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# FOLLOW-UP STUDY ON THE ROLE OF UNIDO'S TRAINING ON THE ECONOMIC REINTEGRATION OF REPATRIATED REFUGEES IN LIBERIA

DEPARTMENT OF POLICY, RESEARCH AND STATISTICS

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**Follow-up Study on the Role of UNIDO's Training on  
the Economic Reintegration of Repatriated Refugees  
in Liberia**

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## **1. Background of this study**

Drawing on recent follow-up research, this report presents the main findings on the employment and job situation of former beneficiaries of UNIDO's training programmes aiming to promote the economic reintegration of Liberian returnees.

Between 2013 and 2014, UNIDO provided two training programmes in Liberia to facilitate the process of economic reintegration of repatriates from neighbouring West African states. The first training programme, the *Entrepreneurship Development Programme* (hereafter EDP), was designed to provide 120 hours of training consisting of two modules. The first module was *Introduction to Entrepreneurship, Work and Life Skills* and the second was *How to Establish and Manage Your Business*. In total, the EDP trained 685 beneficiaries between November 2013 and May 2014. The second training programme, the *Skills Training Programme* (hereafter Skills Training), offered a wide range of vocational skills and techniques such as plumbing, beauty care, catering, computer hardware servicing, auto mechanics, baking and hair braiding. In total, the project trained 327 beneficiaries between March and July 2014.

Between October and December 2014, the research team carried out a study involving 74 beneficiaries of these programmes to explore the impact of the trainings in facilitating economic reintegration of the returnees. The initial study showed mixed findings about the impact of UNIDO's programmes on the returnees. Even after completing the training programmes, the majority of trainees remained jobless. However, despite the difficulties they encountered in finding work, many of the beneficiaries who had participated in the original trainings strongly emphasised the personal value they drew from these vocational education programmes and remained remarkably optimistic about their future job prospects.

The previous study also identified two key factors that affected the ability of returnees to establish livelihoods upon their repatriation to Liberia. First, both prior to and during the period of research in late 2014, Liberia was severely hit by economic hardship due to the prevalence of the deadly Ebola virus. The devastating epidemic had a significant impact on the reconstruction of livelihoods of repatriating refugees in Liberia. Second, data collection (October to December 2014) was carried out relatively soon after the completion of the two training programmes (May 2014 for EDP and July 2014 for Skills Training), which may not have been a sufficient duration to effectively capture the full impact of the training programmes. Due to these circumstances, our previous report emphasised the necessity of a follow-up study to assess the role of UNIDO's vocational training in facilitating the economic reintegration process of returnees.

Against this backdrop, we conducted a follow-up study between August and September 2016 involving the original participants from the 2014 study. The data collection was carried out by an independent international consultant and one national project staff member of UNIDO Liberia, under the guidance of the UNIDO project manager at Vienna headquarters. Our research methodology consisted of two main instruments: 1) a short survey, and 2) in-depth interviews with programme beneficiaries.

The short survey was designed to gather information about the current employment status of the programme's beneficiaries. We approached all 74 beneficiaries who had participated in the 2014 study and were able to speak with 50 respondents (the other 24 participants could not be contacted for various reasons such as changes in their phone number or emigration from Monrovia). Among these 50 respondents, we randomly selected 20 beneficiaries for individual in-depth interviews and gathered more detailed information about their current livelihood and income conditions.

In summary, the employment conditions and socio-economic status of the beneficiaries seem to have generally improved compared to our initial research in 2014. Of 50 returnees who participated in this study, over three-quarters have some form of work or participate in livelihood activities, which is a significant increase compared to the results of our previous research. As the negative impact of the Ebola crisis has largely disappeared, this follow-up study reveals the actual potential of vocational training programmes in facilitating the economic reintegration process of repatriates in Liberia.

We acknowledge some important limitations in this study. First, it is extremely difficult to claim the causality between previous training programmes and the participants' current employment and economic conditions. Since there are many other factors that can affect these two variables, it is particularly difficult to quantitatively establish a link between the beneficiaries' current economic conditions and UNIDO's training programmes. Thus, in this study, we used in-depth qualitative interviews to capture how the respondents perceived the impact of training on their employment and job status based on their own experiences after completing the training. Second, our limited budget and time constricted our data collection efforts. Given our modest budget and the limited number of researchers, it was not possible for the research team to interview all 50 respondents within the designated time period. Notwithstanding such limitations and given the current lack of such studies, we believe that this study offers important data about and valuable insights into the role of training programmes in promoting economic reintegration of returnees.

The remainder of this report is organised as follows. The next section surveys the existing literature on the reintegration of returnees, especially in relation to the role of vocational training programmes. The subsequent section provides an overview of the context in which our research took place. As the main section of this paper, we then present the key research findings drawn upon the short survey and the individual in-depth interviews. Finally, the last two sections outline some primary lessons for UNIDO's programming on reintegration support for returnees and provide a conclusion.

## **2. Literature review: vocational training for economic reintegration of refugees/returnees**

### **2.1 Economic reintegration for returnees**

UNHCR places reintegration in its so-called '4R' approach for dealing with refugees in post-conflict contexts: repatriation, reintegration, rehabilitation and reconstruction (UNHCR, 2004). It defines reintegration as 'the progressive establishment of conditions which enable returnees and their communities to exercise their social, economic, civil, political and cultural rights' (UNHCR, 2008:1). As this definition alludes, reintegration should be conceptualized as a gradual transition starting with physical return, then moving on to gaining access to a meaningful livelihood and rights as citizens in the country, and eventually attaining full reintegration (Hovil, 2010).

