

Casamance Refugee Women's Engagement with Development Programming in the Gambia

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Abstract

In situations of protracted displacement, integration is often the only viable option. Regaining independence and self-reliance is key to medium and long term re-establishment of lives in exile. Where the receiving country is a developing country, the practical challenges of integration are compounded by the existing context of poverty into which refugees arrive. International and local agencies work to provide support through assistance programming including skills training but face diverse challenges which impact on outcomes for refugee women. Whilst displacement may bring positive social change for some, gains can be eroded by shortcomings within assistance programming.

Through the lens of gendered experiences of forced migration, this paper discusses how Casamance refugee women in The Gambia engage with development programming such as skills training, their access to programmes, and to what degree the refugee women are able to successfully translate training into sustainable livelihoods.

Introduction

Refugees from the Casamance region of Senegal continue to enter The Gambia as a result of what is Africa's longest running conflict (Evans 2004). Mostly residing in Gambian border villages with a minority continuing to urban areas, women and girls form more than half of this refugee population. As Mehta points out, whilst displacement may bring positive social change, which may reorder social and gender relations and previously experienced social and cultural restrictions, programming fails to minimise the loss encountered during displacement (2011: 1). The potential gain on one hand and the loss on the other limit the potential particularly of women and girls and traps them in vulnerable situations, albeit different ones. This article discusses how Casamance refugee women settling in The Gambia as a result of the continued instability in the Casamance region access and engage with assistance programming such as skills training, and to what

degree the refugee women successfully translate training into sustainable livelihoods and, if they do not, what the barriers are to doing so. How do these women see their futures and those of their daughters now that their traditional livelihoods as subsistence farmers have been disrupted and replaced with the uncertainties of farming poor soil in Gambian host villages or, for example, taking in washing in the urban areas, or adapting to learning new skills? What sense do they make of food and material assistance and of skills training in moving forward their displaced lives? Through the lens of gendered experiences of forced migration, this article considers the effectiveness and stumbling points of assistance programming as experienced and reported by Casamance women, and explores whether programming in The Gambia meets refugee expectations. The aim is to employ the approach to assisting refugees in The Gambia to inform approaches in other develop-

ing country contexts, particularly in situations of protracted refugee situations (Crisp 2003), and to highlight which facets of assistance programming would be useful to develop or alter. Standard or long-used methods of “dealing with” or approaching the “problem” of refugees are logistically difficult to change. But if, as is the consensus, assistance programming has the intention to ultimately recreate self-reliance, independence, and to restore dignity (Crisp 2003; Hunter 2009; UNHCR 2011), then methods that are currently only partially effective warrant revision. This article argues that the evidently limited success of assistance programming in The Gambia results in women’s lives being constrained or diminished and that this is particularly apparent regarding the translation of skills training into sustainable income generation. Such limitations negatively impact the women’s ability to regain self-reliance and their integration, and generate continued reliance on assistance rather than facilitating a pathway from assistance to independence. Where repatriation is unlikely in the foreseeable future, as it is in the case of Casamance, the “forgotten” solution of integration (Jacobsen 2001) must be fully and effectively engaged with by international organisations, their local partners, and by refugees in order to support refugees in rebuilding lives.

Competing forces such as traditional social and family expectations of gendered lives and life potentials, material desires generated by the media and urban experience, and the awareness that continuing a subsistence farming lifestyle in exile necessarily requires support, influence Casamance refugee women’s attitudes to their present and their future. Women’s expressed experiences of the past and present and their hopes and desire for an improved future – or at least a self-reliant future – in the face of current deprivation and vulnerability, must underpin policy related to women refugees in developing country contexts. This is particularly so in situations of protracted displacement where local integration is the viable option, such as with Casamance refugees. Testimonies such as, “My father forced me to abandon my education and marry. I don’t want my daughters to have the life I had,

they will have education”, provide evidence that women have a vision of an improved future for their daughters if not for themselves.

Those who are involved in the design and delivery of assistance and programming are in some ways also guardians of access to a changed and, as Mehta notes, a positive future. However, as Hunter (2009: 2-3) points out in a criticism of UNHCR and its policy toward self-reliance, the potential benefits to refugees of a policy which encourages self-reliance are undermined by accompanying reductions of material assistance due to reduced UNHCR budgets. According to Hunter, “The effects are paradoxical. Refugees are expected to exercise rights they do not have to achieve a degree of independence which is not even expected of local populations in the same context and without access to the bare minimum of resources.” Going further, she states that “refugee self-reliance is not possible within the current framework of UNHCR responses to refugee situations.” The presence of adequately supported programming by UNHCR is crucial not only with regard to the present requirements of establishing refugee livelihoods, but to the reconstruction of futures for refugees and to finding long-term solutions for those displaced, particularly in protracted situations.

It is useful to note at this point that borders between The Gambia and Casamance have been, and still are, porous, with little or no official regulation. Cross-border trade and marriage have been common and members of the same families have settled on both sides. Some women respondents in this study were born in The Gambia and moved to Casamance upon marrying a Casamance man. These women then fled across the border with their husbands and children. Whether these women can be called refugees is debateable: On the one hand, they feel that they are, on the other hand, they acknowledge that they have ties to The Gambia which assist their relocation. Their possession of Senegalese ID, with which they may acquire a refugee identification card and access food aid and other assistance available to refugees, is one challenge faced by aid organisations.

