

Return to Security?

Refugee return from the Netherlands to Sierra Leone: an analysis of human security and re-integration

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Preface

This thesis in front of you is the result of almost a year of preparations, field research and writing. I have put a lot of effort and energy into it, but it would not have been possible without the help of others.

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Refugee return from the Netherlands to Sierra Leone

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List of abbreviations

AVR	Assisted Voluntary Return
AVRD	Assisted Voluntary Return from Detention
CBS	Central Bureau of Statistics
CHS	Commission on Human Security
COA	Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers
DT&V	Repatriation and Departure Service
EMN	European Migration Network
EU	European Union
GST	Goods and Services Tax
HRT	Return and Reintegration Regulation
IND	Immigration and Naturalization Service
IOM	International Organization for Migration
MbT	Mediation Agency for Return
PAP	Personal Action Plan
REAN	Return and Emigration of Aliens from the Netherlands
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNAMSIL	United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone
VWN	Dutch Council for Refugees
YOS	Youth of Sierra Leone

1 – Introduction

“It’s difficult to build up a stable life. First there was the war, then you flee, but because I couldn’t get documentation I wasn’t able to build up a stable life in the UK as well. Not having the possibility to build something is very stressful. Now I am back in Sierra Leone, and it’s not easy here as well. Time after time you try to build up your life, that’s very difficult and brings about a lot of stress.”

This quote by a returnee from the UK, whom I spoke with in Freetown, Sierra Leone, shows the difficulty of what is often assumed as returning ‘home’. Returning to their country of origin after having lived abroad for a number of years is not a universal desire among refugees (Al-Rasheed, 1994), but a process fraught with difficulty, doubts and practical problems. This thesis will discuss these ambivalent experiences of refugee returnees in Sierra Leone throughout their process of return.

Sierra Leone was ravaged by more than a decade of civil war, rooted in bad governance, corruption and denial of human rights (Derksen, 2008). The war lasted from 23 March 1991 until the formal peace declaration by the United Nations on 17 January 2002 (Pham, 2004), during and shortly after which approximately 350.000 Sierra Leoneans fled to foreign countries. Of this number, 9.260 refugees applied for asylum in the Netherlands between 1995 and 2004.¹ On 8 July 2002, the Dutch government declared Sierra Leone safe on the basis of a country report by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This report led to the end of the categorical protection for Sierra Leonean nationals (Algemeen Ambtsbericht Sierra Leone, 2002). Asylum seekers were no longer automatically entitled to group protection, but each case was to be individually assessed which led to more return. Despite labeling Sierra Leone ‘safe’, many Sierra Leoneans who fled to the Netherlands to escape the violence seem to disagree with this label and returning to their country of origin often is not something they desire, even if the alternative means a life in illegality.

Since the end of the Cold War, international politics became increasingly prone to a policy of refugee return, whereby refugees were granted ‘temporary protection’. Until then, refugees were encouraged to integrate in Western countries. From the 1970s on, a restrictive attitude towards migration developed with an emphasis on the importance of return (Black & Gent, 2006; Ghanem, 2003). In order to on the one hand stimulate a return to the country of origin, and on the other hand increase re-integration of the returnees, return assistance is needed. Therefore, several voluntary return programs were set up in order to assist rejected asylum seekers in the Netherlands in returning to Sierra Leone, as well as assistance programs upon their return in Sierra Leone.

The subject group of this research exists of rejected asylum seekers, people by the authorities found not to qualify for a refugee status, not to be in need of international protection, and no longer authorized to stay in the host country, and of irregular migrants, people who enter and/or stay in a state without legal documentation (IOM, 2008a). This includes people who have either chosen to return to their country of origin, Sierra Leone, on a voluntary basis, or who have been forced to return by the Dutch authorities through deportation after staying in the Netherlands with expired documentation. Both groups

¹ <<http://statline.cbs.nl/StatWeb/publication/?DM=SLNL&PA=71924ned&D1=a&D2=10&D3=a&HDR=T,G2&STB=G1&VW=T>>. Visited on 8 July 2010.

together will be named 'refugee returnees', or 'returnees' in short. The focus is on the experiences of these returnees: how did they experience their return to Sierra Leone, the assistance to accomplish their return, the post-return assistance, and their experience of human security and re-integration in Sierra Leone? This interest led to the following research question: *How and to what extent do assistance programs contribute to the human security and re-integration of returnees in Sierra Leone?*

The main topics under analysis are return assistance, re-integration and human security of refugee-returnees. The focus is on the individual experiences of returnees. The individual's reaction to and experience of the return, which has a big influence on their re-integration, depends on their past experiences in the Netherlands, their socialization and cultural background, and the manner of their return. As Majodina noted: *"The extent to which returning exiles experience difficulties depends not only on the extent of these difficulties but on the social support they receive and the strategies they use to cope."* (Majodina, 1995: 202 in: Ghanem, 2003: 18-19). With the re-integration of returnees in Sierra Leone I understand their re-integration in the Sierra Leonean society-at-large. This includes multiple dimensions, like their social re-integration (the extent to which they involve themselves with social contacts), personal re-integration (their living conditions, accommodation, contact with family members and friends), economic re-integration (the ability to find a job or set up a business and thereby positioning yourself in the society), and cultural re-integration (how do they cope with the African culture after having lived in 'the West' for a number of years and perhaps having adopted different norms and values).

The human security of the returnees forms an important part of this research because their feelings of security influence the re-integration process. The human security concept offers a broad spectrum of types of security, from the obvious form of physical security entailing freedom from violence and physical threats, to broader forms as economic security and political security. This is all seen through the eyes of existential security: how security issues are experienced on the individual level by exploring the stories of the returnees themselves.

These topics will be discussed through the following sub questions:

a) What are the processes of return?

By answering this question I will provide insights into the reasons for return, the different ways of return and the existing return assistance that is offered to refugee returnees from the Netherlands to Sierra Leone.

b) What are the challenges for returned refugees in Sierra Leone?

During my research I found out that returnees in Sierra Leone face a number of common challenges relating to their re-integration and human security. This sub question will go into detail on the challenges that come with the re-integration of returned refugees and the different components of human security influenced by their return. It aims to analyze the extent to which the experience of return affects the re-integration and human security of refugee-returnees.

c) To what extent are these challenges incorporated into assistance programs?

The challenges discussed and analyzed by the previous sub question will here be examined in relation to the assistance programs. This part will elaborate on the preparations of return in the Netherlands, as well as on the assistance after return to Sierra Leone, and form the link between sub question a) and b).

The post-conflict situation in Sierra Leone, which includes millions of returnees trying to recover from the violent civil war that lasted for over a decade, is one from which the world could learn a great deal in the field of return, reintegration, recovery and rebuilding policies. Return policies are a hot topic in the Netherlands. The Dutch Ministries of Justice and Foreign Affairs have set up a pilot called “Platform Duurzame Terugkeer”, an integral approach focused on organizational complementarity and increasing the sustainability of return to people’s country of origin (Cordaid, website, 2009).² Since 1 March 2010, the integral approach has become a fact under the name “Stichting Duurzame Terugkeer”, which started its operations on 1 June 2010.³ Academic research can contribute to the understanding of security, which forms one of the basics of sustainability. Whether or not return is successful in terms of security and sustainability, has its influence on the promotion of peace in post-conflict countries (Black & Gent, 2006). Although sustainability forms an important component of return and re-integration, it will not be a specific topic focused on in this research. Because the measurement of sustainability requires a long-term research that takes into account individual, as well as community and contextual aspects, it goes beyond the scope of this research. By focusing on the human security component of return and the re-integration of refugee returnees, this research will contribute to the social as well as scientific debate about return by analyzing the issue of return through anthropological insights.

This thesis will start with a theoretical framework in which the theories prevalent in returnee research as well as human security and re-integration will be discussed in depth. Subsequently, the methods of research used during the three months of fieldwork will be explained in the methodology chapter. The data gathered during this period of time will be presented in three chapters, which will be in line with the sub question presented above. The final chapter will be the overall conclusion.

² <http://www.cordaid.nl/Ons_werk/Maatwerk_bij_Terugkeer/Ondersteuning_asielzoekers_bij_terugkeer_naar_land_van_herkomst.aspx?mId=10114>. Visited on 29 November 2009.

³ <<http://www.maatwerkbijterugkeer.nl/nieuws/nieuwsbrief-mei-2010>>. Visited on 2 August 2010.

2 - Theoretical framework

The human security of returnees to Sierra Leone forms an important subject of this research project. The term ‘human security’ is very broad, raising a wide variety of issues regarding security and well-being (Eriksen, 2005). Its broadness encourages interdisciplinary thinking (Winslow & Eriksen, 2004), and enables researchers to analyze widespread topics along the lines of security issues. My research aims to contribute to the human security debate by linking it to the re-integration of refugee returnees in Sierra Leone, and to theoretical insights about home, identity and notions of belonging in order to explain the complexity of return migration from the Netherlands to Sierra Leone.

Feelings of security influence the re-integration process. By determining the shortcoming of the human security of returnees, their re-integration could be improved: *“Human security enables the identification of the primary insecurities and vulnerabilities that need to be addressed and the prioritizing of the strategies required for [...] reintegration.”* (UN, 2009: 36). At the same time, a successful re-integration is important to enhance security (Kibreab, 2002 in: Bascom, 2005: 166), because forms of attachments can function as a security basis (Eriksen, 2005).

2.1 – Human security

The normative human security approach as proposed by the Commission on Human Security (CHS) connects several kinds of freedom, namely freedom from fear, freedom from want, and the freedom of future generations to inherit a healthy natural environment (CHS, 302: 4). It offers a broad spectrum of types of security, from the obvious form of physical security entailing freedom from violence and physical threats, to broader forms as economic security and political security. The types of security used in this analysis are as follows:

1. Economic security

Threats to economic security are persistent poverty and unemployment (UN, 2009). It resembles an assured access to basic income (Kett, 2005), through government financial assistance if necessary. Unemployment increases the risk for persistent poverty, but employment is not a sufficient condition for not experiencing persistent poverty. The ability to afford life necessities is mostly a decisive factor for experiencing economic security (CHS, 2003). This could also be hindered when someone is employed, for example when you are in need of expensive medicines but your salary does not allow you to purchase them. Therefore, economic insecurity often leads to other insecurities to occur.

2. Food security

Food security entails the entitlement to food. Food security is most clearly shown by hunger and famine (UN, 2009). The lack of food created insecurities of how to make it through the day, of how to feed your children, etcetera.

3. Health security

The lack of access to basic health care is often decisive in experiencing health security. The security of your health is connected to food security and hygiene (UN, 2009). Malnutrition will decrease your body's ability to fight against external influences like diseases and infections. Unsafe food or the lack of clear water supply will cause harm to your health. Here, the interconnectedness of the types of security becomes clear again: the availability of food, being able to afford safe food, the presence of health care and having access to it, all contribute to health security.

4. Environmental security

Environmental circumstances like resource depletion, pollution, and natural disasters influence people's feelings of security (UN, 2009). It includes having access to clean water and air and non-degraded land (Kett, 2005). Pollution will cause hygiene problems, natural disasters will create physical insecurities, and resource depletion might lead to the loss of income and food from the agricultural sector.

5. Personal security

This type of security is connected to threats close to home. Criminality, domestic violence and child labour are important triggers for personal security (UN, 2009): of your ability to feel safe in your personal surroundings like your house and your town. Having a roof on top of your head, your psychological wellbeing and feelings of home are included here. The protection of civil and human rights is an important aspect of personal security as well.

6. Community security

What does your surrounding community mean to you? This type of security closely links to social re-integration. Tensions in the community surrounding you can risk your community safety. These tensions are mostly to be found on identity grounds (UN, 2009). Social security issues like social status, network, gender relations, family life and social exclusion will be shared under this dimension.

For this research I will include tensions along returnees and stayees. On the one hand, returnees have certain perceptions towards their home population that might have to do with guilt or maybe superiority because they were able to develop and receive schooling in their host country. On the other hand, stayees will probably have their own opinion about the people that have left and now decided to return after the war, while they stayed through the suffering (Ghanem, 2003). Estrangement and not being able to reintegrate into your former community may create feelings of community insecurity.

7. Political security

The political regime that rules the country is an important part of how people perceive their security. Post-conflict situations are often encountered with new regimes that have to pave their way, that have to gain the trust of the population, and who are confronted with a country that needs to be rebuilt. This might lead to insecurity amongst the civilian population who are not sure about the intentions, the chances of success, and who are probably suspicious towards governmental institutes which have formerly put them through

war and despair. Political security includes the refugees' right to be treated alike to all citizens of their home country, and to continue these rights upon return (Kett, 2005).

8. Cultural security

"Loss of homeland can lead to a loss of cultural identity" (Kett, 2005: 100). In relation to my research this dimension of security can provide me with information on if and to what extent return affects culture in the country of origin. According to Kett (2005), security and the freedom to practise cultural and religious beliefs are essential for the preservation of someone's sense of identity. Here, Kett talks about security, freedom, and identity in the case of exile. I will look at people's cultural security in the context of return. People's worldviews might be changed during their stay in exile, due to a process of acculturation, in which refugees adopt cultural traits of other groups (Doná & Berry, 1999), leading to changes in their cultural beliefs and attachments. How will this influence their cultural security in Sierra Leone?

According to Eriksen (2005: 3), every society has its own wants and fears. When analyzing refugee returnees, they can be perceived as a society on its own, with its own specific wants and fears relating to their stay in exile and return to their country of origin. The importance of the human security concept lies in its 'people-centered' approach, and its building blocks of 'protection' and 'empowerment'. The people-centered approach entails a focus on individuals and their communities, which forms the basis for re-integration in the context of refugee return.

The 'protection' component implies a 'top-down' approach. It recognizes that threats are the outcome of events that take place beyond people's control. In order to protect them against these threats, their basic rights and freedoms must be guaranteed (CHS, 2003). Protection implies a 'top-down' approach because it requires the implementation of a protective structure by states – as being primarily responsible. In addition to that, it requires a comprehensive approach in which organizational agendas of organizations dealing with security and development are brought together (UN, 2009). In this research project, protection is regarded as a top-down approach by return assistance programs in order to find out whether or not protection is incorporated into the programs. They provide returnees with the practical means to return, but to what extent does this strengthen their protection and security? Do returnees feel safe returning with the assistance?

