The politics of return: Understanding trajectories of displacement and the complex dynamics of ‘return’ in Central and East Africa

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By 2019, a record high of 79.5 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide as a result of persecution, conflict, violence, and human rights violations (UNHCR 2020:2). In the decade leading up to this only a fraction of this number were able to ‘return’ or find a ‘durable solution’. Multiple waves of displacement are common, and ‘return’ often involves far more complicated arrangements than the term suggests. Yet if ‘return’, as a one-directional durable solution is increasingly rare, the need to understand it in difficult and dynamic contexts of precarity and multi-directional mobility, is all the more urgent. This introductory essay reflects on what studies of return can tell us about the ‘life cycle’ of conflict and displacement dynamics in war-affected Central and East Africa, with particular focus on Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan and Uganda. ‘Return’ and the ‘returnee’ category is broad and includes former combatants, especially those involved in non-state armed groups. We survey the historical and conceptual background of ‘return’ and its growing prominence in international policy before introducing four areas in which the articles in this special issue contribute to our understanding of IDP, refugee and combatant return dynamics: conceptualizations of home and mobilities; everyday negotiation of belonging; the relationship between return and ‘cycles of violence’, and finally the ways in which return shapes and re-shapes governance and public authority across settings.

Introduction

The UNHCR has called the 2010s ‘the decade of displacement’ (UNHCR 2020:4). By 2019, a record high of 79.5 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide as a result of persecution, conflict, violence, and human rights violations (ibid:2). The ‘decade of displacement’ label recalls a more optimistic moniker: ‘the decade of repatriation’, coined by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Sadako Ogata, to describe the 1990s. Today, the UNHCR continues to prioritise safe and sustainable refugee and IDP return as a response to conflict-driven displacement, but acknowledges that growing numbers of people remain in situations of protracted precarity, with ‘little hope of a durable solution’ (ibid: 48). Since the turn of the century, repatriation figures have declined as displacement figures have increased (Hansen 2018: 134). This is not surprising given that the vast majority of contemporary displacement is caused by wars and ‘generalized violence’ that last for years on end and resist peaceful political resolution (ibid). In the last decade, only 3.9 million refugees have returned to their country of

origin, compared with 14.6 million in the period 1993-2003 (Hansen 2018: 134; UNHCR 2020: 50). Meanwhile, available data suggests that roughly 31 million IDPs were able to return or find a 'solution' to displacement during the last decade (ibid: 32). Yet the increase in IDP numbers over that period are staggering. In the absence of a political resolution to the causes of flight in the first place, multiple waves of displacement are common, and return may not be a particularly durable solution at all. In fact, the dynamics of return may trigger further waves of insecurity, violence and indeed further displacement.

If 'return', as a one-directional durable solution is increasingly rare, the broader topic is nonetheless an important area of continued study. But how might understandings of what 'return' means change in an increasingly difficult and dynamic context of precarity and multi-directional mobility? The articles in this special issue engage with this question and focus on what studies of return can tell us about the 'life cycle' of conflict and displacement dynamics in war-affected Central and East Africa, with a particular focus on Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan and Uganda. Inspired by earlier scholarship that sees return as a complex process, rather than an 'event' (eg. Allen 1996; Black and Koser 1999; Vlassenroot and Tegenbos 2018:3), they engage with under-researched dynamics of return in conflict-affected places, examining the relationships of returnees with each other, with the 'stayee' population; with state and local government elites, and with aid agencies as well as with other forms of 'public authority'. Where things have moved on peacefully, the contributors to this special issue identify processes and practices of social repair that allow for co-existence and improved well-being; where this is not the case, authors provide fresh and compelling insights into why violence and cycles of displacement persist.

Our returnee category is broad and includes former combatants, particularly those involved in non-state armed groups. In the context of DRC, South Sudan and Uganda, many such returnees occupy an ambiguous victim-perpetrator/civilian-combatant status. While some have been involved in 'Disarmament, De-mobilisation and Re-integration' (DDR) and transitional justice (TJ) processes, these tend to be sporadic, short-lived and reliant on donor funding. Many others self-demobilised, including thousands of former Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) fighters in northern Uganda and ex-combatants in the Kivus in eastern DRC who have undergone no formal return or resettlement processes but have returned to civilian life. The articles in this special issue begin to shed light on how and why some former combatants return and integrate

peacefully, while others become recruits of new violent groups, contributing to our understanding of the 'life-cycle' of conflict and displacement in this region.

We begin this introduction with a background to contemporary 'return' and its growing prominence in international refugee policy. We go on to explore conceptual debates in the literature around the meaning and significance of 'return,' 'home' and 'emplacement.' Against this background we introduce four areas in which the articles in this special issue contribute to our understanding of IDP, refugee and combatant return dynamics: conceptualizations of home and mobilities; everyday negotiation of belonging; the relationship between return and 'cycles of violence', and finally the ways in which return shapes and re-shapes governance and public authority across settings.

The history of return

At the point at which the 'decade of return' began, there was almost no published research on the processes, dynamics and politics of return (Allen & Morsink 1994: 2; UNHCR 1985; Crisp 1987; Vlassenroot and Tegenbos 2018: 6). In 1994, a donor report expressed concern that 'what is being promoted as the most desirable solution to refugee crises is a poorly understood social and spatial phenomenon' (cf. ibid: 8). It was not long, however, before a substantial critical literature on return and repatriation emerged, including studies that examined the experiences of returnees and the 'afterlife' of the refugee across Africa, Asia and Central America (see eg. Allen and Morinsk 1994; Allen 1996; Black and Koser 1999; Eastmond and Ojendal 1999; Kingma 1997; Koser 1997; Vlassenroot and Tegenbos 2018:8). Before explaining how the articles in this special issue contribute to this literature, we briefly review the global historical trends that converged towards the end of the Cold War to favour return and repatriation as the preferred response to forced displacement. Following Crisp (2001), we view this through the lens of key political and normative shifts that transformed the UNHCR from being an 'exile-oriented' and 'reactive' refugee agency towards becoming a 'home-land orientated,' 'proactive' humanitarian agency (Crisp: 2001: 175 cf. UNHCR 1995).