A brief outline of the fieldwork and methodology is presented which forms the basis of the data discussed here, followed by some background information on the Casamance conflict and refugees in The Gambia. The article then continues with an empirical discussion of the presence and effectiveness of skills training and outcomes from the view of Casamance women refugees in The Gambia.

Methodology

Fieldwork was conducted in several phases from January 2010 until April 2012 in both rural and urban locations of The Gambia. This article is based on data gathered from rural locations from summer 2010 to February 2011, from urban locations during May-June 2011, and on combined rural and urban fieldwork through to April 2012.

Interviews were held with Casamance refugees and refugee leaders, along with discussions with staff members of international and national agencies working with refugees, such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the World Food Programme (WFP), the Gambia Red Cross (GRC), the Gambia Food and Nutrition Agency (GAFNA), and the Gambia Immigration Department (GID). GAFNA is the current implementing partner of UNHCR and has personnel in the rural Foni districts where around 80 per cent of Casamance refugees are settled. The GRC was formerly the implementing partner of UNHCR with GAFNA until summer 2010. Discussions with staff members of international and national agencies and departments working with Casamance refugees formed the background of the research in terms of the conflict and its impact on The Gambia, past and present food and material assistance, livelihood programming, and locations of refugees.

Interviews comprised a mixture of individual interviews and group interviews, but interviews were mainly at household level. This was for practical reasons as it was common for people to "join" an interview when visiting another's compound, and this was difficult to control without causing misunderstanding. For this reason, very few men- or women-only interviews were car-

ried out. It was also common to find two different households present in the same compound because word had travelled that a researcher was visiting. In total, nine focus groups in rural areas were conducted, 32 household interviews, and ten individual interviews. It is difficult to say how many respondents took part in focus groups and household interviews as some respondents wandered in and out of both. However, there were a total of approximately 45 respondents in urban areas and approximately 60 respondents at household level in rural areas. On-going interaction and participant observation complemented the interviews. Women were encouraged to speak out during interviews and to put forward their experiences. In fact, they did not appear reluctant to talk once I commented that they were very quiet and actively asked them to give their view,¹ and men willingly allowed women to speak once the differences between "men problems" and "women problems" were highlighted and acknowledged.

The UNHCR Assessment March 2010 informed the selection of areas for interviews and access to respondents was initially through GAFNA office and field staff and GRC staff, who made introductions to refugee leaders, after which snowballing methods were used. The rationale for selection was to largely avoid villages and urban areas which had been visited for the UNHCR Assessment in an attempt to avoid rehearsed answers, and to cover a wide geographic area rather than focusing on one village or area.

All interviews were recorded with the permission of respondents.² Interviews were mainly in Jola or Mandinka and a male and female research assistant acted as translator from Jola or Mand-

¹ In previous rural interviews, both men and women were likely to keep quiet when an *Alkalo* – village leader – was present: He was allowed to speak for others, or when refugees spoke, their information was measured and diplomatic. Responses were more free when the *Alkalo* was absent. Similarly, in urban areas, respondents would initially let the refugee leader speak first, after which refugees would speak for themselves.

² Ethical considerations were guided by the advice laid down by The Oral History Society www.oralhistory.org.uk/ethics.php.

inka to English where necessary and appropriate. At times, English or French was used or a combination of languages. For the sake of anonymity, names of respondents have been altered.

Gambia and Senegal and the Casamance Conflict

Gambia is geographically West Africa's smallest state, a 48-kilometre-wide strip of land following the River Gambia and running east to west through Senegal. 52 per cent of The Gambia's 1.8 million inhabitants live in urban areas and 48 per cent in rural areas (CIA 2012). The Casamance region of Senegal is to the south of The Gambia, while the capital Dakar, where the government of Senegal is located, lies in the north of Senegal.

The geographic separation of the Casamance region from Dakar has produced some long-term tensions regarding the marginalisation of the south and a perceived exploitation by Dakar of the south's resources without a corresponding provision of financial, material and infrastructural input. The unrest stems from an unkept promise for the independence of the Casamance region said to have been made by the President of Senegal, President Senghor, at the time of independence in 1960. Dissatisfaction and frustration developed amongst the Casamançais as a result of a lack of progress on this matter, and for the past 30 years the people of Casamance have continued to want independence from Senegal. Expressed at first by popular protest during the early 1980s and then by guerrilla war from the late 1980s to the early 1990s (Evans 2002), the tensions continue to date with intermittent incursions along the Casamance/Gambian border in the Foni districts, particularly since 2006.

In 1982 the separatist *Mouvement des Forces Démocratiques de Casamance* (MFDC) was formed and resulted in armed conflict between the MFDC and Senegalese military forces. Over the years, MFDC forces fragmented into two main groups which then divided into smaller splinter groups (Evans 2002, 2004). The possibility of opposition forces speaking with one voice in a peace negotiation presents a fundamental challenge to lasting peace, and numerous

attempts at brokering peace have failed to produce long-term peace and stability.³

The Casamance conflict has been characterised by sporadic fighting between the MFDC and the Senegalese armed forces as well as by factional fighting. MFDC-led attacks on villages thought to oppose MFDC aims, plus Senegalese military-led raids on villages considered to harbour MFDC members, have made the conflict treacherous for civilians who are suspected by all sides. In 2006, the Government of Senegal increased its military presence in an attempt to eradicate opposition activity and restore stability. After an initial lull, this presence actually served to increase instability, and the peaks and troughs of fighting and attacks on villages continued.