The 'empowerment' component entails *"people's ability to act on their own behalf – and on behalf of others."* (CHS, 2003: 11). The traditional concept of state security merely focused on the military defense of territory. Its insufficiency to provide security for civilians created a reorientation towards securing human welfare (Newman, 2001). The people-centered approach of human security requires an approach of empowerment, which stimulates local ownership of assistance (Hasegawa, 2007) in order to foster people's ability to work on their own security. Through empowerment, people can develop their individual as well as community potential by making social arrangements and taking collective action (CHS, 2003). This is why it implies a 'bottom-up' approach: empowerment is aimed at how to enhance people's capabilities in order to enable them to act on their own behalf, make informed choices and develop their full potential. In addition to that, empowerment arising from civil society enables people to participate

in solutions to ensure human security (UN, 2009). I am interested in the empowerment of refugee-returnees and in the extent to which assistance programs contribute to returnees' empowerment.

Empowerment enables people to strive for their human security. In order to attain a base of human security, people must have and maintain access to minimum levels of food, water, and shelter, and a level of protection from life threats. Yet, psychosocial needs like recognition, participation and respect for 'identity' must be supported as well (Leaning, 2004), relating to people's personal security. This is where human security links with re-integration and identity, which will be further explained in the next section. The reception by the host population and the relationship with the community upon return are important determinants for the course of the re-integration. A network of social or family support provides identity, recognition, participation, autonomy (Bascom, 2005; Leaning, 2004), and community security. In addition to that, the relationship with the location creates a sense of home and safety, thereby contributing to the human security and re-integration.

2.2 – Re-integration and the link to 'home', 'identity' and 'notions of belonging'

The re-integration process can be understood through different dimensions, which I have classified in social, personal, economic, and cultural re-integration. With social re-integration I mean the extent to which returnees involve themselves with the community via social contacts. Personal re-integration is concerned with their living conditions, accommodation, and contact with family members and friends from before their flight from Sierra Leone. Economic re-integration is to be found in the ability to find a job or set up a business and thereby position themselves in the society. Cultural re-integration is interpreted as the way returnees cope with the Sierra Leonean, or 'African', culture after having lived in the West for a number of years and possibly having adopted different norms and values. As argued by Preston (1993 in: Arowolo, 2000: 62) *"the process of integration is one of adaptation; a process of give and take on either side as people learn to live together. [...] at places of origin it is between those who have returned and those who have remained at home during their absence."*

The perception of 'home' is often problematic. It is often assumed that return equals 'going home' and that it will lead to natural re-integration into people's former communities. I will challenge this assumption through the case study of refugee return to Sierra Leone, because re-integration does not guarantee homecoming (Bascom, 2005). In his study about Iraqi Arab and Assyrian refugees in London, Al-Rasheed *"rejects the assumption that refugees' attachment to their homeland and their desire to return are 'natural' givens"* (Al-Rasheed, 1994:199), since return is not a universal desire among returnees. In order to understand the re-integration of refugee returnees in Sierra Leone, their relationship with the homeland as well as with the host country the Netherlands have to be explored. For many refugees, the relation with their country of origin is disturbed because of war, loss, and destruction, and the taste of a better life in the West. This can problematize the relation between returnees and stayees and the re-integration process.

Perceptions of home are often interwoven with identity and notions of belonging. Home is often described with metaphors like 'roots', 'soil', 'seeds'. The question of roots in relation to identity is

something to rethink in times in which the global refugee population is higher than ever (Castles, 2003). Being displaced is often described as being ‘uprooted’: as being taken from your roots. But what does it mean to be rooted in a place? This is an important question as people derive their identity from this rootedness (Malkki, 1992). In addition to that, it are people’s personal social experiences that shape their identity, which makes it also possible to attach to different communities at the same time.

Successful social re-integration leads to a so-called ‘we-feeling’ or to notions of belonging. It creates predictability and intimacy within a certain community, accordingly socially securing people. This explains why many people outside of their place of origin, whether it is their country or culture, remain close to their traditions with which they feel familiar. It provides a sense of security as well as identity (Eriksen, 2005). What it is exactly that provides uprooted people with this sense of security and identity may vary per person as feelings of security and identity are personally experienced and shaped. The way every individual experiences his or her return influences the process of re-integration. These personal experiences of security make it important to look at the topic of return migration through the existential security lens, since it enables me to explain how security issues are experienced on the individual level.

3 - Methodology

Anthropologists highly rely on the ‘field’ as the site for conducting their research. The field can provide us with a lot of information as long as we know how to abstract this information from the field. The process of ‘field working’ is therefore of great importance to anthropologists (Stone Sunstein & Chiseri-Strater, 2007). The ways of carrying out our research is decisive for the success and quality of the research.

3.1 – Conducting field research in the Netherlands and Sierra Leone

This thesis is based on a field research conducted in the Netherlands and in Sierra Leone between 4 January and 30 March, 2010. For this research, qualitative research methods were used. In the Netherlands, key information was gathered through the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in The Hague and the Mediation Agency for Return in Utrecht (MbT). These organizations enabled me to collect various publications about return migration of rejected asylum seekers, to talk to staff members working with people who return to Sierra Leone, and to get in contact with local counterparts in Sierra Leone through which I could get into contact with the actual returnees.

By dividing my research into one month in the Netherlands and two months in Sierra Leone I was able to get a good picture of the issues under research before meeting the returnees in Sierra Leone. The IOM and MbT offered me the necessary information on the process of assisting rejected asylum seekers to return to their country of origin. Interviews with the people facilitating their return and a meeting at a social community center in Rotterdam with a group of six rejected asylum seekers from Sierra Leone provided me with a framework of the situation these people fled from, their stay in the Netherlands, their options after their asylum in the Netherlands was rejected, and their willingness as well as hesitation to return voluntarily.

The part of my field research in Sierra Leone was mainly conducted in Freetown, the capital. This is where most of the returnees live in their aim to build up a new life, find a job, or set up a business. In addition, IOM Sierra Leone is located in Freetown, as well as the MbT counterpart ‘Christian Brothers’: a social center offering counseling and micro credits to returnees from the Netherlands. Mainly through these two organizations, I was able to talk with 18 respondents who had returned to Sierra Leone after living in the Netherlands (15 respondents) and the United Kingdom (UK) (3 respondents) for a number of years, ranging from 2 to 13 years. Open interviews with these 18 people provided me with in-depth information about their decision and process of return, as well as about their experiences of returning to their home country. Their years of absence, reunion with family, friends and community members, their experience with the assistance offered to them, the challenges they encounter in a post-war country still suffering from severe underdevelopment and poverty, and their perception of life after having experienced life outside of the African continent was all useful information abstracted from the interviews. The interviews had an open character, but with an emphasis on their ‘life events’ (Bijleveld, 2006: 217) concerning their return to Sierra Leone and relevant to the experiences and situation of the respondent. Most of the interviews were held at the offices of either the Christian Brothers or IOM Freetown. Because of the accessibility of and the

familiarity with the offices, most respondents preferred to meet me there. The interviews were held in English, and some in Dutch, which made it unnecessary to use a translator. In general, the respondents were very open about their situation and experiences. Nevertheless, some were reticent to talk to me and were wondering what was in it for them when they would talk to me. I always explained I did not work for an organization, that I was working on my research with the hope to be able to accomplish something for future returnees to Sierra Leone. When this was not enough to make them open up, I tried to comfort them by starting off the conversation with asking questions about other things: items in the news, about the weather, and so on. Fortunately, this worked in the few situations where I encountered reticence.

My Dutch nationality had positive as well as negative consequences, mainly depending on the respondents' experiences in the Netherlands. Where some of them were more than happy to talk to me and expressed their appreciation; "*You came all the way from Holland to Sierra Leone to talk to us?*", "*Now I finally have the opportunity to talk Dutch again!*", and asking me questions about politics, the weather and more, others asked me why I came to Sierra Leone if I didn't have any money or concrete help to offer them. Negative attitudes towards the Dutch authorities also played a part: "*Why would I talk to you? They didn't help me in Holland, why should I help you?*" In these situations I tried to make them feel more comfortable to not specifically ask them about their return, but rather started off the conversation as described above, with asking questions about general topics.

With the possibility of meeting some of the respondents multiple times, I had the chance to take a look in their lives rather than them merely telling me about their lives. These valuable visits, on the data collection level as well as on the personal level, broke down most of the boundaries between the respondents and me being the 'white girl' from the Netherlands asking them questions about a difficult period in their lives. Other than the more formal interviews, these follow-ups mainly took place at the respondent's house or at their business place. These visits made me gain their trust, and made them more convinced of my sincere interest into their stories and situation.

All of the 18 refugee-returnees no longer had their residence permits extended in the host-country before their return to Sierra Leone. 6 of them returned by force through deportation and 12 returned in a voluntary manner. All of these 12 returnees returned with assistance from the IOM, of which 3 with assistance from IOM UK and 9 from IOM the Netherlands. 15 respondents were registered at the Christian Brothers, who all had returned from the Netherlands. The returnees from the UK were contacted through IOM Freetown. Unfortunately it was not possible to have interviews with any returnees from the Netherlands through IOM Freetown. There were 2 returnees from the Netherlands who were not linked to the Christian Brothers but who were still in contact with IOM Freetown. Yet, meetings with them did not take place because one of them stayed in Nigeria during my research period, and the other one told me he was not ready yet to talk about his experiences of return since he returned recently. He only told me his return had led to a lot of stress and frustration on his part. Other reasons for not being able to reach additional returnees through the IOM are the optional and free choice of returnees to visit IOM Freetown upon return, the short period of follow-up by the IOM after arrival in Sierra Leone, the existence of the network of returnees from the Netherlands, and the possibility of a microcredit provided by the Christian

Brothers in Freetown, which makes the returnees inclined to turn to them instead of IOM Freetown. In addition to that, most returnees spoken to had already received their financial assistance from IOM the Netherlands, thereby lacking any motivation to visit the IOM office in Freetown.

Besides the valuable interviews, conversations and visits, secondary data collection was conducted. It was possible to look into the files of returnees joining the returnee program at the Christian Brothers, and to talk to the social worker of this organization who guides the returnees and maintains close contact to most of them. Staff members and information brochures provided insights into the procedures at the Christian Brothers and IOM Freetown and a lot of additional information about the process returnees go through and the challenges they face before and after their return to Sierra Leone. Additionally, I tried to collect migration statistics in Sierra Leone, but on a governmental level, as well as on an organizational level at the Christian Brothers and IOM Freetown, it was difficult to collect accurate numbers on return migration. Access to governmental institutions is very difficult. And although both the Christian Brothers and IOM Freetown were very helpful throughout the period of fieldwork, the lack of updates of records and an organized documentation system made it difficult to deliver accurate numbers.

3.2 – Methodological challenges

Field research brings about many methodological challenges. One of those is relying on the selected respondents. Since this research was aimed at the re-integration and security of refugee-returnees who received help from assistance programs, the respondents were selected through organizations offering assistance to people who are about to return or have already returned to Sierra Leone. Because of the time limit of two months of research time in Sierra Leone, it were the people willing and reachable within this group of returnees receiving assistance that I could talk to: there was no full control over whom I got to and did not get to talk with. This led to a research sample of 18 refugee-returnees, including 15 men and 3 women. This unequal distribution of case load can be attributed to the gender distribution within the population of refugee-returnees: mainly young men had migrated to Western countries during the civil war.

The fact that a number of refugee-returnees who received assistance could not be reached through either the Christian Brothers or IOM Freetown sometimes had to do with practicalities of everyday Sierra Leonean life, including the lack of electricity supply because of regular but random power cuts, the inability of people to buy phone credits, or because of family or business-related travelling. A lot of time went into trying to contact people, being asked to call back later, phones shut down when trying to reach someone, and trying to make people willing to talk to me despite my ethical reasons not to offer them any financial compensation. Multiple times people shut down or got upset when they felt like all they did was talking to organizations and researchers since they returned, without seeing any results in the form of money. On one particular occasion I was put on the spot by a man I was supposed to meet on one of my last days in Sierra Leone. The day before our meeting, he called me to tell me he was not sure he would be able to come to our appointment, because he had no money for petrol. He asked me if I could go get a gallon of petrol for his car, or at least pay for it. I told him I would not do that, that I would certainly not get a gallon of petrol for him, and that I did not have a lot of money with me to pay people for our

appointments, something I told all of my respondents on beforehand, including him on an earlier occasion. *“It’s just small money”*, he told me. *“Just 15.000 Leones, that’s 3 euro! That’s not a lot of money for you, you can easily pay that!”* I knew what he was doing and I did not want to be blackmailed into our meeting. On the other hand, it would be one of the last chances to talk with new respondents. The week before had been a difficult one, with a lot of disappointments because I could not reach several potential respondents. I needed his information. Although it made me feel incredibly uncomfortable, I let him talk me into it and I agreed upon giving him the 15.000 Leones the next day. After we hung up, I felt really bad and mad at the same time. Why did I let myself talk into it? Until then, I had brought cookies or drinks to appointments, but I never paid someone out of an ethical belief: I did not want to buy people into my research, and now, so close before the end of my field research, I threw that belief overboard because of a rude man who caught me on a bad day. However, despite these difficulties encountered, many people were willing to talk about their experiences, and when they did they were very open.

One of the foremost shortcomings is the lack of a control group: a group of refugee-returnees who did not receive assistance at any stage of their return. This could have increased the reliability of my findings. Yet, these returnees are the most difficult to find since they cannot be traced through organizations. Attempts were made to get into contact with them through other returnees, but because of the network provided by assistance programs, they also mainly have contacts with fellow returnees linked to assistance programs. This, in combination with the limited research time, made it impossible to include a control group into the research population.

