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## Struggling to Feel at Home

An Inquiry into Sri Lankan Tamil Refugees' Experiences of Reintegration

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## **Abbreviations**

IDP	-	internally displaced person
LTTE	-	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
OfERR	-	Organisation for Eelam Refugees Rehabilitation
UNHCR	-	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

## **Abstract**

This thesis investigates the reintegration process of Sri Lankan Tamil returnees. After the Sri Lankan civil war ended in 2009, a number of refugees who lived in exile in India returned to their country of origin. This research asks how Tamil returnees experience and navigate the reintegration process initiated by their return. It was designed as an explorative case study based on thirteen interviews with returnees in Vavuniya District in October 2016. The analysis shows, that the majority of respondents encountered similar challenges, for example the difficulty to find employment, the perceived lack of support by state actors and organisations as well as feelings of frustration because of loneliness. It was found that persons who were able to access regular employment experienced their process of return much more positive and had managed to improve their situation quite quickly. On the other hand, persons who arrived relatively recently, moved to places they were not familiar with, or had difficulties finding jobs compatible with their skill level were mostly disappointed with their situation. In order to cope with their difficulties respondents used several strategies including making use of family networks and exchanging services with local authorities. Overall, many returnees struggle to re-establish their lives in Sri Lanka and are rather disappointed with their situation. This is partly due to the lack of a coherent reintegration system and the inefficiency of state institutions. This research also shows how the dimensions of reintegration are interdependent and positively influence each other. If this relationship can be better understood it would be of great significance for development programmes with refugee context.

## 1. Introduction

When conflicts end, refugees go home. At least this is a common conception which also has some truth in it. Once the violence that led to forced migration recedes, large parts of the displaced population are expected to return to their former homes to start rebuilding their lives. This thesis investigates such a situation by looking at the return of Sri Lankan Tamils from their asylum in India. Thereby it focuses on the reintegration experience of returnees and aims at better understanding the return process, its challenges and opportunities from the perspective of returnees.

In May 2009 the 30 year long civil war in Sri Lanka ended with a military victory by the government forces over the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Figures about how many people have died in the war are contested but conservative analysis estimates that since the 1980s the conflict resulted in at least 65,000 casualties not counting the numerous injured and displaced (Uppsala Conflict Data Program 2016). Especially Tamils and Muslims were forced to flee during the periods of violence and relocated from regions of intense fighting or multi-ethnic areas. Since the war ended in 2009, the facilitation of refugee return has come on the political agenda. The majority of displaced individuals stayed within Sri Lanka and most of these internally displaced persons (IDPs) have already been able to return to their former homes (Sri Lankan Ministry of Resettlement 2015, p. 1). For several years many of them have lived in so called 'welfare centres' around the country – temporary camps where food and shelter were provided. However, during the war many refugees also fled to other countries, especially in South Asia, Europe, North America and Australia. It is estimated that in 2009 more than 125,000 Sri Lankan Tamils resided in neighbouring India of whom around 75,000 lived in refugee camps in the state of Tamil Nadu (Giammatteo 2010, p. 52). The official policies of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as well as the Indian and Sri Lankan government aim at facilitating the voluntary return of these refugees. However, according to numbers from both the Sri Lankan Ministry of Resettlement and local non-governmental organisations only about 10,000 persons have returned until 2016 with annual numbers declining from 2,058 returnees in 2010 to 434 in 2014 (OfERR 2016). The lack of willingness to return is based on several factors but also conflates with an administrative process which involves Indian and Sri Lankan state institutions and can last from several months to more than a year. According to a recent study, the reluctance to return is primarily based on these legal difficulties as well as low expectations, lack of social support networks, educational issues, intergenerational differences and continued fear of persecution (George, Kliewer and Rajan 2015).

When refugees return to Sri Lanka they face many challenges of reintegration, from finding employment, rebuilding houses, re-establishing social networks to getting their documentation

issues solved. Although scientific literature about Sri Lankan refugees exists, there is a research gap regarding the investigation of returnees' perspectives after return. So far, research on Sri Lankan refugees mainly focused on persons staying in Indian exile (George, Kliewer and Rajan 2015, Giammatteo 2010, Valatheeswaran and Irudaya Rajan 2011), aspects arising from exile including diaspora and transnationalism (Balasunderam 2009, Walton 2015) or psychological effects of the war (Silove et. al 2002; Guribye, Mjeldheim Sandal, and Oppedal 2011). Government institutions and the UNHCR collect data regarding the number of returnees and their location in Sri Lanka but the quality of people's reintegration is less focused. It is unclear how returnees manage to cope with the various challenges of return and how they think about the process. This thesis fills this gap by looking at how Tamil returnees experience the reintegration process and how they manage to re-establish their lives. In Sri Lanka, as in other refugee cases, it is not possible to speak of a single genuine refugee experience since every person has encountered particular challenges related to their displacement. Factors such as length of exile, previous returns, divided families, personal tragedies, physical and psychological wounds of war are playing a significant role in people's ability to adapt to the life in Sri Lanka and overcome the challenges of return. Many children who were born in exile travel to the country for the first time which challenges the common notion of 'returning home'. Furthermore, the return of refugees itself entails more than just the physical move back into the place of origin but includes various facets of reintegration. The importance of a functioning reintegration is emphasised in the theoretical discourse as well as by practitioners (e.g. Long 2013) and is often related to the idea of a 'sustainable' return in which political, social, legal and economic conditions are existent in order to maintain life, livelihood and dignity (Macrae 1999, p. 3). In many countries which have faced conflict-induced displacement in the past, refugee-supporting reintegration programmes are being implemented. They mostly target the immediate needs of shelter and the provision of financial grants (Arowolo 2000, p. 60). But returning to one's former place of living after a long time in exile also means re-establishing livelihood, participating in community affairs, as well as maintaining old and creating new social networks (Cernea 1997, p. 1581). Furthermore, how returnees evaluate their situation after return is based on their expectations (Hammond 2014, p. 499). The motivation and individual aims for return may differ widely and influence people's perspectives especially when it comes to difficulties during the reintegration.

This research listens to the stories of Sri Lankan returnees and analyses how they experience and navigate their return. Thereby, this study contributes to the existing knowledge of refugee return by looking at the case of Sri Lanka – which has only partly been researched. Instead of focusing on the policy level, the thesis focuses on returnees' personal accounts. It is argued that the lived

experiences of the persons involved needs to be listened to in order to fully grasp the complexities of refugee return and reintegration. Only by focusing on these perspectives can returnees' navigation, decision-making, and coping strategies be understood.

In contrast to most other cases, the war in Sri Lanka has ended as a victor's peace with the government defeating the LTTE militarily. The ethnic composition of Sri Lankan society, its geographical distribution, the existing Sinhala-Tamil relations and the fact the LTTE has been fighting for Tamil separation result in some complexities which should be analysed more in detail. This explorative case study took place in the district of Vavuniya in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka. Using semi-structured interviews, the data was gathered from 13 returnee individuals and families which were visited at their homes in October 2016.

## **2. Aim and Research Question**

The aim of this thesis is to gain an understanding of the reintegration experience of Sri Lankan Tamils who have returned from exile in India to their country of origin. The study takes an explorative approach in trying to identify challenges and opportunities encountered by returning individuals through in-depth interviews in which respondents are able to share their views, experiences, hopes and disappointments about their return process. In order to get a holistic understanding of refugees' experiences, throughout the interviews the respondents were given the necessary space to decide what has been important for them. Although the refugee situation in the camps in India has been investigated by researchers, there are hardly any articles on post-war return and reintegration in Sri Lanka. This study wants to contribute filling this research gap.

The research is guided by the following question:

*How do Tamil returnees experience and navigate the reintegration process?*

During the research three sub questions emerged that help answering the main research question:

1. What are the concerns and challenges returnees face after resettling in Sri Lanka?
2. Which strategies do returnees employ to further their reintegration?
3. In which ways do expectations and reasons for return influence returnees' assessment of their situation?

This research wants to contribute to the refugee discourse by stressing both the importance of individuals' perceptions and understandings of return and investigate what factors are influencing their ideas and feelings. Related to Sylvester's claim that war can only be understood by looking at the perspectives of the war-affected (Sylvester 2013, p. 1), I argue that understanding returnees'

experiences is essential for understanding reintegration. International NGOs and UN agencies tend to operate on a more abstract level, based on numbers, laws and categories instead of perceptions and feelings of returnees themselves. However, refugee return is not a linear process and is shaped by an individual's lived experiences and subjective realities.

This thesis adopts Hammond's advice that in order to establish a feasible approach to analysing reintegration, "a firm understanding of the conditions in the areas of return, the needs and expectations of returnees, and the prospects for peace and development in the area of return" needs to be taken into account (Hammond 2014, p. 499). For the last nine months I have been living in the country and continuously learned about returnees and the challenges they encounter. Through my own journeys to the north and discussions with practitioners I was able to learn about the legal, political, economic and social dimensions which returnees face. These insights will complement the empirical material gathered through the interviews.

## **2.1 Relevance for Global Studies**

According to UNHCR figures there are currently 65.3 million displaced persons worldwide – the highest number since the end of World War II. Of them, 21.3 million are considered refugees under the Geneva convention and had to leave their home countries due to conflict (UNHCR 2016). Increased globalisation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has altered the dynamics of war but also of conflict resolution. Through the creation of the United Nations in 1945 and the subsequent drafting of humanitarian charters and refugee institutions an international refugee regime came into existence, which together with governments and NGOs, is coordinating relief operations and shaping the idea of durable solutions to forced migration. Currently post-war voluntary repatriation is seen as preferred way to deal with refugees and a profound understanding of the reintegration process is necessary to enable a swift and effective return experience.

