resettlement sites. It was estimated that up to another 150,000 refugees...would be repatriated in Phase Two and 130,000 in Phase Three'.<sup>16</sup> The proposal was ambitious in its intentions and perceived mandate; it was very much dependent on the good will and co-operation of various external actors, primarily the government of the Sudan and its national refugee agency, the Commissioner's Office for Refugees (COR), and potential donors. In the event there was a mammoth shortfall in the requested funding. A total of US\$32.44 million was pledged, a funding gap of US\$229.75 million.

The intended beneficiaries of PROFERI were all Eritreans in the Sudan who wished to repatriate; had matters gone according to plan the question of resource and service provision would undoubtedly have arisen in a different form. By the conclusion of the Pilot Phase 24,220 individuals had been brought to Eritrea under its aegis. The first returnees arrived in November 1994, the last group in April 1995. Only these returnees have been eligible to benefit from the full repatriation package. Some non-PROFERI returnees and some local residents have derived benefits from varying aspects of post-return programmes, including Phase One projects, but the great majority of returnees have repatriated and begun their post-return lives without anything more than minimal assistance. It is of course impossible to predict how matters might have been had repatriation occurred in an organised fashion and had greater funding been available.

The remit of PROFERI was to be able to offer repatriation and a comprehensive post-return package of immediate assistance followed speedily by various developmental, multi-sectoral and longer-term initiatives. The consistent ethos underpinning PROFERI was for returnees and related

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<sup>16</sup> Sisay 1998: 6

resident communities to achieve social and economic independence as speedily as was feasible, and that a culture of dependency should have no opportunity to develop. In this it was consistent with GoE policies.

#### *General lessons to be learnt from PROFERI*

There are significant lessons to be learnt from the experiences of PROFERI. Several of the core assumptions underpinning the programme were not borne out. In addition, while PROFERI became more inclusive of stakeholders' contributions as time passed, its original format was insufficiently attuned to the different characteristics of the potential returnee population in terms of employment, occupation, education, gender issues, and age; there seems to have been an implicit assumption of overall homogeneity. Had it been possible to undertake more detailed evaluation in the Sudan of people's needs, abilities and expectation, it is likely that PROFERI, and other initiatives aimed at the general lowland population, would have been better prepared for the heterogeneity of the returnee population. There might then also have been greater potential to address the unfolding and changing complexities of the settlement of such large numbers of people. This was frequently felt by returnees not to have been done. Many local people consider they were inadequately informed or prepared for such an influx, and subsequently received too little attention. The lowlands will remain environmentally vulnerable and resource poor: PROFERI and other returnees have often come to be seen as potentially overwhelming.

It should be stressed that over time there was a shift within ERREC and the relevant line ministries to a less top-down approach, and a movement towards greater direction by local-level priorities. Capacity-building and institutional strengthening became increasingly integrated into PROFERI, at national and regional level. This enabled greater attention to local issues within the population as a whole. Thus it has to be recognised that PROFERI in itself constituted a learning process for all stakeholders. In addition, PROFERI was marred by limitations beyond the control of those involved in its day-to-day implementation. Had PROFERI proceeded beyond its limited implementation, the signs are that a significant number of the issues that arose would have been more critically examined and addressed.

PROFERI raised people's expectations too high: its programme components were expected to offer far more than would ever have been feasible, given the parlous post-conflict state of Eritrea and the contingent factors such as limited donor funding.

It is only fair to note that PROFERI was never intended to operate in a vacuum, assisting solely returnees to the exclusion of all those who lived around the resettlement sites. To be so exclusive was always recognised as counter-productive, and would furthermore have been a complete contradiction of the post-war ethos of unity and shared commitment to development. Nevertheless, there was inevitably a concentration of considerable resources and effort on what turned out to be a relatively small group of people. Had funding allocations fulfilled expectations, and diplomatic relations between Eritrea and the Sudan remained cordial, PROFERI would have been a very much larger programme of rehabilitation that would indisputably have reached far greater numbers of local residents.

#### *Lessons to be learnt from the agricultural component of PROFERI*

While there were eleven such PROFERI components, focus will be given only to one sectoral initiative, whose implementation has had considerable ramifications, positive and negative as well as presently incalculable, with regard to the process of integration.