Since 2006, the previous pattern of refugee flight and return has largely been replaced by a permanent movement of refugees into The Gambia. The shift to permanent displacement since 2006 was recognised by UNHCR and the Government of The Gambia by the issuance of refugee identity cards to Casamançais. Hostilities peaked again in 2009 (see Home Office 2010: 16)⁴ and again in 2010. Throughout the period of the 2010-2011 fieldwork, fighting occurred most nights in border areas. Refugee influxes continued through 2011 and early 2012.

While Casamance remains the most fertile area of Senegal, farming livelihoods in this region have been severely disrupted by the conflict and by the presence of land mines.⁵ Refu-

³ 1991 Peace Treaty between MFDC and Senegalese Government signed in Guinea Bissau; 1992 Casamance Peace Commission held in Guinea Bissau; 1993 Peace Treaty signed in Ziguenchor; 1998 crisis meeting held in The Gambia between Gambia, Senegal and Guinea Bissau; 1999 peace talks in Banjul resulting in the short-lived January 2000 Resolution; 2003 peace talks resulting in peace deal and amnesty for MFDC; 2004, new MFDC leader rejects Senegal's amnesty; 2007, ECOWAS produces a conflict prevention framework. The more recent attempts at peace were supported by President Jammeh of The Gambia and President Wade of Senegal and mediated by Guinea Bissau and ECOWAS. (Sources: Gambian newspapers 1982-2007.)

⁴ This report provides a useful chronology of events of the Casamance conflict.

⁵ There continue to be occasional instances of death and injury by landmines in Casamance despite

gees are reluctant to return to Casamance and are fearful of opposition groups and of Senegalese forces who occupy their villages of origin and individual compounds, having appropriated or destroyed houses, land, crops, and livestock, which formed the core of village livelihoods. Refugees' thoughts of return are countered by fear of inadvertent association with opposition forces and possible punishment by Senegalese military or other opposition groups.

Refugees in The Gambia

According to GID registration data and a UNHCR-WFP Joint Assessment Mission (December 2009), there were 8,241 registered refugees from Casamance in The Gambia in March 2010 (UNHCR 2010). At the time of writing, no assessment mission had been conducted since December 2009, but GID and GAFNA field officers constantly log new refugees who arrive at border villages. This figure does not include unregistered Casamance refugees who were absent at the time of the registration exercise. Local estimates of the total number of Casamance refugees (registered and unregistered) living in The Gambia are thought to be between 11,000 and 12,000 (GAFNA and GRC February 2012). Casamance refugees represent the largest refugee group in The Gambia, with smaller populations originating from Sierra Leone (134), Liberia (665), and Côte d'Ivoire (207). At the end of 2011, the total of all *registered* refugees in The Gambia was 9,390 (GID data December 2011).⁶

The majority of rural refugees reside in Gambian host villages in the Foni district adjacent to the border with Casamance. Most of these villages are between 500 metres and five kilometres from the border. A handful of host villages are 15 to 20 kilometres away. The number of host villages varies constantly as refugees move from

de-mining programmes. For example, Jeanie Waddell-Fournier, an ICRC delegate, was killed in September 2006; in May 2008, a man was killed and 20 passengers injured when a bus drove over a landmine (<http://www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/feature/2009/senegal-feature-231209.htm>).

⁶ Due to cessation on 30 June 2012, Liberians were offered assisted repatriation or permanent local integration assisted by UNHCR.

one village to another or to urban areas should they, for instance, discover they have a family member elsewhere. Drawing on figures from the UNHCR Assessment 2007, the UNHCR-WFP Joint Assessment Mission December 2009, and the UNHCR Assessment 2010, and on current records of UNHCR, GID and GAFNA, the number of villages that currently host, or have hosted in the past, Casamance refugees is 83.

Approximately 21 per cent (1,747) of registered Casamance refugees live in urban areas of the Gambia and are spread over a wide area (UNHCR-WFP 2009) within 30 minutes of Serrekunda, and in Brikama, The Gambia's second largest town. The current urban figure is thought to be closer to 2500 when unregistered refugees are included (conversation with GAFNA representative, April 2012). This larger number is supported by the fieldwork in urban areas, where at least half of all respondents were unregistered. Refugees remain unregistered for a variety of reasons, including being absent at the time of a rural registration exercise, or the cost of going to Banjul to register at GID. Some of the respondents without a refugee identification card had acquired Gambian papers.

In rural areas, Casamance refugees stay with family members if they can locate them, or with local villagers. Being host to a refugee family increases poverty and vulnerability in terms of food security, health, and housing for the hosts themselves, and many refugees in rural settings move several times looking for family members or when tensions become too much between host and refugee family. Some rural refugees move to urban areas for work or to improve their housing situation or to find independent housing. Others go directly to the urban areas when they know of a family member already there. The result is a highly mobile refugee population in the first few years after arrival, but especially in the three to 12 months after arrival as they seek family connections and independent housing.

Most Casamance refugees in The Gambia are subsistence farmers, but there are a few exceptions in both rural and urban areas, such as those engaged in work as mechanics, carpenters, fishermen, or tailors. However, it is true to say that

the large majority of refugees are from a farming background and have had limited education, particularly amongst women and girls. Those who attended school in Casamance experienced interrupted education due to the conflict and repeated flight and return before 2006. Since 2006, financial constraints in The Gambia have formed an additional barrier to completing education for many refugees.