Analysing refugee return can be done from various perspectives. Due to global studies' multidisciplinary it allows researchers to make use of various methods and approaches. This thesis is using a qualitative approach to investigate refugee return and touches upon issues of decision making, re-establishment of livelihood and social integration. There are already a number of books (see for example Black and Koser 1999) and research papers concerning return movements in countries like Mozambique (Koser 1997, Juergensen 2002), East Timor (Dolan and Large 2004), Liberia (Omata 2012, Hardgrove 2009), Eritrea (Bascom 2005), Burundi (Fransen and Kuschminder 2012, Hovil 2012), Iraq (Iaria 2014), and Croatia (Koska 2008). This thesis wants to share some insight into the Sri Lankan case and contribute to the knowledge about reintegration. Barbara Harrell-Bond

(1989, p. 42) has stressed the importance of research on repatriation from people other than “armchair academics” who use policy documents and agency language. This thesis is therefore highly relevant to the field of global studies and investigates refugee return by grasping the experience of returnees in order to understand the dynamics of the process.

### **3. Background of the Case**

The Sri Lankan civil war lasted nearly three decades from 1983 to 2009. It was primarily fought between the government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the northern and eastern parts of the country. The conflict can be categorised as a separatist struggle as the LTTE was aiming for an independent Tamil state in Sri Lanka. The conflict was characterised by periods of intense violence and forced disappearances by the government as well as guerrilla tactics, forced recruitment and suicide bombings by the LTTE (Uppsala Conflict Data Program 2016). The majority of the displaced population stayed in Sri Lanka and many have spent time in refugee or detention camps (Saparamadu and Lall 2014, p. 2). A large number also fled by boat over the Palk Strait to neighbouring India and at the end of the war different sources estimated the number of refugees based in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu at around 125,000 (Giammatteo 2010, p. 52). Between 1987 and 1990 an Indian Peace Keeping Force was deployed to the Northern Province but soon got involved in clashes with the LTTE. Once the force withdrew to India heavy fighting continued between the government and the LTTE (Uppsala Conflict Data Program 2016). Hence, many refugees fled in the early 1990s (including 10 out of 13 respondents from this study) due to intense violence and spent more than 20 years in exile. Others were displaced multiple times as they assessed periods of ceasefire as conducive for return but later had to flee again.

In the period from 2009 to 2016 around 10,000 refugees have returned from India to Sri Lanka (OfERR 2016). The national policy of Sri Lanka is aiming at facilitating the return of all refugees, but NGOs are criticising the difficult administrative process of applying for papers in India which can take more than a year and the constraints on the return travel (there is currently no ferry service and returnees are restricted to 30kg per person when taking a plane to Sri Lanka). There are still more than 65,000 refugees accommodated in 107 government-run camps in the state of Tamil Nadu of which according to Act for Peace (2014) around 40% have expressed the wish to return. The camp inhabitants are supplied with dry rations and electricity but lack formal employment opportunities as they are restricted from taking up certain jobs, especially in the government sector. Many are working in painting and construction sectors or as day labourers. It is estimated that of the 24,000

children who have been born in the camps around 15,000 are not yet registered with the Sri Lankan Deputy High Commission in Chennai and are formally considered 'stateless' (OfERR 2015). Legally Sri Lankan refugees are facing many restrictions regarding freedom of movement and access to services. For journeys outside the camp inhabitants may have to apply for special permits from the security apparatus.

When exploring returnee's reintegration experience one needs to understand the nature of exile. The Tamil-speaking population in Sri Lanka stands at around 5 million which constitutes 25% of the island's population. Of them, 3.1 Million (15%) are ethnic Tamils while the rest of Tamil speakers belongs to the Moor/Muslim community (Department of Census and Statistics Sri Lanka 2012). Almost all refugees who fled to India resided in the state of Tamil Nadu where with more than 60 million speakers, Tamil is the dominant language (Census of India 2001). Although refugees happened to live within a Tamil society during their exile, there are several differences between Indian and Sri Lankan Tamil culture including language, caste, traditions or values. Sri Lankan Tamils rarely intermarry with Indian Tamils. All respondents in this study who have married during exile have done so with fellow refugees.

Another important aspect of the case is the nature of the victor's peace that ended the war. In fact, several attempts to negotiate a lasting peace agreement between the warring parties have failed and in the period from 2006-2009 the government forces started an offensive that finally led to the military defeat of the LTTE. In many other refugee return cases the armed conflicts have ended with peace treaties between the warring parties. As a consequence of the victor's peace refugees were able to return to Sri Lanka, but there is ongoing military presence in the northern parts and screening of returnees regarding their past involvement. During the resettlement of IDPs in the period from 2009 to 2012 Saparamadu and Lall (2014, p. 15-16) argue that the centralisation of power and top-down control in post-war Sri Lanka led to a lack of ownership for the local administration in the implementation of resettlement programmes. Furthermore, Sinhalese President Mahinda Rajapaksa did not pursue devolution of power but instead extended the central state apparatus in order "to acquire political legitimacy in a region that was previously subjected to an alternative state formation process" (ibid, p. 19). This and the increased military presence led to a "post war militarisation [...] that constitutes the logistics of occupation and humiliation of the defeated other" (Senanayake 2011 in Saparamadu and Lall 2014, p. 20). Using the military in reconciliation and nation building is a controversial undertaking which many Tamils reject. Many individuals who were interviewed in this research also argued that the government is not doing enough to facilitate refugee return and with its excessive bureaucracy hinders successful reintegration.

In Sri Lanka the government has created a Ministry of Resettlement which is responsible for the 'resettlement of IDPs in their original places of living with dignity' (Saparamadu and Lall 2014, p. 8). In cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Interior Ministry it is also commissioned with the facilitation of refugee return from India. Returnees can apply for a national identity card (NIC) which is often needed for wage employment and establishing one's identity in government offices. Most returnees are moving back to their places of origin in the northern and eastern parts of the country. After the war a lot of infrastructure has been rehabilitated and existing factories were able to continue production. However, being the least industrialised region of Sri Lanka, the economy of the Northern Province is based on small scale agriculture, trade and service (Central Bank of Sri Lanka 2015) and many returnees are unemployed. Moving to the capital Colombo or other agglomerations is not affordable as they are already struggling with higher costs of living.

#### **4. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework**

This chapter analyses the scientific debate about refugee return and reviews the key concepts relevant for this thesis. Given the explorative nature of the study the sense-making of the empirical material and the development of the theoretical framework happened as an iterative process, through which the relevant concepts for analysing the material were identified.

In the first part I introduce refugee return concepts by referring to the theoretical literature, policy documents, and the findings of other qualitative case studies. I discuss UNHCR's durable solution framework in order to show alternatives to refugee return and focus specifically on the idea of voluntary repatriation which is the basis of the Sri Lankan case. In the second part I scrutinise the concept of reintegration and its components. It encompasses the idea of sustainable return and includes the social, economic and political processes involved in the re-establishment of returnees' lives. In the third part, I discuss the concepts of experience and social navigation which form core concepts of the analysis.

##### **4.1 Voluntary Return as a Durable Solution**

After World War II the UN member states adopted several conventions and declarations related to refugee protection (e.g. the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees). Rights of refugees were strengthened and signatory countries were obliged to grant the right of asylum for certain persons seeking protection in their territory. As asylum is only a temporary measure and does not offer a long-term perspective, three durable solutions for refugees living in exile for an extended

period were developed: *voluntary repatriation* (the return of refugees to their country of origin), *local integration* (staying permanently in the country of exile and obtaining residency) and *third-country resettlement* (the move to another country which offers permanent residency) (UNHCR 2003). Of these three solutions, repatriation is often seen as most preferable, because of various reasons including lower costs compared to maintaining refugee services in exile, host country interest, as well as the idea that refugees have an aim to return home (Harrell-Bond 1989). This preference has not always been the case and Chimni (2004) argues that before the idea of voluntary repatriation became prioritised, resettlement programmes were more prominent, especially during the cold war. In contrast to local integration and third-country resettlement, repatriation can only be initiated when relatively stable conditions in the conflict regions have been attained. In this sense it is a solution applicable to post-conflict situations while the other two are often applied in protracted conflicts. However, refugees may start returning when they perceive the conditions to be conducive for return and this sometimes happens long before designated programmes or support mechanisms are set up (Lambo 2003, p. 79, Arowolo 2000, p. 65).

The institutional preference of voluntary return can be linked to what Malkki (1992, p. 27-33) calls the “pathologization of uprootedness in the national order of things”. In her view a dominant thought in the refugee discourse is the view that groups of people are closely connected to a particular territory which is a fundamental part of their identity and cultural belonging. Because of this underlying view, the notion of bringing people ‘back home’ is seen as the most natural approach. The return of refugees entails a variety of challenges and is more complex than commonly perceived. Black and Koser (1999, p. 5) criticise that policy makers often understand the physical return as “the logical end of the refugee cycle”. As mentioned above, in most repatriation cases it is perceived that peace – or rather the absence of violence – has been established and the situation is conducive for return, but Zetter (1988, p. 100 in Koska 2008) argues that the absence of the root causes of conflict alone does not provide a sufficient basis for sustainable return. Furthermore, some root causes for the civil war may still exist, e.g. disadvantages in education or lack of economic development. The end of violence is therefore not a sufficient factor and the sustainability of return is also based on favourable socio-political and economic indicators and an accepting receiving population (Mensah 2016, p. 308).