By the end of the Cold War, the international community was confronting a very different kind of refugee situation to the one that existed when the 1951 UN Refugee Convention was drafted. The 1951 Convention responded to those who had been displaced by war and conflict in Europe and initially, refugee protection was a useful tool in the ideological battle between East and

West (Loescher 2003:7). In 1956, for example, after the Soviet military crackdown in Hungary, a US Navy sealift assisted Hungarians fleeing their homes and offered them refuge in the US. Photographs of men and women arriving at US airports carrying suitcases emblazoned with the words 'United States Escape Program' were widely publicised, and their flight from communist oppression to sanctuary and protection in the US was celebrated. Beyond the propaganda value of their personal accounts of repression under Soviet rule, many eastern bloc refugees were educated and highly skilled. US politicians spoke enthusiastically about the potential of these 'productive workers' to benefit society and the economy by filling key gaps in medical, scientific and industrial roles (Pastor 2016:201).

With the accession of the 1967 Protocol, the UNHCR became a 'global organization' (Loescher 2003:10). The original focus on providing legal protection to refugees fleeing communist regimes expanded to include large-scale refugee relief programmes across Africa and other developing regions (Loescher 2005:15; Crisp 2001: 169). The refugee camp model was a product of this shift but by the late 1970s its many shortcomings encouraged a more developmental approach towards displaced populations and host communities, including an emphasis on self-sufficiency and sustainable development over long-term relief (Harrell Bond 1986). This UNHCR (and broader donor) approach came to be known as the 'refugee aid and development strategy,' but it was a difficult political balancing act. Refugee populations were growing steadily, and while richer donor countries did not want to grant refugees asylum on their own soil, they also had serious reservations about pumping money into host countries that would not guarantee sustainable integration as a final outcome. Host states in turn felt that if richer countries were unwilling to burden share, the very least they could do was provide substantial development funding, but even then, it was politically risky for them to guarantee indefinite settlement (Crisp 2001; Betts 2010).

In some respects, the end of the Cold War signalled the demise of the 'refugee aid and development' strategy and set in motion a new approach: the '*returnee* aid and development' strategy (Crisp 2001). With the Cold War over, UNHCR- administered repatriation was on the increase. For example, the collapse of the USSR resulted in huge numbers returning to El Salvador, Nicaragua and Guatemala; hundreds of thousands of Cambodians were repatriated from Thailand in 1993 to vote in national elections; and roughly one million refugees returned to Ethiopia from Eritrea after 1991 (Vlassenroot and Tegenbos 2018: 8; Long 2013; Stepputat 1999; Eastmond & Ojendal 1999; Kibreab 2002, 2003). Returns during this period were not

always straight-forward. In some cases they were hardly 'voluntary,' part of a pattern of coerced return that had already begun towards the end of the 1970s as host governments and host communities began exhibiting 'refugee fatigue' (Barnett 2011: 255). The moral and legal case for better UNHCR oversight of repatriation processes was therefore a strong one. An expanding focus in this area was reflected in the budget: before the mid-1980s an average of 2% of the UNHCR's budget was spent on repatriation programming; this increased to 14% in the period 1990-97 (Crisp 2001: 174).

It was also the case that refugees were returning to fragile countries. The new emphasis on assisting with repatriation dovetailed with a new focus on supporting peacebuilding, conflict prevention and development in return countries (see UNHCR 1992, 1998, 2004). Barnett writes about a 'conceptual marriage' taking place between 'repatriation as a durable solution and repatriation as a form of protection' (2001: 25). A quote from a UNHCR official illustrates the shift well: 'We used to give them seeds and supplies and a handshake at the border, but now we are increasingly involved in the economic, political and human rights situation of the home country' (Barnett 2001: 25). By the end of the 1990s, the UNHCR had built closer links with the World Bank and other UN agencies in an attempt to ensure better coherence and co-ordination between shorter- term re-integration efforts and longer-term reconstruction efforts in conflict-affected places. The later came to be known as the Brookings approach, and the term 'returnee aid and development' was gradually phased out and replaced with 'post-conflict re-integration' as the UNHCR became involved all manner of 'routine' liberal peacebuilding efforts, from disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of former combatants, to transitional justice and reconciliation (Crisp 2001: 186; MacGinty 2012; UNHCR 2004; UNHCR 2008). This explicitly recognised that successful 'returns' involved not just refugees and IDPs but also combatants. The majority were rank-and-file soldiers and fighters, and many occupied an ambiguous 'victim-perpetrator' status (Baines 2009), moving between combatant and civilian roles through coercion or through choice.

This expansionist humanitarian agenda was underpinned by a new understanding of global security, and how displacement and population movement threatened it. While the end of the Cold War set in motion repatriation for many, it also ushered in a huge rise in intra-state wars across, for example, sub-Saharan Africa, the Balkans, and South East Asia that generated further displacement. These civil wars were framed by many politicians and sections of the media in the west as *global* security threats in so far as they were 'refugee-producing situations,'

that could reach national borders. Asylum applications across western Europe were rocketing, and far from being welcomed as during the cold war, these refugees were often framed as ethnically and culturally 'other'. A language developed to express a new 'protectionist political discourse' and the socio-economic impact on Western states was portrayed in stridently negative terms (Boswell 2003: 25; Zetter 1991; 2007). Western governments reassured domestic constituencies that, for those who had managed to gain entry, repatriation, rather than assimilation was the end-goal (Zetter 1991:56; 2007: 117). By the end of the 1990s, the figures were striking: between 1912 and 1969 nearly 50 million European refugees were re-settled abroad (Chimini 1998: 364, cf. Bialczyk 2008: 10). By the end of the century, only one percent of the world's refugees were offered re-settlement (ibid).

The ethical and political tensions between a more 'expansionist' humanitarian agenda and a more protectionist refugee regime found expression in the new category of the 'internally displaced person'. In 1994, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Sadako Ogata, said that 'population displacement, whether *internal* or international has gone beyond the humanitarian domain to become a major political, security and socio-economic issue, affecting regional and global stability' (cf. Hammerstad 2011: 237-8, italics added). Whereas in the past, the UNHCR had functioned mainly as an agency that assisted refugees once they had crossed borders, its emphasis was now on working with displaced persons and potential refugees *within* their national borders, or promoting policies that would return them to within those borders. To some extent this was welcomed as a progressive agenda in so far as it recognised a need to offer assistance and protection to that growing category of people who were displaced by conflict but who did not fall under the refugee category. In 1998, the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement were published, which included a right to a durable solution, notably 'to return voluntarily, in safety and with dignity, to their homes or places of habitual residence' (Guiding Principles, Section V; Bradley 2018: 219). The Guiding Principles were associated with the emergence of a powerful normative agenda which re-conceptualised sovereignty as form of responsibility to populations. The UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons, Francis Deng had famously argued a few years earlier that 'a government that allows its citizens to suffer…cannot claim sovereignty in an effort to keep the outside world from stepping in' (Deng *et. al* 1996: 33). This provided a justification (albeit highly contested) for a more interventionist 'protection' strategy in places where states are 'unwilling or unable' to safeguard their own citizens from genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity.