Assistance to Casamance refugees in The Gambia

After the increase in refugees permanently displaced from Casamance to The Gambia after 2006, international agencies responded by providing refugees with the support of food aid and basic material items. Later, assistance was expanded to include host villagers in recognition of their own consequent vulnerability. In co-operation with UNHCR, WFP provided food assistance from September 2006 until July 2009, with a limited distribution until February 2010 to clear warehouses. During this same period, UNHCR, via GRC and GAFNA, supplied items such as latrines, water, sleeping mats, mosquito nets, and basic clothing items. After the final official WFP supply in July 2009, the focus of assistance switched from food aid and material items to sustainable livelihood programming, which continues to date.

In addition, from September 2006 until the time of writing, all Casamance refugees in The Gambia are entitled to refugee identity cards which allow them the freedom to live and move within The Gambia. The card provides the right to work, but this right is effectively limited to casual work due to an employment tax levied on foreign nationals, including ECOWAS citizens such as the Senegalese. The refugee identity card also entitles payment by UNHCR of refugee children's school fees up to a prescribed limit and allows access to free or reduced cost medical care at government hospitals and clinics upon referral by the UNHCR clinic. Possession of a refugee identity card removes the requirement to buy an annual residence/work permit and alien card. Refugee identity cards also allow access to sustainable livelihood programming, including skills training.

Livelihood programming in The Gambia

Largely, livelihood programming for Casamançais in The Gambia has focused on initiatives aimed at restoring farming practices in rural areas. Refugees in almost all rural areas are given land to farm by the village *alkalo*, although this land typically is on the edge of the village and is the least fertile. A significant element of livelihood programming was the distribution in May 2010 and May 2011 by UNHCR of tools, animals, and ground nut seeds to refugee families. The goal of the initiative was to develop the land refugees had been given, but success has been varied and limited by the numbers of animals and tools distributed, which was sufficient for only 400 refugee families on the basis of 4 families sharing one set of animals/tools.

Another related initiative is the establishment in larger rural settlements of community gardens. These are predominantly run by women on land given by the village and have been successful overall. However, in one location visited during fieldwork, it was reported by refugees that the garden initiative did not work well due to disputes over ownership of the produce and arguments with Gambian villagers who, on seeing the success of the garden, wanted to reclaim it. Where gardens have worked, the result is miraculous by comparison with the "kitchen" gardens many women try to plant next to their houses, which fail largely due to lack of hand tools and poor soil.

Refugee livelihood programming in The Gambia has also focused on capacity building for communities and individuals. Strengthening existing, or teaching new, competencies is key to the support offered to refugees to restore independence, but it has not always been successful. An example of community building for rural Casamançais is a bakery project run by refugees. Assisted at the outset with UNHCR funding for renting premises and purchasing raw materials for first production, the project foundered due to insufficient business knowledge among participants, despite some UNHCR managerial input (conversation with *Alkalo*, bakery co-operative members, and GRC representative, April 2011). The project has been restarted with a new purpose-built bakery

built on land donated by the village. Initially only men were involved in the bakery (conversation with bakery project chairman, February 2011), but the new project now also includes women committee members (GAFNA, August 2012).

Capacity building for individuals has focused on teaching refugees in both rural and urban areas new skills that can be a sustainable income-generating alternative to farming. Skills training opportunities vary from rural to urban settings and those available in rural settings are fewer in number but better accessed by refugees, whilst those in urban settings are more varied but have limited accessibility. The variety, access and engagement of these initiatives will be further discussed later in the article.

A further livelihood programming initiative has focused on micro-credit. At the request of UNHCR, the National Cooperative Credit Union of The Gambia (NACCUG) provided a micro-loan facility for all registered refugees aimed at small business start-ups. Refugees were asked to put forward a simple plan for their business and to state the amount of money required. This facility failed in 2010/11 due to the non-repayment of loans by refugees. UNHCR and the micro-credit facility came under heavy criticism by refugees who demanded grants, not loans, and this may partially explain the non-repayment. A further reason for non-repayment could be dissatisfaction on the part of refugees because in some cases only part of the money requested was actually given. Respondents stated that the money provided was not sufficient for business start-ups and so was instead spent on rent or food. GAFNA, on the other hand, observed that those refugees who "use the money to invest in business are doing well, whilst some have absconded and others use it in other ways" (conversation with GAFNA representative, August, 2012). In 2012, GAFNA had plans to train 100 urban refugees and to link them with NACCUG micro-loans, but at the time of writing this scheme had not yet started.

Other international donors are active in The Gambia in relation to refugees, including Concern Universal, who operate cross-border programmes, and USAID, whose emphasis is in Casa-

mance itself, while a number of local NGOs provide support at the local rural and urban levels.

Women and livelihood programming

Possession of a refugee identity card provides access to all sustainable livelihood programming, therefore it is important that refugees not only possess a card, but that they are also able to access programming.