4 - Processes of return

“Voluntary return is an important component of a balanced, effective and sustainable approach to the return and, where applicable, reintegration of unsuccessful asylum seekers.” (Council of the European Union 2005 in: IOM, 2008a: 9). This quote shows the importance of voluntary return, according to the Council of the European Union. The processes of return can be divided into voluntary and forced return, meaning return instigated by the returnee him-/herself and return through deportation by the host country’s authorities. Host countries also prefer voluntary return over forced return because of the humane character of voluntary return as well as the cost-effective component of voluntary return in relation to forced return (IOM, 2008a). This chapter aims to answer sub question *a) What are the processes of return?* It will go into the processes of return by explaining the different stages of refugee return migration from the Netherlands to Sierra Leone.

4.1 – Declaring Sierra Leone safe to return

The exact number of people who fled from Sierra Leone to Europe because of the war is unknown, due to the fact that not everyone applies for asylum. Table 4.1 shows the number of Sierra Leonean refugees who applied for asylum in the Netherlands:

Table 4.1 Sierra Leonean asylum applications in the Netherlands

Year	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
Asylum applications	390	250	390	480	1280	2000	2410	1610	310	140

(Statline-Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) the Netherlands)⁴

Most Sierra Leonean asylum applications in the Netherlands were registered between 2000 and 2002, when the war was in its final phase. This was also the case in my research population. 12 out of the 15 returnees who returned from the Netherlands applied for asylum in the Netherlands between 2000 and 2002.

The official end of the war was declared on 17 January 2002 by the United Nations (Pham, 2004). Hereafter Sierra Leone has been declared safe by the Dutch government on the basis of a country report by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, issued on 8 July 2002. This report assessed the ‘total situation’ (Art. 29 lid 1 sub d Vreemdelingenwet 2000) in Sierra Leone as ‘generally improved’, which led the Parliament to end the categorical protection for Sierra Leonean nationals. The assessment of the total situation as generally improved was based on “*the peace process put into action in November 2000 which has made considerable progress since September 2001*”, “*peaceful elections*”, “*the extension of the UNAMSIL mandate until September 2002*”, “*the accessibility for humanitarian aid throughout the country*”, and “*neighboring states of the Netherlands no longer automatically granting subsidiary status to Sierra Leonean asylum*

⁴ <<http://statline.cbs.nl/StatWeb/publication/?DM=SLNL&PA=80059ned&D1=a&D2=0,57&D3=a&HDR=T,G2&STB=G1&VW=T>>. Visited on 8 July 2010.

seekers.” (Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, 2002: 85-86). The report interprets security as a decrease of violence, and as state security when it comes to the asylum policy of neighboring states which might have influenced the Dutch policy. This led to the end of the categorical protection of Sierra Leone (Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, 2002). Asylum seekers were no longer automatically entitled to group protection, but each case was to be individually assessed which led to more return. Temporary asylum permits were often no longer extended on the basis of the end of the categorical protection policy. The number of granted asylum applications from 2001 until 2008 is shown in table 4.2.

Table 4.2 Sierra Leonean granted asylum applications in the Netherlands

Year	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Total	1350	1210	220	320	440	430	290	120
Temporary	1340	1200	190	120	180	150	150	90
Permanent	10	10	20	190	260	290	150	30

(Statline-Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) the Netherlands)⁵

Rejected asylum seekers, people found not to qualify for a refugee status because they are no longer in need of international protection and are not entitled to remain on other grounds, are no longer authorized to stay in the host country (IOM, 2008a) and are thus obliged to leave the country. When a rejected asylum seeker does so without forced expulsion, the return is referred to as ‘voluntary’ (Van Houte & De Koning, 2008). This is a highly debated term in return migration literature, because of the lack of plausible alternatives when the only option besides return means a life in illegality in the host country. Despite its disputable nature, I will use the term ‘voluntary return’ for rejected asylum seekers and irregular migrants who return to Sierra Leone without the Dutch authorities physically forcing them, because it corresponds with the terminology used by the IOM, which acts as the main facilitator of voluntary return (IOM, 2008a). Nevertheless, the degree of voluntariness differs per individual migrant, and so will the effect of the return on his or her re-integration and feelings of security.

4.2 – Reasons for staying

During my one month of research in the Netherlands, I was able to talk to six irregular migrants together with a staff member of IOM the Netherlands. All six men fled from Sierra Leone in 2001 or 2002, when the war was in its final phase. Around 2007, they all lost their temporary residence permit on the basis of the Dutch asylum policy and the declaration that Sierra Leone was safe. Yet, they were all still in the Netherlands and, according to their own experiences in the Netherlands and idea of the safety situation in

⁵ <<http://statline.cbs.nl/StatWeb/publication/?DM=SLNL&PA=71924ned&D1=a&D2=10&D3=a&HDR=T,G2&STB=G1&VW=T>>. Visited on 8 July 2010.

their home country, not ready to return. Some of the main reasons for not wanting to return to Sierra Leone were: *“I do not want to go back because I have been in the Netherlands since 2002, and have learned a lot here through work and schooling”*. Another man kept repeating that he was afraid to return, because of his physical security; *“It is not about money, or food, it is about security, no violence, and not getting killed. I am not looking for trouble, or criminality, I just want to live a peaceful life.”* And later on he added: *“I do not feel safe to return to Sierra Leone.”* Fear is common amongst irregular migrants. The war has left them scared and scarred which leads to personal and subjective feelings of insecurity, the so called existential insecurity, based on their own fears and image of when they left Sierra Leone: full of violence, fear, death, loss, destruction. They know the war is over, but they are still too scared and hung up to the image of the country when they left that they do not feel ready to return. Stress and frustration because of what they have experienced during the war often lie at the basis of this fear. One of the men, let's call him Ibrahim, reacted very emotional throughout the meeting whenever one of the other guys talked about returning to Sierra Leone. He sighed a lot and kept on shaking his head. At one point he started shouting: *“Don't tell me about Sierra Leone, I don't want to hear anything about Sierra Leone. I will never return! Stop telling me about Sierra Leone!”*, at which he put his leg on the table in front of him, rolled up his pants, and showed a large scar on his shinbone. Still raising his voice, he told us it was a shot wound from the war. Although I was shocked by his dramatic scene, it was played down by Abubakarr, the man who had dominated most of the meeting. And even when I made a comment about it to the IOM staff member once we had left the meeting, she was very laconic about it by saying that it was an act to get our attention and that it probably was an old wound which had nothing to do with the war.

Some people say they do want to return, but there are always certain conditions. Abubakarr kept on mentioning conditions, one after the other. *“If you can find my family, I will be able to return.”* This is one of the types of assistance that could be provided with the help of IOM Sierra Leone, explained during the meeting (verbal information IOM staff member, 6 January 2010). Yet, later on Abubakarr told us he only wanted to return when someone could guarantee him a job and an income, that he had already tried all the ways and organizations to return, and that he would go back as soon as he had a good plan and found money and sponsors to support him with that. This shows how irregular migrants feel insecure and unsafe. They find themselves between an uncertain life in illegality in the Netherlands, surrounded by the prosperity of ‘the rich and white men's land’, which the Netherlands was named during a number of conversations, and their insecurity, fear and ignorance about a life in Sierra Leone. They extend the option of voluntary return once their temporary residence permit is expired. Thereby they postpone the possibility to return voluntarily, because the longer they continue their lives the way they do, the bigger the chance of getting arrested and deported by the Dutch authorities.

Based on the focus group meeting with the six irregular migrants, job security, income security and physical security came out as their main concerns, which only partly corresponds with the assessment of the Ministry. This discrepancy is mainly to be found in the interpretation of security. Taking into account the main features of human security, namely the people-centered and multi-sectoral understanding of insecurities (UN, 2009), the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been directed at inter-state and outer-

state security. Its decision was based on the peace process, the elections, international aid, and the asylum policy of neighboring states, thereby putting the state interest before the interest of the people. Instead of a multi-sectoral approach, this has more of a one-dimension approach putting the end of war and violence up front. Striving for peace and stability is an important goal to reach security, I will not deny this. Yet, the assessment shows that the concept of human security as explained by the UN is not incorporated as such into asylum procedures of the Dutch government.

4.3 – Reasons for returning

When taking into account the security objections to return as pointed out above, what were the reasons for return for the people who did go back to Sierra Leone? For all the 18 people interviewed, the return was instigated by the loss of asylum in the Netherlands. Of these 18 people, 6 were deported, and 12 returned voluntarily. Some had already lost their temporary residence permit and others had been informed that they were about to lose it in the near future. Their status at time of return did not become clear in all conversations.

The stress and struggle that comes along with a life in illegality was the foremost reason to return for voluntary returnees after having lived in the Netherlands without an extension of their residence permit. Disbelief and incomprehension about their refugee status being revoked came out of most of the conversations I had with returnees. They felt disbelief because they were not able to build up a stable life in a safe surrounding and were sent back to the country they had fled from. *“I was like, what’s the point? I was expecting people to protect me. I wanted to feel safe. So if I had to suffer there, let’s go back and suffer here.”* Feelings of incomprehension arose because many felt like they were punished by the Dutch government without knowing why. *“I don’t know how they see us to be honest. If they see us as a criminal or what. But for me, I never had a problem with police over there.”*

One respondent caught my special attention, Lansana. He had just returned in November 2009, three months before I first met him in Freetown. At the age of 16, in the middle of the war in 1996, he had left the country by decision of his father who wanted his son to be safe. At that time the war had not reached Freetown yet and he was still able to attend school. He left his education, friends and family in the search for a safe heaven and ended up in the Netherlands. Before he was granted a temporary residence permit, he was living in an asylum seekers’ centre and going to school. After six years in the Netherlands, he got involved into a fight which led the police to arrest him. Hereafter, his residence permit was no longer granted and he ended up in illegality. For seven years he lived his life in illegality. What this entailed exactly did not become clear to me. At one point he told me he was living on the street. Later on, he told me: *“In Holland, it is different. When I was there, I was living on my own, going to school, going to work, come back to my place, and have food to eat. I didn’t have problems with anybody.”* It could be that both stories are true, considering his stay of 13 years in the Netherlands, which makes it likely he had lived under different conditions. What did become clear was the stressful situation he lived in just before he decided to return to Sierra Leone. *“In Holland I was living as an illegal. It was so difficult for me in Holland. I tried everything but it was so difficult. Even something to eat, I couldn’t get it. So I thought*

maybe I come back, before it gets any worse. That's the problem you know. [...] I didn't have anybody to help me and the government also refused to help me. I was living on the streets, it's not easy to be on the streets. [...] My father is here. I used to talk to my father and he advised me to come back. Even my brother in Holland, and my other brother in America, they all told me to go back. So I just thought maybe to listen to my father's advice and come back."

Other stories of returnees also showed that those who lived in illegality decided to voluntarily return at a point when the stress of their illegal life became too much. *"I said it's not necessary to stay for me anymore. Not being allowed to work, not getting documents, so what's the point of staying? It is better to go back and struggle, because it is the same struggle, so better struggle somewhere in freedom, where you may get out of one day. At that time I really wanted to go back."* And: *"You always have to watch your back, it's very stressful. I was always living with the fear of getting arrested. You are not able to build up your life when you are not allowed to work. Not being able to build up your life, time after time, that's a very stressful place to be in."*

In the cases of return of rejected asylum seekers, to end up in illegality and the stress and struggle that involves living as an illegal was something they wanted to prevent. Acceptance of their rejection came out of every conversation about their return. Not wanting to live as an illegal, under insecure, difficult and poor conditions, and having the possibility to receive return assistance, were important reasons for them to cut the knot right after they heard their residence permit would expire without extension. How the voluntary return of rejected asylum seekers is executed will be explained in the following section.

4.4 – Ways of return

Multiple actors are active in the field of return migration in the Netherlands. This thesis will not make an inventory of all return facilities available, but will focus on those which played a prominent role in the lives of the returnees included in the field research. The main organizations offering voluntary return assistance are the IOM and MbT.

A rejected asylum seeker is granted a period of 28 days in which he/she has the opportunity to voluntarily leave the Netherlands. When this period expires, the person becomes an illegal alien and runs the risk of getting arrested and deported (Van Wijk, 2008). Deportation, meaning forced return, is executed by the Repatriation and Departure Service (DT&V).

4.4.1 – Voluntary return

As discussed in section 4.1, a return is referred to as voluntary when a rejected asylum seeker does so without forced expulsion (Van Houte & De Koning, 2008). As an intergovernmental body, IOM acts with its partners in the international community to:

- assist in meeting the growing operational challenges of migration management,
- advance understanding of migration issues,

- encourage social and economic development through migration,
- uphold the human dignity and well-being of migrants.⁶

IOM the Netherlands started its operations in 1991 with a main focus on return migration (IOM, 2008b). As showed in table 4.1, most Sierra Leoneans applied for asylum in the Netherlands in 2001 and 2002, as well as most of the respondents of this research. From April 2002 until December 2009, IOM the Netherlands assisted 120 Sierra Leoneans with returning to their country of origin by means of different assisted voluntary return (AVR) programs (IOM internal statistical documentation, 2010).

The IOM can be reached directly by visiting the IOM office or through other actors in the field of asylum and return. On most occasions, foreign nationals are referred to the IOM by the DT&V, the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA), responsible for the reception of asylum seekers, or the Dutch Council for Refugees (VWN), which provides support during the asylum procedure and during civic integration (EMN, 2009).

IOM the Netherlands' main return program is 'Return and Emigration of Aliens from the Netherlands' (REAN), which has been in effect since 1 May 2006. This program assists migrants in their basic needs when they leave the Netherlands. The conditions to be met by the migrant applying for the REAN program are:

- the migrant has not departed on the basis of the REAN arrangement in the five years prior to the application, and has not been removed from the Netherlands at the expense of the Dutch government.
- the migrant is not a citizen of one of the countries that are excluded from the REAN arrangement (the current EU countries and number of other Western countries), unless it concerns a victim of trafficking in human beings.
- the migrant came to the Netherlands to settle for a prolonged period.
- the migrant agrees that, after departure, any procedures still pending with the Immigration and Naturalization Service (IND) will be terminated or that any residence permit will be revoked.
- the migrant is unable to pay for the journey personally.
- the migrant intends to leave permanently.
- the migrant is able to obtain valid travel documents or possesses them already (passport or laissez passer).
- when an application for voluntary return is submitted, the IOM will enquire from the IND whether there is no objection to the departure and the provision of means for the return and reintegration of the particular migrant.⁷

When the migrant applied for the assisted voluntary return meets the conditions, he/she receives the following support:

- information about the return process,

⁶ <<http://www.iom.int/jahia/Jahia/lang/en/pid/9>>. Visited on 29 May 2010.