Before the 1990s, the assumption was that repatriation and reintegration equalled going back to a 'home' in which returnees would simply reconnect within a familiar environment and community, thereby ultimately increasing their well-being and quality of life (Ghanem, 2005). Today, most academic and policy discussions recognize that the reintegration of returnees is a complex social, economic, and political process – not simply a return to a previous status quo ante. By contrast, many scholars show the hardships that returnees face in the process of integration in their country of origin (Kaun, 2008; Omata, 2013; Eastmond & Ojendal, 1999; Carr, 2014; Marsden, 1999; Stefansson, 2004).

Current literature separates the process of reintegration into four categories: 1) economic, 2) social, 3) legal and 4) cultural reintegration (Cassarino, 2007). Amongst these, successful economic reintegration poses a particularly onerous challenge for both returnees and the country of origin governments (Omata, 2013; Tapscott, 1994; Jackson, 1994; Rogge, 1994). Currently, the average duration of refugees' exile is nearly a quarter century (UNHCR, 2016). During such protracted exile, most refugees lose key livelihood assets such as farmland and livestock, and have to rebuild an economic base from scratch in their country of origin following repatriation

(Shanmugaratnam, 2010). Research on the reintegration of returnees to Serbia highlights that their situation on the labour market was extremely unfavourable and the vast majority requested organisational assistance to find employment for their economic survival (Cvejic, 2015).

Furthermore, reintegration into post-conflict settings usually takes place in extremely adverse environments (Zieck, 2004; Jacobsen, 2005). In war-devastated areas, roads and other transportation infrastructure are often destroyed. High unemployment is a common symptom in war-torn countries. Many of the states that have experienced a destructive conflict have a very low capacity to fulfil the economic demands of society at large. Frequently, returnees struggle to survive below the poverty line with very few livelihood options following repatriation to their home country in the face of these onerous difficulties (Carr, 2014; Shanmugaratnam, 2010).

In the face of these challenges, the role of aid agencies should be to facilitate the reintegration process of returnees by assisting in the construction of their economic livelihoods and self-sufficiency. Such support includes enabling returnees to access various income-generating means or even to reinstate them to their former jobs or facilitating direct restitution of their property and recovery of other assets. Amongst these efforts, providing vocational and entrepreneurial training has been spotlighted as an effective intervention measure to support the development of livelihoods skills of returned refugees so they can engage in income-generating activities and attain economic self-reliance.

## **2.2 Provision of training for refugees and returnees**

Vocational and entrepreneurial education is traditionally seen as a means to equip trainees with skills that are relevant in the labour market and enhance their employability (Oketch, 2007). The ultimate objective of such training is to help beneficiaries attain gainful work by enhancing their technical skills and eventually leading to improved socio-economic welfare (Hujet et al., 2006; Echtner, 1995). Over the last few decades, the role of vocational and entrepreneurial education has regained a prominent position in the international policy community, partly in response to a series of economic downturns and financial crises worldwide (McGrath, 2012; Hirshleifer et al., 2014).

The provision of entrepreneurial and skills training programmes has also become mainstream as part of international assistance to refugee repatriates in their country of origin. In recent years, the provision of technical and vocational training has been widely used as a means of empowering refugees in attaining economic self-reliance in various contexts (for instance, see Jabbar & Zaza, 2016; Shabaneh, 2012; Jabbar & Zaza, 2016; Pietka-Nyakaza, 2015; Jansen, 2015; Amone-P'Olak, 2007).



The positive impact of such training is well-documented. According to Monsutti (2006), whereas uneducated Afghans in Iran were unwilling to return to their country of origin, repatriation was generally easier and more successful for those with education and vocational skills. In the case of Namibian returnees from Angola, due to the extreme shortage of qualified personnel in Namibia, returnees with strong educational and vocational backgrounds were in great demand, while those without such qualifications struggled to find work (Tapscott, 1994).

### **2.3 Critique of vocational education programmes**

The key indicator used to determine the success of vocational and entrepreneurial training is whether individuals who have completed training courses have gained meaningful employment—either as wage workers or as self-employed entrepreneurs—by utilizing their learned skills (Luby, 2015). Yet the outcomes of many training programmes for non-refugee beneficiaries are mixed. According to Oketch (2007), the success of many vocational and entrepreneurial education programmes in Africa is limited in terms of helping graduates secure gainful employment. In Turkey, Hirshleifer et al. (2014) found minimal impacts of training on the wages and incomes of beneficiaries. In the same paper, the authors also point to the role of other human capital variables such as numeracy, literacy, and personality as differentiating factors for people's employability.