Field work showed that the general benefits of having a refugee identity card seemed not to be known to all respondents, and interviews routinely became a forum for informing refugees of this. Due to the fluidity of interviews at household and group level, it is difficult to say exactly how many respondents were aware or unaware of the benefits. However, there was a clear impression that a significant number were not aware. An estimate would be that over 50 per cent of respondents in urban areas and 20 per cent of rural respondents were unaware that possession of a refugee identity card gave them access to free education and free or subsidised health care. Although the system of providing education and health care is not perfect (Hopkins forthcoming), this assistance is able to help reduce financial concerns of refugee families, leaving more money available for food, which all respondents expressed as their primary concern. The subject of livelihood programming and skills training as a further benefit of the refugee identity card was lost on many respondents, especially those who went directly to urban areas, almost all of whom said they had not received food supplies or any other material items since arriving in The Gambia. Their reasoning that no further assistance would be forthcoming since no basic assistance had been given could be seen as sound.

It could be argued that for rural refugees there is less of a need to press home the benefits of the refugee identity card, since livelihood programming and the information about it comes to them in the village in which they live rather than them having to seek it out. For urban refugees who are more dispersed and less visible (Hopkins forthcoming), being informed about programming is less certain and relies on social networks and being in contact with refugee lead-

ers. The effective dissemination of information could therefore be argued to be more crucial in their case.

Furthermore, access to programming goes beyond the possession of a refugee identity card and beyond the actual existence of programming and training to include logistics, knowledge, and psychological and physical health: knowing of the existence of programming and training, knowing where it is, having the money to travel to the place, knowing how to be a part of it, having the good health and motivation to travel, and being emotionally able to participate.

As noted above, the main focus of livelihood programming for Casamançais in The Gambia is on re-establishing farming practices in rural areas. However, the quality and quantity of land Casamance refugees are given by their hosts in The Gambia does not compare with what they farmed in Casamance and they cannot produce, even with seed and fertiliser assistance, a comparable crop. Their previous knowledge of soil and methods of maximising its potential cannot be applied to the land they have in The Gambia. Furthermore, the refugees had to leave behind their cattle, which provided fertiliser for crops. Thus refugees' attempts at regaining self-reliance through farming may face failure even before they begin.

Hunter (2009) finds similarly when she argues that UNHCR self-reliance policy is erroneously based on the idea that subsistence agricultural livelihoods will lead to refugees becoming self-reliant and that policy is structured to facilitate agricultural production with the aim of achieving refugee food self-sufficiency. As she points out, the ratio of provider to dependents is important and refugees must meet not only food needs but also non-food needs, and the "expectation that refugees can meet these needs through subsistence agricultural production is fundamentally flawed.... even refugees who have previous farming experience may struggle to adapt to new conditions in asylum countries" (Hunter 2009: 27-30).

Therefore if the likelihood of Casamance refugees being able to regain self-reliance through subsistence farming is unrealistic – and as Harrell-Bond and her team (1986: 262) observed,

"many people in settlements were unlikely *ever* to be able to grow enough food to support themselves" (emphasis in the original) – then provision of, and access to, alternative livelihood programming is evermore important, as is its successful transition to sustainable income-generation. The next sections discuss the alternatives currently available in The Gambia.

Skills training – what and where

Elements of livelihood programming available to Casamance women in The Gambia are community gardens in rural areas where gardens are predominantly run by women, training in soap-making and tie-and-dye in the urban area and in 20 rural communities, and hairdressing in urban areas. GAFNA provided IT skills courses in the urban area to train refugees in the basics of IT. This training was available to both men and women; however, problems with the continuity of funding proved the main obstacle and the training closed after three months despite considerable interest from refugees who registered for the course. With the support of UNHCR and GAFNA, the NACCUG micro-loan scheme is hoped to again be available to all refugees who can apply in rural areas and in the urban area of greater Banjul. The scheme encourages small business start-ups and forms an important part of UNHCR's strategy to rebuild refugee self-reliance because of the reluctance amongst banks to lend to refugees due to their mobility.

No women respondents reported accessing IT training, NACCUG micro-loans, or hairdressing training. Training and support in bee-keeping is available to men and women in 20 rural communities, but no women reported being involved in this programme either. In five rural communities, UNHCR/GAFNA has instigated bio-gas projects aimed at improving soil fertility and animal capital in rural communities (conversation with GAFNA representative, August 2012). Whilst this is open to women, none work on this programme.

The programmes women reported taking part in were community gardens (rural) and soap-making and tie-and-dye training (rural and urban). In village locations, training in soap-making and tie-and-dye were brought to 20 rural communi-

ties and women from surrounding villages would join. In urban locations, training is held at the UNHCR Centre to which women travel both for initial information on training and for the training itself.

Factors governing access and uptake of skills training

Fieldwork suggested women were not proactive in seeking out skills training either in urban or rural locations. In urban areas this may be partly explained by their background as farmers used to working their own land and engaging in activities within a small radius from home, leading to their reluctance to travel for training. However, many urban-based Casamançais were unaware of skills training and those that were aware of it thought training was only open to refugee leaders, a finding that was replicated in rural areas as well. Again and again during fieldwork, especially in urban areas, we found ourselves informing refugees of the *existence* of skills training in the urban area. Hawa, an older lady living with her brother in the urban area of Kotu whilst recovering from tuberculosis, explained through her brother:

Did you have any skills training from UNHCR so you could do some work for yourself?