⁷ <http://www.iom-nederland.nl/Programma_s/Terugkeer/Basisvoorwaarden_Terugkeer_REAN>. Visited on 30 May 2010.

- assistance at Schiphol airport during departure and, to the extent applicable, during transit and arrival,
- a plane ticket to a place as near as possible to the final destination,
- a compensation of the costs of the travel documents,
- a financial contribution to bridge the initial period after departure from the Netherlands, which consists of two categories:
 1. €500,- per adult or unaccompanied minor foreign national, and €100,- per minor accompanied family member of foreign nationals,
 - who are still involved in aliens law proceedings or whose term for departure has not yet expired and who have resided in the Netherlands for more than three months,
 - who are in possession of a residence permit.
 2. A limited amount of €200,- per adult or unaccompanied minor foreign national, and €40,- per minor accompanied family member of foreign nationals,
 - who are still involved in aliens law proceedings or whose term for departure has not yet expired and who have resided in the Netherlands for more than three months,
 - who are no longer in possession of a residence permit.⁸

The amount of financial contribution differs on the condition of being or no longer being in possession of a residence permit. When a migrant applies for the assisted voluntary return before his/her residence permit expires, he/she will receive a higher financial contribution. This could be ascribed to the value attached to migrants who voluntarily return before they end up in illegality.

In addition to the REAN program, there is the Return and Reintegration Regulation (HRT) for people who applied for asylum in the Netherlands before 1 January 2008. Under certain conditions, adult asylum seekers can be considered eligible for an additional contribution of €1750,- under HRT:

- if they have a temporary residence permit, but are willing to revoke it.
- if they are still residing lawfully in the Netherlands.
- if they have applied for asylum prior to 1 April 2001 and have been designated by the IND as not qualifying for the general regularization exercise.
- if they have applied for asylum after 1 April 2001 and are still residing in a reception centre after expiry of the term for departure.
- if they qualify for placement in a Freedom-Restricting Location (until at most one week after placement).⁹

This regulation is designed for foreign nationals to improve their possibilities for sustainable re-integration in the countries of origin (or in a third country of resettlement) by means of financial support. For people with health-related problems and victims of trafficking in human beings, extra financial support or support in kind from the REAN and HRT programs is available.

⁸ <http://www.iom-nederland.nl/Programma_s/Terugkeer/Basisvoorwaarden_Terugkeer_REAN>. Visited on 30 May 2010.

⁹ <http://www.iom-nederland.nl/Programma_s/Terugkeer/Basisvoorwaarden_Terugkeer_REAN>. Visited on 30 May 2010.

Upon return in Sierra Leone, returnees have to contact the IOM office in Freetown within three months in order to start the re-integration assistance, if they are entitled to this under the program they returned with (verbal information staff member IOM Freetown). The different forms of the re-integration activities and the ways to invest the financial assistance on behalf of the re-integration will be discussed in section 4.5.

Much of the assistance offered by the IOM consists of financial support, but the need for more money was a topic for discussion in many conversations with the returnees in Sierra Leone. *“This country is broke. That’s the problem, people don’t have capital. They just send people back, but Africa is very difficult. We need organizations like IOM, but as soon as you leave the plane, they say this is the amount of money you have to live your life with. They give you a ticket, and when you step into the plane, they have no more business with you. I was thinking, maybe they can make sure for maybe 10 years you have money to eat. [...] But they will not do that, they cannot do that. I know they cannot do that.”* Lansana, who was still under a lot of stress because of his return to Sierra Leone after having lived in the Netherlands for thirteen years, told me: *“The money is still with me. The money they gave me, it was nothing. What can I do with it? The money is too small, I don’t know what I can do with it. That’s why I want to leave Sierra Leone.”* His disturbance and fixation on wanting to leave Sierra Leone made the post-return assistance counselor at the Christian Brothers, who will be discussed later on together with the running program, decide not to give him the money made available yet. He argued that he had made the mistake before, to hand out the money in an early status after return, which led some returnees to spoil it or to use it to buy a ticket out of the country, making them end up in illegality again.

In order to understand the cultural value of money in Africa, and the emphasis put on money in almost every conversation I had with returnees in Sierra Leone, I will explain a little about money matters in Africa. The money issue amongst returnees is partly understandable, but did strike me on multiple occasions. A fact is that Sierra Leone is one of the poorest countries in the world, taking in the 180th position of the Human Development Index 2009, which includes data about 182 countries.¹⁰ Yet, the people I spoke with had all lived in the Netherlands for a period of time ranging from three up to thirteen years. In Sierra Leone, many people have an image of European countries as the ‘rich men’s land’, where money is available for everyone. Despite their knowledge about the Netherlands, knowing that although almost everyone has a roof on top of his head and is able to have three meals a day, but under the condition that people still have to work for it to maintain that, I was sometimes approached as the rich white girl who was supposed to share the money. The distribution of money is a fundamental economic concern in most African societies. Micro solutions to money problems are common in order to have all people meet their minimum needs, or that at least make sure they survive (Maranz, 2001). I had found myself in many situations where money turned into the topic of conversation once people saw me, the white girl from the Netherlands. From taxi drivers, market sellers, and random people on the street, to some of the staff members of the organizations I was in contact with, they often put their personal circumstances that made

¹⁰ < http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/country_fact_sheets/cty_fs_SLE.html>. Visited on 29 June 2010.

them need my money before me. Depending on the situation and the person asking, I walked along or I gained their trust and understanding by explaining my situation, what I was doing here, that I had paid for my own plane ticket and how I provided for my studies in the Netherlands by having a part-time job. And after a number of weeks I knew that money, the sharing of money among family and sometimes community members and a short term vision concerning people's financial needs, was not only something that came into their minds when they saw me, it is a big part of the African culture.

The second organization under research is the Mediation Agency for Return (MbT), a branch of the developmental organization Cordaid. It aims to facilitate humane and independent return of rejected asylum seekers and irregular migrants to their country of origin by offering assistance for re-integration. It offers individual assistance measured to the needs of the person who wants to return with the starting point that every returnee decides about his/her own return and future.¹¹

Considering the fact that MbT is a mediation agency, their work goes through the supervisor of the person who wants to return instead of having direct contact with the people who wish to return themselves. In most occasions, this supervisor is from the IOM, VWN or COA (EMN, 2009). The supervisor acts as an intermediary between the future returnee and MbT, and has to formulate a specific request and maintain good communication with the returnee in question in order for MbT to offer suitable assistance (Cordaid, 2004). In the case of a specific request, the partner organization in the country of origin will be contacted. Concerning return to Sierra Leone, MbT works with their partner organization the Christian Brothers, located in Freetown. The Christian Brothers and their work with returnees from the Netherlands will be further discussed in section 4.5. The actual return will be organized by the IOM, but MbT will then arrange the financial settlement for the returnee which will be paid by the Christian Brothers after the returnee has applied there for assistance (EMN, 2009).

Another partner of MbT in the field of return migration to Sierra Leone was Samah, the interest group for young asylum seekers up to 25 years old in the Netherlands. Through the 'Beyond Borders' project, a joint project between Samah and MbT, and financed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, young asylum seekers who wished to return were sponsored to rebuild their life in Sierra Leone (Cordaid, 2006; EMN, 2009). Unfortunately, Samah had to end its activities on 1 December 2009 after ten years of practice, due to a lack of funding. At that time 'Beyond Borders 2' was in its starting phase and has now been taken over by MbT.

Samah has been very active in the field of guiding and supporting young asylum seekers from and returnees to Sierra Leone. During the conversations with the returnees in Sierra Leone, Samah came up regularly in a positive manner: "*Samah made it possible for me to get a loan here. Samah helped me now I am here.*" The extent to which Samah will be missed in the field of assisted return migration to Sierra Leone remains to be seen.

¹¹ <http://www.cordaid.nl/Ons_werk/Maatwerk_bij_Terugkeer>. Visited on 5 May 2010.

4.4.2 – Forced return

In contrast to the return and re-integration programs focusing on rejected asylum seekers and irregular migrants who choose to return voluntarily, forced return measures exist for people whose legal stay has expired. According to the Dutch Ministry of Justice, these people should not be rewarded for their behavior (EMN, 2009). DT&V is the organization responsible for the actual departure of illegal aliens from the Netherlands. The preamble of the departure and the departure itself exist of ten sequencing steps. The process starts off with a transfer file about the foreign national who needs to leave the Netherlands. The person about to leave and the ‘Return Supervisor’ will then draw up a departure plan together, which lays down the steps to be taken by DT&V as well as by the person him-/herself. Despite the fact that the departure process had been put into operation, meetings will continue to take place in order to try to motivate the foreign national to return voluntarily with the assistance of IOM under their program Assisted Voluntary Return from Detention (AVRD).¹² This IOM program is only available for people in detention. When needed, a complementary research will take place to determine the identity or nationality of the person in question. Based on the information available and the documentation, DT&V will adjudicate the possibilities to departure. Subsequently, the possibilities and conditions for departure will be checked, after which the laissez passer will be requested. Personal circumstances will be tested and taken into account before the departure. Once all previous steps have been taken, it is time for the actual departure, after which the personal departure plan will be finished (website DT&V¹³; EMN, 2009).

According to the stories of the deported returnees I have spoken to, an arrest and a stay in a deportation cell is a frightening experience. Joseph told me: *“When you get to Holland they tell you to seek asylum. I did and I was accepted. Two years later they told me my asylum was no longer granted and that I had to leave. But I had nowhere to go at that time, so I took it to the streets. I was caught by the police and I was held prison in Tilburg. After some months they took me to Schiphol. I refused and they started beating me up. I was wrestling with the police on the plane and the pilot did not want to take of with me, so they took me back and I was locked up in solitary for two weeks, because they said I had a fight with the police. I did not want to return because I had nothing and no one to go to. After the solitary, they put me back in prison for some weeks and then they came to pick me up to go to the plane for the second time. Thinking about what they did to me the first time, what I went through, I couldn’t resist anymore so I gave up.”*

4.5 Post-return assistance

Depending on their way of return and contact with family and friends in Sierra Leone, returnees more or less need to make use of the post-return assistance available. This research has only included returnees who have received some type of post-return assistance, due to the fact that they have been contacted through IOM Freetown and the partner organization of MbT, the Christian Brothers. Returnees who did not have had post-return assistance were almost impossible to find, especially considering the short period of research time, since they are no longer in contact with organizations who helped them return even if they

¹² <http://www.iom-nederland.nl/Programma_s/Terugkeer/Basisvoorwaarden_Terugkeer_REAN>. Visited on 30 May 2010.

¹³ <<http://www.dienstterugkeerenvertrek.nl/werkwijze/vertrekproces/>>. Visited on 1 June 2010.

received return assistance.

People who returned with assistance from IOM the Netherlands have to contact the IOM office in Freetown within three months upon their return in order to begin the re-integration assistance, if they are entitled to this under the program they returned with (verbal information staff member IOM Freetown). The ‘Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration Programme Sierra Leone’ offered by IOM the Netherlands “*aims to assist you (the future returnee) with your individual reintegration needs, as well as those of each member of your family returning with you.*”, as stated on the information sheet of the program that needs to be signed by the returnee concerned. The assistance offered exists of a financial contribution to a number of re-integration activities set by the IOM. These include:

- a) Individual orientation and counseling to clarify your needs;
- b) Transit accommodation in Freetown for a specified period;
- c) Secondary transportation to destination outside of Freetown;
- d) Establishment of Micro Business to the Maximum of Euro 2000;
- e) Vocational training;
- f) Education;
- g) Referral to appropriate medical facilities for referred case.

The assistance is not given in cash but is given cut in the form of targeted payments to suppliers of equipment or services.

The Christian Brothers is the primary organization in Sierra Leone offering post-return assistance to returnees from the Netherlands. The Christian Brothers is a public social organization offering multiple types of assistance in the field of welfare and education, including post-return assistance for returnees from the Netherlands. They function as the partner organization of MbT. Through the possibility of a loan, which is free of interest and enabled by MbT, and social counseling by the social worker at the Christian Brothers, post-return assistance is developed in Freetown.

The Christian Brothers are a very accessible organization, where people can come to at any time. Once a returnee applies for help at the Christian Brothers, the social worker will hold meetings with the person three times per week, two weeks in a row. These meetings are aimed to talk about the personal situation of the returnee, his/her problems, life in Sierra Leone, his/her future perspective and plans, etcetera, in order to clarify what is going on in someone’s life and to discover the bottleneck. After these two weeks, the social worker will consider the possibilities for a loan and he stays available for the returnee at any time. Together with the returnee, a Personal Action Plan (PAP) is drawn up, which includes information about the returnees’ wishes relating to work and or schooling, his/her work- and schooling experience in the host-country, interests, hobbies, and personal goals. The PAP is an initiative of the Beyond Borders project discussed above, a cooperation venture between Samah, MbT and the Christian Brothers.

The Christian Brothers offers assistance to all returnees from the Netherlands. Hereby the organization fulfills an important role in the post-return assistance, by providing a helping hand to the re-integration of all returnees regardless of the fact if someone has been voluntarily returned or deported.

Another re-integration project running in Sierra Leone is 'Youth of Sierra Leone' (YOS), a self-help organization based in Freetown, created for returnees from the Netherlands. Samah has been responsible for its creation. Up till now, YOS has been strongly linked to the Christian Brothers. YOS exists since the beginning of 2009 with the aim of providing a network by and for returnees in order to assist and support each other after they are back in Sierra Leone. Due to internal struggles, like personal problems of returnees getting in the way of organizational meetings, YOS has not been able to position itself as an independent organization yet, and is therefore still located at the office of the Christian Brothers under supervision of the social counselor. As pointed out by the IOM as well, the social counselor at the Christian Brothers also expressed to me the importance of a pro-active role taken by the returnees, thereby emphasizing the empowerment of returnees in order to enhance their human security.