It is significant that this emerging norm of responsibility to protect was intimately lied with the pressing humanitarian and political question of what to do about growing numbers of IDPs (Bellamy 2008). For many, there was concern that the UNHCR's new approach was actually a way of containing potential refugees. As Losecher argued, 'the UNHCR has always trod a perilous path between its mandate to protect refugees and asylum seekers and the demands placed upon it by states to be a relevant actor in international relations' (2003:vii). There was concern that rather than providing refugees with protection, the UNHCR was working to stem the flow of potential refugees through conflict resolution, peace-keeping, peace-building and humanitarian assistance. The internally displaced person, or 'IDP' was a new operational category that became synonymous with encampment and containment. Even if it was reluctantly complicit, some argued that the UNHCR had made a 'devils compact', allowing humanitarianism to become 'the enemy of refugee rights' (Barnett 2001: 246; Branch 2011).

Today it is certainly the case that those displaced by conflict are less likely to cross borders. The latest UNHCR figures tell us that of the 79.5 million people displaced at the end of last year, 45.7 million were internally displaced (UNHCR 2020). For those who do cross borders, the prospect of a durable solution remains remote. Nearly eighty percent of today's refugees are caught up in situations of protracted displacement. The UNHCR (2020b) acknowledges a:

> 'diminishing prospect for refugees when it comes to hopes of any quick end to their plight. In the 1990s, on average 1.5 million refugees were able to return home each year. Over the past decade that number has fallen to around 385,000 meaning that growth in displacement is today far outstripping solutions'.

Last year witnessed the beginning of the implementation of the Global Compact on Refugees and its Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) and a new UNHCR IDP policy (UNHCR 2019). Both highlight the desirability and importance of 'safe, voluntary, informed and sustainable return of displaced people' and the need to 'support conditions in countries of origin for return in safety and dignity'. They also acknowledge how difficult this is in context of contemporary violent conflict.

Whilst also recognizing this difficulty, the articles in this special issue set out to explore the under-researched dynamics of refugee, IDP and ex-combatant 'return' in conflict affected places. To kick-start the research project from which the articles in this special issue derive, a systematic literature review of major debates pertaining to refugee, IDP and ex-combatant

‘return’ was conducted (Vlassenroot and Tegenbos 2018).[i] It found that much of the existing literature is structured around global priorities relating to displacement and return, and therefore tends to be both policy-orientated and normatively driven, seeking improvement in global and national efforts towards repatriation and re-integration (ibid: 8). There is, for example, a substantial literature that focuses on the decision-making processes of returnees relating to return (eg. Harild 2015; Koser 1997; Omata 2013); and on the extent to which repatriation may be involuntary and thus constitute ‘*refoulement*’ (eg. Zieck 2004; Krever 2011).

In addition to the significant legalistic literature on repatriation, the extant scholarship on return can be broken down into four main categories (see Vlassenroot and Tegenbos 2018). The articles in this special issue both contribute to – and challenge – our understanding in these areas. Firstly, there is a conceptual debate about the nature of ‘return,’ ‘home’ and ‘emplacement’. Given the importance of this debate in framing most of the articles in this special issue, we explore its key tenets in the following section, and then outline how the articles in this special issue advance our thinking in relation to these concepts. Secondly, there is a small literature on the linkages between return/repatriation, re-integration and development. This tends to equate sustainable returns with socio-economic development and major policy paradigms such as DDR and TJ. The articles in this special issue challenge this narrow and top-down focus, placing socio-economic concerns and donor agendas in broader perspective. Thirdly is the debate about returning ex-combatants and cycles of violence in fragile contexts. The articles in this special issue offer conceptual insights into this under-theorised area. Finally, is a growing literature on return as a political process, involving the negotiation and re-negotiation of citizenship and political community. The articles in this special issue bring a ‘public authority’ lens to this important emerging research area, emphasising the importance of understanding actually existing governance dynamics and the ways in which they may foster or hinder fairer political outcomes.

Concept of return

As made plain in the title of this introductory essay, return is a deeply political process. Beyond the physical act of returning home, is the question, *what to*? If it was a violent conflict that drove people from their homes in the first place, then how has the political dispensation changed and what form of political community is now possible and desirable? Katy Long writes that return and repatriation should be viewed as a ‘restorative process’ with far greater

ambitions than the physical movement of displaced persons from A to B; a process that 'contains within it the possibility of constructing new forms of political community' (Long 2013:2). Megan Bradley similarly argues that right to 'domicile' return for IDPs, as stated in the 1998 Guiding Principles, is a 'narrow interpretation,' that 'belies the complexity of the moral and political claims at stake when IDPs assert their right to return' (2018:218). Too often it seems, these deeper questions have been neglected by international policy makers and governments, who view return and repatriation as the most expedient option, the end-goal being re-establishment and maintenance of international order based on the 'status quo,' or as Crisp put it, to reduce the number of refugees (we might also say IDPs) 'on the international community's books' (Long 2013:2; Crisp 2001:172).

As already noted, as these motivations became more evident, they came under increasing scrutiny in academic scholarship and policy commentary, which documented ways in which organised returns departed from legal and ethical standards of voluntariness and safety. Part of the problem, some argued, was that the international community viewed concepts of return through a nationalist lens, equating 'return' with 'homecoming,' and the end of displacement with the re-establishment of the 'natural tie' between persons and their 'patria' (Allen and Turton 1996; Warner 1994; cf. Vlassenroot and Tegenbos 2018:6). Scholars interrogated ideas of ideas of 'return', 'home-making' and 'emplacement,' and began to challenge the simplistic 'discourse of repatriation,' which equated return with a former home, conceived territorially and spatially (Hammond 1999: 230; Hammond 2011:505).