There is a wide range of administrative and organisational aspects to consider including reception, assistance, providing housing and livelihood as well as psychological care. Integrating the returnees into the health and education system also needs to be facilitated (Hammond 2014, p. 504). Therefore, we must understand return as a complex process converging with the concept of

reintegration, which is discussed below. Iaria (2014, p. 43) reminds us that return should not be understood only as a one-way physical movement but instead can result in returnees maintaining their social networks in both countries and make use of transnational ties when it comes to livelihood strategies and social support.

#### **4.2 Reintegration**

Reintegration is a concept describing the re-establishment of people's lives after return to their country of origin. This applies to refugees who return from exile but also migrant workers who return after a long stay abroad. It is related to the concept of *integration*, sharing some – but not all – of its dynamics. From practitioner and academic literature, we can find many definitions of reintegration. Most authors would agree with Macrae's definition equating the term with "the achievement of a sustainable return – in other words the ability of returning refugees to secure the political, economic, legal and social conditions needed to maintain life, livelihood and dignity" (Macrae 1999, p. 3). It is a non-linear multidimensional process which is unique in every case. Although we can identify similarities between return cases, the economic, social, legal and political factors differ as does the historical context. The UNHCR uses the term reintegration as part of its 4R-framework. Implementation of its relief programmes and support mechanisms are based on the view that repatriation, reintegration, rehabilitation and reconstruction must be the core for sustainable post-conflict stabilisation with a refugee context (Jallow, Malik and Heinbecker 2004, p. ONE-8). Although there is a large number of policy papers and programme evaluations this literature review will focus more on theoretical insights and case studies. In the following I want to introduce the relevance of some individual factors like the duration and the conditions of exile, age, gender and social networks (Rogge 1994 in Fransen and Kuschminder 2012, p. 5), before discussing the economic, social, legal and political dimensions of reintegration.

In the Sri Lankan and many other cases, a major part of the refugees spent more than two decades abroad. Researchers like Barbara Harrell-Bond (1989, p. 42) argue that the longer refugees reside away from their country of origin, the more challenging a return will usually be. Many Tamil refugees fled in the early 1990s and only some of them have returned to this day. Thousands of children were born in the camps and have never been to Sri Lanka before. Especially for this younger generation which grew up in the host society the notion of 'returning home' is quite problematic (Long 2013, p. 183). A recent study investigating Tamil refugees in India and their willingness to return to Sri Lanka has found out that there are major intergenerational tensions. Members of the older generation, which hold the decision-making power in the Tamil family, want to go back while the younger

generation has only little or no memory of the country and is more hesitant to return (George, Kliewer and Rajan 2015, p. 11-12).

For persons who do return there are numerous challenges they are likely to encounter. It is important to understand reintegration as a long-term process since re-establishing economic livelihoods, political participation, and social networks can only be achieved over time. It is also criticised that relief organisations often limit their support to one or two-year programmes which is seen as too short-sighted (Hammond 2014, p. 506-508). Furthermore, sometimes returnees only get to know about the support possibilities once they do not qualify anymore. Research shows, that returnees who have always considered their exile as being temporary, often kept close personal contacts with family members and friends in the country of origin and could rely on broader social support networks upon return (Omata 2012, p. 278; Carr 2014, p. 148-49).

#### *Economic Dimension*

One of the main challenges of return is the re-establishment of livelihoods. After more than 20 years abroad the first difficulties after return may revolve around claiming old property and rebuilding the house. If the returnees use agriculture for income generation it can take months or years until the first harvest can be collected. During this time support mechanisms are essential and if organisations do not provide food and financial grants, family support becomes vital.

In order to analyse the importance of access to income-generating activities we have to understand the concept of sustainable livelihood which is not only relevant for refugee return. Chambers and Conway (1991, p. 6) suggest to define it as comprising “capabilities, assets (stores, resources, claims and access) and activities required for a means of living” and argue that its sustainability is dependent on the ability to “cope with and recover from stress and shocks, maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets, and provide sustainable livelihood opportunities for the next generation”. It is a concept offering a holistic perspective on the complexities of rural development (Knudsen 2006, p. 90). People’s livelihood strategies are often dependent on several factors. If returnees have for example learned new skills or finished higher education in exile it can help finding a job if the labour market in the region of origin is compatible. A successful transfer of skills is not only beneficial for the individual, but can influence the local economy as experience, innovation and economic capital is shared. Therefore, one of the challenges of reintegration programmes is to preserve these gains which may lead to a socially transformative process (Jallow, Malik and Heinbecker 2004, p. ONE-5). Omata’s (2012, p. 272) study of Liberian refugees returning from Ghana argues that “the transferability of livelihood strategies from exile and access to meaningful networks in Liberia were key determinants in differentiating the degrees of returnees’ economic integration.”

Having sufficient economic capital available is another factor which can prove important as wealthy and well-educated individuals find it easier to reintegrate (Carr 2014, p. 146-47). Houte and Koning (2008, p. 38) have found that persons who have enjoyed pre-flight education, work experience and familiarity with the environment have an easier time adapting upon return. In the case of Sri Lanka this would mostly refer to persons above 40 years of age as the majority of refugees left the country in the 1990s. Some argue that we also need to analyse the absorptive capacity of the return region as the labour market may not offer many opportunities for the newly arrived (Arowolo 2000, p. 68). The ease of economic reintegration is also based on the area of relocation. In war-torn countries the destruction of infrastructure and livelihood assets influences decision of where to return to. In the case of Liberia, Omata (2012) argues that many returnees settled in the capital Monrovia, as personal property and previous village community structures were destroyed. Furthermore, larger agglomerations provide more diversified employment for skills which refugees may have learned during exile.

From the literature we can assess the importance of the economic aspects of reintegration. However, it is still unclear how the different dimensions are interrelated and influence each other as favourable political and social condition can improve access to livelihoods.

### *Social Dimension*

Social components of reintegration cover the fields of family, community relations, health, education and religious affairs. There are also cultural factors which need to be considered, including language, norms and values, traditions, clothing, music or food (Cassarino 2004). Researchers have found that “the attitude of the local community towards returnees has a great impact on returnees’ ability to reintegrate” (Fransen and Kuschminder 2012, p. 4). It is not always possible to return to one’s hometown as the places may still be insecure, land is claimed by the military or the sources of livelihood have been destroyed. If returnees are not able to settle in their home region, many social contacts cannot be recovered and as a newcomer to a community trust relationships and social ties with other members need to be built from scratch (Eastmond and Ojendal 1999 in Fransen and Kuschminder 2012, p. 4). In the case of Eritrean refugees returning from Sudan, Bascom (2005, p. 171) also found that “the social networks derived in exile were a good deal stronger than those derived in the first eight years after return”. This finding indicates how difficult it is to establish social ties as an outsider in a new community.

Regarding cultural factors of reintegration, the Sri Lankan refugee case is not typical. As discussed in the background chapter the refugees have lived for many years in a Tamil dominated Indian state

where many linguistic and religious features are not exactly the same, but quite similar. The education system was based on Tamil and English as mediums of instruction – the same as in northern Sri Lanka. In a different case, Fransen and Kuschminder (2012, p. 13-19) have found that refugees returning to Burundi from their exile in Tanzania were struggling with integrating into the French/Kirundi education system after growing up in an English/Swahili school. Even though the returnee children were better educated and ahead of their compatriots, the absence of language skills was a big problem.

Another social aspect of reintegration are the living conditions. Many Sri Lankan refugees were accommodated in densely populated refugee camps and are now confronted with rural settings. Arowolo (2000, p. 70) argues that returnees have to relearn the old ways of life, for example agriculture or cattle raising. Koska (1999, p. 229) on the other hand contends that we should not understand return only as a reintegration into traditional ways of life, but rather as “the beginning of a new chapter of adaptation to a set of completely new circumstances”.

#### *Political and Legal Dimension*

Reintegration also entails a return into a political community. According to international conventions, refugees who decide to go back to their country of origin should also enjoy the same rights as every other citizen. Often documentation needs to be provided since passports, birth certificates, identity cards or education certificates may be either destroyed or outdated. Political and legal equality are essential pillars for economic and social reintegration. Fransen and Kuschminder (2012, p.5) understand it as the establishment of citizenship rights (right to free speech, right to vote, etc.) and access to the judicial processes. However, in many autocracies these citizenship rights were not accessible in the first place.

#### **4.3 Experience**

Sylvester (2013, p. 2-4) argues that “war cannot be fully apprehended unless it is studied up from people’s physical, emotional, and social experiences” instead of being assessed only through the eyes of major political actors. The same argument can be extended to studying reintegration. The inclusion of first-hand actor’s perspectives leads to a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomena as well as challenges dominant narratives which so far silenced the people’s individual experiences.

The focus on experience as a source of knowledge has its roots in standpoint theory – a strand of feminist thought. It argues that individual perspectives are being shaped by a person’s experience of daily life and claims that what one knows is influenced by one’s position in society (Smith 1997, p. 392-398). Thereby, the notions of objective truth and knowledge are contested. Instead, truth is understood as “an experience in which the knower is a constitutive element of the knowledge attained” (Hekman 1983, p. 208). Applying a concept of standpoint theory allows to focus on the processes by which meanings regarding reintegration are created, negotiated and adapted by the returnees. Moreover, for Harding (2004, p. 2) using qualitative data from relevant social actors can be “a way of empowering oppressed groups, of valuing their experiences, and of pointing toward a way to develop an ‘oppositional consciousness’”.