The aim of providing skills training for refugees is essentially the same as that for non-refugee beneficiaries – obtaining gainful employment or livelihoods with the skills and knowledge acquired through training programmes. Research conducted by the Women's Refugee Commission strongly criticizes training that offers technical job skills to refugees. The study found that the majority of training programmes do not offer skill sets that match current or emerging market demands, resulting in low attainment of meaningful employment or viable enterprise upon completion of the training (Women's Refugee Commission, 2007). Moreover, most training programmes for refugees focus solely on increasing the supply of skilled labour without addressing the need to also increase market demand or to diversify employment options, thus resulting in a limited impact on job creation or business development amongst trainees (Women's Refugee Commission, 2006 & 2007).

Another criticism is that providing training alone can do little to promote the process of economic integration of returnees. In South Sudan, for instance, many returnees came back with new skills including welding, electrical and furniture making. However, there is often a dire lack of resources, especially initial capital, to enable these vocational skills to be put to use

(Pantuliano et al., 2008). In such cases, the programmes may have trained the beneficiaries, but did not necessarily enable them to achieve meaningful economic reintegration.

Furthermore, there is a scarcity of follow-up studies that look at the longer-term outcomes of training for refugee returnees. As suggested above, reintegration is often a protracted process – taking place over several years or longer after repatriation (Crisp et al., 2008). Only few studies exist that track former trainees to better understand the challenges they face as well as their success (and failure) in socio-economic reintegration (Women’s Refugee Commission, 2007). This dearth of follow-up studies leads to a risk that the importance and impact of training programmes has become over-emphasised, giving the false impression that the provision of training alone enables former refugees to economically reintegrate upon their return home.

### **3 Research context**

Liberia has been gradually recovering from the social, economic, and political damage caused by a brutal and lengthy conflict. The Liberian civil war began in 1989 when Charles Taylor took up arms against Samuel Doe, the president of Liberia at the time (Ellis, 1995). This incursion marked the start of a 14-year civil war in Liberia during which approximately 750,000 refugees fled to other countries in the region including Ghana, Guinea, Nigeria, Sierra Leone and The Gambia.

The Liberian civil war ended in 2003 with a final ceasefire agreement between the warring parties and Taylor stepping down from power (Levitt, 2005). Following nearly a decade of stability and security in Liberia, UNHCR invoked the Cessation Clause on 30 June 2012, thereby ending the refugee status of any Liberians who had fled their country during the civil war between 1989 and 2003. As a result of the cessation of refugee status, the year 2012 witnessed a surge in the number of returnees, with around 30,000 Liberians returning home, doubling the initial estimate of 15,000 for that year. By the end of 2012, UNHCR had completed its voluntary repatriation programme under which more than 155,000 Liberians returned to their country of origin, 23 years after the onset of the civil war (UNIDO, 2013).

Although a significant number of refugees returned to Liberia, the country’s economic foundation and market capacity remained limited. The World Bank notes that the continued low global commodity prices and post-Ebola economic decline have created significant challenges for the Liberian economy. Gross domestic product (GDP) growth in 2015 was flat, compared to 0.7 per cent in 2014. According to UN official statistics, Liberia’s GDP per capita in 2014 was estimated at USD 483. Approximately two-thirds of all Liberians live in poverty, and the country’s economy still heavily relies on foreign assistance from donor states.

Unemployment prevails, especially among young people in Monrovia, Liberia's capital. In the absence of any social security, the vast majority of Liberians depend entirely on work for their sustenance, involving long hours of unskilled labour at low levels of productivity and income (Republic of Liberia Ministry of Labour, 2009). Similar to other West African states, the main characteristic of Liberia's labour market is informality. In 2007, over 85 per cent of workers were employed in informal sectors. Access to waged employment in the formal economy is largely reserved for the higher educated.

Many schools throughout Liberia were destroyed during the conflict, and training infrastructure is still sparse, especially in rural areas. With few educational facilities, about 45 per cent of the working population have never attended primary school, and fewer than 15 per cent have completed secondary education. Women have much lower levels of education than men across all age groups, and a considerable rural/urban difference in terms of education is evident for both sexes (Republic of Liberia Ministry of Labour, 2009).

Moreover, the external calamity has severely damaged the economic adjustments of recent returnees. Between 2014 and 2015, Liberia, like Sierra Leone and Guinea, was severely hit by economic hardship due to the prevalence of the deadly Ebola virus. According to Jim Yong Kim, the President of the World Bank Group, *'Ebola is a humanitarian crisis first and foremost, but it's also an economic disaster for Liberia, Guinea, and Sierra Leone'*. (UN News Centre, 2014). The World Bank Group estimated that the economic damage related to Ebola was projected to result in limited economic growth in Liberia throughout 2015, due to reduced economic activity and investor aversion. The devastating epidemic had disrupted the livelihood reconstruction and job search of training beneficiaries during our previous research in late 2014.

In the face of these daunting challenges, reintegrating tens of thousands of returned refugees has posed an enormous burden to the Liberian government, which requested international assistance to help facilitate the repatriation process. Against this backdrop, UNIDO agreed to implement interventions to facilitate the socio-economic readjustment of Liberian returnees. Since the early 2000s, the organization has implemented economic recovery programmes in many post-conflict countries such as Iraq, Sudan, Afghanistan, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire and Sri Lanka, including a number of projects targeted at refugees and IDPs. Drawing upon such expertise, UNIDO assisted Liberian returnees from neighbouring countries by providing vocational skills training, entrepreneurship training and other related services to increase their opportunities for employment or to start their own livelihoods or business.