Rather than 'home-coming,' it was suggested that something closer to 'home-*making*' happens when refugees and IDPs 'return' (Hammond 2011: 505). This is for several reasons. Firstly, repatriation does not necessarily mean return to a previous home. People who have been displaced for many years may not be able to access former property or land and may be settled elsewhere (Hammond 1999; Allen and Morkinsk 1994). 'Stayees', those who did not flee, may now resist the re-entry of returning populations, particularly where resources are scarce or political divisions remain raw (Hammond 1999; Kibreab 2002; Bascom 2005; Fransen and Kuschminder 2012; Barasa and Waswa 2015). Of course, not all returnees will face such bleak prospects, but even in those situations where repatriation is a largely positive experience, it still involves profound shifts in livelihood strategies, traditional social networks and the 'positioning of the returnee in the context of kin, community and the wider spheres of region and nation' (Hammond 1999: 231). These shifts are always gendered. In her rich ethnographic

study of experiences, displacement and return among the Nuer of South Sudan for example, Grabska (2014), shows that return is about navigating generational and gender norms to create a new space and new home. Gendered experience as well as gendered imaginaries in situations of return are variably part of producing, reproducing and/or disrupting existing social orders and the persons who inhabit them.

The person returning then, may be substantially different from the person who left. Displacement can be a hellish experience – theorists have drawn upon the work of Giorgio Agamben, who, inspired by Foucault (1979) and Arendt (1973), argued that refugee and IDP camps are archetypal 'spaces of exception,' unregulated by legal or political protections, where refugees live as 'bare life,' or as Bauman (2003) graphically put it 'human waste'. These depictions may hold some truth in certain settings but are hard to recognise in others (Cooper-Knock and Long: 2018). Asylum detention centres in Europe might be at one end of the spectrum (Ibid: 60 Ramadam 2013). In other contexts though, displacement might offer opportunities for economic activity, new skills, education and access to assistance regimes, exposure to new forms of media and global cultures. Kakuma camp in Kenya, for example, which has hosted refugees mainly from Sudan and Somalia, has been described as a 'development camp': 'sophisticated polities, with marketplaces, schools, hospitals, mosques, churches, running water and decision making for all' (Wilde 1998: 108, cf. Hilhorst and Jansen 1123). When the UNHCR deemed repatriation to Sudan to be safe for many of the camps' residents, refugee leaders expressed alarm at the poor infrastructure and lack of schools and told the camp residents to stay put in Kakuma (Hilhorst and Jansen 2010: 1128). Of course not all refugees and IDPs live in camps, and experiences of exile and displacement in other settlements and urban areas are also formative. Whatever the experience people have had, it is likely to have been transformational in some sense so that, as Hammond (1999:229) writes, 'whether a returnee comes back to his or her birthplace or settles in an entirely new environment, he/she considers return to be more of a new beginning than a return to the past.' This is especially so given the protracted nature of so many contemporary displacement situations. Younger generations who came of age while displaced might have weakened connections to ancestral lands and may even be 'returning' to a place they have never lived.

These insights have led some scholars to dismiss the very notion of return and repatriation as illusory and nostalgic, wrongly implying a fixed connection between 'people, place and identity' (Warner 1994; cf. Vlassenroot and Tegenbos 2018:10). Hammond's research on

Ethiopian refugees repatriating from Sudan to Ethiopia in the mid-1990s shows how imperfect terms like reintegration, reconstruction and rehabilitation are. Rather than go back to the Highlands, from where they fled, people developed a more economically sustainable 'border culture,' drawing on skills and social networks formed in the refugee camps (Hammond 1999: 243). In her comparative ethnography of camp and self-settled urban refugees from Burundi in western Tanzania, Malkki argues that 'sedentrist' thinking based on 'nationalist discourses' exaggerates the extent to which displaced people feel a connection to a former home (Malkki 1995; Kibreab 1999:390). She finds that ideas of home and Hutu identity are fluid and constructed according to different experiences of exile, therefore rejecting what she calls 'botanical metaphors', in which people describe themselves and are described as 'being rooted in a place and as deriving their identity from that rootedness' (1992: 27; cf. Kibreab 1999: 391).

This conceptualization of 'return' is not shared by all. Pushing back against what he sees as an excessively 'de-territorialized' view of the world Kibreab argues that actually:

> 'the relationship between a territory and identity, not in terms of a link between a people and a soil, as such, but rather in terms of membership of a state occupying a given territory with the right to exclude others from that territory, is significant' (1999: 408).

Citizenship offers opportunity and security and it is connected to a 'geographically bounded physical space' from which people's 'entitlements emanate' (ibid). This, argues Kibreab, signals the enduring importance of repatriation because it offers the possibility of membership of a political community. This recalls Long's (2013) extensive treatment of this very idea. Based on her fieldwork in Guatemala, Long argued that repatriation must be viewed as more than the social act of creating or recreating a 'home' because it denotes a process of negotiating or re-negotiating political belonging, and by extension a social contract between state and citizen.

Where Long (2013) goes further than Kireab is in her deterritorialization of the concept. She sees what she terms 'empatriation' as the creation of a new political community that is not necessarily physically bounded. It follows that you can re-patriate to a political community without necessarily residing there. She draws upon the experience of refugees in West Africa and Afghanistan who remained mobile, largely for economic reasons, even after they had re-claimed their citizenship in their home countries. Such arrangements have been endorsed by the UNHCR and regional organizations as offering a durable solution to displacement (Long

2013:2; UNHCR 2008; 2016; Long 2010). Ongoing mobility has also been advocated for as a durable solution for IDPs, where permanent settlement may hinder economic opportunities and livelihoods (Bradley 2018: 225). Indeed the arguments above in relation to voluntary return and 'repatriation' are also largely applicable to IDP return. While IDPs may not have crossed a border, their flight was likely necessary because their own governments were 'unable or unwilling' to offer them protection from persecution, conflict, violence and human rights violations. As Bradley (2018:221) points out, while the 'regularization' of citizenship status may not be a concern, the end of displacement is a deeply political process often involving the articulation of claims including the restitution of lost property but also 'redress of past wrongs, opposition to ethnic cleaning, and recognition as equal and legitimate members of the political community'. These principled political claims, may well be in tension with the political priorities of the stayee community, but also with returning combatants and even those returning as refugees.

Rethinking mobilities and 'home'

The idea that 'return' might not mean permanent physical return has produced interesting empirical studies of mobility and conceptual advances around the idea of 'home' in protracted displacement situations, and the articles in this issue push us further in this direction.