Brother: Sometimes, but they stopped that now. The time she was in Kampant [village], they selected a number of people to go and have skills training in Kampant, but she was not part of them. The refugees were too [many] and everyone can't be part of the skills training, so they select only the eldest – the leaders – to represent you. When they were taking people, she was here [in Kotu] so they can't take her while she is here, paying fare every day.

There is skills training here – did you know that?

No. I didn't know.

The skills centre is not far.

I don't know the place.

Haddy, a woman living in the urban area of Kasaikunda, was another example:

There was skills training like tie-and-dye. Did you do that?

Yes it was in Bulock [village] but the time it was there, we were here. So this skills training, we were not part of it.

Have you ever been to the UNHCR centre?

No, none of them have been there. It's only the leaders who have gone there.

It's open to anybody.

They didn't know it.

In both urban and rural locations, Casamançais realised that farming was not possible or was not sufficient to provide for all their needs and that supplementary activities or UNHCR assistance was required. When WFP food aid ceased and emergency food interventions by UNHCR and ICRC were seen to target only new influx refugees, refugees felt abandoned and did not know whom to turn to since, to their understanding, UNHCR were there to assist them. However, the change in assistance from food aid to livelihood programming did not drive Casamançais women to seek or to take the opportunity of other skills as alternatives or additions to subsistence farming, even when they were aware of the existence of skills training.

Amongst those who did participate in skills training, especially in rural areas, it seemed almost as though women engaged in training partly as a social activity rather than as a commercial alternative to a farming lifestyle. This raises questions around motivation: Are women taking up the training in order to turn it into a sustainable livelihood, or do they engage in it because they understand they are expected to do so as part of "programming" and as part of the "assistance bargain", or do they take up the training as a social activity with a side benefit of learning a skill which is of personal use in the household?

In urban areas women were more likely to seek paid work washing clothes or as maids or to cook and re-sell food than to engage in training. In rural areas, paid work is scarce, which may also partly explain why women are more likely to take up training. But another explanation of uptake in rural areas is that training is brought to the village instead of women being required to travel to a training centre. Travel to a training centre in urban areas incurs costs in terms of money and time, and urban respondents found the cost associated with training to be outweighed by possible earnings from casual employment.

Furthermore, travel to the training centre relies on participants' good physical and emotional health to make the journey regularly and to engage with what is being taught. The effort entailed in making the journey to a training centre may discourage those who are ill, traumatised or who are more concerned with establishing their family's whereabouts and safety. Hawa in Kotu was interested in the training but had concerns:

I want to go but I am not much well, and to pay fare every day up to there I will start disturbing my brother. This training is good, I can do my own soap making and go there. But one thing that is disturbing me is my mind. If my mind is not steady I cannot be comfortable.... Cos everything I had inside my house they take it, our corrugate iron they take it too. When I think of that I am sometimes frustrated.... Cos I am going to think of all those things I have lost.

For refugees to take up skills training is to accept change. Changes in family life, structure, and gender relations, which Mehta (2011) refers to as an empowering factor of forced migration, present opportunities for change which women respondents embraced. Talking of her own lack of opportunity, one woman is able to plan a different future for her daughters now they are in The Gambia: "My father forced me to abandon my education and marry. I don't want my daughters to have the life I had. They will have education." But a future with education is not necessarily a future of farming, and she continued to tell us how she hoped her daughters will make use of their education to perhaps become teachers.

However, other pathways to changed lives and women's empowerment through displacement are not taken. The reason women do not take up all the opportunities offered to them may rest partly with their own motivation or their perception of the outcome, partly with male members of the rural community deciding what women may do, or with the strangeness of the activity being so far out of the range of experience so as to be irrelevant, for example IT training for populations with no or limited literacy skills. Considering that Casamance women are predominantly rural farmers, they may not see urban-relevant

skills as important or conceivable even amongst those who have settled in urban areas, and they may be unable to imagine a positive or practical outcome from undertaking such training. Activities which can be learnt and practiced around the home are more in keeping with their lives prior to flight, and may be another factor in why soap-making and tie-and-dye training sees more uptake than other training.

For refugee women to embrace the change that displacement has presented them with – to move away from primarily subsistence farming to other money-generating activities or a mix of activities – it is important that such changes minimise the impact on lives in order that changes be seen as conceivable or as appropriate to their lives. Supporting this change is important to do in a way that feels sufficiently familiar to them to allow them to engage readily in a new activity and to see a relevant future in it; conversely, too much change, too quickly, may feel alien and risk non-engagement or a limited outcome.

Translation to sustainable livelihoods

Translation of skills training to sustainable livelihoods partly relies on women undertaking the training with commercial gain in mind. If some women undertake the training as a social activity without also seeing it as a route to income generation, the objective of skills training may not be fulfilled.

The limitations of community gardens and soap-making and tie-and-dye in terms of income generation were clear during visits to communities. Some of the produce grown in community gardens is set aside for re-sale, but most of it is consumed by those involved in maintaining the garden. Soap can be both used and re-sold at local level, but generates a small level of income similar to buying and re-selling produce from the market. Tie-and-dye holds promise as a source of income and women were enthusiastic about this potential. However, women expressed frustrations regarding both soap-making and tie-and-dye initiatives.

After UNHCR/GAFNA training, women were given the materials with which to make soap. Once the soap was made they sold it and were

happy with that result. However, they said that they now required the raw materials again if they were to make further batches of soap. The difficulties inherent in this initiative become clear in this excerpt from an interview with Jatu in Bijilo:

Even now the wife can do soap-making. It's because of the money the husband can't buy oil for her to make the soap.