#### **4.4. Agency and Social Navigation**

Many international aid agencies underestimate the perceptions and actions of displaced populations when designing relief programmes. Huysmans et al. (2006 in South and Jolliffe 2015, p. 218) criticise that instead of strengthening the resilience and coping strategies of the effected individuals, development organisations mostly catalogue abuses and insecurities and tailor their projects in regard to these findings.

Following the critique, this study puts a focus on the returnees’ agency by analysing how they navigate their reintegration process. By recognising the structure-agency dilemma this research stresses the importance of a “reciprocal relationship where neither structure nor action can exist independently” (Giddens 1984, p. 25). Human agency and social structure are intertwined concepts, as “[s]ocial structures are represented in the choices agents make [...], while at the same time agents shape and reshape social structures” (Hardcastle et al. 2005, p. 224). This means that social structures enable and constrain human actions, while actions also reproduce the existing structures.

Having this in mind I will now discuss the concept of social navigation and its implication for the analysis. It is a useful approach for analysing rapid social change, granting alternative perspectives on human action at the intersection between agency and social forces (Vigh 2009, p. 420). It allows us to comprehend returnees not only as passive, receiving objects, but as self-conscious active subjects who assess and evaluate their environment and adapt their actions accordingly. Furthermore, the concept offers a third dimension to the dominant understanding of movement and mobility. “Where we normally look either at the way social formations move and change over time, or the way agents move within social formations, navigation allows us to see the intersection – or rather interactivity (cf. Jensen, 1998) – between the two” (ibid 2009, p. 420). In this way, when analysing coping

strategies of returnees, the study not only looks on how people act, but how they interact with their environment in order to overcome difficulties and access services.

## **5. Methodology**

For investigating the complex social dynamics entailed in refugee return I chose a qualitative case study design. According to Yin (2003, p. 1) it is a useful approach when attempting to gain a deeper understanding of contemporary phenomena with a real-life context. Yin's understanding of knowledge gathered in case studies is based on a constructivist perspective built upon the social construction of reality. It is founded on an interpretivist epistemology which emphasises the *understanding* of human behaviour instead of the positivist ideas of *explaining* (Bryman 2012, p. 28). Truth is seen as being relative and dependent on one's perspective. By interviewing informants, the researcher therefore gets a better view of people's experiences and which allows them to comprehend their actions (Baxter and Jack 2008, p. 545). In the following I explain my data collection methods, the sampling, refer to the ethical and procedural challenges encountered, and explain the approach of thematic analysis.

### **5.1 Research Methods**

Aimed at gaining insights about returnees' reintegration experience I chose to conduct a case study using qualitative methods. I decided to gather the data for this study through semi-structured interviews, which allowed me to introduce the research topic and at the same time to be flexible enough for the respondent to influence the direction of the interview. By using broad open-ended questions, I gave the interviewees sufficient leeway to guide me to issues that they felt are important (Bryman 2012, p. 472).

I designed the interview guide being informed by the theoretical literature and other case studies on refugee return, talks with practitioners from the Organisation for Eelam Refugees Rehabilitation (OfERR), my own experiences during my time in Sri Lanka and a brief field visit in August 2016. The first part of the interview guide aims at establishing rapport and accessing some basic information including origin, family history, refugee life in India and the return decision. The second part explores the returnee's experience upon return and covers different aspects retrieved from the literature review (for example livelihood strategies and social integration). It also allows the respondents to discuss their hopes and ideas about the future. When respondents led the discussion towards different issues they were concerned about, I gave them the necessary space to explain their feelings and views.

I recorded most of the interviews after having obtained informed consent and having informed the interviewees about the confidentiality of the conversation. The interviews were conducted in Tamil using a translator. Recording allowed my translator to transcribe the audio files into written form which was helpful for the thematic analysis. Like Ely (1991, p. 82) I had the feeling that after a few minutes, people felt unaware of the tape recorder and although I explained that the taping can be stopped at any time, no respondent had requested it. However, three interviews were not recorded – two respondents felt uncomfortable and in one instance recording was not feasible due to rain.

## **5.2 Sampling**

In order to get in contact with returnees I relied on support by OfERR. I reflect on the implication of this cooperation in a separate chapter (5.4). At first, I wanted to do the sampling independently. However, I quickly realised that without the organisation's returnee register it was very difficult to do an informed sampling. Two female employees from OfERR's Vavuniya office supported me in looking through the (Tamil language) register for possible candidates and called them to organise the interviews.

As reintegration experiences are dependent on several factors I chose to use quota sampling and select respondents based on two criteria – length in exile and time of return. In the literature the length of exile is identified as an important variable in reintegration analysis. The longer refugees have lived abroad the more difficult a return would be (Harrell-Bond 1989, p. 42). On the other hand, Oberai (in Arowolo 2000, p. 63) argues that the minimum time for interviewing returnees after return should be three months in order to gain meaningful insight into the dynamics of reintegration. However, during the interviews several persons were usually present hence, different lengths of exile and return dates were represented. Through the fact that respondents returned at different times between 2010 and 2016 I was able to grasp the *process* of reintegration as returnees who came back recently expressed different experiences than returnees who were able to settle down for several years.

This research is based on the data compiled from 13 interviews. It is difficult to name the exact number of respondents as usually additional family members were around and added information or their personal views. I decided to allow this to happen as I didn't want to put any restrictions. I assessed the gender ratio to be about equal and women also openly shared their views. Most respondents were aged between 30 and 50 years, but I also talked to one young person in his 20s as well as two elderly men. About nine interviewees left in the early 1990s and returned during the past

years staying more than two decades abroad. The four other respondents spend ten or less years in exile.

Most of the interview partners have been to OfERR's Vavuniya office in order to ask for support or get information about support mechanisms. The two staff members that helped me in organising the interviews knew some of the respondents personally. This connection may have provided a basis for a trust relationship between me and the interviewees. I was not considered a total stranger but I also made clear that I am not working for the organisation and am doing an independent scientific study. After conducting the 13 interviews, reviewing my notes and rethinking about the many talks I had with practitioners I felt that the data I gathered allowed me to represent and analyse the experiences of returnees regarding reintegration. Many responses were repeated by several interviewees and although the individual stories differed there was less new insights. I turned over the audio recordings to my translator who started working on turning the files into a written transcript. In a larger study it would have been interesting to enlarge the number of respondents and include more criteria, for example urban and rural or educated and less educated returnees. However, for the scope of this study I decided to limit the number of interviews. Furthermore, it is difficult to assess how well the selected respondents were representative for the district. However, I think that many of the findings in this thesis could also have been analysed with a different sample.

### **5.3 Location**

The location for this case study was Vavuniya District in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka. This was decided after consultation with an OfERR staff member and a Danish development worker who had a good understanding of the field. In contrast to some other districts this kind of research would have been a much more sensitive topic due to the history of the war. Vavuniya is located next to the old front line where many people were displaced and is now one of the areas where many refugees return to. Two months before data collection I was able to visit OfERR's Vavuniya office for one week and get a better insight into refugee returns and the organisation's interventions. As I got a better understanding of the area and its characteristics I decided to choose the district as location for the case study.

The district has 171,512 inhabitants and a majority Tamil population (Department of Census and Statistics Sri Lanka 2012). Except for the district capital Vavuniya it is a very rural area with a large agricultural sector. Like in many places in the North and East of the country there is a lack of employment opportunities and only a few bigger companies are based there. During most parts of the war the frontline between LTTE and government-controlled areas was located a few kilometres

north of Vavuniya town and as the last major settlement before the LTTE regions the town became a commercial centre and a transport hub, channelling all traffic to the North. The area has experience much violence and suffered from the use of landmines which are still being cleared (Landmine & Cluster Munition Monitor 2015).

The government introduced a programme in which landless returnees can apply for land (see UNHCR 2015, p. 16). Returnees may get assigned overgrown bushland that they have to clear or a housing scheme in areas where several dozen houses were constructed. One of the informants I spoke to lived in such a land allocation scheme but most lived either on their reclaimed property or in rented houses while waiting to get their allocated land. All respondents lived in the immediate area (up to 20km) of the district centre.

#### **5.4 Research Ethics**

Conducting research with vulnerable populations requires careful preparation and continuous reflections during the field work. There are many aspects to think of including “power, consent and community representation; confidentiality; trust and mistrust; harms, risks and benefits; autonomy and agency; cultural difference; gender; human rights and social justice; and in the worst cases, oppression and exploitation” (Mackenzie, McDowell and Pittaway 2007, p. 300). Although returnees have lost the status of a ‘refugee’ many are still encountering difficulties related to their displacement experience. Therefore, I prepared myself thoroughly for the encounters through incorporating research suggestions from similar studies. In the following I am referring to some of those challenges and explain how I designed the research in an ethical way and used appropriate measures to cope with some of the arising issues.