The acknowledgement of situations of 'ambiguous' return has given rise to concepts such as 'split return' and 'circular mobilities'. Research on South Sudanese refugees in Uganda shows how refugees create 'their own durable solution' to exile and displacement through various strategies, including economic and social integration in the host country (Hovil 2010:1) and practices of 'circular' mobility, which involves visits to land and family in home countries but the maintenance of residence and refugee status in Uganda (Kaiser 2010; Hovil 2010). A more formalised 'spilt return' has also been conceptualised in the literature and it refers to those situations in which households split up to ease the return process and mitigate against the economic and security risks it entails (Harpiviken 2014; Eastmond 2006). For example, research shows how the Afghan return from Iran and Pakistan in the early 1990s and early 2000s was characterised by keeping some family members behind, whilst others returned to establish a viable new life (Harpiviken 2014). Sometimes this kind of arrangement persisted for years on end, 'producing "migratory social capital" essential to households' survival strategies' (Ibid: 68).

The articles in this special issue further conceptualise the empirical specificities of such complex and multi-directional arrangements. In their ethnographic study of cross-border mobility among South Sudanese refugees in Uganda, O'Byrne and Ogeno question not only the one-dimensional nature of 'repatriation discourse' but also assumptions of 'regularity' and 'predictability' evoked by possible alternative and more dynamic concepts such as 'circular', 'oscillating' and 'pendular' mobility (some of which are favoured by others in the special issue). They point to the diversity and uncertainty of what they term 'pragmatic mobilities'. There was the notorious 'Owot the Driver' who was well known amongst camp residents for transporting goods and people, 'both living and dead', across the border, and profiting well from doing so. But much more common was what they call 'humanitarian failure-induced mobility', whereby 'life in a refugee settlement was simply too fragile to be bearable.' This was aggravated by the introduction of a government Biometric Verification Exercise (BVE) which aimed to regulate the distribution of food aid via finger printing and iris scanning technology but, in practice, irregularised and constrained it. Without a transparent distribution timetable, and with the banning of food collection on behalf of absentees the new system (adhered to by the UNHCR and WFP) meant that 'pragmatic mobility' for sheer survival became both harder and more necessary. Yet, despite often arising from existential crises, the authors see these mobilities as 'particularly powerful manifestations of agency, seeking to at least allow for the possibility of greater personal and collective control in otherwise uncertain contexts'.

While O'Byrne and Ogeno's concern centres around pragmatic spatial mobilities, Mbu-Mputu and Trapido bring us into more ideational territory, where imagined mobility and future homecoming feature as way of asserting political membership and belonging. They examine the ideologies and practices of Congolese nationalism in exile, and how this has informed ideas of home, belonging and potential return which has changed dramatically over the years. The idea of return becomes constitutive of diaspora politics; a mobilizing political platform which shifts over time from consumer driven ideals about how to embody and construct the 'good life' to a more radical 'exile nationalism'. The authors trace how this transformation has occurred as culturally validated figures of success and authority have changed. They show how claims to authority and ways of fulfilling obligations of belonging have shifted from the figure of '*Mikilistes'* (male migrants resident in Europe who were the joyous patrons of musicians, dispensers of designer goods and romancers of beautiful women), to *'combattants'* (a diffuse group of diaspora-based activist political opposition that has emerged since the 2000s and are

an important feature of the Congolese political scene). Their nationalism is intimately connected with a love of 'home', their 'obsession' with return, and the construction of transnational political fields.

Mbu-Mputu and Trapido's article centres around an analysis of two socio-political categories: the *milikistes* and the *combattants,* which almost exclusively figured as male. In different ways, each of the articles in the special issue illustrate ways that the experiences of displacement and return are gendered. This goes beyond an analysis, however important, of the ways that men and women are variably impacted by consequences of war and the ways that broader conceptions of masculinity and femininity are mobilized and or challenged through processes of displacement or combat and subsequent 'return'. Displacement itself has different meanings and is associated with (usually hierarchical) gendered positions. In contrast to the situation noted above with male migration to Europe, women in many of the other contexts considered in this special issue, under ordinary circumstances, are expected to leave their natal ancestral lands and to begin new affinal homes on the land of their husband and his kin. Mobility itself then is gendered 'female'. Porter points out that in Acholi, in northern Uganda even the etymology behind the word 'woman' is a verb meaning 'to migrate'. Estrangement from land might thus be taken as feminizing, or as Schulz has argued of being subjected to other wartime of violence, as a 'displacement from gendered personhood'(Schulz 2018).

Like Mbu-Mputu and Trapido, Porter continues with the theme of the imagined ideal 'home', in this case, as being central to rethinking mobilities, and 'moral geographies' of camp and home. She explores how 'home' is being reconfigured in the aftermath of displacement particularly as it pertains to intimate gender relationships. Wider societal movements into camps and subsequent 'return' entailed a host of spatial changes with a profound impact on 'normal' gendered orderings. The mass displacement of over 90 percent of the Acholi population in northern Uganda meant that most people had limited if any access to land and cattle, with the former greatly structuring everyday activities of gendered life and the latter the basis for negotiating kinship relationships. What does it mean that for the time of encampment virtually no new 'marriages' took place? She argues for casting spatial considerations and movement as central to understandings of 'marriage' more broadly, but especially so as part of the project of making a home in the aftermath of war. During the profound ruptures of war and displacement, she suggests, gendered ideals of intimate relationships and the project of making a home remain surprisingly resilient, even if everyday realities are increasingly divergent. The

disjuncture between them opens a space where couples, kin groups and wider public authorities are engaged in increasing contestation over the forces of imagined ideals, sexual desires and aspirations for a good life.

Despite the massive upheavals entailed by decades of displacement, Porter's article indicates a surprising level of continuity at least in ideals of home. Pendle and Akoi also refute the idea that exile and war are points of 'total social rupture,' showing how particular configurations of displacement itself were part of strategizing for an aspired 'good life' when return became possible. Comparing two different South Sudanese communities and how their experiences of displacement shaped their 'return' from Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya, they show how exile can 'result in reproductive social processes as well as transformative social processes'. In the 1990s, young men who came to Kakuma from Gogrial were sent by families with military connections to benefit from the schools set up by the UNHCR. For the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) commanders, for example, sending sons to Kakuma was part of a 'strategy to preserve their own and their families status through education'. Most people fleeing from violence in Gogrial at this time were displaced internally. Access to Kakuma was 'carefully socially regulated', and those who made it were politically and militarily connected. In Bor on the other hand, in the early 1990s, almost the entire population fled at once, and many families ended up in Kakuma for well over a decade, regardless of social class, connections or gender. New universal access to education in Kakuma represented a remarkable change from previous life in Greater Bor. By the end of 2012, the UNHCR had assisted with the repatriation of 335,000 South Sudan repatriations, in addition to spontaneous and 'split' returns from Kakuma. The young men returning to Gogrial re-entered the elite, quickly taking up jobs in NGOs and government: this was, after all, 'part of their families planned trajectory for how they would serve the family and gain authority'. Those returning to Bor on the other hand, had a very different displacement history. Despite also receiving an education in Kakuma, many remained unable to access employment on their return. These different return trajectories highlight how varied circumstances of displacement shape opportunities upon 'return,' even decades after flight.