The objective of the agricultural component was to support the 24,220 PROFERI returnees to meet their food needs from their agricultural and pastoral activities. As such it probably represented the central plank of the entire programme, with an intention to enable returnees to become independent and to integrate into the general population. There was a degree of

incomprehension among non-PROFERI returnees and local residents as to why a small group should be so favoured, in a situation where there could be no question of preferential treatment based on prior activity. The comparison was drawn several times with ex-fighters: assistance to whom was generally considered more justified due to their very specific contributions to liberation.

The package eventually offered to each PROFERI returnee household (male-headed and FHH) in the former provinces of Gash Setit and Barka (now the one province of Gash Barka) consisted of the following elements:

Access to 2 ha of agricultural land and certain inputs, e.g. seeds, tools and fertiliser;

Extension services, including advice on environmental protection and pest control;

Livestock of choice to an equivalent value of 2,500 Birr;<sup>17</sup>

Vaccination of livestock;

Free veterinary treatment for one year.

One major problem that rapidly became apparent was that households were frequently unable speedily to clear and prepare the 2 ha. Many FHHs and other vulnerable households were incapable either physically or financially to complete the work themselves or pay someone else to do so. This situation was to an extent ameliorated by the free provision of tractors for ploughing. However, this was never intended to be a permanent service, and after 1998 cost recovery programmes were to commence. Many PROFERI beneficiaries have complained that the land allocated to them was too far from their settlements. Thus in Goluj most land is 7 km away; in Fanco it is between 3-5 km distance. The majority of returnees must walk to their land, so this can constitute a problem. However returnees might quibble, their position taking need not be emblematic of dependency, despite certain comments to this effect from MoA staff members. Quite some returnees raised this subject, stating that their feeling was that they had been told they would receive assistance to re-establish their livelihoods. In this context, their view was that they should not have been faced with problems such as these.

Another emphatic comment was frequently made: this was that returnees were expected to become farmers. The provision of 2 ha was felt by some almost to propel them towards livelihood patterns that they themselves would not have chosen, or would have chosen to combine with activities such as petty trading or teashop management. PROFERI returnees were well aware that they were under no obligation to accept the agricultural package. Nonetheless, few said they had been brave enough to consider rejecting a generous offer, and this in itself created a sense almost of obligation.

A further factor with significance is that lowland farming practices differ quite markedly from those in the highlands, from which a significant number of refugees originally came and many of the Ministry of Agriculture officials also come from. Most highland farming is based on land scarcity and/or degraded soil quality, on relative (seasonal) abundance in good years of water, and relatively high numbers of available workers. Several returnees emphasised their view that the MoA had been insufficiently aware of this factor.<sup>18</sup>

With regard to the livestock package: there were certain aspects of this input that did not develop as planned. '[T]he number of animals given to each family is far short of the viable herd sizes required for completely pastoralist or agropastoralist lifestyles, and best projections predict that it would take at least five years for sizes of shoat [sheep and goat] herds to reach such numbers. Thus the livestock package is best considered a gift of capital, appropriate to those

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<sup>17</sup> The Ethiopian Birr was replaced as the Eritrean currency by the Nakfa in late 1997

<sup>19</sup> Hansen (1996) is highly critical of MoA staff members' occasional ignorance of lowland farming methods; see especially p.63.

with the skills and interest to herd them properly' (1995: 22).<sup>19</sup> Those with experience in livestock production and maintenance, and especially those who were able to repatriate with their own animals, were often able to use the additional provision as a welcome boost. Others, who were either inexperienced or ultimately not interested, used their animals as assets, to be sold on so as to provide capital for other ventures. Land seems to have been very much more a fixed asset, and one which a fair number of PROFERI returnees were unable to put to much use, mainly due to household vulnerability and/or lack of agricultural knowledge. It is probable that FHHs, especially those with young children where no male member might have had an opportunity to learn skills, would be particularly disadvantaged. This was corroborated during discussion on several occasions.