#### *OfERR Affiliation*

Talking about the civil war is a sensitive issue in Sri Lanka. Structural problems that led to the outbreak of war are not yet resolved and there are still contested narratives about who was responsible for the violence. Before 2015 the northern parts were off-limits for foreigners and research about Tamil returnees would either not have been possible or very difficult. However, the new government which gained power in January 2015 has changed this policy and reduced restrictions. Once I arrived in the country, I contacted several local organisations working with returnees including OfERR, the Organisation for Eelam Refugees Rehabilitation. The organisation’s mission is to empower and uplift vulnerable and disadvantaged people in Sri Lanka and supports refugee reintegration of Tamil returnees. OfERR has two main branches: OfERR Ceylon and OfERR

India. In India the organisation is very active in the refugee camps and facilitates different programmes from small scale entrepreneurship to vocational training. In Sri Lanka they are working in the Northern Province and Eastern Province where they focus on supporting returnees in documentation or access to livelihood opportunities and conduct protection trainings. Visiting their offices and volunteering there allowed me to learn more about the challenges returnees encounter and the programmes that are set up to improve the situation of the individuals. In this way it has also functioned as a gate-keeper for me. In a first short field visit in August 2016 in Vavuniya District I was able to talk to returnees through an OfERR translator. I quickly identified the implications of being accompanied by someone from the organisation when asking about people's experiences. Most persons we visited have in one way or another benefited from OfERR's support and may have responded positively as a staff member was translating from me. During the main data gathering I therefore organised an independent translator to take a more neutral perspective. However, for getting access to returnees and the quota sampling I still had to use OfERR's database and the affiliation with them also eased the official processes needed for the study. The organisation does not get returnee information directly from the UNHCR or government agencies, but instead collects the personal information from returnees visiting its offices. This of course cannot include all persons who returned to one area, but is still the best list I could access. Names and return dates are noted as well as the issue of why that person has come to ask for support. In this way, all informants I talked to have registered with OfERR but besides counselling they did not get any financial or material support.

### *Power Relations and Role of Researcher*

Regarding the power relations between interviewer and interviewee I needed to reflect on my position as researcher. As an educated person from Europe I was talking to very vulnerable people that have personal, sometimes traumatic displacement experiences. This asymmetry has important implications and demands ethical reflexivity (Block et al. 2013, p. 71). DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006, p. 317) stress that social roles shape the interview process and the researcher has to give thought and reflect on their position, "acknowledging power differentials between them and integrating reciprocity into the creation of knowledge".

After arriving at a returnee's home I did not commence with the interview right away but showed interest for their family members, agricultural work and housing. In this way me and the interviewees established some rapport and I felt that they were happy to explain things or show me around. After the interviews I always spoke to my translator and discussed the case or asked him certain questions

regarding marriage, culture or caste issues which he could grasp more easily during the interviews. As a non-Tamil with no more than basic knowledge about Tamil history and culture, the translator helped me to understand and reflect on some cultural aspects. This was valuable contextual knowledge to make sense of the data.

Being an outsider has several limitations, but also allows for space that an 'insider' has difficulty to enter. Dwyer and Buckle (2009, p. 54) do criticise the dichotomy of insider versus outsider and argue that although one might not share ethnic group or language, other factors like age, common experiences and interests can reduce invisible barriers and facilitate access and reduce the power imbalance. I felt that talking about my own experiences growing crops, talking with younger respondents about sports or education issues helped reduce the limits attached to being perceived as outsider.

Although refugee return in Sri Lanka is a politically sensitive topic I felt that returnees were able to talk openly about their experiences. Having talked to practitioners in the field and analysing the current situation myself I felt that their participation in the research did not result in any negative consequences for them. It is still difficult to assess to what extent respondents agreed to be interviewed based on me being a foreigner.

### *Informed Consent*

Another challenge is the notion of informed consent. In many studies, including qualitative research, informed consent papers are used. Ellis et. al. (2007: p. 467-469) have argued that this process can carry along some problems, especially when working in developing countries, as signing a voluntary consent document involves western-value ideas of autonomy and self-determination which may not always be applicable in the field. Other authors suggest the use of iterative models of consent which view consent more as an ongoing negotiation between researcher and informant (Mackenzie, McDowell and Pittaway 2007, p. 307). When getting in contact with returnees I took great care to explain my research aim and informed them about confidentiality and anonymity in the written thesis. I also introduced the respondents to the interview format and their ability to refuse to answer questions or stop the interview at any time they want. All except for two respondents accepted to be recorded.

### *Empathy and Positionality in Refugee Research*

As I am researching and interviewing formerly displaced people, further factors need to be considered. Maggio and Westcott (2014, p. 213-223) suggest that empathy with refugee informants

needs to be reflected upon. Most persons I talked to were rather poor and I heard several times that they suffered from many hardships. Some didn't know what they would eat for lunch or had their crops destroyed by cows. In these situations, one feels empathy for the respondents and offers some good words in order to comfort them. After the interviews were done I was sometimes able to share my knowledge regarding possible support programmes and government schemes which can be accessed in order to help respondents in their situations. If the case, this was deliberately done at the end in order not to influence respondent's answers.

There is also a large debate about positionality in research and if the study can influence informants' situation in a positive way (see Block et al. 2013, p. 73). I believe that this thesis can lead to a better understanding of the important factors of reintegration from returnees' perspectives. By asking what they feel are the most important things to be provided for newly arrived returnees and my respondents talked lengthily about this. They were able to use their own experience to identify the areas which were most important for them and those responses could inform organisations active in the field to strengthen certain services.

### *Translation-Related Issues*

I relied on the use of a translator as most Tamil returnees were not able or felt uncomfortable to communicate in English. I was able to get into contact with Kishanth Sri, a young Tamil man who graduated from an English-medium school and was able to accompany me during the research. The fact that respondents could speak in their mother tongue also enabled them to explain their opinions in more detail. There is always some data lost during translation, but before I started with the interviews I briefed the translator about the importance of his work and the relevance of every sentence. It was very helpful that my translator came from Vavuniya himself as otherwise many locations were hard to find. He was not affiliated with any local organisation and thereby preserved the relatively neutral setting.

Conducting the interviews, I identified an unknown benefit of using a translator. During the time when I listened to the translation from Kishanth the respondents had the time to think again and often added some more ideas about a topic after the translation was done. In this sense I felt that these short breaks actually proved to be somewhat productive.

## **5.5 Delimitations**

This thesis does not aim at gaining representative insight into how well Sri Lankan Tamil returnees are reintegrated. This approach is far beyond the scope of this thesis and would be very challenging if

we consider the difficulties of reintegration measurement. While aiming at listening to individual stories the research was not based on narrative interviews but rather on semi-structured interviews. I felt that this technique was more flexible and allowed me to ask more specific questions. Even though this limits the participants' ability to freely choose which topics to address, it allowed a better steering of the conversation as I had to use a translator.

I have been talking to people living in Vavuniya District of Sri Lanka's Northern Province and the findings I gathered may have been different if research were to be conducted in other districts. According to talks with NGOs the situation of returnees may be more difficult in other areas, for example Mullaitivu or Killinochchi districts, due to the economic situation, military occupation or lack of infrastructure. As mentioned in the introduction, the interviewees have encountered different reintegration challenges and this thesis does not give the impression that there is a single genuine Tamil reintegration experience as multiple realities and experiences exist. As a foreigner talking to returnees about personal and sometimes intimate topics, some information may have not been shared with me. I tried to establish rapport and ensured confidentiality of the information, but it can be assumed that some very personal experiences may have been withheld.

## **5.6 Model of Analysis**

The findings of this study are analysed using thematic analysis. It is a poorly demarcated, yet widely used qualitative method of analysis which "through its theoretical freedom [...] provides a flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of data" (Braun and Clarke 2006, p. 77-78). The method is based on the identification of recurring patterns (or themes) in the data which are relevant to answer the research question. The coding process includes capturing interesting and important aspects in the respondents' answers by reading the material thoroughly. The themes in this analysis were not mentioned specifically in the data but rather constructed through a process of combining certain recurring codes (Bryman 2012, p. 580). After accessing the written translations, I thoroughly engaged myself with the data and marked answers and phrases which were surprising, interesting or related to concepts I have read in the literature. After this process I listed all the tags and tried to categorise them into larger themes. The compiling resulted in seven to eight themes which I then merged into the three main themes that are being analysed in the next chapter.

## 6. Findings and Analysis

In this chapter I am discussing the findings of the field work which are relevant to answer the research question of how returnees experience and navigate the reintegration process. The sense-making of the data has been an iterative process resulting in the identification of three major themes:

1. return decision making and feeling of belonging,
2. independence and self-reliance, and
3. frustration and disappointment.

Although the respondents had very different life stories and experiences, I found that their answers could often be categorised into one of these themes. In the following I analyse how reintegration is experienced and shaped by relating respondents' testimonies to previous refugee return literature and its relevant concepts.

### 6.1 Return Decision Making and Feeling of Belonging

The experiences of flight and exile as well as the question of why refugees return is important for analysing reintegration (Koska 2008, p. 202-203). The reasons for return describe people's motivation and directly influences expectations regarding the country of return. If returnees are not aware of the situation in the home country, they may be exposed to disappointments as life satisfaction is dependent on the expectations.

The decision to return is far from straightforward and refugees use various ways to assess the situation in their home country including the contact with friends and family at home or through the media. When displacement has been prolonged, refugees may have established themselves in the country of asylum and are generally less likely to return (Hammond 2014, p. 502). In the Sri Lankan case many refugees spent over 20 years abroad and created close social relationships, got accustomed to life in the camps or secured employment which they did not want to give up.