The following sections present the main research findings on the recent employment and income status of UNIDO’s training beneficiaries in Liberia.

#### **4. Research findings**

##### **4.1 Summary of findings from the short survey**

The first step of our follow-up study involved conducting a short survey to identify how many previous research participants we would be able to trace. We attempted to contact all 74 returnees who had participated in our previous study in 2014, and succeeded in contacting 50 of them by August 2016. As summarized in Table 1, of these 50 participants, 20 are men and the rest are women. In our 2014 survey, we selected the same number of beneficiaries from both the EDP and Skills Training programmes, but this time, we got responses from 32 beneficiaries from the Skills Training programme and 18 from the EDP programme.

**Table 1 Results of the short survey**

<b>Breakdown of 50 participants</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>%</b>
Males	<b>20</b>	<b>40</b>
Females	<b>30</b>	<b>60</b>
EDP beneficiaries	<b>18</b>	<b>36</b>
Skills Training beneficiaries	<b>32</b>	<b>64</b>
Beneficiaries with a job/IGA	<b>38</b>	<b>76</b>
Beneficiaries without a job/IGA	<b>12</b>	<b>24</b>

One of the most important tasks in this survey was to record the beneficiaries’ current employment and job status. Whether a returnee has some form of income source or not after receiving UNIDO’s training is a key indicator for assessing the training’s impact. Each respondent was therefore asked whether they are currently employed or engaged in any type of income-generating activity (as of August 2016). As shown in the table above, 38 of the former training beneficiaries—76 per cent of 50 respondents—had some form of job or income-generating means while 12 of the beneficiaries were not involved in any economic activity at the time.

When we interviewed 74 of the training participants in December 2014, 30 respondents—about 40 per cent—were involved in income-generating activities (see Omata & Takahashi, 2015 for

more details). In this follow-up study, which was conducted about 1.5 years later, the percentage of beneficiaries who are engaged in employment increased by more than 35 per cent.

Of the 50 survey participants, 47 agreed to participate in an in-depth individual interview to record details about their livelihood trajectories, level of income, as well as their perception of the impact of UNIDO's training on their current employment and job status. Given the limited time and financial resources, we randomly selected 20 interviewees from those who agreed to be interviewed. The findings from these individual interviews are presented in the following sections.

## **4.2 Beneficiaries with employment or jobs**

Of the 20 randomly selected beneficiaries, 14 were engaged in some form of income-generating activity—either self-employed or employed by others—at the time this study was being carried out in 2016. These 14 participants (4 male and 10 female) consisted of 5 EDP graduates and 9 Skills Training graduates. They ranged between 32 and 51 years of age.

As already noted above, while it is extremely difficult to establish a causal relationship between the training the participants received and their current working status, we asked the beneficiaries whether the training offered by UNIDO helped them get their current job or income-generating activity. Nine out of the 14 interviewees who were employed claimed that the vocational training they received contributed to their search for a job and employment.

Amongst the 9 beneficiaries who associated UNIDO's training programme with their current employment conditions, different patterns of impact from the training emerged.

### ***4.2.1 Enabling trainees to build new livelihoods with acquired skills***

Terrance, a 29-year old male returnee at the time of this interview, participated in UNIDO's programme and received skills training in 2014. During his exile in Sierra Leone, he was mostly attending school and had never been engaged in any economic activity because he was under his parents' care. Upon repatriation, Terrance had only few marketable livelihood skills. When we asked him why he had applied for the training, he responded: *'I applied for the UNIDO training because I needed some skills so that I can be independent and contribute to my family and community.'*

At UNIDO's Skills Training, Terrance studied to become an electronics technician. Upon completion of the training programme, he opened his own auto-mechanic shop in Monrovia.

Interviewer: What type of skills training did you receive from UNIDO?

Terrance: *Auto electrical skills.*

Interviewer: Why did you select that skill?

Terrance: *Because I had basic knowledge in dealing with electronic things. So this skill suited my interest. Also, most auto electricians [in Liberia] don't have an official certification. I wanted to get one [from UNIDO].*

Interviewer: Have you ever used skills or techniques you learned from the UNIDO training programme for your current work?

Terrance: *Yes. I apply them every day.*

Interviewer: Do you think you made the right selection of skills training?

Terrance: *Yes. I made the right decision because it is presently helping me a lot. This is my single source of income. [With this income] I can sustain myself and my family.*

His work as an auto-technician seems to provide Terrance with a decent level of income. In the same interview, he attributed his improved economic status in part to UNIDO's vocational training:

Interviewer: How much income are you making from your current auto-mechanic work?

Terrance: *About USD 200 [per month].*

Interviewer: Has your income increased since receiving UNIDO training?

Terrance: *Yes, it has increased because I was not making any money before [the training].*

Interviewer: Has your income contributed to your socio-economic conditions and welfare, including your household members?

Terrance: *Yes.*

Interviewer: How do you compare your current socio-economic conditions with those of your neighbours?

Terrance: *I think I am better off.*

At the end of the interview, we asked Terrance whether he has any concrete recommendations to further improve UNIDO's training programme. As a general suggestion beyond his own experiences, he gave the following statement: 'UNIDO should increase the length of the training programmes and should also provide internships after training is completed. It helps students get a job faster.'