### ***Issues Relating to the General Returnee Population***

#### *Livelihood strategies in relation to integration*

Returnees interviewed often agreed with PROFERI beneficiaries: they were of the view that the GoE position on the expected post-return livelihoods of the great majority of returnees is that they should ideally engage in settled agriculture. A sizeable number of returnees pointed out that this focus presupposes various key criteria, several of which were not always and entirely borne out by circumstances. Many also noted that if PROFERI returnees frequently found it difficult to cope even after receiving assistance, how much less likely might it be that they themselves could swiftly succeed in becoming self-sufficient. The perception voiced was that the GoE prefers all those now resident in the Southwest lowlands, and those who may repatriate in the future, to be or become farmers, and that this is seen as the best route to (re) integration. Yet the feasibility of this preference has not been fully considered or tested. One worry was that competition for scarce natural resources might become acute if the majority of people are expected to farm. Another was that many returnees and locals might understandably feel somewhat coerced or manipulated into taking up a livelihood to which they are not suited. The remark was made that true integration can only come about when all groups of people see themselves as having been given room and time for consideration and, crucially, negotiation with those living nearby. Otherwise the imposition of general principles and top-down edicts might very well be counter-productive.

The view was occasionally expressed that there continues to be an unrealistic assumption by local government that returnees will speedily become self-sufficient; it was felt there should be greater awareness of the complexities of post-return rehabilitation and integration. Most returnees who discussed livelihood strategies, PROFERI and others, felt that many issues had yet to be fully addressed. While some considered the GoE should take a more pro-active stance, others had strongly opposed views: they wanted to be left to make their own decisions – while on occasion wanting a governmental safety net. This is clearly an extremely complex subject, whose even partial resolution will take considerable time.

Many returnees appear wary of reliance on either subsistence agriculture or small-scale pastoralism due to their experiences while in the Sudan. Thus those returnees interviewed who were old enough to have worked in agriculture or as (agro) pastoralists while living in Eritrea frequently described how their livelihood strategies had perforce had to change, and often change radically, in the Sudan. A great number of those who had been agropastoralists or pastoralists had become entirely settled workers or farmers: their livelihoods had undergone fundamental change. The point was frequently made that being a farm labourer need not necessarily give the best preparation for post-return independent agriculture. Several returnees spoke of how hard times were, without the safety net, however minimal and patchy that might have been, of access to tractors, implements for hire and other services. Some mentioned having

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<sup>20</sup> Hadgu *et al* 1995: 22

decided to put off the start of cultivation of crops, because they did not feel they would not be able to cope. It was additionally pointed out that many returnees had lived in towns while in the Sudan, thereby becoming distanced from any rural, agricultural roots they may have had. The position of younger returnees was discussed: they might either never have worked on the land, or be averse to doing so.

### *Economic Activities*

The ways in which returnee households are coping with post-return economic exigencies represent another element in the potential process of integration. Research has indicated that for many, focus has perforce had to narrow so significantly that questions of interaction with the wider community and negotiation of mutually compatible relationships have had to be postponed.

Migration, especially among younger men, is becoming increasingly significant as an economic coping strategy. Such movement is both within Eritrea and further afield, predominantly to the Sudan. The GoE does plan to develop irrigated agriculture and to provide work opportunities for far larger numbers of people than would ever have been feasible in the past. This may well eventually lead to a reduction in migration, but the possibility remains that for many residents of the Southwest lowlands diversification of livelihood strategies will continue to be the norm. Certainly a number of male returnees described how they were either considering moving on to Asmara or elsewhere to find work, or that a member of their household had already done so. While returnees share the limited economic options available with the local population, research suggests greater willingness among male returnees to contemplate either short or longer-term migration. Another differentiation, and one noted several times, is that PROFERI returnees have the luxury of several options. They can choose to retain their land and livestock allocation, or to make use of it as they wish, by leaving household members in the lowlands; they can sell their land and/or livestock and use the capital to provide a base for future economic activities.

It should be noted here that FHHs in general do not demonstrate anything like the same flexibility in terms of being able to weigh options for location and diversification. In addition, an impression of acute isolation was sometimes gleaned from discussions with women in such households: integration was perceived as an opportunity for give and take, for mutually productive relationships. It was felt that these take time and a degree at least of security to develop fully; such luxuries were often lacking. Several returnee women in this group living in Asmara who described their activities since return said they had had to move on from the lowlands, effectively cutting off their connection with the post-return activities, specifically the agricultural component.