The respondents from this study stated various reasons for return – the most prominent being family reunion. When fleeing to India, many have left parents, siblings or other family members behind. Respondent 1 left Vavuniya in 2006 with her husband and two children. They spent ten years in exile and when asked about their return decision she said:

*“Our parents are here in Sri Lanka. My husbands' sibling is here. He had nobody there [in India]. So he was always saying that we have to go back.”*

Others stated that they wanted to take care of sick family members or re-join parents who were alone. Returning because of family-related issues seems to be a very important factor when taking the decision to come back. However, some of the respondents also left family members in India when they returned. Respondent 2 said that in order to take care of his sick mother he left his two daughters in India. They are married to other Sri Lankan refugees, their children are going to school and they do not want to return as it will disturb the children's education. Finishing school or higher studies in India often plays a role in the timing of return as parents want their children to graduate before leaving for Sri Lanka.

Another return reason is based upon the restrictions on the life as a refugee. Some respondents argued that due to the refugee status they lack good employment opportunities and have only limited freedoms. To understand this argument one must remember that Sri Lankan refugees are carrying special identity documents, experience restrictions in freedom of movement (permissions to leave the camps are required), have no access to government jobs and limited abilities to buy property or get vehicle licences. Respondent 6 stated:

*"In India we were refugees. But Sri Lanka is my country. I have citizenship here. But in India there are no documents. I am only a refugee. When I go to a job, they treat me as a refugee."*

His father added:

*"I can't buy a bike because I am refugee. I can't buy land because I am refugee. I am not an Indian citizen. I can't get a bike license or anything else."*

After the conflict ended the family has taken the opportunity to return and although they were struggling to get food and shelter, they argued that they do not want the next generation to grow up as refugees.

More return factors mentioned included accessing government pensions (for former state employees), securing land (sometimes overgrown and left-alone land is being redistributed) or simply a feeling of belonging to Sri Lanka. There may be diverging views within families as two female respondents indicated that their husband was the decisive person in the decision-making. Often young persons who were born in India are lacking proper documentation since children who were not registered at the Sri Lankan High Commission are officially stateless (India does not allow access to citizenship). During the interview with respondent 11 and another background conversation it became clear that young returnees who are coming back alone are sometimes aiming at getting their documentation in order (converting birth certificates, applying for citizenship and getting a passport – a process which can take more than a year), but have no plans to settle permanently in Sri Lanka.

They may want to go abroad for work, improve their education or simply return to India not being a refugee.

Pondering the different pull and push factors is essential in deciding about staying or returning. Often refugees lack the information of how the situation in Sri Lanka has developed. During exile most of the respondents have kept contact with relatives and neighbours in Sri Lanka to get first hand descriptions. It is not uncommon that single family members return alone and prepare the ground for others to follow. In two cases male family members returned to Sri Lanka, assessed the state of the property and communicated the challenges and the characteristics of daily life in Vavuniya. Once some form of shelter was prepared, the rest of the family followed and therefore some of the initial difficulties were reduced. Respondent 10 returned in 2012 with her husband, but after giving birth she decided to go back to India as sanitary facilities in their little shack were deemed inadequate for the baby. After her son got older and the shelter was improved she finally returned to her husband permanently in 2014.

Of all the aspects influencing the return decision security concerns are of paramount importance (Carr 2014, p. 149-50). All of the respondents felt that Sri Lanka was generally safe, although some were initially taking precautions and did not go out at the night or avoided travel to more militarised districts like Mullaitivu or Killinochchi.

Secure conditions alone do not necessarily lead to refugee return. One theme that emerged from the data is the concept of 'home' and reference to an idea of belonging. When discussing return decision making and returnees' plans and hopes for the future, many respondents have used phrases indicating a sense of connection to a *patria*. This term is borrowed from Long's (2012, p. 372) conceptualisation of homecoming and what it means for refugees. She identifies two dimensions of *patria*: a physical location or 'home' and a collective identity or 'belonging'. Her work is influenced by Warner's publications which claim that voluntary repatriation is more than just the return to one's country of origin but a return to a home and a community (Warner 1994, p. 161). The preference of voluntary repatriation discussed in chapter 4 has often been justified from an organisational perspective, while the investigation of what 'returning home' means for refugees is less researched.

Warner (1994, p. 162) argues that *belonging* refers to a refugee's association with those who are similar, which he understands as constituting a homogenous group. But what are the groups, Sri Lankan Tamil refugees identify with? I found that the Tamil returnees I interviewed were strongly identifying as *Sri Lankans* or *Sri Lankan Tamils*. In exile in Tamil Nadu they were living in a Tamil society, but also constantly reminded of their difference from Indian Tamils through special accommodation in camps, travel restrictions, social norms or other forms of discrimination. Some

refugees may have adapted to this life, but for many respondents the permanence of this treatment and ascription of a certain identity reiterated their guest status. Respondent 9 said:

*“We were just refugees when we stayed in India. We can’t even buy our own land. They will not give us citizenship. We can just eat and live there. If we come to Sri Lanka, we can buy our own land and do something on our own”*

and later:

*“[Now] I feel free in my mind. It feels like my native place, my native country to hang around.”*

He refers to the entity of Sri Lanka and links it to the opportunities that are connected to being back in his ‘own country’. This feeling does not only affect refugees that have vivid memories of their life in Sri Lanka, but also young persons who were born in Indian refugee camps which is an example of the intergenerational transfer of patria. Respondent 11, an Indian-born young man who came to Sri Lanka for the first time (primarily for the reason to get a passport and go abroad for work) said:

*“This is like my motherland. I was born and grown there [in India]. But I cannot say that it’s my own place because we were living as refugees. We can live bravely [here] as it is our own place. We cannot talk if there is a problem. It is their country. In our country, we can talk whatever we wish. Even though, people are born and grown in another country they won’t give away their native country. I will come [back] here even if I go abroad.”*

We can see that for him the notion of home is also connected to the concept of citizenship and the civil rights that are connected to it. Long understands refugee return primarily as a political process which should be focused on returning to a political community and safeguard citizens’ rights. According to her, “citizenship can be broadly understood as a form of political membership that guarantees rights and freedoms through the practice of responsible, collective, popular sovereignty. Above all, meaningful citizenship offers protection against the arbitrary deprivation of political rights” (Long 2013, p. 16). She clearly puts an emphasis on the political dimension of reintegration and understands it as a fundamental part of a successful return process. Other authors would agree to this and further stress that refugees also yearn to overcome a feeling of placelessness accumulated during exile and a perceived loss of cultural space and identity (see Kibreab 2003, p. 30). In the best case this placelessness can be overcome in a properly managed process.

For many respondents, the notion of ‘home’ is also connected to ownership or attachment to land. Respondent 2, an elderly man, said:

*“How much time can we stay in India? It’s not really our native place. Here, if we get a land, we can feel that it is our own property. Isn’t it?”*

The possibility to build up something lasting for the future featured in many answers. As this physical facet of homecoming is related to people’s aims of becoming independent I discuss the issue in the following chapter in more detail.

## **6.2 Independence and Self-Reliance**

The second theme recurring in the data refers to perceptions of personal freedom and the aim to live life without having to rely on other’s support. In many aspects it is closely connected to the first theme, as decision making and feelings of belonging contribute to people’s motivation of being independent. In order to understand this, we have to reconsider the conditions during exile in India. The camp accommodation was build and is owned by the Tamil Nadu government which also supplies basic services such as electricity, water, a certain amount of food, and monthly allowances per family (George, Kliever and Rajan 2015, p. 3). If people move into Indian towns these provisions are not available. Furthermore, the Indian federal government considers the presence of Sri Lankan refugees as temporary and citizenship cannot be obtained. Therefore, activities aimed at establishing permanence are discouraged and result in limited abilities to build up sustainable livelihoods for camp inhabitants.

During their time in exile, almost all male respondents have worked as day labourers, especially in painting and construction. Agricultural work during harvest or weeding seasons was possible but cultivation of own crops was not feasible due to lack of land. Although basic services were provided and there were plenty of day labour jobs available, for many of the study’s respondents the aim of regaining individual freedoms and the prospect of being self-reliant factored greatly in their return decision.

A major component of re-establishing life in Sri Lanka involves the issues of land. After arrival almost all respondents were travelling to relatives’ homes. The family was and is the single most important social and financial support system for returnees. Especially during the first few weeks the assistance was highly appreciated, helped returnees to get settled and learn about the differences between life in India and in Sri Lanka. In order to become independent, returnees needed land and while some owned property (which was often overgrown by forest), others could apply for a land allocation scheme from the Sri Lankan government. The distribution can take more than a year and many applicants were frustrated about the slow progress. Vavuniya is a rural district and for many families,

small-scale agriculture diversifies their income sources. This reiterates the importance of having land and for many returnees such as respondent 10, it is also of emotional value:

*“It’s happy when we live in our own place. Whatever there in India, it was the house of the government. Even if we have built it spending lacks [100.000s] of money. [...] If I build anything [here], we can go and come back. It will be ours. I am happy to live in our own place.”*

Several respondents benefited from NGO’s who provided agricultural material. In order to plant crops a well is also a necessity, as during dry season irrigation is the main system of cultivation. Respondent 12 was an elderly man who lived with his wife in his daughter’s property in order to support her raising the child. His own land was covered by forest and situated a few kilometres away. Although his old neighbours were asking him to clear his land and return to them he decided to stay with his daughter:

*“I have planted all these [trees]. If I want to go anywhere I have to start my life from the beginning. I don’t have that much energy.”*

He cultivates many papaya trees and is planning to build a large garden that can provide fruits for the family and himself in the future:

*“If I plant four coconut trees today, it will give some coconuts when I am unable to work. At that time, I can’t work. Isn’t it?”*

Although agriculture is an important income source, the main aim of returnees is to secure regular wage labour. In contrast to the very volatile income through day labour, a monthly income from a good paying job features in the livelihood strategies of all respondents.