Similar to Terrance, Georgina, a 37-year old widow with 3 children, joined UNIDO's Skills Training programme in 2014 and acquired interior decoration skills. Before receiving UNIDO's training, she did not have any stable income-generating means in Liberia. When asked what her motivation was for participating in UNIDO's programme, Georgina stated: '*I wanted to learn something and I wanted to be empowered. I was inspired by someone, an uneducated lady who is surviving on curtain making, so I chose the same course*'.

After completing the training programme, she established her own curtain-making business and is currently earning USD 500 - 600 monthly when receiving several contracts. Georgina appears quite satisfied with her current employment and economic situation, which she believes are attributable to the Skills Training programme.

Interviewer: Has your income increased since receiving UNIDO training?

Georgina: *Yes, because now I can afford to pay my kids' school fees, my rent and even food.*

Interviewer: How do you compare your current socio-economic conditions with those of your neighbours?

Georgina: *I am a way better off than my neighbours.*

Interviewer: Has the UNIDO training contributed to your current socio-economic conditions?

Georgina: *Yes. It has contributed a whole lot by empowering me.*

The cases of Terrance and Georgina are relatively straightforward and demonstrate a plausible causal relationship between the training they received and the subsequent foundation of their new livelihood, as they had no income-generating means before receiving vocational training from UNIDO. Neither had benefited from other skills training programmes other than that offered by UNIDO and their current work—auto mechanic and curtain making—clearly match the skills they acquired in the Skills Training courses. Moreover, their current monthly income appears to be reasonably good given Liberia’s GDP per capita. In these cases, and as the beneficiaries themselves acknowledge, it is plausible that UNIDO’s training has had a significant effect on these returnees by helping them obtain new vocational skills and to establish livelihoods.<sup>1</sup>

#### **4.2.2 Strengthening existing skills and businesses of trainees**

The vocational and entrepreneurial training is not necessarily designed to make new entrepreneurs out of all participants. A considerable number of training beneficiaries already had jobs or employment before receiving UNIDO’s vocational training. The aim of these beneficiaries was to strengthen their existing vocational skills and/or to acquire comprehensive business knowledge and techniques to run their (existing) enterprise.

Esther, for example, a returnee from Ghana with her husband and 2 children, received beautician (hair care) training from UNIDO in 2014. Before she applied to UNIDO’s training programme, she was already engaged in multiple livelihood activities, including hair-braiding. While Esther sought to refine her job skills to earn more money, she did not have access to vocational education upon her repatriation until UNIDO provided her with this opportunity. She explains her motivation for applying to UNIDO’s Skills Training: *‘I applied to UNIDO’s programme because I wanted to achieve something for myself and my family... I selected a hair care course because I have experience with it and I was passionate about it. Also, I assumed it would give me quick money’.*

Upon completion of the training course, she joined a group of hair-braiding women and has been utilising her skills that were strengthened by the training.

*I work with a group of friends. We offer various types of hair-braiding for women... I can now successfully braid various hair styles like the Ghana corn row, two fingers, Asha Conneh, etc. I learned these techniques through UNIDO’s hair care programme.*

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<sup>1</sup> For Terrance and Georgina, there were of course other factors that enabled them to establish their own enterprise such as access to start-up capital. However, gathering detailed data on their entrepreneurial progress was beyond the scope of this follow-up study.



Prior to the training, Esther was involved in some casual income-generating activities and was earning around USD 30 per month. Now she focuses exclusively on her hair-braiding business and makes about USD 50 per month. In an interview with her in October 2016, she commented on her socio-economic conditions and the value of the vocational training programme:

Interviewer: How do you compare your current socio-economic conditions with those of your neighbours?

Esther: *I am better off than most of them. Some people don't even have the opportunity to send their children to school, but by the grace of God, we are OK.*

Interviewer: How do you see the value of entrepreneurship and skills training for the economic reintegration of returnees?

Esther: *For those who are determined, the training was very valuable. We went through all parts of the training and are now able to pursue something new [with the newly acquired skills].*

In the same interview, Esther also mentioned that during and after the spread of the Ebola epidemic in Liberia, her hair-braiding business shut down completely. She recalled: *'When Ebola came, we completely stopped working because we were very concerned that we may get infected with the virus from our customers.'*

Though her current work is going well, her future objective is to establish her own beauty salon. When we asked her about the need for any other type of assistance to enhance her work, she highlighted the need for financial support to open her own business. As there is demand for skilled hair-braiding, she believes that expanding this business is a realistic objective.

The majority of EDP beneficiaries were already engaged in some form of employment before participating in UNIDO's training programmes. For most of them, the central aim was to acquire fundamental business management skills such as book-keeping, pricing and inventory control in order to strengthen or expand their existing income-generating means.

Janet, a 47 year old EDP beneficiary at the time of the interview, was earning a living from hair braiding during her exile in Ghana. Upon her repatriation in Liberia some years ago, she changed her livelihood and established her own shop selling used clothing in Monrovia, but she did not have formal business management training prior to attending UNIDO's training programme. By participating in the EDP training, she intended to learn accounting in order to better control her prices and costs and increase her profit:

Interviewer: How much income are you making from your current job/IGA?

Janet: *Approximately USD 2,000 per month.*

Interviewer: Has your income increased since receiving UNIDO training?