### ***Gender Issues in Post-Return Integration***

#### *General government policy and practice*

When discussing the GoE approach to gender issues, observers are united in their approval of the position consistently taken on gender equity: a clear and positive commitment exists. So too do "a supportive policy environment and strong political will and commitment for creating gender equality".<sup>21</sup> It should also be stated here that although there is disagreement expressed as to the route towards gender equality, observers are in no doubt about the desire to achieve this goal. By contrast, there may be nations elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa that have instituted more detailed and elaborate policy mechanisms with regard to activities on gender issues, but have failed to address such matters constructively. There is genuine will within the government, the importance of which cannot be ignored.

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<sup>21</sup> Tadria 1997: 7; see also UNICEF 1995



Nevertheless, specific and pro-active initiatives and implementing structures may become necessary. There is no dedicated chapter or section in the Draft Constitution on gender issues and initiatives to promote greater equity. Deeply entrenched patriarchal structures and resultant acute gender inequality may require greater direction from government. At present no organisation exists that would have the capacity and potential to monitor government gender policy and practice. Such measures might serve to hasten the evolution of sustainable change and also to monitor the extent of genuine progress. There are indications in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Report to the 4<sup>th</sup> UN Conference on Women that this crucial issue of the gap between policy and practice, between governmental initiatives to increase and strengthen women's participation, and reality in the villages and settlement sites, must be addressed.<sup>22</sup>

However, if communities are to be mobilised, there must be clear mechanisms to ensure that this occurs. These should ideally incorporate a core element of community-generated activities, in addition to any higher-level initiatives deemed necessary. One potential danger of allowing change to evolve 'naturally' is that this process may result in the all too lengthy survival of the gender gap. The significant developments seen during the years of struggle may otherwise be dissipated or even lost.

#### *Gender equity and integration*

The general precepts of GoE approaches to greater gender equity apply to returnee women and those with whom they live and come into contact, as do the concerns expressed. Nonetheless, the various and widely different experiences of exile will often have considerable effect on how such issues are acknowledged and addressed. At present, however, the government impetus seems to be towards greater focus on shared goals and forward planning than on the inclusion of different perceptions in debate and implementation. Heterogeneous experiences may become subsumed within a wider, more broad brush approach that effectively denies opportunities for true internal development of majority views. Integration may become a shibboleth to be pursued at the cost of genuine negotiation that would anchor the often extremely substantial changes required in behaviour and attitude in a more sustainable manner.

It might be more constructive to view gender equity and integration as aspects of the total project of nation building; one without the other would surely be unsustainable, imposed by government fiat rather than by a process of negotiation and discussion. 'Integration' in itself encapsulates the notion of change. If it accepted that 're-integration' is a hollow premise due to the enormous varieties of experience and perception within the Eritrean population as a whole (including returnees), then a return to the *status quo ante* is entirely untenable. As such, issues of gender equity are inextricably linked to the preparations of the foundations of the new society; they are also essential to any longer-term development of a truly integrated nation whose ethos incorporates the achievements of the liberation struggle.

#### *Changes in Refugee and Returnee Gender Relations*

Research for this chapter indicates that many refugee women's gender rôles have undergone profound changes after flight, often as a result of dire necessity.<sup>23</sup> Women who would previously never have worked outside the household had to do so in order to assist the survival of their families. Nonetheless, many returnee women described how they, and a significant number of other women, had either maintained their traditional gender rôles, or were actually made to confine themselves even more to the private domain, due to religious pressures within the Sudan. Thus many women's lives have seen considerable shifts, either in a more traditional direction or sometimes towards considerable autonomy. All such factors may have profound

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<sup>22</sup> This 1995 document provides a frank and detailed account of government views and socio-cultural barriers to gender equity.

<sup>23</sup> There is considerable discussion of this subject in the literature: see Kuhlman 1989 & 1994; Kibreab 1995 & 1996a & b; Oku Bright 1985 & 1994; Bascom 1996.

repercussions on the ways in which integration occurs, or indeed whether this is satisfactorily achieved. Certainly many returnee women expressed their scepticism with regard to the speedy development of a well-integrated social order, in which they felt in accord with local women.