How much is it to buy the oil for soap-making?
[calculating] ... So 1400 dalasi [£28]

With that money you can make soap. How much profit will you get from it?

You will make every time 500 [£10] profit. What I do when I make the soap I borrow [money] from people.

So are you doing that now?

No, now I am not doing it cos oil is expensive. A cup of oil costs 10 dalasi. I cannot make profit out of it now.

Asked what happened to the money from the first batch sold, the women said that money was spent on daily needs.

Tie-and-dye generates different problems. UNHCR/GAFNA skills training is provided up to a basic level. Whilst women said they were happy to receive this training, they added that the finished product was not suitable for re-sale as it was not of a high standard. When asked if there was a sufficient market for tie-and-dye, the women responded positively saying, yes there was a market, but that the quality of their products had to be better. Different groups of women reiterated this point, saying they required additional training to improve their basic skills.

If translation of skills training to sustainable livelihoods relies in part on women having commercial gain in mind, it also rests on the degree of training and on having rudimentary business knowledge. As the women's experience with soap-making shows, creating a viable business requires understanding that money for raw materials needs to be deducted from sales revenue if they are not to return to being once again reliant on UNHCR for raw materials.

Throughout the interviews, most women expressed interest in engaging in some sort of business, whether it was soap-making, tie-and-

dye, cooking to resell, or setting up as a tailor, as noted by Haddy in Kasaikunda.

If there were two things that could make your life easier, what would those two things be?

For her number one is business, someone to help her with money. The other woman says if they can have these sewing machines and be trained for sewing and selling.

Potentially linking in with the NACCUG micro-credit facility, these women had the desire to create businesses but not the resources to make them a reality – either in terms of actual finance or in terms of skills or business knowledge. Furthermore, the lack of accurate information about who may obtain micro-credit prevented many from even trying, as became apparent when speaking with Mariam in Brikama:

Yes we once thought about it if there is any credit place where we can work and pay back. The husband has not seen any. The only place we see is where credit is given to people who have a government job.

[To interpreter] Have they assumed that or have they been there to ask?

They sometimes think about it but the husband realises that [he must] have something so that if they defaulted they can take it or sell it. They have not. Cos he has not a compound. I don't know if there are other avenues for borrowing.

The skills training element of livelihood programming in The Gambia therefore seems not to have gone far enough in terms of the content and the level of skill taught, and accurate information about access is not widely enough disseminated, especially in urban areas. Whilst the intention of the training is to provide skills that will enable women to be self-reliant as they were in Casamance, the reality is that it gives women only part of what they need to achieve this, leaving them in a position of dependency and vulnerability – perhaps worse off than before the training because they have been shown the promise of a future that cannot be fulfilled.

The two examples above of soap-making and tie-and-dye are relevant to both rural and urban contexts where similar stories were reported

by respondents. The additional potential barrier in urban areas to translating skills to sustainable livelihoods is the distance to training centres and the cost of getting there, as Hawa in Kotu Quarry explained above. This example was not an isolated incidence, nor did it apply only to urban areas. In one village, Sutusingjang, women were aware of skills training in Bulock, but the 5km walk was too far and too tiring on top of the women's household responsibilities. Distance and cost acted as demotivating factors, exacerbated by depression, disheartenment and trauma related to the experiences and uncertainties of flight, and both women and men opted for casual work or petty trading instead of training because the need to earn money to eat today did not allow many to enter into training for tomorrow.

Making sense of assistance and programming

Livelihood programming aims to facilitate self-reliance and establish local integration, therefore it is important to understand what sense women make of assistance and skills training in moving forward their displaced lives. Is assistance and training relevant to them and appropriate for their needs, or does it confuse and frustrate them?

Food distributions were, and still are, a lifeline, even though they have now ceased for Casamance refugees in The Gambia except for emergency interventions for new influxes of refugees. Food is awaited, anticipated, hoped and prayed for. The shift from the distribution of food and material items to livelihood programming is a shift from dependence to hopelessness for many respondents who said they now did not know what they would do. Life became a futile wait for those who are too old or too traumatised to adapt to new livelihoods, and for others life has become a struggle to learn new skills and the necessary commercialism to translate them into sustainable income.

During interviews, trying to counter their feelings of hopelessness with a discussion of what they themselves could do to help their situation, particularly women in rural areas appeared to prefer the relative certainty of food assistance.

However, when directly asked what they would prefer: food, money to buy food, or a way to make money to buy food, the answers were complex and conditional and provoked much discussion. As a reflex, some women in the group interviewed replied "food". Other women in the group contradicted them, saying money was more useful, as exemplified in the following household discussion in Lamin:

If they received assistance, what would be the two most important things for them?

The most important thing is food. For money they can try to have contracts. But food ...

Interpreter: They are debating. She says food number one. But the other says money, 'cos if you don't have money where will you have money to buy fish? They decide money is the second thing, you can buy books for your children to go to school.

So when they say money as their second, can I understand that to mean work?

He said fine, but money too. If they have the money they help each other to make a business. For her, as a lady, if you give the money to the man he says we have to divide the money. This, you have to let me keep it, this one I can use it to make a business. So you can take that money and go to the shopkeeper, buy oranges, bananas, come and sell it again to gain profit. That's why she said money. Something to start a small business.