Janet: *Yes, it has increased because I got lots of experience from the training which has helped my business.*

Interviewer: Can you give me a concrete example?

Janet: *Since the training, I have been able to control my prices to surpass my competitors. I always price my goods a little lower than my competitors. I learned this technique from EDP training.*

Janet says that her used clothing business is going well and that her future aim is to expand her business if she can get a loan from a financial institution.

#### **4.2.3 No linkage between UNIDO's training and current employment status**

On the other hand, some beneficiaries did not see any connection between participation in UNIDO's training and their current job or socio-economic conditions. As explained above, of the 14 beneficiaries who were engaged in some form of income-generating activities prior to the training, 3 responded that there was no link between the training and their current occupational status (and 2 others replied that they cannot determine whether a linkage exists between them).

Olivia, a 40-year old beneficiary of UNIDO's Skills Training programme, is one of these 3 respondents. In 2014, she chose a course on events decoration:

Interviewer: Why did you apply for UNIDO's training programme?

Olivia: *I heard about the opportunity offered by UNIDO. I wanted to learn something because no knowledge goes to waste.*

Interviewer: What type of skills training did you receive from UNIDO?

Olivia: *Events decoration.*

Interviewer: Why did you select that skill?

Olivia: *I selected this skill because I love to beautify places and I love seeing beautiful places.*

Although Olivia intended to build her occupational profession on the training she received, it did not work out. Instead, she has been working as a teacher at a nursery school in Monrovia since 2015 and is earning around USD 50 per month. In an interview with her, she expressed dissatisfaction with her current work and considers her income level lower than her neighbours.

According to Olivia, it is difficult to work full-time and sustainably in events decoration because demand is highly volatile and seasonal – demand for events decoration only occurs during the dry season and around holidays. When we asked her whether she has any recommendations to improve UNIDO’s future training programmes, she responded: *‘I advise UNIDO to recommend trainees to employers. Don’t just train people and leave them on their own’*.

Similarly, Gloria, a 28-year old returnee from Ghana, says that her current work as a kindergarten teacher has little to do with the vocational training she received in 2014 through UNIDO’s programme. In an interview with her in October 2016, she explained her initial interest in UNIDO’s training course:

Interviewer: What type of skills training did you receive from UNIDO?

Gloria: *Front desk operations.*

Interviewer: Why did you select that skill?

Gloria: *Because I like secretarial work. I thought it would be easy to find work as a receptionist.*

Interviewer: Do you think you made the right choice of skill?

Gloria: *Yes, because I liked it.*

While Gloria does not regret her choice of vocational training course, she admitted that the training was of little use for her current teaching work. In the same interview, we asked Gloria whether she has ever used any skills, i.e. techniques she acquired during the UNIDO training programme. She responded: *‘No. I have not gotten the kind of job that requires those skills. It is very hard to find a job for the type of training I got from UNIDO’*.

From her current work as a kindergarten teacher, she earns about USD 40 per month, but she remains dissatisfied with the amount of income she receives. We asked her whether there is any type of assistance she wishes to receive to improve her occupational status, and she replied: *‘I*

*need more training, especially computer training. It will help me get a [secretariat] job more easily.'*

### **4.3 Beneficiaries without employment or jobs**

When we conducted our study in 2014, 44 out of the 74 participants—about 60 per cent—were not involved in any income-generating activity. The vast majority attributed their unemployment to either the lack of access to capital to start up a business or to the economic downturn in Liberia caused by Ebola (see Omata & Takahashi, 2015 for details).

According to the results of the short survey held in 2016 (see Table 1 above), the percentage of beneficiaries without any income-generating means decreased to 12 persons – 24 per cent of the sample of 50 respondents. Of these 12 beneficiaries, we managed to interview 6 respondents between September and October 2016 to better understand why they are not engaged in any economic activity. Although it is not possible to make generalizations based on such a small sample, some commonalities emerged from the individuals' circumstances.

#### **4.3.1 *Insufficient technical skills despite training***

In the case of Anna, a 29-year old former beneficiary of computer skills training, the limited proficiency of her computer knowledge and technical skills seem to be a major challenge in her job search.

Interviewer: What type of skills training did you receive from UNIDO?

Anna: *I took computer hardware.*

Interviewer: Why did you select that skills training?

Anna: *I love computers and software, so I wanted the hardware knowledge.*

Interviewer: Do you think you made the right choice of skill?

Anna: *My first choice was software, but I was not successful, so I ended up doing hardware.*

Although Anna successfully completed the training, she has never worked in the area of her training and has been unemployed since early 2016.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Anna has been living at her family's home and her family members are taking care of her food and daily needs. She therefore does not face any imminent daily survival issue.

Interviewer: Why aren't you engaged in any job now?

Anna: *My [computer] knowledge is insufficient, so [I have] no job.*

Interviewer: Before you received training from UNIDO, did you have any job?

Anna: *No. I have never worked.*

As her comments above indicate, while she sounds passionate about computers, prior to UNIDO's vocational education, she neither performed any computer-related work, nor received any professional training in this area. Anna said that she would like to start her own business based on her acquired skills, but unless she advances her technical knowledge and skills with additional training, it will be difficult to make her computer business viable.

