

# Ending refugees' exile

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We all tend to assume that refugees want to go home. But often refugees cannot just return to their home country when conflict ends. Many have spent decades in exile; many second and third-generation refugees have never seen the place which they are now expected to call home. Research funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) shows that for many refugees a quick return isn't the right answer.

Dr Katy Long at the London School of Economics says: "There is usually political pressure to start organising refugee returns as soon as there's a possibility of peace. But in places such as [Somalia](#) or Afghanistan, poor security, poverty and a lack of infrastructure persist long after the acute crisis has eased, so it's often hard for [refugees](#) to feed and support their families after they return.

A recent survey suggests that up to 20 per cent of the refugees who have returned to Afghanistan since 2001 may have since become displaced again. The solution, Dr Long says, is to stop thinking about refugee return as a permanent, one-off move, and concentrate instead on developing new flexible approaches that encourage cross-border links, allowing refugees to become [migrants](#). Refugees often spend decades living as part of a different community, and may have jobs or families there.

"It makes sense for refugees to retain this link," says Dr Long. "Doing so may also contribute to wider peace-building and development in the home country through providing remittance money and access to education and skills training." [Fieldwork](#) with Guatemalan refugees who

had returned from Mexico showed that success is far more likely if refugees are able to participate in and help shape their own return.

Dr Long says that [West Africa](#) provides one example of how such ideas might be put into practice. The Economic Community of West African States offers citizens in the region common rights to work and reside across its 16 member states. This has allowed refugees returning from [Sierra Leone](#) and Liberia to continue working and living in their countries of refuge but now living as West African citizens under the protection of their home countries.

In East Africa, similar arrangements may be put into place for Rwandan refugees in Uganda who do not wish to return home. The UN is encouraging Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran to make similar arrangements, but continuing insecurity has made progress difficult.

Dr Long says: "The international community needs to recognise that in areas where insecurity and poverty are likely to persist for years, migration is often an essential coping strategy for families and communities. We really need to think about how we can help support refugee mobility as part of our peace-building or development efforts in these regions".

**More information:** For more information on the survey 'Rapid Assessment Refugee Returnee Population & Reintegration Dynamics' see [www.internal-displacement.org/...t-Survey\\_Jan2012.pdf](http://www.internal-displacement.org/...t-Survey_Jan2012.pdf)

Provided by Economic & Social Research Council

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