Another finding of this particular piece of research is that while significant numbers of returnees, men and women, may have maintained altered gender relations since repatriation, others have not. Interviewees (female, male and those in FHHs) in Hagas, Keren and Asmara described how return had ushered in, or re-introduced, more restrictive practices: their views varied on the acceptability of such changes. This finding adds to the growing body of research on various aspects of gender relations in post-war Eritrea that has highlighted the quite significant resurgence of traditional attitudes and behaviour, and the profound strength of such beliefs.<sup>24</sup> Such resurgence could have considerable ramifications for the achievement of gender equity, and also for integration.

For instance, the most important decision made by many returnees in the recent past was whether or not to repatriate. '[M]en are making the repatriation decisions for unassisted households. 61 % of the male respondents in Wad el Hileau indicate that they will not consult their wives at all... The remaining 39 % imply that they will tell their wives of their decision, but only one suggests that his wife will have any substantive input'.<sup>25</sup> The question of whether wives had been consulted was put to two groups of male returnees in Hagas and Keren. Their responses were uniform, and could best be summarised as a mixture of incomprehension and amusement: why should wives have any part to play, when it is the husband's rôle to be in charge of the household? What is significant here is that several of these men's wives do now work outside the household, i.e. in this respect gender relations have changed somewhat.

While there are indications of some changes in gender relations, and while the positive experiences of what appears from this research to be a small minority of returnees will doubtless have some influence, there is little suggestion as yet of a genuine revolution or even a more modest shift. The determined stance of the GoE may eventually have effect, although the response may well in certain instances be entrenchment rather than alteration. Another longer-term influence may be the large numbers of FHHs: they will have no choice but to develop new gender relations with the wider society. So too will ex-fighter women, whose perceived radicalism, and the negative attitudes of the majority of those around them, do rather give the lie to any hope of speedy improvement towards greater equity and equality.

#### *Returnee women's participation in the public sphere*

This study has found virtually no indication of even minimal participation by female returnees in the public arena; in this they are at one with local women. On the ground there appears to be far greater lip service to ideals than adherence to practical measures designed to increase women's involvement. It should be pointed out that it is often women themselves who are equally or even most resistant to any such changes in gender rôles and relations. Until women participate more, initially in village-level activities, the promotion of gender equity is bound to be limited. So too will activities aimed at greater integration of elements of the community: if women's voices are unheard, how can any decisions be genuinely inclusive and foster integration and cohesion.

#### *Gender-Specific Initiatives for Returnees*

Most returnees interviewed on the question of gender-specific initiatives said they had little or no information about government-run projects that were earmarked for FHHs or other female groups. Quite a number of women seemed at least a little concerned about the absence of such

<sup>24</sup> Studies by Kane 1996 on education in the lowlands, on gender dimensions of health care by Issayas 1996 and Araya 1997, on the national political environment by Garcetti & Gruber (forthcoming), on the gender situation analysis by Gruber 1998, and the various UNICEF studies from 1994, 1995 & 1996, consider various elements of this issues.

<sup>25</sup> Bascom 1996: 71

safety nets; the majority of those who were worried about this subject expressed a keen interest to know more and if possible to be involved in such activities. The fact of the matter is that: 'There are no specific [PROFERI] programmes addressing the gender issue, the shelter provision being the only visible priority given to women family heads'.<sup>26</sup> However, various PROFERI components did actually address the issue of FHHs, with allocation commensurate with the percentage these constitute of the entire returnee population. Thus 30 % of the crop production package component was given to FHHs; FHHs were similarly targeted so as to receive a fair proportion of farm tools. In the event ca. 46 % of beneficiaries were women. While in certain settlements and sites, e.g. Alebu, vulnerable households did receive assistance in the construction of houses and clearing of some land, in others, e.g. Fanco, they did not.