The articles in this special issue therefore rethink mobilities as multi-directional and dynamic. They conceptualise ties to 'home' as tethered to geographic and social imaginaries, but not necessarily linked to physical dwelling. Indeed 'home' is a resilient but contested idea that evolves in response to changing material realities. We now turn to focus on how the articles in

this special issue reveal how belonging and social repair are negotiated in such complex environs.

Negotiating belonging

Since the emergence of an international policy trajectory from the late 1980s onwards that has sought to tie refugee and IDP humanitarian assistance to longer term development objectives, there has been significant scholarly interest in the socio-economic challenges of re-integration once repatriation/resettlement has occurred. Articles in this special issue seek to understand how standardised approaches to reintegration – such as DDR, TJ and PSS – are experienced by returnees and stayees; and relatedly, how social repair and sustainable livelihoods emerge outside of these interventionist frameworks.

In their study of ex-combatant return in Mbandaka, the provincial capital of Equatuer province in north-western DRC, Carayannis and Pangburn survey the relative failure of numerous 'Western-driven' attempts to finance and implement DDR programmes, including the $200 million World-Bank co-ordinated National Commission for Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (CONADER) launched in 2002. Echoing findings elsewhere, they argue that in DRC, conventional DDR programming, which foregrounds vocational training and modest support packages for former combatants are 'insufficient to sustain them in civilian life' and 'often fail'. Instead, they tell the fascinating story of the *tolekistes,* a several thousand strong group of ex-combatants who have managed a degree of socio-econonmic re-integration by forming a unionised bicycle-taxi organization, equipped with the bicycles provided by the failed CONADER programme. They find that ex-combatants are most likely to 'return' to where they have support systems, and in the case of the *Toleka,* the social support structures provided by union membership offered the best chance of post-war socio-economic integration. At the same time, they point out that 'a strong, locally owned support, and re-integration network like the Toleka union can only be as successful as the conditions around it permit'. While the *Tolekistes* have managed to construct a new identity as 'some of the hardest working people' in a town that is 'driven, literally, by these bicycle taxis,' sustainable reintegration into civilian life remains a complex political process, and 79% of the 100 of whom were interviewed, said they would consider joining the army or armed group again. We explore the significance of this in the next section.

Articles by Anna Macdonald and Raphael Kerali, and Tim Allen *et. al* in this issue also explore how international and national programmes aimed at facilitating reintegration after return have sporadic, unintended or unpredictable impacts – and indeed – how life goes on in spite of, or in the shadow of such interventions. In their study of stigma and stigmatisation of LRA returnees in northern Uganda, Macdonald and Kerali look beyond meta-narratives of 'transitional justice' in Acholiland, Uganda to explore return dynamics of post-war village life in the aftermath of mass displacement across the region. Focusing on male returnees believed to have been forcibly abducted by the LRA, they find that, on return, stigmatization and exclusion by the broader community is likely to depend on three (sometimes interlinked) factors: firstly, whether individual behaviour of the returnee is considered 'good' and 'normal', meaning economically productive and respectful to others; secondly whether the returnee is thought to have come back from the LRA with bad spirits that will 'contaminate' the local environs; and third whether the returnee is considered a threat to resources in the context of post-displacement political economies of survival, particularly in relation to land. They find that because it happens for different reasons, stigmatization serves a range of functions. Often it is deliberately exclusionary, rooted in rejection, even the desire for expulsion from village life. In other instances, it is based on cultural ideas related to the importance of cleansing and/or shame in re-socializing individuals after wrong-doing and is re-integrative in purpose. Uniting this, stigmatization functions as a form of resistance to international and national discourses around amnesty, forgiveness and anti-stigma, and as a way of people and communities expressing some agency in spaces of return.

Allen et. al examine the troubling question of what happened to the children who returned from the LRA. Quite strikingly, they find that in following UNICEF best practice guidelines on the social reintegration of child soldiers by placing returnees with immediate relatives, NGOs and UN agencies were actually causing unintentional harm. In their follow up of a random sample of 230 returnees that had returned via one NGO-administered reception centre, Allen *et. al* find that those who are most likely to 'abuse or reject' returned children (most of whom are now in their 20s or 30s) are their own family members. This is largely because of concerns about access to customary land within extended family networks, but also because of fears that returnees come back contaminated by polluting spirits that will harm others. A particularly vulnerable group – as in other contexts – were those young women who returned with children who had been 'born in captivity': a third of the sample fell into this category. It is interesting to note that 15% of females and 12% of males in the sample are now renting plots of land to

cultivate near towns and trading centres. Here, they might also have access to funded support networks for LRA returnees and also 'socially supportive' Pentecostal churches – indeed many had become 'born again'. The authors conclude that 'in general, return from the LRA has been most successful where integration into rural life has failed or not been attempted.' The article exposes serious problems with the central assumptions guiding international agreements such as the *Inter-agency Guiding Principles on Separated and Unaccompanied Children* – at the very least, Allen *et. al* suggest, children being reunited with families in conditions of acute deprivation (often IDP camps) and severe social instability – should have been followed up systematically.

These articles raise serious questions about the legacies of humanitarian assistance in contexts of displacement and return. This is the broad topic that animates Kara Blackmore's article in this issue, also in the northern Ugandan context. Blackmore's study is concerned with 'what was left behind' after internally displaced persons returned home. She argues that the material remains of displacement and aid assistance – objects, archives and human remains - trigger memories that shape daily life in the post-war present. She shows how these challenge the official 'memorial complex' as curated by humanitarian, religious, NGO and state initiatives. Showcased in exhibitions and documented in reports, official memories present a partial, politically authorised picture of conflict legacies that exculpate the Ugandan state and position the LRA as the 'singular antagonist' during the conflict. They also effectively erase humanitarian failures around the administering of the camps; the management of returns and the destruction of personal records and data. Through her interviews, she shows how the continued use and re-making of rationed objects such as food assistance tins; watering cans and lanterns create a 'material landscape' that allows for the 'wider exchange of memory'. Material remains also refer to human remains and 'haphazard' burial sites that remain scattered in former displacement sites reminding people that proper Acholi rites and rituals for the dead were not possible during those times. The article extends our thinking beyond conceptualizing return as pertaining only or even primarily to living populations, and rather prompts us to consider the ways that the dead and other ongoing interactions with material remains of displacement shape the negotiation of belonging in new spaces upon 'return'.