Currently, a former refugee from Sierra Leone who has been granted with a permanent residence permit in the Netherlands is present in Freetown to strengthen the YOS, struggling with their existence and acting out its goal of creating a social network to assist young returnees.

4.6 – Conclusion

The processes of return can be divided into voluntary and forced return, meaning return instigated by the returnee him-/herself and return through deportation by the host-country's authorities. All returnees had lost their temporary residence permit or were about to lose it, due to the Dutch asylum regulations and the revocation of the categorical protection policy for Sierra Leonean nationals in 2002.

For voluntary returnees, the stress and struggle that comes along with a life in illegality was the foremost reason to return, or the prospect of ending up in illegality was something they wanted to prevent. The voluntary return programs under research were the IOM, facilitating the departure with a plane ticket, travel documents and a financial contribution, and MbT, offering assistance accustomed to the returnees' needs through mediation with their partner organization Christian Brothers in the case of specific requests. Upon return, returnees can turn to the IOM office in Freetown and the Christian Brothers for post-return assistance, existing of financial assistance and counseling.

Irregular migrants choose to live in illegality because they do not feel ready to return. Fear and not feeling safe to return is common amongst them. Stress and frustration of what they have experienced during the war often lies at the basis of their fear. Yet, this life is not free of stress as well. Irregular migrants take the risk of getting arrested and deported by the DT&V, which means the loss of any return assistance in the Netherlands. Upon return in Sierra Leone, the Christian Brothers offer post-return assistance regardless of someone's way of return.

5 – Challenges for returned refugees in Sierra Leone

During my research I found out that returned refugees in Sierra Leone face a number of challenges relating to their re-integration and human security. Trying to build up a new life by finding a place to live, providing an income, (re) building (former) social contacts: things that once were a part of your life in Sierra Leone have vanished because of the war and years of absence. This chapter will explain and analyze the challenges discovered during the conversations held with the returnees in Sierra Leone by answering the second sub question: *What are the challenges for returned refugees in Sierra Leone?*

5.1 – Transition from the Netherlands to Sierra Leone

Returning to Sierra Leone is a difficult transition for most returnees after having spent several years in a Western country like the Netherlands. Although most of the people in my research population returned voluntarily, not everyone expected to get their asylum application rejected in the Netherlands and often they found it hard to deal with being back. Besides the disappointment of getting rejected for permanent asylum in the Netherlands, disappointments upon return can lead to a lot of other frustrations as well. Lansana, who was advised by his father to return after having lived in the Netherlands for thirteen years, escaped from the stress of a life in illegality. However, the situations he encountered in Sierra Leone did not end his feelings of stress and frustration. *“I went to Holland when I was a small boy you know [16 years old]. So it was not easy for me to come back and start again. Even now I already regret it. My life has not improved. Now I am doing nothing. In Holland it is different. There, I was living on my own, going to work, come back to my place, and have food to eat. I didn’t have problems with nobody. But now I don’t have my own place, I live at my father’s place. Nine o’clock I have to be in the house or else he will lock me out. I was thinking maybe if I come here, my father would let me help with the business, try to improve it you know. But it’s not working. Me and my father, we are having problems, we do not understand each other. I just want to go away from my father, he is very difficult. Maybe it’s the culture, the culture in Africa. Maybe I am not used to it anymore. Africa is too hard. [...] Also, the country is not so developed, economically. There is a lot of poverty. There is too much suffering here.”* Although Lansana did not go into detail about what he means with the suffering in Africa, from his story stem expectations, changed and difficult family relations upon return because of personal changes and mutual misunderstanding, cultural differences between the Netherlands and Sierra Leone, and economic challenges.

5.1.1 – Expectations vs. reality

Expectations of the situation in Sierra Leone and the reception of family members can turn out different once the return has become reality. Almost all returnees talked about the difficulties of their return for which returnees should be prepared. One of the returnees was an exception in the sense that he told me he knew exactly what he would face in Sierra Leone. He explained the discrepancy between return expectations and reality to me as follows: *“When you come here you think you’re coming to your people, to your friends, who knew you since when you were little. Then you feel exited about your return and then you come here and feel the other way around. [...] Before I came here I knew the difficulty I was going to face*

over here, and when I came I faced it exactly. I knew I was going to have difficulties with the parents, I knew I was going to have difficulties with the economy, I knew I was going to have difficulties with the country side. I knew all the difficulties I am facing now.”

According to a woman who returned to Sierra Leone after having lived in the UK for nine years, it is difficult to know where you are returning to after years of absence: *“People living overseas, like me, don’t know how life is here in Africa. You don’t know exactly. They will phone you, they will tell you, but still you don’t understand what they are going through.”* She also talked about feelings of guilt she carried because she left during wartime to improve her life, while others stayed and continued to suffer. Most returnees fled from Sierra Leone towards the end of the war. 15 of the 18 respondents fled between 2000 and 2002, which made them go through most of the suffering throughout the war similar to the suffering of the stayees. Nevertheless, this woman’s feelings of guilt had a big influence on her life upon return. She told me that she will use the personal changes she had gone through and the experiences she gained in the UK to help other people rebuild their lives. The personal changes returnees have gone through during their years of absence will be discussed in the following section.

5.1.2 – Personal changes

Levitt (1998) looks at how ideas, behaviors, identities, and social capital flow from host- to home country communities, called the transmission of ‘social remittances’. Social remittances are created through interaction of migrants with the host country. The degree of interaction can differ per person. This determines the extent to which migrants adopt new behavioral patterns and views. The flow takes place when migrants return to their host society, either to live or to visit. Through this flow, social remittances can play a role in transforming home country social and political life. The impact of and receptivity to the social remittances partly depend on the differences between the host- and home country. The assimilation of social remittances becomes more likely when the norms, values, and behaviors are similar to the ones prevailing in the home country (Levitt, 1998). In the case of returnees from the Netherlands to Sierra Leone, the flow of social remittances creates a gap between stayees and returnees, instead of a transformation of social and political life in Sierra Leone. The experiences of returnees in the Netherlands and have ensconced in the person, leaving a print on their identity. People’s worldviews might have changed during their years in the Netherlands, leading to changes in their cultural beliefs and attachments.

According to Kett (2005), a loss of homeland can lead to a loss of cultural identity. Yet, it is imaginable that a long term stay in the Netherlands can lead to an adoption of another cultural identity, in which different cultures are diffused, instead of losing the Sierra Leonean cultural identity. *“When I went to Holland, I got to see many people, many nationalities. I got to know race, how people live, how people think about you. It was a good experience. Being in Holland made me know a lot of things that made me different. There are things that make me upset. Poverty leads to many destructions. I’ve seen poor people, because there are poor people too, but the way they handle things, I have learned that. You don’t need to be eager or to hurt someone just like that. In Africa that is common. Europe has changed me a lot, how I see things. The way I handle people and talk to people, that kind of things.”* This quote shows that this man

has turned his experiences in the Netherlands into learning, but not every returnee is capable of doing so. Some encounter problems with stayees because of their change during their stay in the Netherlands. *“When you have travelled, you encounter problems with the people here. They think differently, none of them has travelled and seen other things. Therefore, I live my own life now, I live it on my own.”* The influence of personal changes on the relationship with stayees will be discussed in section 5.2.

5.1.3 – Transition to new insecurities

Instead of perceiving the differences between the Netherlands and Sierra Leone as an obstacle for re-integration, some returnees turn it around into an opportunity to take in a proactive attitude on re-integration and to strive for security: *“I think without culture you cannot be secure, it’s a custom. It offers a lot of guidance. After the time I spent in Holland [4 years], I tried to catch up, to know the system. When you return here, you have to become used to the culture.”* Culture in African countries has a lot to do with the community. Three of the most important values in African culture are interdependence through mutual economic and social support, community life by putting the interest of the group ahead of individual interests, and active participation in society. Although culture is subject to changes in time and influences of modernity, the main ideas live on (Maranz, 2001). Another returnee also emphasized on the importance to adapt yourself to the Sierra Leonean culture and community ones you are back in order to re-integrate: *“When you are coming back to Sierra Leone you have to move with them, you have to change. Although Holland was different, you have to fit into the community in Sierra Leone.”* By adapting to the Sierra Leonean culture and community, returnees can create their own cultural and community security. Showing you are making an effort opens doors to re-integration.

Making a personal effort is an important part of the re-integration of returnees, since social remittances can create an enormous gap between stayees and returnees, instead of creating cultural diffusion where Levitt (1998) talks about in her article, when the host- and home country differ a lot. What I encountered on a regular basis, was returnees making comparisons between life in the Netherlands and life in Sierra Leone. *“It is not the same as over there. The way of life, everything. Because of there, if you feel sick, you have your doctor, everything.”*

Many respondents emphasized the lack of health security in Sierra Leone, as well as the lack of employment and economic possibilities. One of the respondents I had a lot of contact with was John. He was deported to Sierra Leone by the Dutch authorities in 2005, after having lived in the Netherlands for five years. Since then, he is not able to find a job. His wife runs a little shop at a big market in Freetown, selling food and spices. John feels bad about her making the money, as little as it is. *“I don’t have money for myself. If I did have my own money I would help my wife develop [her shop] but now only my wife helps me, that’s not good. As the man you are supposed to do something for your wife.”* In addition to that, his wife suffered from health problems, which cost them a lot of money considering there is no such thing as health insurance in Sierra Leone. Every consult or visit has to be paid in cash which puts a heavy burden on their health- as well as their economic security. *“My wife is sick sometimes, she has a health problem. But if you are here without money, without a job, it is very difficult. I am scared sometimes, scared of what*

might take place, maybe another problem will arise. In Africa it is always like that: today is good, tomorrow is worse.”

Despite the difficulties of life in Sierra Leone, the experiences in the Netherlands have also made some of the returnees grateful for being back in their country of origin. *“In Holland it is difficult to get a work permit. You can sit more than three years, no working. It has happened to me. [...] I always say to my friends, family, I don’t think it’s too good there. Wherever I am, I should have my own rights, to work, to meet with people, not doing bad things. I want nobody to tie me down. That’s why I prefer to stay here now. Here is my homeland. The rights that I have here are far more better than there as far as I have experienced.”* Al Rasheed (1994: 202) explains ‘homeland’ as being linked to national and ethnic belonging, i.e. belonging to Sierra Leone. For some returnees, the harsh experiences relating to their rejection have annihilated their feelings of national belonging to the Netherlands. On the other hand, under some conditions the perception of ‘homeland’ can shift towards the host country. Refugees have experienced terrible things which made them flee. This has made their relationship with their country of origin severe and problematic (Al-Rasheed 1994, *ibid.*). The first time I talked to Lansana, he told me he did not want to be back in Sierra Leone, that he regretted his decision to listen to his father’s advice to return, and that he would do anything to leave the country again. He literally said he was feeling ‘homesick’. He was constantly reflecting back on the Netherlands, an attitude that hampers someone’s re-integration. His relationship with Sierra Leone was not only problematic, but had also diluted throughout his thirteen years of absence. He had become alienated from the country, and missed his friends and his life in the Netherlands despite the stress and insecurities he had to live with during his time in illegality.

In many cases it takes time for people to accept their return. The social worker at the Christian Brothers explained me the need of acceptance. Throughout his years of working with returnees, he encountered a lot of frustration about being back. The meetings during the first two weeks of counseling are aimed at to talk about the personal situation of the returnee, his/her problems, life in Sierra Leone, his/her future perspective and plans, etcetera, in order to clarify what is going on in someone’s life and to discover the bottlenecks. These meetings can be time-consuming because of a lack of acceptance of being back and a focus on getting out of Sierra Leone again as soon as possible. Calming down the returnees, giving them insights in their situation and possibilities and thereby working towards acceptance of their situation, is important to enable them to open up to the situation they are in and to create the opportunity to re-integrate.

The personal security of returnees plays an important part in the context of transition as well. I have chosen to incorporate psychological wellbeing in this dimension of human security, because of the difficult psychological condition returnees often find themselves in, including stress, trauma and frustration. Their identity and feelings of belonging are shaken and torn apart. *“Some people just go crazy”*, according to a number of returnees. Psychological disturbances came up regularly in the conversations. Rumours of suicide and of people who went ‘crazy’ after their return are widespread amongst the population of returnees. People need to be mentally strong to survive and rebuild their lives after return (Derksen, 2008). This underlines the importance of assistance and counseling before and after return

migration, especially when the differences between the host- and home country are as big as between the Netherlands and Sierra Leone.

5.2 – Return to family and community

While stayees experienced a post-war Sierra Leone, trying to rebuild a life in a destroyed country, returnees tried to built up a life in a foreign country in which all facilities are present but within a completely different culture and environment than they were used to. These different life paths have created some difficult relationship between returnees and stayees. The fact that almost all the returnees have lived in the Netherlands, and three in the UK, makes the relationship even more complicated than when they would have fled to another African country. Western countries are often described amongst Sierra Leoneans as ‘the rich white man’s land’. All 18 returnees I have spoken with expressed the stress that follows from a return from the West empty handed. The economical expectations of especially family members are enormous upon return. This section will explain the challenges upon return relating to family and community in Sierra Leone after having lived in the Netherlands for a number of years, and the way this influences the re-integration and human security of the returnees.

5.2.1 – Economical expectations and stigma

“Whatever you want to do, stay focused. Returnees have a stigma. Forget about the stigma, because people will talk and will not say pleasant things about you. ‘Oh look, that guy is from Europe, he came back home with nothing, he’s a loser.’ It hurts you, it’s painful to hear this kind of things, but you have to ignore them, live on, and concentrate on what you want to do.” This quote is by Joseph, the returnee who has been deported back to Sierra Leone in 2005 as discussed in section 4.4.2. All of the 18 returnees I have spoken with in Sierra Leone, either deported or voluntarily returned, told me about the expectations and stigma they experienced upon return. The fact that they returned from Europe plays an important part in this. *“Nobody wants to help me because I went to Europe. It makes everyone think I am rich.”* This was further explained to me by one of the returnees from the UK: *“Returning from Europe goes hand in hand with the expectation that you have become rich. Everyone asks you for money, which you don’t have. They mock you, talk about you, and think you are a loser for returning empty handed. These are difficult conditions under which you have to build up your life.”* Shame and embarrassment play an important role in their identity as returnee. An empty-handed return is often shameful for returnees because they cannot live up to the expectations of family and friends. In addition to that, stayees in Sierra Leone do often not understand why asylum applications would get rejected and therefore expect them to have committed a crime in order to be send back (Derksen, 2008).