This thesis finds that accessing sustainable livelihood was essential for respondents’ life satisfaction. Only few of the interviewees obtained regular income and in order to access possibilities, they used of different strategies. Respondent 6 worked for a trader in the morning vegetable market and facilitated the consignment of large quantities of food to local shops. Some female respondents were able to work in tailoring, mostly in small businesses. Respondent 5 was a self-employed electrician who was able to sustain himself through the job. Often families relied on a single male breadwinner, while elderly women, mothers and children were not working and took care of the house. The fact that many households are based on a single income can have negative consequences during times of economic difficulty. Ellis (2000, p. 299) stresses the importance of diversified livelihoods arguing that possessing alternative incomes can make a difference between viable situations and destitution.

Transferring livelihood assets and skills from exile to the home country can influence reintegration positively (Omata 2012, p. 272). However, two female respondents who possessed the ability to tailor could not work as they did not have access to sewing machines. In contrast, respondent 9 was able to bring his camera and photography skills with him from exile. He is now a freelance photo and videographer who was able to set up a business after return, filming weddings and other ceremonies. He learned his skills during his time in India and planned to use it to establish himself in Vavuniya. Now, he has hopes to develop his business further:

*“I have to develop my shop. I have to buy a Canon 5D camera. I have applied for a loan for that. [...] I have taken a 150,000 Rupee [1000 USD] loan earlier. Now it is fully settled. If I buy a 5D camera, I can ask for 50,000 Rupee [330 USD] per order.”*

Many returnees have dreams to build up businesses, but success is dependent on various factors. Ellis’ understanding of livelihood also values non-economic aspects, for example social relationships and institutions that facilitate access to assets and income (Ellis 2000, p. 290-291). Social ties are extremely important especially when establishing new businesses (Carr 2014, p. 147, Omata 2012, p. 275). As videography orders are often based on trust relationships respondent 9 tried to reactivate his old social relationships after 20 years in exile:

*“I searched and met everyone. It took long time to find everyone. It took about one or two years. I got contacts of everyone from here and there. [...] I am still in touch with them. I had forgotten their faces. They came and introduced themselves, hugged me and treated me well.”*

In this case it was possible to restore old social networks which form a viable basis for economic activity, especially as a service provider. This process – the reactivation of old social networks – can be understood as one strategy to navigate the challenges of return.

The importance of social capital can be identified in all aspects of reintegration. As mentioned above it is particularly helpful in the initial phase of return. Once refugees return, they face many difficulties related to life in Sri Lanka and its administrative processes. Besides family members providing accommodation, financial support is also vital as the cost of living needs to be sustained. A working social safety system involving family and kin is therefore a key asset for a successful transition (Omata 2012, p. 270-271).

The quality of returnees’ social networks – and therefore their social reintegration – also influences the chances of accessing income-generating activities such as agricultural and labour works. Respondent 6 who worked in the vegetable market described how he got his job:

*“Because of the person known to my father I got the job there. He was the owner of the land in front of our lost land [...].”*

When asking about the chances of finding a job without recommendations and local friends he said:

*“Yeah, it’s much more difficult. They do not trust everyone instantly, and they can’t. So they don’t give jobs to strangers.”*

Accessing sustainable livelihood is therefore directly connected to one’s ability to make use of social relationships. In the case of Sri Lankan returnees, the network is almost always based on family and kinship ties and only to a lesser extent on neighbours or friends. However, over time returnees established connections with other community members and there are also NGO programmes aimed at setting up support groups with the involvement of local authorities and community leaders (for example OfERR’s ‘welcome groups’).

Social and economic reintegration were two aspects where the temporal dimension of reintegration could be observed. In this study I could see that the longer respondents spent in Sri Lanka the more positive they assessed their personal situation. Forced migration scholars argue that usually it takes time to adapt to the new setting as “return is rarely a reintegration into old ways of living, but instead the beginning of a new chapter of adaptation to a set of completely new circumstances” (Hammond 1999, p. 229).

Although many respondents were struggling after return, they felt unhappy to be dependent on family members’ goodwill and wanted to regain economic independence as soon as possible. One strategy to access funds was taking bank loans. The money was often used to build houses or buy income-generating assets, such as agricultural material or sewing machines. However, taking loans is connected to the risk of unintended indebtedness as interests are high. The family of respondent 7 took a loan to pay for a three-wheeler leasing scheme. Three-wheelers are a major means of local transport in Sri Lanka and the investment was aimed at generating regular income for the family. However, after a while they were unable to pay the rates:

*“We sold the three-wheeler as we were unable to pay the due and bought another three-wheeler. As we couldn’t pay it again, we took many loans.”*

The family was then struggling to be self-sufficient:

*“We didn’t realize the situation at the beginning. But now it’s difficult for us. We are suffering more here than there [in India]. It was better there in the camp. We can go to jobs there. We can go for jobs anywhere there. We can even go up to*

*Andhra [Pradesh, an Indian state]. It's not the same here. The livelihood is a big issue here."*

Another option to get access to money is pawning. Some returnees have given their jewellery to local pawnbrokers and got cash in exchange. This was used to pay for bills or improve damaged housing. Although buying back the valuables involves considerable interests, it still offers a simpler way of accessing finances than taking bank loans as no guarantor is needed.

### **6.3 Feelings of Frustration and Disappointment**

Almost all returnees I talked to have been through episodes of strong frustration. Many respondents have shared experiences regarding the most difficult times during their return. As mentioned above, reintegration is rarely a straightforward process and all interviewees have encountered set-backs. However, some have been able to overcome the hardships while others are trapped by debt, no access to regular income and lack of social embeddedness. Their personal accounts allowed me to identify the dimensions in which the reintegration process has stalled or not worked. I have classified them into four categories: (1) struggle for food, shelter and employment; (2) lack of support; (3) loneliness; and (4) comparisons between India and Sri Lanka.

#### *Struggle for food, shelter and employment*

Several respondents have experienced periods of food shortage, especially during the first year after return. Except for one, nobody has received any food rations from the government or relief organisations. Although financial grants were sometimes available and returnees had personal savings, these were depleted rapidly as the cost of living is much higher than in India. I was also told that the permanent thought of how to provide the day's lunch or dinner put a lot of stress on the adult family members. When interviewing respondent 1, he told me that he didn't know yet how they will get their dinner today. Most of the time family members help out but he doesn't want to be a burden for them. Respondent 12, who is living with his wife, his daughter and grandson said:

*"We may face hardships at any time. We have a child with us. If he is hungry at times, where can we go for food?"*

And later regarding the challenges he encountered immediately after return:

*"I suffered much that time. For about the first and second year I suffered so much. This place was a forest. I always worked here and went to work outside. They kill us at work. But what to do? I suffered and finally stood up. I suffered much for two years."*

Male heads of families are expected to provide for the rest and since many have a hard time finding employment they cannot generate the necessary income. The labour market in Vavuniya District does not offer many skilled jobs, but rather limited day labour work in agriculture and construction. The two daughters of respondent 1 have finished their Bachelor of Commerce degree in an Indian university but are unable to use their skills. After transcribing the certificates into Sri Lankan standard they deposited them at the local mayor's office in order to receive help. All four family members who came back five months ago are still unemployed and their father argued that:

*"If my children want to work in a [...] company, they have to go to Colombo and stay in Colombo. That's not possible. I can't stay here leaving girls alone in Colombo. This is a problem."*

One needs to consider that Sri Lanka is a very centralised country with its financial and commercial centre located in the Western Province around the capital. His statement indicates that there may be some incompatibilities between the labour market in their exile (where both daughters had been able to work in a bank) and the receiving region in Sri Lanka. The view was shared by other returnees who saw much better opportunities in India regarding finding employment.

In this research returnees have identified access to sustainable livelihood as the most important factor in re-establishing themselves after coming back. Most returnees I talked to have not expected the process to be so tiresome and difficult. In addition to the challenges of finding employment some suffered from the lack of access to suitable shelter. Often they were supported by their kin while constructing a temporary shelter with clay bricks and tin sheets distributed by UNHCR. Limited funding for investments led to desperation with respondent 7 who said:

*"We need to raise our children. So we need some livelihood. We need a house. We don't get the housing scheme yet. We are putting our effort. But the income is not up to the effort. We don't know what to do. If we want to grow some hens, we don't have the initial investment. The daily income from the three-wheeler is spent for the expenses of children, food and to pay for the loans. So we can't save any money."*

The family's exile lasted only three years and many social ties could be maintained, but one working male had to sustain the cost of living for his mother, a sister, his wife and their children.

A number of respondents were also waiting for government land allocation and housing schemes. While a majority was able to stay at relatives' homes others were renting properties. For them the monthly payment put even more pressure on the family to find a job. The burden of financial debt is another strain to many. In these cases, support programmes which relieve returnees' hardships are essential.