Similarly, Yark, a male recipient of visual graphics training by UNIDO, indicated that his limited computer proficiency has been an obstacle to entering the profession. Before participating in UNIDO's training, he was not working in a job or in employment related to visual graphics. Upon his repatriation, Yark benefited from some training programmes provided by other agencies such as Save the Children and GTZ, but the areas of training focused on agriculture and child protection, which makes it difficult to create any synergy effects between the trainings.

Interviewer: Why did you apply for UNIDO's training programme?

Yark: *I found the training to be an opportunity to advance my own skills.*

Interviewer: Why did you select a visual graphics course?

Yark: *Everything in the world today is centred around computers, so I wanted to acquire that skill.*

Interviewer: Do you think you made the right choice of skill?

Yark: *Yes. I had very little computer knowledge before this training. But through this training, I was also able to improve my knowledge about computers.*

While taking the visual graphics course at UNIDO certainly contributed to enhancing his basic knowledge in computer graphics design, the training alone did not help Yark obtain meaningful work in this area. He has been unemployed for more than one year and his wife has been maintaining the household. In the same interview, he emphasised that he would be able to establish his own business if he had access to initial capital. In his case, however, it remains

questionable whether his enterprise would be sustainable as a business with his limited technical expertise in computer and visual graphics.

#### **4.3.2 *Lack of clear vision post-training***

In other cases, beneficiaries seem to have lacked a clear idea of how they would convert their vocational and entrepreneurial skills into a viable business, which from the outset was considered to be the responsibility of the trainees themselves.

For instance, Beatrice, a 44-year old returnee from Nigeria, received EDP training in 2014, although she did not have an existing business at that point.

Interviewer: Before you received training from UNIDO, did you have any job or income-generating activities?

Beatrice: *No, I did not have any job.*

Interviewer: Why did you apply for UNIDO's training programme? What did you want to get out of the training?

Beatrice: *I applied because the programme was for returnees and I was a returnee. I thought that after the programme, there would be some kind of package to help us start our own business.*

Interviewer: Are you currently engaged in any job or income-generating activities?

Beatrice: *No. I spent the initial capital to start my business to pay rent. Presently, I am not doing anything.*

As her comment suggests, while Beatrice intended to establish her own enterprise, she used her start-up capital for other purposes. She is still thinking about opening her own business, but access to financial resources for securing initial capital remains a major obstacle. In the meantime, her family members have been working so that she has been able to meet her basic daily necessities. Interestingly, even though she has not found any meaningful income-generating activities despite completing EDP training, she still feels that UNIDO's training programmes have helped improve her socio-economic life:

*UNIDO's training has contributed to my life because the business management skills [from EDP] have been useful for me. Before I received training, I used to waste money, but now I save a portion of any money I get.*

Other former beneficiaries who remain unemployed after having received vocational training have had to stay out of the labour market due to changes in their personal and familial circumstances. Ronelle, one of the beneficiaries who is currently unemployed, completed the Skills Training course for front desk operations in 2014. However, she soon got pregnant and delivered a child and has stayed home to look after her child while her family members are working. In her case, she made a deliberate choice to prioritize taking care of her child rather than enter the labour market; hence, her case cannot be linked to the limited success of UNIDO's training programme or to any lack of effort by the beneficiary. In her interview, Ronelle praised the quality and value of the vocational training she received and expressed her intention to look for job opportunities in the near future.

## **5. Lessons and recommendations from the study**

Drawing on the findings of this study, this section presents some important lessons learned about promoting the economic integration of refugees through vocational training, as well as recommendations for UNIDO's future reintegration support schemes for returnees.

### **5.1 Overall improvement in employment and income status**

This follow-up study shows that the overall employment conditions and socio-economic status of training beneficiaries seem to have improved 1.5 years since the initial study was carried out. As described above, of 50 returnees who participated in our study in 2016, over three-quarters are now engaged in some form of job or income-generating activity. This is a significant increase since the previous study in December 2014, which found that only 40 per cent of beneficiaries were involved in income-generating activities.

As mentioned earlier, while it is almost impossible to determine causality between participation in a training programme and the participants' current job and economic status, our in-depth interviews reveal a plausible relationship between the two for at least some of the beneficiaries. Moreover, a considerable number of beneficiaries highlighted the positive role UNIDO's training programme has played in building their current economic foundation. The findings of this study should be understood in relation to the local economic context of Liberia, which is plagued by high unemployment and weak economic capacity. More generally, the economic context in which such programmes are provided must be considered when analysing the overall 'success' of UNIDO's interventions.

This finding, in turn, underlines the extremely negative impact the Ebola crisis had on the process of returnees' economic reintegration and job-searching efforts in 2014. During our previous research, many of those without a job or employment stated that Ebola had destroyed

the entire country and crippled the labour market and economic transactions. The findings from this study indicate that the beneficiaries of UNIDO's training programme have gradually returned to the labour market and in some cases have been able to capitalize on their acquired skills and knowledge.

### ***5.1.1 Examining 'unsuccessful cases': unrealistic expectations?***

Several of the beneficiaries who participated in this study have not succeeded in building a meaningful economic livelihood, albeit having completed a training programme over two years ago. Looking at these cases, there is evidence suggesting that there are some discrepancies between adequate communication with the beneficiaries about UNIDO's training programmes and managing their expectations.