The economical expectations and stigma upon return from Europe hamper the human security and re-integration of returnees. Their personal and community security is affected by people talking behind their backs, mocking them on the streets, and not letting them into the community. *“When you return to Sierra Leone you have nothing to come back to. People expect you to have become rich, so when you come back you are supposed to give them money. They think we are greedy, that we don’t want to share our*

money with them. This gives us a lot of stress.” Without community security, it will be very difficult to re-integrate into the Sierra Leonean society. The stigma stayees put on returnees can halt them from participation and thereby from building up their life and re-integration through settling in the community, finding a job, etcetera. One of the returnees told me he now lives his life on his own, a situation with which he said to be very happy. He was deported in 2006 and encountered the problems as described above, which made him live in retirement: *“When I came back, I stayed in the house for a month. I never came out during that month, because I was so ashamed. The people thought very bad of me. That was very difficult to deal with. Now, I am healthy, I can work for myself, and that is all I need: live my own life and always keep it to myself.”*

Conteh-Morgan has argued in his article about peace building and human security, that many post-conflict societies hold high levels of social distance, because of the negative images of the ‘other’ that were caused by and that dominated throughout the years of conflict (Conteh-Morgan, 2005). In this context, I change this argument into negative images of the ‘other’ caused by and dominated throughout the years of exile. Economical expectations and misunderstanding caused by years living apart in completely different environments and cultures, led to stigma. It has made stayees and returnees grown apart. As pointed out above, all returnees emphasized on these issues. To a certain extent they all experienced the same problems, which makes it an important issue to discuss in chapter 6 where I will link the challenges to assistance programs.

5.2.2 – Reception by family

During my field research, I discovered the importance of the reception of returnees by family and friends. Whether or not family members are welcoming returnees home upon return, has a big influence on their re-integration and feelings of security. However, not every returnee can go back to family. Many people have lost relatives during the war or do not know the whereabouts of family members. Although this has its influence on the personal situation of returnees, this section will focus on the people who did get back in contact with family members upon return, in order to explain the influence of family relations on human security and re-integration.

One of the most courageous and positive returnees I met was Aisata, a woman who had lived in the UK for almost seven years. She had lost her parents during the war and found a way to flee the country at the end of 2002, when the war was officially over but when the country was not stable and peaceful yet. During her stay in the UK, she met a man from Sierra Leone with whom she got a daughter. Due to the insecurity of her living in illegality and her boyfriend, who was granted with a temporary asylum, having to take care of her, himself, and their daughter, she decided to return to Sierra Leone. She and her daughter had only been back for six weeks at the moment we met. Even I had been in Sierra Leone longer at that time! On top of that, she was five months pregnant of her second child. The first time we met, at the office of IOM Freetown, we exchanged phone numbers. A couple of days later I called her to make an appointment. I went to her house in the far eastern part of Freetown, where I was welcomed by her, her aunt and uncle, sister in law and her two year old son, and Aisata’s daughter of three years old. Aisata told

me that her uncle had been missing since the war and that she got back in contact with him just a couple of years ago. When she did no longer feel like she had another option than to return to Sierra Leone, she contacted him and he generously invited her to stay with him and his wife if Aisata would decide to return. So she did. He picked her and her daughter up from the airport, which already saved her a lot of stress, after which he took them to his house to take care of them. In his house, she has her own room for her and her daughter, free of rent and including meals. Although Aisata knows they do not mind her staying with them, she is determined to set up her own shop and rent her own place, for the sake of her own self esteem. Nevertheless, she is incredibly grateful to her uncle and aunt for their reception: *“They are my mum and dad now.”*

Aisata’s family offers her a stable and loving home. Even I felt it, without being part of the family. The hospitality and openness struck me from the moment I walked into their home. The way a returnee is welcomed by family and friends upon return can provide the person with feelings of belonging and a sense of home. Aisata’s family did not doubt for a moment to take her and her daughter into their home after being apart by war and seeking refuge in the UK for almost a decade. She felt at home again, which provided her with an identity and the strength to accept her return and to build up a new living.

Nevertheless, one has to consider that Aisata’s situation was exceptional within my research population. In some cases the returnees were offered accommodation by family members but disturbed relationships due to mutual misunderstandings often made it a difficult situation to live in. In other cases, the returnee had lost his/her family during the war, or preferred to stay on his/her own in Freetown, because of foreseen problems as encountered by others.

Lansana had a very problematic relationship with his father upon return. As told before, he returned on advice of his father and was invited to live with him and work in his pharmacy. This turned out to be impossible because of their strenuous relationship. They did not understand each other and the fighting between them worsened throughout the two months I was in contact with Lansana.

The reception by family members differs per returnee. The degree of mutual understanding is often defining for the development of the relationship upon return. Acceptance of return and being able to adapt to the situation and culture of Sierra Leone are important determinants. That is why when an advice by family members to return is act upon, it does not guarantee a successful reception as might have been expected. Therefore, both family support and the way the returnee behaves towards the family determine the degree of reception and personal re-integration.

5.2.3 – Importance of community

Whether or not returnees think of the community in Sierra Leone as an important factor in their lives influences their social re-integration: the extent to which returnees involve themselves with social contact in the community. The importance of taking an active part in the community in Sierra Leone has been pointed out to me multiple times, either by returnees themselves or by assistance programs. The social worker at the Christian Brothers explained to me the importance of community as a way to settle down yourself upon return, to re-integrate. Due to the lack of governmental securities in the sense of insurances

and underemployment in the country, a social safety net in the form of a social network and taking part in the community is often regarded as a necessity to life. One of the board members of YOS, Mohammed, explained this importance to me as follows: *“In Africa, so also in Sierra Leone, we have a culture which is not as in Europe. As long as you live in a community, everyone is supposed to know you and you have to get close to them, to associate with them, and to know you very good. Maybe one day the opportunity will come, you will meet someone to offer you a job. So because you mingle with the community they know you, they know you are not a criminal. All your communication comes from the community.”* At the same time, he pointed out that this is not self-evident in the case of returnees. *“For returnees it is hard to get close to the community. They will come up to you because they think you have money, which you don’t have, so when they come up to you, you will give them distance. As time goes on, you will get used to them little by little. [...] But to get familiar with people, the way you put yourself, is up to you.”*

Return can also mean a revalidation of the Sierra Leonean culture, community and family life. James found it hard to adapt to the way of living in Sierra Leone upon his return in 2007. He had to make a lot of effort, containing cooperation, sharing and gathering, but he decided that this was his only option to live his life. Now he talks about himself as *“a Sierra Leone person”*, who enjoys talking Krio, his native language, and taking part in community activities.

Despite the argued importance of community, I have also heard different stories from returnees who had their personal reasons not to engage themselves with the community too much. Return after having lived in the Netherlands for multiple years can lead to feelings of estrangement from stayees (Ghanem, 2003). Misunderstanding between returnees and stayees can be a big influence on that, as explained in section 5.2.2, but also cultural, as well as social and community differences can play a part in feelings of estrangement. This is what I encountered in one of my conversations with Lansana: *“I find it like I am an outsider now. For me it’s not easy to live amongst the people anymore.”* His estrangement from the community makes it difficult to socially re-integrate and find a way to deal with his shattered identity upon return in Sierra Leone. When social roles vanish, the building blocks of identity are broken down. Migration to a different culture, which was exactly the case for Lansana after having lived in the Netherlands for thirteen years, asks for reconstruction and re-negotiation of social identity, a process described by Berry as ‘acculturation’ (Colic-Peisker & Walker, 2003).

The experiences with the community upon return often determine whether or not returnees find it important to take part in community life, leading to different levels of participation. A community can offer identity when people are insecure about their position in society and sense of belonging. A community maintains individual identities through support and recognition, and at the same time fosters solidarity (Conteh-Morgan, 2005), enabling people to feel secure through community security. Most returnees I have spoken with did realize the importance of taking part in the community life at a certain point after their return. The social identity provided by community life can offer citizenship, employment, territorial belonging, formal and informal social networks, etcetera (Colic-Peisker & Walker, 2003). Even the ones who claimed not to take an active part in it, could not deny a certain degree of necessity of community life in order to run their business, or to find some comfort by being able to talk and share with people.

5.3 – *Financial matters and economic security*

Section 5.2.1 has already explained some of the challenges returnees face that relate to financial matters. This section will merely explain the way returnees try to build up economic security and how this relates to other types of security like food security, health security, and future perspectives.

Economic re-integration is to be found in the ability to find a job or set up a business and thereby positioning yourself in the society. Finding employment in Sierra Leone is very difficult. The government does not create enough employment and the widespread corruption makes it almost impossible to find a job without having connections (Derksen, 2008). The situation of the labor market thus not constitutes the sole factor that influences access to jobs, it are also political and cultural barriers like knowing the right people at the right place that play a role (Refugee Council, 2005), which was pointed out before by Mohammed. This is why most people try to make a living by starting their own business, although the high costs and competition do not make this easy either.

According to the Christian Brothers' social worker, having a plan of how to rebuild your life once back in Sierra Leone is one of the necessary links to make someone's return successful. Yet, what appeared to me is that most returnees did not return with a plan. Their sudden leave in some cases might have to do with this, but a lack of acceptance of return can also play a part. It takes time for returnees to be ready to start something. Often they first have to accept their situation and calm down before they are able to map out what they want to do. Here lies an important task for post-return assistance programs, where will be looked at in chapter 6.

Persistent poverty and unemployment are the biggest threats to economic security (UN, 2009). Nevertheless, employment does not equal the end of persistent poverty. The ability to afford life necessities is a decisive factor for experiencing economic security (CHS, 2003). *"The only security we need is to get an amount of money to start and develop our life. You can have security when you have an amount. [...] That's the only way you can live your life."* This returnee talks about how economic security influences your life in multiple ways. It links to food security as well as health security and personal security. Lansana spoke of employment and money as well when I asked him about his feelings of security in Sierra Leone: *"No, I do not feel secure. I cannot find a job, I don't have money to take care of myself, that's not good for me. If I have my own business, my own money, then I can take care of myself."*

1 January 2010, a month before I arrived in Sierra Leone, the government introduced the Goods and Services Tax (GST). This tax of 15% has to be paid over imported as well as locally produced goods and services, with an exception of life necessities as rice, fuel, medicines, and schoolbooks. Although the GST is supposed to replace seven former taxes, it puts a heavy burden on people's expenses because the former taxes were often not collected. Multiple returnees complained about the price raise of products. *"Food security is difficult right now. Food has become so expensive with the new taxes. If you don't have money it is a bit difficult. [...] If they (assistance programs) help us financially, food security will not be an issue."*

The influence of economic insecurity on health security is clearly present in Sierra Leone. A health

insurance system does not exist, so people are forced to pay for every visit, treatment or medicine on their own. *“The government does not protect our security. For health security you have to pay. If you don’t have the money, it’s your problem.”* This quote points at health as well as political insecurity. Political security includes the refugees’ right to be treated alike to all citizens of their country of origin, and to continue these rights upon return (Kett, 2005). But what if the rights returnees experienced in the Netherlands were bigger than those they experience upon return in Sierra Leone? Being confronted with a lack of welfare in terms of economic security, health insurance, and food security after having experienced an abundance of these rights, can lead to a decline in political faith. It takes time for returnees to adapt to this situation in which there is no governmental safety net present.

Health security was pointed out as most important dimension of security during almost all of the conversations with returnees. *“Health is the most important. When you are healthy you can do a lot of things.”* The insecure economic circumstances most of the returnees find themselves in, creates high levels of unpredictability of wellbeing. *“If we talk about the way of living, the food, or the hospital, than I don’t feel so secure. At any moment, anything can happen and I don’t know what will happen.”* The knowing that you might not be able to take care of yourself at the moment something happens to you because of a lack of money, creates a lot of insecurity in the lives of returnees.

The insecure economical situation explains the widespread short term vision returnees, as well as other Sierra Leonean citizens, have. Whenever I asked someone how he/she was doing, my question was frequently replied with an answer that entailed that they were doing fine today but that they could never know what tomorrow would hold for them. Future perspectives and long term visions are therefore very scarce in Sierra Leone. Whenever money is available it is used to cover immediate needs, which leads to a lack of foundation to save money for a future planning, making it even harder to create a solid economical basis (Maranz, 2001).

5.4 – Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the challenges for returnees in Sierra Leone with the aim of answering sub question b) *What are the challenges for returned refugees in Sierra Leone?* It turned out that everyone experienced a difficult transition period, due to the discrepancy of reality with the expectations on beforehand, personal changes returnees have gone through during their time in the Netherlands, and insecurities that they did not experience before. The reception by family members and the extent of re-integration into the community can be decisive for the degree of difficulty to adapt. Financial matters play an important part in the lives of returnees as well. Economical expectations from stayees as well as the poor economical circumstances in Sierra Leone create a lot of stress, thereby influencing the re-integration process and feelings of security.

In this context of challenges relating to return, and as an introduction to the next chapter, I would like to quote Welch (1984): *“a human security agenda ought to reactivate and reaffirm the right to life, education, freedom of movement, to receive justice, to work, and participate in the benefits and decision-making of the community”* (Conteh-Morgan, 2005: 77). A great opportunity lies in the hands of

governments of host- and home countries and assistance programs to reactivate and reaffirm the human security of returnees by protecting their rights and empowering them to participate and re-integrate.

6 – Meeting returnees’ challenges

The challenges discussed and analyzed in the previous chapter will now be examined in relation to the assistance programs, according to sub question c) *To what extent are these challenges incorporated into assistance programs?* I will pursue the course of chapter 5 and analyze the helpfulness of assistance programs in relation to the challenges encountered by my population of returnees in Sierra Leone. By elaborating on the preparations of return in the Netherlands, as well as on the post return assistance in Sierra Leone, this chapter will form the link between chapter 4 and 5.