The outcome of this discussion was not certain, but what was certain was that women thought about what they needed and how they would use it. They were not impassive, but, when presented with the question, gave careful consideration to what would be best for them. Although they hoped my presence indicated some food might be forthcoming, when asked what they would like, except for food, it was clear they had thought about this already and indicated they appreciated the question because no-one had asked them before.

Respondents acknowledged food assistance could not be a permanent solution and agreed that a way to earn money was preferable to simply being given food or money. But how to make this transition was not clear to them and left them in confusion and disarray. Many refugee respondents reported the "sudden" halt to

food assistance. Although UNHCR and WFP had informed refugees over a period of time of the approaching end, refugees could not understand what was to replace food assistance if they were not to starve. Whilst education and health were also concerns, the immediate and overriding need was for food – a need that had to be immediately satisfied. Therefore, whilst new skills were useful and were welcomed, food was needed now, today, and women's attention on tomorrow necessarily had to be secondary. For women respondents, their need was for food *and* for training simultaneously. This suggests over time a combination of effectively delivered new skills could replace or complement subsistence farming as a livelihood.

Conclusion

It was clear from the fieldwork that if livelihood programming was to fulfil the objective of providing new skills for income generation, those skills had to be delivered at a level suitable for commercial gain and in conjunction with basic business knowledge, and information regarding access to training had to be improved. Fieldwork also showed that UNHCR as well as its implementing partners and GRC and GID were all active in the dissemination of information about skills training; however, there were still serious gaps that had an impact on women's (and men's) capacity to establish new livelihoods.

As Conway wrote in 2004 about refugees in The Gambia:

there is often a strong desire to engage in income generating activities, but there is a lack of outside technical assistance from UNHCR and/or its partners. A common misconception is that income-generating projects can be developed and sustained without such assistance, prompting people to invest energy and resources into a non-viable project. Often the result is that without effective input and guidance, the refugees find it much more challenging to establish and sustain what are already vulnerable businesses (2004: 9).

Little seems to have altered since then. Livelihood programming still does not go far enough or provide sufficient or appropriate technical input to support refugees in the transition from

food assistance to self-reliance through gaining new commercially viable skills. Whether reduced UNHCR funding is the cause or whether this is due to inadequately researched and implemented programmatic use of funding, the result for refugees is the same.

The impossibility for most Casamance refugees in The Gambia to start or build livelihoods whilst also adequately supporting their families with basic food necessities, not to mention other needs such as healthcare, is supported by Conway, who states that a "common finding in all locations was the refugees' inability to preserve assets and accumulate savings, as most were just barely getting by with what little resources they had or were given to them" (2004: 2). Again, this is still the case nine years later and refugees are still unable to plan for tomorrow. The development of programmed solutions such as food assistance alongside structured skills training that takes refugees to commercial skill levels, including basic business guidance on establishing sustainable small businesses, would be a useful step.

Discussions with GAFNA, which administers skills training, showed that the organisation recognised the requirement for higher skill levels but is limited by funding and by the requirement to include as many refugees as possible in available training. Bearing in mind budgetary constraints, providing a higher level of training to fewer, selected women could be an alternative if those women then passed on their higher level of skill to other women in their area under guidance from UNHCR/GAFNA. In urban areas this strategy may address the demotivating factor of travel cost and time and effort spent travelling to the training as women could establish informal groups in their own neighbourhood. Enabling trained women to pass on their skills in this way also recreates the social aspect that appears to be a positive factor for rural women. Reducing the burden on UNHCR and NGOs and transferring the responsibility to refugee women may assist in creating greater feelings of participation and ownership of the training amongst those women.

Actively including women in the planning stages of phasing out food assistance and phas-

ing in skills training may be beneficial in order to ensure refugees understand what is happening and when it is happening. Whilst UNHCR and their partners informed refugees that WFP food assistance would cease for Casamance refugees in The Gambia, the shift from food assistance to livelihood programming and refugees' position in that change had not been understood by refugees in a way in which they could make sense of the change and of their position in it.

Finally, it is important that the general benefits of having a refugee identity card, which gives access to free education, subsidised health care, and to sustainable livelihood programming such as the skills training discussed in this article, are known to all refugees. Conversations with refugees during fieldwork revealed a large proportion claimed to be unaware of the benefit, which is of concern, but is in conflict with conversations held with staff members of UNHCR, GAFNA, GRC and GID throughout the period of fieldwork, who stated that refugees were told about the refugee identity card again and again. Given that financial constraints limit refugees' ability to buy food, pay rent and visit health clinics, possession of the

refugee identity card is a vital component of support which has the potential to relieve much of the financial pressure of education and health. Since the organisations responsible for refugees in The Gambia aim to inform their audience of the benefits of holding a refugee identity card, either something somewhere in the chain of informing refugees is breaking down, or refugees are actively choosing not to have a refugee identity card. Interviews do not support the latter since refugees showed considerable interest and asked questions about how and where to obtain a card and stated they now planned to visit the relevant office in the coming few days.

Lessons drawn from Casamance women refugees in The Gambia can inform similar situations of protracted displacement elsewhere where local integration is the viable option. However, integration depends on a successful transition period from dependence on assistance to independence through well thought-out and delivered livelihood programming that fits with the needs of beneficiaries and introduces change in a manner that refugees are able to perceive as attainable and relevant.

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