As shown above, some trainees chose to attend highly technical training courses—visual graphics and computer hardware—, despite lack of prior knowledge and practical experience in those areas. For these beneficiaries, the UNIDO training alone was insufficient in transforming them into experts in these technical areas. This, in turn, raises the question whether beneficiaries select appropriate skills training for their career development, and whether UNIDO should have provided such training courses as part of vocational education programmes.

This finding echoes the results of our 2014 study, which indicated major challenges in obtaining employment or establishing a sustainable enterprise in computer graphics. The following comment is an excerpt of a Skills Training beneficiary, who struggled to build an economic foundation based on the training he received:

*I took a training course in visual graphics. But it is very hard to find employment in graphic design, so I wanted to start my own company. But [the cost] of establishing a visual graphics business is very high ... I am now selling cold water and drinks, but cannot make any savings from such a small business.*

(Joseph, 32-year old returnee from Guinea).

These returnees did not necessarily indicate 'love and passion' for computers and graphic design, and their goals may have been too ambitious given the limited duration of UNIDO's training programme. When asked what they would like to request from UNIDO, these beneficiaries insisted that they needed more training— an understandable request given their limited technical expertise in these areas. Managing beneficiaries' expectations in relation to the limitations of training programmes is an issue UNIDO should consider addressing in subsequent programme schemes.



### **5.1.2 *Rethinking the provision of financial services***

Limited access to loans can be a major obstacle to the economic reintegration and development of self-reliance of returning displaced people, as many of them return home with little savings (Cohen, 2000; Kaun, 2008). In the 2014 study, a noticeable number of respondents complained about the lack of financial support after having received training and that UNIDO did not engage in the direct provision of financial support (see Omata & Takahashi, 2015 for details).

Although the majority of beneficiaries have managed to establish some form of economic foundation in Liberia, the challenge of access to financing deserves further investigation. Finance is not necessarily limited to start-up capital only. As illustrated above, some of the trainees seem to have established promising businesses that are built on their training experience. For these successful entrepreneurs, it may be constructive to provide loans so they can expand their existing enterprises and move to another stage of economic empowerment.

### **5.1.3 *Building broader partnerships***

Related to the provision of financial services, and as the first study also emphasised, UNIDO may need to strengthen its partnership with a wider range of key stakeholders to achieve meaningful and holistic support for the economic integration of returnees. In addition to the partnership with UNHCR and the government of the respective country, partnerships with specialized agencies will enable UNIDO to fill identified gaps in its current reintegration schemes.

Providing finance for returnees is one example of such a partnership. Financial services for repatriated refugees need not be offered by UNIDO; micro-finance institutions, local banks or development agencies may be better suited to provide such assistance for returnees. According to Sesnan et al. (2014), it is in fact preferable for micro-credit to be provided by an agency that is not linked to the organization providing training.

UNIDO may want to play a ‘catalytic role’ in formulating partnerships to facilitate returnees’ economic integration. In post-conflict settings, the state often has little capacity to fulfil the economic requirements of the returnees and of the community at large, and assistance for economic readjustment of returnees is not an area of expertise of UNHCR (Crisp et al., 2008). Given the years of experience in providing vocational training, private sector development and local economic contexts, UNIDO is well-positioned and attuned to assuming a coordinating role in economic assistance for returnees in post-crisis contexts.

#### **5.1.4 *The need for systematic monitoring and research***

Finally, UNIDO should create a systematic monitoring system for the economic integration process of training recipients. The impact of entrepreneurial and skills training should be evaluated over a long period to fully understand its significance (McGrath, 2012). Particularly in a country like Liberia, which has experienced widespread economic devastation due to protracted conflict and disease epidemics, it is not realistic to expect that the reintegration process can be completed within a few years. However, there is currently a significant dearth of systematic studies on the long-term process of economic readjustment of returnees in post-war settings.

Moreover, given the complexity involved in assessing the impact of training on beneficiaries, such monitoring should ideally be complemented by in-depth research carried out by a third party. As this report demonstrates, it is difficult to make generalizations about the reintegration process, as it depends on a number of micro and macro factors, including individual asset profiles and the general economic climate (Fransen & Kuschminder, 2012). Post-training evaluations coupled with detailed studies can contribute to identifying implementation challenges and refining programmes to achieve more meaningful results.

## **6. Conclusion**

This research has investigated the current job and employment conditions of former beneficiaries of UNIDO's two training programmes that were designed to promote the economic reintegration of returnees to Liberia. Given the lack of follow-up research on the impact of training on the reintegration of returnees, this paper represents an important pioneering work for UNIDO and other agencies working in this field. With the diminishing of the external shock of the Ebola crisis in Liberia, the findings of this follow-up study better demonstrate the potential of vocational training programmes for the reintegration of repatriates in Liberia.

As a way forward, it would be useful to conduct much larger-scale and systematic studies involving the beneficiaries of training programmes over a period of several years. The scope and scale of this study, as noted at the outset of the paper, are constrained by financial and human resource limitations. Ideally, the sample size should be much larger and the selected beneficiaries should be periodically contacted following the completion of training and compared with the achievements of a group of non-beneficiaries. Such comprehensive research can help UNIDO provide more refined measures and generate pragmatic lessons for future programming to support the economic reintegration of returnees.

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