As explained in chapter 5, many returnees face problems of re-integration and human security, ranging from unemployment and personal changes creating mutual misunderstanding, to economical expectations and social stigma. In order to prevent a personal, internal strife, as well as social exclusion, community conflicts, and a lack of human security, re-integration has to be achieved soon after return (Arowolo, 2000). *“If it can be assumed that a potential migrant is a fully integrated member of his place of origin, the decision to migrate and his actual departure from the home environment should not rob him of the status as a formerly integrated member of his home base. Upon return from a chosen place of destination, he needs to be ‘reintegrated’ into the original society to which he was already acculturated. This process applies to returnees from voluntary migration and to those returning from various forms of forced movements, including persons moving out of their countries and in exile, or living in “in exile” as a result of internal displacement.”* (Arowolo, 2000: 62). The process Arowolo talks about has to be set in motion in the host-country before the actual return takes place, in order to prepare for changes and difficulties to be encountered. In addition to that, the assistance programs need to be up-to-date according to the situation in the country of origin and to fit the returnees’ personal circumstances in order to have a positive influence on the rebuilding of their lives.

6.1 – Preparing for the transition from the Netherlands to Sierra Leone: pre-return assistance

Pre-return assistance should be to prepare for changes and difficulties to be encountered upon return (Arowolo, 2005). The willingness to return, reasons for return, and sources of information about return are important circumstances before the actual return takes place, which will influence the re-integration process (Black et. al., 2004 in: Black & Gent, 2006). These circumstances can be positively influenced by pre-return assistance programs.

IOM the Netherlands’ main return program is REAN, which assists migrants in their basic needs when they leave the Netherlands. The assistance can be extended with other programs when applicable to the situation of the person concerned. The ‘Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration Programme Sierra Leone’ offered by IOM the Netherlands exists of a financial contribution to a number of reintegration activities set by the IOM, as explained in section 4.5. Information about the assistance offered by this program is given before return, but the actual assistance itself is given upon return in Sierra Leone.

The mediation agency MbT can offer suitable assistance when there is a specific request prior to return. Through their partner organization the Christian Brothers, MbT will provide the future returnee with

an answer to the specific request and can arrange an interest free micro credit for the returnee upon application at the Christian Brothers. Flexibility is a crucial issue for involvement in voluntary return according to the Refugee Council (2005). This is possible at MbT because of the assistance accustomed to personal needs. MbT mediates between the request in the Netherlands and the supply in Sierra Leone to assist in finding accommodation, to resolve medical problems, to find family members, to find employment or schooling to set up your own business, and more. The request has to be realistic and fit within the local context of the place of return. A business plan can appear to have full potential in the Netherlands, but will fail in Sierra Leone if there is no market for the product or service offered (MbT, 2008). This is where mediation between MbT and the Christian Brothers is of great value. By removing specific obstacles before the actual return takes place, the personal strength of the person concerned will grow and empower him/her to continue the process of return (MbT, 2008).

The challenges of the transition from the Netherlands to Sierra Leone contain a discrepancy between expectations about the situation in Sierra Leone and the reality, personal changes returnees have gone through during their years in the Netherlands, and the new insecurities they face due to all kind of differences between the two countries. To what extent are these challenges met by pre-return assistance programs, and are future returnees provided with a certain foundation and confidence to rebuild their lives before they return to Sierra Leone?

In order for returnees not to find themselves in a situation that severely differs from what they expected on beforehand, correct and up-to-date information has to be provided. This should include information about the political and economic situation in the country, about employment, practical information about how to find accommodation, and advice on how to work on their social re-integration upon return. Information about social-economic circumstances in the city or village they want to return to should be provided as well. This information can be requested by the organization offering assistance. The Dutch IOM caseworker can send questions to the IOM office in Freetown, which will 'trace and check' the information that is asked for. This includes the 'tracing and checking' of information about family members (verbal information supervisor operations IOM Freetown). 'Information on Return and Reintegration in Countries of Origin' (IRRiCO), a website developed by the IOM, includes country information sheets that can be consulted by migrants in order to find accurate and reliable information about their country of origin. In the case of insufficient information, questions can be sent to the IOM contact person in the country of origin.¹⁴ Unfortunately, such a country information sheet has not yet been developed for Sierra Leone. MbT works with more specific requests in order to solve practical problems before the return takes place.

IOM the Netherlands as well as MbT both have partner organizations in Freetown, a vital issue for involvement in voluntary return (Refugee Council, 2005), which enables them to provide up-to-date information about the situation in Sierra Leone. IOM is a worldwide organization, while MbT is a small

¹⁴ <http://www.iom-nederland.nl/english/Programmes/Return/Return_projects/Information_on_countries_of_origin_IRRiCO>. Visited on 29 July 2010.

scale organization with a small local organization as its partner. Where IOM operates within its worldwide rules and guidelines which can limit its practices, MbT has the opportunity to assess specific personal requests in their own opinion. This is also shown by the organizational statement of MbT which says that they aim to facilitate humane and independent return of rejected asylum seekers and irregular migrants to their country of origin by offering assistance with the goal of re-integration. The organizational statement of IOM merely includes the aim of facilitating the migration itself, which does not initially aims for re-integration. The 'Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration Programme Sierra Leone' does offer re-integration facilities, but is unfortunately limited to the activities as set by the IOM, instead of offering assistance accustomed to the specific requests and needs of the upcoming returnee him-/herself.

Providing up-to-date and correct information about the situation in Sierra Leone is of great importance. This is shown by the following example of DT&V, the Dutch service responsible for forced return, published in a Dutch newspaper article. Ahmad, fled from Sierra Leone in 2001, illegally lives in the Netherlands since September 2004. The DT&V employee working with him, Jitske, tries to convince him to return. Their conversation shows the importance of people who know what took place in the country of origin of the person concerned that made him fled, and who are informed about the current situation in the country:

Jitske: *"Don't you have to think about returning?"*

Ahmad: *"Yes, I thought about it. But the situation is not good."*

Jitske: *"But it is a difficult life here as well."*

Ahmad: *"Every night I am thinking. 'What have I done?'. Or I have nightmares. Sometimes I am crying."*

Jitske: *"Would your wife not want you to come back?"*

Ahmad: *"No, they kill people. It's still not safe."*

Jitske: *"I wish you a place where you can live in peace."*

Ahmad: *"Me too."*

Jitske: *"But that won't happen here. The judge has given a negative judgment."*

Ahmad raises his voice: *"I have seen death in my home country! Soldiers wanted to cut off my limbs."* Almost jelling: *"My compatriots know no mercy. There is hatred, violence."*

There is a silence.

Jitske: *"But maybe there are more people there, who are afraid. You are very special, with the rebels that came after you, but others might have the same problems. They cannot all come to live in the Netherlands. That's not fair."*

Ahmad: *"But I am already here. I am safe here."*

A long silence follows.

Jitske: *"Difficult."*

Ahmad: *"Very difficult."*

(Van Nierop, 2010: 14-15).

From this conversation stems the importance of informed people working in the field of return

migration, especially when it involves a post-war country like Sierra Leone. The DT&V employee is fobbed off by her client with outdated information, which is already assessed by the judge who decided Ahmad's permit would no longer be extended. His fear to return is important to take into account, but by going along with someone's story without having knowledge about the current situation, makes it impossible to enable a return that includes the personal strength and empowerment a returnee needs to rebuilt and re-integrate upon return.

To be informed as being the organization offering pre-return assistance, also means to be informed about the economical expectations, the stigma, and the reception by family returnees will face upon return. Although every case of return is different, these challenges are all acknowledged by the returnees I have spoken with in. In one of my conversations with a voluntary returnee, I asked him if there are things people should know when they think about returning to Sierra Leone. He answered: *"They have to know life is difficult here. People's families think that someone from Europe is returning to bring them something. When you come here without anything it will be very difficult, and you will not be welcomed by the family."* Information about these challenges upon return, how to deal with them, and, if possible, laying contacts with family and friends in Sierra Leone on beforehand and informing them about the return, could possibly lighten these difficulties before return.

In order to be able to deal with your personal changes due to your stay in the Netherlands and with the insecure circumstances in Sierra Leone, a pro active role has to be taken in. By approaching personal changes as a learning experience and making an effort to adapt to the situation, doors to re-integration will be opened. Pre-return assistance programs can support this process of re-integration through adaption by making the upcoming returnee aware of it and the difficulties that might occur. Hereby, returnees can be empowered to take in the pro active role and take initiatives needed to re-integrate and rebuilt, and to strengthen their human security. Yet, considering the fact that post-return assistance is only offered in the case of voluntary return, a pro active role has already been taken in, because the person who wants to return has to report himself at the IOM and/or MbT in order to set the return process in motion. Both assistance programs stimulate empowerment by offering a hand to preparing the return: by assisting and supporting return, but at the same time expect a pro active role of engagement in the process of return, since they operate in a structure of voluntary return.

The pre-return assistance offered in the Netherlands merely consists of financial assistance, with a possible addition of special requests if the future returnee requires so. IOM does this by offering financial assets to support re-integration activities and providing the plane ticket and a compensation of the costs of the travel documents. MbT does this by providing practical answers to specific requests, accustomed to the person considered, and providing a micro credit in cooperation with the Christian Brothers to enable empowerment and the rebuilding of returnees' lives upon return. The returnees I have spoken with claimed the financial assistance to be the most important aspect of the assistance, although they often did mention the need for bigger amounts of financial assistance.

6.2 – Dealing with challenges upon return: post-return assistance

Many returnees still face problems relating to their re-integration and human security in Sierra Leone. Here lies an important task for post-return assistance programs. This section will discuss the post-return assistance in Sierra Leone offered to returnees from the Netherlands along the lines of the different forms of re-integration as explained in chapter 2.

6.2.1 – Economic re-integration

The primary organization offering post-return assistance to returnees from the Netherlands is the Christian Brothers. Through MbT, the Christian Brothers can offer returnees from the Netherlands an interest free microcredit. This microcredit can be given out to people who returned voluntarily as well as to people who were deported, which makes the Christian Brothers the only organization in Sierra Leone to be providing post-return assistance to deportees.

Employment is the most important aspect of economic security, through assuring access to a basic income (Kett, 2005). It enables people to afford life necessities, a decisive factor for experiencing economic security (CHS, 2003). The purpose of the microcredit is to support returnees to settle in Sierra Leone, to help them re-integrate into the society (verbal information social worker at the Christian Brothers). It can enable a basic income through offering a helping hand in setting up a business, something which is very common in Sierra Leone because of the scarcity of jobs. In order to be considered for the microcredit, returnees have to have a plan that needs to be approved by the social worker, otherwise there is a big risk the money will be misused. *“We need to calm them down, to stabilize them first before we give the money. Otherwise they might use it to leave Sierra Leone for example. I’ve experienced this in the past. Stabilizing the returnee is the only way to help him. It is very common amongst returnees that they want to leave to Europe again during the first months upon return.”* For two weeks, three times per week, counseling meetings with the social worker will be planned. The goal of these meetings is to calm the returnee down, to make him/her develop a plan to create an income, and to re-integrate them into the society. The social worker explained this as follows: *“I need to counsel them first. Talk with them about plans, behavior, family, feelings. We all discuss this together. We will visit the family, talk to neighbors, to friends, and call in meetings with colleagues [the fellow returnees frequently referred to each other as colleagues, as well did the social worker] so they can share experiences. They can take a look at the business sites of colleagues and take each other out on social activities. Then, I will see if they’re fit for the credit. Their plan has to be accepted by the family as well. After 1 or 2 months I will call them back to talk about the plan. What is the plan? How is it going? If they have no plan, they have to go back to the family to discuss and think about which activities to undertake.”* A helpful tool is the PAP, which includes information about the returnees’ wishes relating to work and or schooling, his/her work- and schooling experience in the host-country, interests, hobbies, and personal goals. Forcing the returnee to think about these topics by drawing up a PAP, helps to create a sense of direction and to set goals for the future.

All four forms of re-integration come together in this process of counseling and setting up a plan: the personal re-integration, through the involvement of family and friends; social re-integration, by getting

them in contact with fellow returnees and talk about their experiences together; cultural re-integration, through conversations about someone's feelings and behavior making it problematic to adapt; and economic re-integration when the credit enables a returnee to set up a business, positioning him-/herself in the market, and provides him-/herself with an income to generate economic security.

Most returnees appreciate the work of the Christian Brothers. The following example is from the deported returnee Joseph, who now transports people in Freetown by driving a minibus, to gain an income. *"The Christian Brothers did a lot for us. Getting us together is big work and giving us the loan is a big help. I know everyone can admit to that, because I saw myself living in the streets before the loan, hustling for something to eat. Though it is still difficult, we have to stress that, we're trying."*

Despite returnees' appreciation towards the Christian Brothers for providing micro credits, comments heard were that the amount is too little, or that it should be a gift in order for them to rebuilt something stable. Another point of critique is the lack of transparency concerning the provision of credits. Because of the above explained process, not everyone will be granted with the loan which creates anger and grudge within the group of returnees who joined the organization. John is one of the men who has not received a credit since his return. He told me he does not know why: *"They help some people, but they don't help me. So then I stopped to come here. I came to every meeting, but they don't give me anything, they don't help with the business, they only give some people the money."*

Post-return assistance from the IOM was not that common amongst the returnees from the Netherlands. Most of them who returned with pre-return assistance from the IOM had already received their financial assistance before they got on the plane, which made them see no surplus of visiting the office in Freetown. This created a lack of monitoring upon return. Nowadays, the grant is no longer given in cash on beforehand. The person in question has to clarify his/her intention with the money upon return, after which IOM Freetown will decide if it is feasible. Then, the money is given in the form of goods and supplies as soon as the receipts are received by IOM the Netherlands. Most returnees I have spoken with, received financial assistance from the IOM before this was in working, but the ones who did experience the new procedure saw it as a burden because the money, which they often do not have, has to be paid by themselves in advance.