The findings in these articles complicate conventional policy ideas about what constitutes successful re-integration. The UNHCR for example, notes that returns are both 'effective' and 'sustainable', when 'returnees are similar to the local population in terms of socio-economic

conditions and security' (UNHCR 1997: 2; cf Vlassenroot 13). According to the IASC Framework, a durable solution has been reached for IDPs when they 'no longer have any specific assistance and protection needs that are linked to their displacement and such persons can enjoy their human rights without discrimination resulting from their displacement' (cf. Bradley 2018:223). Yet while global policy agendas around economic livelihoods, DDR and TJ may have resonance, they often belie everyday realities of the people concerned. People navigate these systems amidst many others, making claims upon them or circumventing them as they set up unions; move to towns; negotiate with elders over burials and pursue social repair in situations of chronic economic and political insecurity. At the same time – many are left vulnerable in part because of the misapprehension of the specificities of their lives and struggles.

Cycles of return and cycles of conflict

Despite a significant literature exploring the relationship between out-migration and conflict onset, very little research has been conducted on the relationship between return migration and conflict, and the 'security implications of return migration are undertheorized' (Schwartz 2019:112). In a recent article on refugee return and post-conflict violence in Burundi, Schwartz points to Bosnia Herzegovina, Iraq, South Sudan and El Salvador to argue that 'conflict between returning and non-migrant populations after civil war is a nearly ubiquitous issue for societies recovering from such wars,' often triggering further waves of insecurity and displacement (2019: 110). In Burundi, she finds that 'migration-related group identities' have formed during different phases of the conflict. On return after the 1992-2005 civil war, reified distinctions between *repartries* and *residents* were likely to become violent when certain groups perceived themselves to be excluded from post-conflict institutions, particularly those related to land governance 'based on where they were physically located during wartime' (144).

While most of the articles in this special issue imply the potential for generalised insecurity and violent conflict as a result of uncertain or unsettled returns, Vlassenroot *et. al* focus specifically on this question. In their article on combatants and former combatants in eastern DRC, they analyse the phenomenon whereby youth have been engaged in processes of 'incessant' armed mobilization and demobilization. Adopting the lens of 'circular return' (see above) they show how rank-and-file combatants move agentively and fluidly between different

'social spaces' of fighter and civilian, and indeed, how neither of these categories are well suited to describing their realities. They present a challenge to macro-arguments which neatly connect the failure of DDR efforts to a delineated 'remobilization' process. However, rather than use a security frame to understand combatant return dynamics, they are interested in the processes of social mobilization and 'social rupture' that inform individual decisions to join, leave and re-join armed groups. This granular level analysis tells us that for rank-and-file combatants, armed groups produce 'rules, values and resources,' and by extension forms of 'social and symbolic capital' that are ruptured on return to civilian life: 'return to combat, in this sense, is a reclaim to what was lost as a consequence of demobilization'. In eastern DRC, movement between combatant and civilian spaces and identities is not a one-off event but a form of constant 'pendular mobility' which is driven by interlocking dynamics of pressure by former commanders; fluctuating insecurity at home; frustration with re-integration into civilian life; a fragmented military landscape; and nostalgia for the social and material benefits of combatant life. At the same time 'being part of an armed group does not include a rupture with other social spaces. In fact, combatants in most cases remain connected to their home communities': via mobile phone communications, messengers, and even physical visits when military operations are close to home villages.

Akoi and Pendle similarly point to the ways that 'return' cannot be equated with a rupture from a history of engaging in armed conflict. Far from it. Their comparison of young men returning from the SPLA in the regions of Greater Gogrial and Greater Bor in South Sudan shows how sustained links to the military, elite and even possession of or access to arms continues to play a role in their present as a strategy of social negotiation—again showing the poor fit of socio-legal categories of civilian and combatant. As explored in the next section, such ongoing linkages, impermanence and ambiguous statuses in situations of 'return' play into contestations and negotiations of public authority in 'return' settings.

Return and the re-negotiation of public authority

In the same way that return is simplistically equated with 'home', it can be erroneously conflated with 'peace' and the end of a political process. While studies of displacement regularly highlight the ways in which refugees and IDPs are stripped of fundamental rights, research exploring how the process of return reshapes power, politics and ideas of citizenship has only emerged quite recently (Vlassenroot and Tegenbos 2018: 19; Long 3013). Studies

show how the process of return is deeply constitutive of on-going negotiations around statehood, political legitimacy and belonging (eg. Metsola 2010; Soderstrom 2015; Stepputat 1999). In war and genocide situations where ethnicity was politicized and weaponized, 'return' can involve state-level re-constitution of social and ethnic categories as part of nation-building and statecraft. It is argued, for example, that in post-genocide Rwanda, new inclusive/exclusive citizenship categories have been created which are based on roles during the genocide but also patterns and histories of mobility (Turner 2015). Studies have also shown how humanitarian assistance programmes for returnees can re-shape state-society relationships, even if this were not the intended end-goal. In Afghanistan for example, the UNHCR became involved in the Afghan Land Allocation Scheme which granted landless Afghan returnees full Afghan citizenship and had significant implications for statebuilding processes (Scalettaris 2013). Recently, there has also been interest in the role of refugees and IDPs in peace agreements (eg. Anderson-Rodgers 2015; Koser 2007). There is some agreement, however, that IDPs in particular tend to be marginalized during negotiations (ibid).