The National Union of Eritrean Women represents the one national NGO with a specific remit to advance gender equity and equality. It has been involved with female returnees from the earliest days of repatriation. NUEW runs a range of credit schemes, for market traders in Tessenai town, for those involved in the plantations at Ali Gidir and for women working at Talatasher. In Alebu NUEW has provided 20 donkeys and 20 water bags for FHHs. The donkeys are used for collection of water, fuel wood and reeds for making baskets. Women decided, by a process that is unclear, to allocate the donkeys and water bags to 'older women with status in the community'. Others walk and carry water, wood and reeds on their backs. NUEW has also initiated a dressmaking project.

#### *Women's self help initiatives*

Many of the returnee women interviewed for the DFID study described their participation in *equb* (Tigrinya) or *sanduk* (Tigre) rotating credit schemes. The value of such support networks is incalculable, and may well aid the development of greater integration of various returnee groups. However, at present there seem to be few credit schemes where both returnees and local residents are members. In this respect it could ultimately be advisable to integrate all self-help initiatives into a more national, or at least regional, framework. This might create opportunities for crosscutting groupings that would otherwise have been slow to develop.

#### *Female returnees' access to education and health care*

This study does not indicate that returnee women's occasionally greater involvement in the economic sphere is extended to decision-making in other areas such as children's education, women's entitlement to literacy training, females' access to health care and choice regarding family spacing, to name just a few key points. The complexities of achieving genuine, sustainable (rather than situation-specific, short-term) changes in gender relations is revealed in the matter of who makes crucial decisions regarding the very lives of members of the household. In this respect, men remain in complete and invariably undisputed charge. In addition, integration, in the sense of the development of a more generally egalitarian and inclusive polity, is unattainable if all are not allowed to be involved in decisions and matters that have enormous bearing on both individuals' lives and the future shape of society.

#### *Education*

When considering whether the opportunity for education is available to female returnees, it is apparent that supply-side provision of schools, teachers and textbooks is only part of the picture. Practical considerations such as poverty and distance from school may preclude both boys' and girls' involvement in education. In addition, and critically, parents' and communities' attitudes towards the relevance and appropriateness of girls' education are central to any discussion of both gender equity and also the eventual success of integration. The case must be that unless all members of a community are given equal opportunities in terms of social perceptions and expectations, however horrendous and limiting the constraints of poverty may be, the concept of

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<sup>26</sup> Rosso 1996: 33

integration will always remain a hollow cause. In Eritrea, as in many other contexts, the fact is that gender equity of entitlement and access to education and health care is minimal.

This piece of research has failed to indicate any widespread and returnee-specific differentiation in terms of attitudes towards girls' enrolment and, crucially, retention in education. Possibilities of access and entitlement have been found to emanate more from individual households' perceptions than from any general attitudinal shift while in exile. Fathers tend to be the ultimate arbiters of their children's education; returnee individuals described a range of reasons why they had either decided to educate their daughters as well as their sons, or why they would wish that they could do so. However, there tended to be broad consensus among those returnees opposed to girls' education as to why it is inadvisable or unnecessary, and in these views they were in overall agreement with the local population. Thus only girls are felt to be of risk of losing their traditional values through education. Education might prompt girls and young women to step beyond their time-hallowed rôles as daughters, wives and mothers. For instance, early marriage is the norm for very many girls in Eritrea: this represents an absolutely central element of people's low prioritisation of girls' education. When girls marry as early as 10 or 12 (and this they continue to do, despite vigorous attempts to the contrary by the GoE), parents frequently consider girls' education to be entirely superfluous.

In practical terms, the GoE allocated the entire UNDP Independence Bonus to the building of fourteen schools in the returnee resettlement areas, with the intention that returnees and local residents should benefit. The educational coverage at the time the bonus was awarded was about 12%; with those fourteen schools, this is expected to increase to 30-35. Despite the construction of the schools, as matters stand at present, there are still very large numbers of PROFERI and other returnees (and local residents) who are not deriving full benefit from education initiatives. In addition to gender inequality, other factors include shortfalls in provision. A further limiting issue is cost: parents of children in government-run primary schools must pay a registration fee per term; while in some instances this is as low as 5 Nakfa, this might well give pause for thought.

#### *Healthcare*

Many returnees, especially women, expressed the view that they had had better access to health care provision while refugees. While this was the case only among those that had been settled in camps or dedicated refugee settlements, it is consistent with findings from other situations of forced migration. Thus in this context, as with education, there are enormous supply-side constraints currently operating in Eritrea, which preclude the easy access of almost everyone, irrespective of sex or prevailing gender perceptions.