6.2.2 – Social re-integration

Although economic re-integration, and economic security deriving from it, forms one of the most important aspects of a successful re-integration upon return in Sierra Leone, the importance of social re-integration should not be underestimated. *"As a people, Africans emphasize groupings, sameness, and commonality. Rather than the survival of the fittest and control over nature, the African worldview is tempered with the general guiding principle of the survival of the entire community and a sense of cooperation, interdependence, and collective responsibility."* (Cobbah, 1987 in: Conteh-Morgan, 2005: 78).

The social worker at the Christian Brothers pointed out to me the importance of community as a way to settle down yourself upon return, to re-integrate. Taking part in the community provides a social safety net. Due to the lack of governmental securities in the sense of insurances and underemployment in

the country, it is often regarded as a necessity to life. Contacts offer you a social network which you can ask for help, which creates community security.

In order to reach community security, social re-integration thus has to take place. Different factors influence the process of social re-integration, factors that have merely to do with someone's stay in the host-country. This includes the age at the time of flee, the duration of stay in the host-country, the extent of acculturation to a foreign culture, and the nature, frequency and intensity of contact with the home country during absence (Arowolo, 2000). This emphasizes the need for post-return assistance accustomed to the returnees' personal situation and circumstances in order for it to help the person re-integrate.

The self-help organization YOS, created for returnees from the Netherlands, aims to provide a network by and for returnees in order to assist and support each other in Sierra Leone. The extent of involvement differs per member of YOS, but its contribution to a feeling of not being the only one experiencing problems upon return, and a feeling of belonging to a certain group: a community of returnees, makes it easier to cope with their return. According to the board member Mohammed, the goal of YOS is to provide a network in which returnees can share their experiences and help them to move on and rebuild their lives under the circumstances of having to deal with a lot of challenges as explained in chapter 5. *"We are all returnees from Holland. We are back home. We are brothers and sisters that came home. We now try to organize ourselves."* What stems from this quote is the 'we' feeling amongst the returnees, calling each other 'brothers and sisters'. This underlines the importance of offering a community, a social network, to be part of.

6.2.3 – Personal re-integration

Personal re-integration is concerned with living conditions, accommodation, and contact with family members and friends. This strongly relates to personal security which entails threats close to home and the ability to feel safe in your personal surroundings. The living conditions and accommodation of a returnee play an important part in the personal re-integration and security. Most returnees have lost their houses because of the war and because of their fleeing out of the country. Having a safe place to live creates a feeling of security. *"For personal security, I need to protect myself. [...] First, you need accommodation. Because you left, the place will not be waiting for you."* Safe accommodation can function as a starting point for further re-integration. Once returnees have found a safe place to sleep, a basis to rebuild their lives, they might be able to work on other types of re-integration as well.

As explained in section 5.2.2 and stressed by Arowolo (2000), the reception by family (and friends) who stayed in Sierra Leone is vital to re-integration. The problem of expectations and misunderstanding is widespread amongst returnees and their family. The involvement of family members in the re-integration process could be a great help in the re-integration process. The involvement of family in the creation of a plan upon return, as explained in section 6.2.1 is part of the assistance offered by the Christian Brothers. Yet, this does not guarantee personal re-integration in the sense of creating mutual comprehension and acceptance. Information about each other's situation, the breeding of mutual

understanding, and mediation in the case of disturbed family relations upon return, can contribute to the increase of personal re-integration.

6.2.4 – Cultural re-integration

Cultural re-integration highly depends on the returnees' ability to adjust. Groupings, sameness, and commonality are of great importance within African cultures (Cobbah, 1987 in: Conteh-Morgan, 2005: 78), including the Sierra Leonean culture. It can create a feeling of security, through being part of a social network that functions as a social safety net, but can hamper the cultural re-integration if the returnee has trouble adapting to the culture of cooperation and interdependence. The course of the process of re-acculturation, whereby the returnee has to adapt to his/her former culture after a period of absence (Colic-Peisker & Walker, 2003) can be positively influenced by the inclusion of family and community in the post-return assistance programs. A process of reconciliation, which has to take place between a returnee and the culture in the country of origin, can be seen as an opportunity to re-affirm and re-establish relationships (Arowolo, 2000), thereby restoring cultural and communal values. This again shows the linkage between the different types of re-integration and security which are all needed to safely resettle someone in his/her country of origin.

6.3 – Conclusion

The forms of re-integration discussed appeared to differ, yet also to closely relate to each other through its influence on different forms of human security. This asks for a holistic view within return assistance in which having a plan, the relation to family members and a returnees' place in the community are all needed to successfully re-integrate someone upon return in Sierra Leone. The Christian Brothers have incorporated this holistic view into their program to a certain extent, which could be improved with an increase of financial assets, transparency, and more precise and up-to-date documentation of the situation of the returnees.

Existential security has to be the spearhead of the assistance, as well as of research into return assistance. Experiences and coping mechanisms differ per returnee, making it important to vary assistance per returnee. “... *in order [...] to enhance human security [it is needed] to make the views, activities and experiences of ‘real people’ a bedrock of deliberations and overall efforts.*” (Conteh-Morgan, 2000: 84). Programs with the ability to be accustomed to the personal situation and needs of the returnee are of great value to provide successful assistance that leads to re-integration and human security.

7 – Conclusion

After the Dutch government declared Sierra Leone safe to return for most individuals on 8 July 2002, the categorical protection of refugees from Sierra Leone ended. In order to stimulate return to the country of origin as well as to increase the human security and re-integration of returnees, assistance is needed. This research has examined return assistance between the Netherlands and Sierra Leone on the basis of experiences of 6 irregular migrants and 18 returnees. My interest in their experiences around the process return, of the pre- and post-return assistance received, and of human security and re-integration upon return in Sierra Leone led me to ask the following question: *How and to what extent do assistance programs contribute to the human security and re-integration of returnees in Sierra Leone?*

The processes of return can be divided into voluntary and forced return, meaning return instigated by the returnee him-/herself and return through deportation by the host-country's authorities. The voluntary return programs under research were the IOM and MbT, who facilitate the departure, offer a financial contribution, and assistance accustomed to the returnees' needs. The voluntary returnees spoken with, either wanted to prevent a life in illegality or were bowed down by the stress that comes with a life in illegality.

Forced return, through deportation by DT&V, involves no pre-return assistance and detention before being put on a plane to Sierra Leone. Despite this unattractive prospect, irregular migrants choose to live in illegality and run the risk of deportation, because often they are too scared and hung up to the image of the country during the war that they do not feel ready to return. Both ways of return, whether voluntary or forced, ask for effective assistance that conducts return that includes human security and re-integration in Sierra Leone.

The creation of the human security approach as a reorientation towards securing human welfare has enabled the link between theory and practice. With this research I have tried to connect anthropological research with the practicalities of return assistance, thereby contributing to the discussion of how to use the concept of human security in practice. The case study of returnees in Sierra Leone enabled me to discuss the most important characteristics of human security, as well as to show its connection to theories of re-integration, home, notions of belonging, and identity, which provides a valuable tool for the practice of return assistance. Being aware of the source of (future) returnees' challenges and insecurities enables to seize on them in practice.

In order for returnees in Sierra Leone to gain human security and re-integration, a holistic view is needed to be adopted by both pre- and post-return assistance programs, that recognizes the linkage between the two, as well as between the different types of human security and re-integration. Amongst returnees in Sierra Leone, economic insecurity, which influences other types of insecurity especially regarding family relations and health, and community insecurity, which strongly relates to cultural insecurity, are the biggest threats to their well-being. The biggest threats to economic security are persistent poverty and unemployment, both widely present in Sierra Leone. How economic insecurity can influence health security is clearly present as well. The lack of an insurance system, leads to the knowing that you might not

be able to take care of your health problems when something happens to you. This creates a high level of insecurity, emphasized on by almost all returnees spoken with. Family and community relations are tested by economical expectations towards and stigma put on returnees from Europe, the reception of returnees, and the extent of personal changes of returnees. It became clear that all returnees experienced the economical expectations and stigma from stayees, but the ones who experienced them from family members had a more stressful re-integration and expressed more feelings of insecurity than the ones who did not encounter this type of family problems. Despite the need to link different insecurities in assistance programs, it could be difficult to do so since the organizations discussed all have their own area of expertise. A complementary allocation of tasks could create a holistic approach of return migration from the Netherlands to Sierra Leone. The “Stichting Duurzame Terugkeer”, a cooperation between nine organizations offering services to (rejected) asylum seekers with the aim to assist in independent steps towards a safe return, including future perspectives and a sustainable re-integration in the country of origin,¹⁵ could provide a holistic approach. The successes of their work remain to be seen, but the initiative to join forces gives confidence for improvement of return assistance.

Returnees’ experiences in the Netherlands have left a print on their identity. The perception of home and the relationship with the country of origin are often problematic. Return does not always equal ‘going home’ and re-integration does not guarantee homecoming. Perceptions of home are often interwoven with identity and notions of belonging, which can be achieved through social re-integration. Social re-integration can lead to notions of belonging through the creation of predictability and intimacy within a certain community. It provides a sense of security as well as identity.

Community is of great importance in Sierra Leone. Culture in African countries has a lot to do with the community. Three of the most important values in African culture are interdependence through mutual economic and social support, community life by putting the interest of the group ahead of individual interests, and active participation in society. Community security enables social re-integration and the reconstruction and re-negotiation of social identity by creating social roles. By adapting to the Sierra Leonean culture and community, doors to re-integration are opened, and returnees enable themselves to create their own cultural and community security. The cultural values consist of economical, social, and community aspects, which clarifies the need of a holistic view incorporated in assistance programs working on return migration.

These challenges encountered by returnees upon return have to be prepared for as soon as of the pre-return assistance. This requires correct and up-to-date information to be provided before return. Both IOM and MbT have partner organizations in Freetown, a vital issue for involvement in voluntary return to provide information about Sierra Leone. This enables them to provide upcoming returnees with information asked for. The pre-return assistance offered in the Netherlands merely consists of financial assistance. MbT offers the additional service of solving practical problems through mediation with the Christian Brothers. Laying contacts with family and friends in Sierra Leone on beforehand and informing them about the

¹⁵ <www.stichtingduurzameterugkeer.nl>. Visited on 2 August 2010.

upcoming return could further enlighten the difficulties upon return.

Upon return, returnees have to take on a pro active role. By approaching personal changes as a learning experience and making an effort to adapt to the situation, doors to re-integration will be opened. Assistance programs can support this process of re-integration through empowerment. The organizations offering post-return assistance are the Christian Brothers and IOM. The Christian Brothers offers counseling sessions during two weeks, three times per week. The goal is to calm the returnee down, develop a plan to generate an income, and re-integrate him/her into the society. This process includes all four forms of re-integration. The time and effort invested in this process is widely appreciated amongst the returnees. The self-help organization YOS, based at the Christian Brothers office, could use some organizational improvements, but contributes to a 'we' feeling and feelings of belonging because of the possibility to share experiences with fellow returnees from the Netherlands. Post-return assistance by the IOM for returnees from the Netherlands is something that could be expanded. It was not that common amongst the returnees, and the ones who did make use of it complained about the procedure of having to pay their goods and services in advance and hand in the receipts before receiving the financial contribution.

The Christian Brothers' realization of the importance of social re-integration in order to reach community security is an important contribution to their post-return assistance program. It acknowledges community as a way to settle down upon return and its ability to serve as a social safety net. A point of improvement could be to extent the involvement of family members in the re-integration process to create personal re-integration. It will increase the mutual comprehension and acceptance. This cannot be enforced, yet be stimulated through breeding understanding of each other's situation, and mediation in the case of disturbed family relations can contribute to a process of reconciliation and the increase of personal re-integration and –security.

With this research, I have tried to explain the importance of considering returnees' background, personal experiences and relations in Sierra Leone prior as well as upon return in order to offer them assistance aimed at their re-integration and enhancing their human security. A great opportunity lies with the assistance programs to achieve this by reactivating and reaffirming the principles of human security of returnees through protecting and empowering them to participate and re-integrate.

Executive summary

People who fled from Sierra Leone to the Netherlands because of the civil war in their country or origin between 1991 and 2002, face multiple problems that are linked to return to Sierra Leone. Through a three month field research in the Netherlands and Sierra Leone, I have tried to discover the most important challenges of former refugees who returned to Sierra Leone, and the extent to which return assistance programs contribute to their feelings of security and re-integration. This is done in this thesis through a discussion of the processes of return, the challenges for returnees in Sierra Leone, and the incorporation of these challenges into return assistance programs. The emphasis is on the personal feelings and experiences relating to returnees' security, in the broadest sense of the word, and their re-integration upon return in Sierra Leone.

The processes of return can be divided into voluntary and forced return, meaning return instigated by the returnee him-/herself and return through deportation by the host-country's authorities. Both ways of return ask for effective assistance that conducts return that includes security and re-integration in Sierra Leone. Amongst returnees in Sierra Leone, economic insecurity, which influences other types of insecurity especially regarding family relations and health, and community insecurity, which strongly relates to cultural insecurity, are the biggest threats to their well-being.

The cultural values in Sierra Leone consist of economical, social, and community aspects, based on interdependence, mutual support, and community life. Upon return, family and community relations are tested by economical expectations towards and stigma put on returnees from Europe, hampering their feelings of security and ability to re-integrate. All these interconnected challenges that influence returnees' security and re-integration ask for a holistic approach to be adopted by return assistance programs. The challenges encountered upon return have to be prepared for as soon as of the pre-return assistance. This requires up-to-date information to be provided before return, financial assistance, solving practical problems relating to someone's personal situation, and laying contacts with and informing family and friends in Sierra Leone about the upcoming return on beforehand. Upon return, this holistic approach has to be maintained by post-return assistance programs.

After having discussed the processes of return and the challenges returnees face throughout the process of return, I have linked them to discover the extent to which the challenges are incorporated in return assistance programs. Returnees' background, their personal experiences, and relations in Sierra Leone prior as well as upon return have to be taken into account by assistance programs in order to improve their re-integration and enhance their security. The personal experiences and interpretation of security, namely existential security, has to be the spearhead of return assistance as well as of research into return assistance, since experiences and coping mechanisms differ per returnee. Programs with the ability to offer accustomed assistance that meets the returnees' needs therefore increase the chances of a successful return in terms of security and re-integration.

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