Despite providing very useful insights into the 'politics of return' much of this literature is state-centric and top-down, analysing the political process of return through the lens of national discourses, international frameworks such as peace agreements and international paradigms, such as DDR and transitional justice.[ii] The articles in this special issue instead view the politics of return through a 'public authority' lens. This lens takes as its starting point the fact that the governance arrangements in the contexts under study depart dramatically from ideal-typical depictions of the Weberian state. Whether in DRC, South Sudan or Uganda, the case studies in this special issue engage with return dynamics in situations where the state is relatively absent; exploitative; distrusted and/or weakly resourced. A public authority perspectives focuses on how the governance of people, territory and resources actually functions under such conditions (Lund 2006; Hoffmann and Vlassenroot 2014). State institutions may operate, but it is likely that the functions and services associated with 'the state' - justice, security, education, and healthcare - for example, are delivered in combination, or indeed in parallel, with other public authorities that claim legitimacy and power and enjoy a degree of popular consent. This might include, for example, customary chiefs and elders, religious authorities and groups, kinship networks, self-help groups, civil society organisations, humanitarian agencies, organized criminal gangs, militias and rebels (Hoffmann and Kirk 2013). By analysing 'return' dynamics through a public authority lens, the articles in this special issue advance our understanding of actually existing political orders. These orders may make social repair, mutuality and economic

activity possible, but can also contribute exclusion, further violence and thus further cycles of displacement.

As studies in DRC by Carayannis and Pangburn and Vlassenroot *et. al* demonstrate, elite public authority dynamics tend to be corrupt, exclusionary or predatory so that sustainable return and re-integration is very difficult and, particularly for former combatants, a return to armed groups becomes a viable and attractive option for many. Armed groups can be, as Vlassenroot *et. al* argue, 'a refuge to deal with joblessness, and a space of political and economic opportunity'. Meanwhile, peace processes in DRC have had 'little effect on the local politics of mobilization,' and as armed groups have proliferated, they have evolved into 'dominant power brokers,'. As public authorities they work alongside local and national political and customary leaders to impose or sustain – in the words of one respondent 'spaces of transit for those in search of responses to their needs' (x). Carayannis and Pangburn meanwhile show how, for the *tolekistes,* despite managing a degree of socio-economic re-integration, frustration with perceived corruption and poor functioning of the provincial government has created severe disillusionment with civilian life.

As different forms of public authority regulate social, economic and political order, they can assume the role of 'societies moral guardians, deciding what constitutes acceptable behaviour and who is and is not part of the community' (Kirk and Green 2020: 5). In Uganda, this is seen in public authorities' contests to regulate sexuality and social reproduction. Porter's study indicates ways that the spatial configuration in camps undermined gerontocratic control and eroded the material basis of elders authority over youth as the allegiances of young men shifted away from kin and toward their peers. In the period of return, they continue to grapple with the reverberations of the drastic reduction in formal marriages and disruptions of 'normal' gendered life. Allen *et. al* meanwhile, analyse the public authority dynamics of patrilineal landholding, kinship networks, and spiritual pollution to explain how the humanitarian approach of relocating LRA returnees (many of whom were children when they were taken by the rebel group) with immediate relatives had negative consequences. In terms of political community as Macdonald and Kerali show in northern Uganda, at the most local level there was a degree of consensus among public authority figures and the broader village community, that LRA returnees must conduct themselves in a way that is conducive to the 'normal' functioning of social and economic relationships and spiritual balance. Those returnees believed to have transgressed certain moral and normative boundaries were likely to experience

stigmatization. This stigmatization was a form of social accountability and could often be deeply exclusionary, including, for example, preventing the 'wrong' sort of returnee access to authority positions within the local-level political structure of the village.

The UNHCR does not make much reference to political re-integration in its policy frameworks, preferring instead to measure 'effective reintegration' as those situations in which returnees enjoy the same socio-economic and security conditions as stayees (Vlasseroot and Tegenbos 2018: 20; Fransen 2017:1). And yet, as the articles in this special issue, and other scholarship attests, this cannot be achieved in the absence of inclusive political processes and arrangements (eg. Long 2008; 2013; McMullin 2013). As in many other contexts, in DRC, South Sudan and Uganda, returnees were coming back into unstable political environments, better conceptualised through the lens of complex public authority dynamics, than ideal-type Weberian governance. International frameworks that have sought to build the state in such places have failed, in part, because they ignored how actually existing governance functions and promoted externally designed, top-down models that floundered on implementation. The articles in this special issue serve well to remind us of the importance of conceptualising return as a deeply complex and contextual political process, the trajectory of which is shaped and re-shaped by public authority dynamics that can only be made fairer, just and more peaceful if they are understood.

Conclusion

In different ways, the articles in this special issue demonstrate the inadequacy of static frames used to conceptualise the experiences of populations on the move as a result of violent conflict. Return, repatriation, demobilisation, reintegration and reconciliation are operational categories that have been devised in order to design policies and provide services, for refugees, IDPs and former combatants. As peacebuilding and development paradigms, however, they belie the dynamism of displacement and return. As the articles in this special issue show, experiences of displacement and return diverge from and complicate temporal, spatial and socio-legal assumptions that continue, to a large extent, to be employed by the UNHCR, aid agencies, states and many scholars in more or less nuanced ways.

This introductory essay has traced the diminishing prospects of the long-held 'durable solution' of return amidst the staggering growth of displacement, increasingly contained within borders. Yet, despite the difficulties and complexities of achieving anything like permanent 'return', the

idea of it continues to feature in imaginaries of international and national policies, as well as in the minds of displaced and 'demobilized' populations. As the articles in this special issue show, the moral and political stakes of the project of return are high. Return entails not just a re-configuration of persons and places, nor entirely new arrangements. Social, political and symbolic capital is accrued, disrupted and re-shaped in the constant mobility in and out of spaces (camps, settlements, military bases, homes) that are not always as distinct as is imagined. In DRC, South Sudan and northern Uganda, standardised approaches to return and reintegration have failed to engage with multi-directional and fluid mobilities or with the political complexity that continues to shape daily lives, as public authorities contest for power in contexts of limited statehood. While social repair and sustainable livelihoods have emerged outside of and in relation to these interventionist frameworks, cycles of violence have also persisted, or seem very close to being triggered.

Static frames are used to make lives on the move more legible, but they do very little to help us understand what is really happening. The frames used in this special issue on the other hand - re-thinking mobilities; the negotiation of belonging; cycles of return and conflict; and the variable roles of public authority in processes of return - help us re-think the difficulties and possibilities of 'return' as policy-makers and many displaced persons continue to see it as the most preferred 'durable solution'.

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[ii] Despite this, as Vlassenroot and Tegenbos (2018: 20) cite Alfieri (2016), Long (2013) and McMullin (2013) among others, to argue that 'researchers have advocated for a research agenda that incorporates the political agency of returning populations

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