The GoE intention with regard to provision of health care to returnees has been as for education: that any facilities should ultimately benefit the general population. Both temporary and more permanent clinics and health posts were constructed at the various PROFERI sites. In addition clinics are well established in Hagas, and the town of Gulu; returnees in Tessenai are able to make use of the newly constructed hospital, while those in Keren have access to the refurbished hospital in town. Despite such attention, it is undoubtedly the case that many returnees share much the same predicament as other residents of the lowlands: a very significant shortfall at all levels of health care, in terms of both numbers of health professionals and facilities. Those in the PROFERI sites might count themselves lucky, especially when it is borne in mind that the majority of Eritreans are an average of 20 km from a health facility of any description, a distance frequently compounded by mountainous or very rough terrain.

However, it has to be stressed that it was with regard to women's access and entitlement to health care that traditional gender perceptions came most to the fore in a detrimental sense, even more so than for education. As with education, there appeared little differentiation between

returnees and other sectors of the population: where variation in attitude and behaviour emerged was according to ethnicity and/or religion. Thus Muslim Tigre and Hedari men, whether or not returnees, were loathe to contemplate any changes in what they described as centuries' old practices, where women and girls were not to seek health care from strangers. Their wives and daughters evinced other wishes, but stated that they would seldom have any opportunity to contravene tradition.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The two laudable but hitherto largely theoretical concepts of integration and gender equity in the new Eritrea can be considered as belonging to the same continuum. The government of Eritrea intends to create a nation built on these guiding principles, yet neither implementation structures nor genuinely localised methods and means of dissemination of information and directives have been put into effect. As yet there appears to have been insufficient consideration given to the realities of how to bring about profound and lasting alteration of embedded tradition and cultural norms in a situation of cultural, ethnic and religious heterogeneity. While the intentions of the government cannot be faulted with regard to proclaimed purpose and a clearly defined perceptual framework, without practical application in the villages, settlement sites and hearts and minds of the Eritrean population, such innovation will have little relevance. Otherwise the gap between principle and practice, intention and application, may become wider and less easy to bridge.

There is considerable, it has been argued unrealistic, reliance in government instruments and policy documents that integration and gender equity will come about through people's own will and efforts in the communities of Eritrea. This approach depends heavily on individuals' and communities' desire for change, as well as their subsequent willingness and ability both to institute and sustain any such changes. Many of these would have to be fundamental, and to place most responsibility on the people themselves, without putting in place clear policy directives and support on the ground, might be asking too much. In order for people to acknowledge and accept that both the notion and practice of equity are integral to independent Eritrea, stakeholders must be convinced that each initiative has at its centre the promotion and establishment of an acceptable approach to civil society and social order. Reassurance must also always be given to those who do not directly benefit from any one specific initiative. Programmes and projects must be accountable to those involved; there must be evidence these are working towards an eventual (and not too long delayed) general improvement of living conditions and opportunity. Such criteria have not always been met.

In practical terms of programme implementation, whether with returnee or other primary stakeholders, there is a great need for government transparency and opportunity for negotiation. There are indications that PROFERI beneficiaries are frequently perceived by other returnees and local residents as especially, even unfairly, assisted in a context of pervasive food and general economic insecurity. Such assistance, invariably known in scrupulous detail to those without any connection to PROFERI, has from time to time been described as ushering in hierarchies of favour and benefit. One relatively frequent remark made in various lowland locations was that a combination of a lack of GoE explanation of the PROFERI programme and the actual tangible evidence of differential treatment was almost inevitably going to create an atmosphere of disquiet. This atmosphere is unlikely to assist speedy integration.

As has been noted elsewhere in this chapter, the GoE is engaged in the project of the creation of a nation with foundations in equity for all, regardless of gender, religion, ethnic group or other criteria. It can be argued that integration *per se* constitutes an intrinsic and crucial aspect of the development of civil society and the polity towards this ideal. While the focus here has been on the efforts to bring about integration of returnees, 'integration' writ large surely incorporates the

notion of equity, not least in terms of negotiation of future national guiding principles and the more humble but equally crucial daily organisation of life at communal level. Present evidence suggests that the gender element of the integration equation would benefit from more pro-active initiatives from government in regional and local offices and bodies. While post-return activities to foster integration have on occasion led to feelings of hierarchy and narrow preference that have in fact obviated some of the good intentions of the GoE, the situation is that in terms of gender equity there has as yet been minimal intervention. The more diffuse approach to grappling with the profoundly entrenched resistance to re-negotiation of gender relations reveals the difficulties of responding to an endemic situation as opposed to addressing a unique occurrence, that of refugee return.

This attitude towards the creation of the nation has its ramifications in terms of social integration. Returnees come from all the ethnic groups, and such identity and identification, as well as religious affiliation, cultural mores, gender relations, and other criteria, will affect their responses to the unifying strategies of the GoE. While people may wish to accept the over-arching identity inherent in being Eritrean, they may also wish to continue to acknowledge, and have acknowledged, their other means of self and group identification, and their different histories. The ways in which such complex networks of perceptions and allegiances are addressed will have critical importance for the development of an integrated Eritrean national polity. Returnees will play an extremely important part; their own views must have space, as must those of other groups within the population. Residence in another society with its own cultural and religious traditions will have left an indelible mark on refugees, many of whom will indeed have been born in 'exile'. Until 'repatriation' they will have known no other home – Eritrea will be a foreign land, whose customs and *modus vivendi* will have to be learnt. Of course many refugees born in Eritrea will have both to re-learn Eritrean ways and somehow accommodate the changes which have occurred in the fabric of society since their forced migration.

It remains to be seen whether and how the disparate constructions of identity come together in the national project, and how far alternate views may be incorporated. Much has been written of the prospects of continuous negotiation, if not discord, inherent in the absence of nationally binding sources of identity and cohesion/integration. 'The modern nation-state... grows less out of natural [sic] facts –such as language, blood, soil and race- but is a quintessential cultural product, a product of the collective imagination... [N]ations, especially in multi-ethnic settings, are tenuous collective projects, not eternal natural facts'.<sup>27</sup> If a collective imagining of the Eritrean nation is to be introduced after a period of great disruption and antagonism, in effect created anew after the resolution of conflict so deep-rooted that previous unifying memories and myths are no longer tenable, then all groups within society must feel part of a common cause. Only then might an integrated polity be achievable.

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<sup>27</sup> Appadurai 1993: 414-415

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## APPENDIX TWO

### ABSTRACT OF PROPOSED PAPER FOR THE 42<sup>nd</sup> ANNUAL MEETING OF THE AFRICAN STUDIES' ASSOCIATION

**Panel Title: Gender, Race and Resistance in the History of Eritrea**

**Panel Chair: Asgedet Stefanos and/or Ruth Iyob**

**Other Panel Members: Giulia Barrera, Dept. of History, Northwestern University  
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#### ***Issues of Gender, Return and the Creation of the Nation***

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Since liberation in 1991 some 190,000 refugees have returned to Eritrea from exile. Perhaps 70,000 live in female-headed households; many are among the very poorest in society. Returnee communities present a microcosm of both the tensions and opportunities potentially resulting from the wide-ranging legal and constitutional challenges to traditional gender roles and relations instituted by the Government of Eritrea. The two extremes of predominant and profound gender inequity, based on centuries of customary behaviour and attitudes, and more egalitarian practices frequently co-exist in one location.

While a very few women and yet fewer men experienced forced migration as a liberation from restrictive gender roles and relations, in that they had perforce to move beyond prevailing perceptions of appropriate behaviour, the great majority of women have had no choice but to return to the old ways. There is a growing body of research on various aspects of gender relations in post-war Eritrea that has highlighted the resurgence of traditional attitudes and behaviour, and the resilience of these in the face of change (e.g. Garcetti & Gruber (forthcoming); Gruber 1998; Kane 1996; MFA 1995; UNICEF 1994 & 1996).

My paper examines the ways in which returnees, as individuals and as members of communities may either help or hinder the development of the Eritrean nation as a genuinely equitable and cohesive polity, where women and men have equal rights, duties and expectations.

#### **References**

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