### *Lack of Support*

The main actors in the field of returnee reintegration programmes and humanitarian relief are the UN-organisations (UNCHR, UNICEF, UNDP), the Sri Lankan government and local as well as international NGOs. Many respondents profited from one or another programme, but it is hard to see a coherently working support system. Most respondents returned by plane through a UNHCR-organised group and were entitled to receive a reintegration grant. Depending on the family size this can range up to several hundred US-Dollars and is partly given in cash and partly deposited in a bank account. Once returnees settled they had to actively investigate about the possible programmes they could get assistance from. For many respondents this led to frustration, especially about the local administration and their effort as the mother of respondent 11 recalls:

*“We didn’t know about these things [support programmes]. We had nobody to tell about it. We didn’t know anything. [...] Even the GS officers [Grama Seveka; a local government official] didn’t tell anything. You know about the local GS officers. They just look for money. They don’t care whoever dies. They need bribes. It is becoming like India.”*

This was the only instance where I was told about corruption in Sri Lanka. However, several times respondents mentioned problems with corruption when they had to obtain important documents in Indian institutions and the mother of respondent 11 was probably expecting Sri Lanka to be different. The family of respondent 1 was in a similar situation where they were waiting for a land allocation and have submitted their daughters’ degree documents to the local GS officer in the hope get help. As they perceived the land allocation process to be very slow, they sent one daughter to volunteer in the GS office – not fully selfless as the mother disclosed:

*“The GS has said that he will give us land. We didn’t get it till now. But if we help in some way, he will too help us.”*

This case illustrates how returnees develop coping strategies in order to improve their situation. As the daughters were unemployed the family felt that they could offer some free work force with the hope for preferential treatment. In Sri Lanka a good relationship with people in power or in influential positions can prove very valuable. Through returnees’ knowledge about how certain goals can be achieved in Sri Lankan society they try to manage situations accordingly.

Apart from state services, international and local NGOs provide most support. Many respondents benefited in one way or another from relief programmes – especially from the provision of agricultural material, for example seeds, tools, motor pumps and water pipes. However, it varied

how well returnees were informed about the support possibilities. While some received assistance and were grateful about it others were disappointed by the lack of help.

The most reliable social support structure was the family. Close relatives who stayed in Sri Lanka often contributed a lot to the well-being of the newly-arrived returnees. Sometime good friends and neighbours also helped with building work or planting activities. However, respondent 6 perceived some of his friends to break their promises arguing that those who said that they will help them have abandoned them. When talking about old social relations of his father he said:

*“He had old friends, but as they are settled here now they don’t care much. [...] If they meet me, they will talk, but they won’t be close friends because they think that I will ask help from them. [...] As we are in poverty, they are afraid to be close to us, because they think we might ask help from them.”*

This is an interesting quote showing how respondent 6 assessed the restraint of old contacts to form closer relationships as unwillingness to become too involved with them due to possible financial repercussions.

### *Loneliness*

After more than two decades in exile reconnecting with old friends and neighbours has not always been easy for the respondents. Some have shared their disappointment with the lack of social relationships after return, expressing a feeling of loneliness. Many returnees have come back leaving relatives and close friends in India. The relationships which formed over two decades were spatially separated after return and some persons felt solitary. Older returnees were able to reconnect with community members, but for the younger generation building up friendships was considered difficult. Two women who married other Sri Lankan refugees in exile were returning to a very new environment when accompanying partners to their place of origin with no relatives around. Respondent 5 arrived in Sri Lanka in 2015 to join her husband who has returned nine years earlier in 2006. She left all relatives behind and said:

*“Leaving mom and dad in India, makes me feel lonely.”*

Although nowadays it is easier to maintain transnational ties through modern communication technology, she became separated by her closest friends and family members. In a similar case respondent 10 said

*“There is no one who came back with us. Mother, dad and my younger sister are in India. I am the only one here.”*

Some were thinking of visiting family in India, but travelling between Sri Lanka and India involves considerable costs as well as valid documents. Passport and visitor visa need to be organised and a return flight from Colombo costs at least 120 US-Dollars.

Respondent 11, a young Indian-born man who came to Sri Lanka for the first time had no social network to reintegrate to. He told me:

*“Everything was new on the first sight here. I felt uncomfortable. I didn’t know how to live here, without my father and all. It was happy in India. There was nobody [here]. I couldn’t find my friends then. I was lonely.”*

He was able to navigate through this difficult situation by contacting fellow refugees who he got to know in the camp and who had already returned. In order to cope with his loneliness, he decided to visit them in their new places in Sri Lanka:

*“I searched and found them and went to their houses. There is one friend in Pesalai, another one in Pandivirichan and another one in Kandy. It took about one month to find them. Until then it was difficult for me here. I thought: why did I come here? Afterwards I got accustomed here. [...]”*

This was the only account where a returnee mentioned to have visited friends who also returned. Another respondent got more involved with the local community through the daily volleyball training on the village grounds. A welcoming community or a network of extended family members are important assets for returnees to connect with. Long-term feelings of loneliness and lack of social embeddedness may increase the feelings of frustration and depression. Lack of social reintegration also contributed to the negative picture many respondents had of their life in Sri Lanka.

#### *Comparisons between life in Sri Lanka and India*

When discussing the return experience and the developments that have taken place after they came back, many interviewees were sharing stories of life in India or compared their current life situation to the one during exile. This was often triggered through discussion about their economic situation. As mentioned before, almost all returnees stressed the ease of getting a job in India compared to Sri Lanka. The inability to secure wage work led to the lack of self-sufficiency.

I was told several times that India was ‘better’ due to a number of reasons. Respondent 10 argued that:

*“In India, the central government helped us in many ways. They have built houses with tin roofs. They have done it very well. Here when we came, even NGOs didn’t do anything.”*

Especially the persons who returned quite recently and were still struggling to cope with differences, organisation of documents and finding employment have expressed positive feelings when talking about their situation in exile. As explained in the background chapter, Indian refugee camps provide basic amenities and refugees do not have to pay for rent, electricity, water and some food rations while there are also NGOs which can provide relief in difficult situations. In Sri Lanka returnees have to rely mostly on their own and access to relief needs to be actively pursued.

Respondent 6 felt that in exile they were able to benefit from state services much more than in Sri Lanka:

*“The only good thing in Sri Lanka is, it is our native country. But in India even though we are labelled refugees there are many advantages such as in hospital services, education facilities, etc.”*

The disappointment with life in Sri Lanka may also be related to people’s expectations of return. The motivation to return included very different aspects and had influence on people’s future plans and goals. Two respondents have regretted not to have thought more about the decision to return.

Others have shared stories of friends who after coming back have taken the decision to return to India, and two respondents exposed that they would like to go back. Respondent 7 said:

*“At first, we had a plan to go back (to India). But we needed money again to go back, too.”*

The frustration does not only affect the returnees but is also transmitted to exile where many are awaiting positive reviews from relatives in order to prepare their own return. As we can see in the statistics the number of Tamil refugees who come back to Sri Lanka has been going down every year.

The family of respondent 7 were telling me:

*“We have told those who called us from India asking for suggestions about returning back not to come back because there are no job opportunities to compensate the prices of things here. There are no companies or factories like in Colombo here.”*

One must stress again that all interviewees in this research were returnees to Vavuniya District and with this data it is not possible to assess the experiences of persons returning to more urban settings like Jaffna District in the North or the Colombo region, where employment may be easier to access. Most persons who shared their sorrows suffered in one way or another from the lack of social or economic reintegration. Although, respondents seemed to be flexible when it comes to navigation strategies often desperation and disappointment could be identified.

## 7. Conclusion

This research examined the reintegration process of Tamil returnees to Sri Lanka based on their first-hand experiences. It investigated what concerns and challenges individuals faced and how they managed to cope with these situations. The study found that many respondents had high expectations of life in Sri Lanka and were somewhat disappointed after return. In contrast to life in exile they expected to increase their opportunities and had many hopes to access sustainable livelihoods, but in most cases initial goals could not be achieved which led to feelings of frustration. Despite returnees' efforts to find employment, most were unable to secure a regular income – especially due to the economic situation in the receiving region of Sri Lanka, but also because of the inability to apply skills gained in exile. Social capital seemed to play a major role in accessing income-generating activities. Returnees also activated their social network in order to mitigate some of the initial challenges connected to shelter, cost of living and getting in contact with community members. It could be seen that the dimensions of reintegration were interrelated and a successful economic reintegration could function as a driver to more social embeddedness and vice versa.

In many refugee return cases, interventions regarding social reintegration are often left out in support programmes and should be strengthened to improve returnees' situations. Some initiatives in Sri Lanka already aim at bringing together the newly arrived with former returnees, local authorities and village elders. This aims at integrating returnees into existing social networks and sharing experiences regarding coping strategies. In contrast to persons who have relocated several years ago, newly arrived individuals had more difficulties accessing livelihood. The initial challenges were increased when people moved to places they were not familiar with, or had difficulties finding jobs compatible with their skill level. It was found that once returnees were able to secure regular employment they experienced their return much more positive and had managed to improve their situation quite quickly.

This thesis contributes to the ongoing research on reintegration by zooming into the not well researched case of Sri Lanka. Through the identification of three major themes, 'return decision-making and feeling of belonging', 'independence and self-reliance' and 'feelings of frustration and disappointment' it was possible to understand the multifaceted reintegration process of Sri Lankan Tamil returnees in more detail. Returnees assessed their situation and developed various coping strategies regarding reintegration. However, the return has not been accompanied by systematic support mechanisms and even if those were set up, many respondents were unaware of them. However, this study is not representative and it is therefore only of limited use to suggest policy changes. A large and more diversified sample would be needed to get more meaningful insights into

reintegration in the whole country. Regarding future research, it would be interesting to set up a study looking at Tamil refugees still living in the camps in India and investigate how these expectations are shaped and what role the transnational communication with returnees plays. Some organisations already facilitate skype calls between family members in order to raise the awareness about potential hurdles. Another research approach could be a longitudinal analysis of returnees which acknowledges the temporal dimension of reintegration. This thesis confirmed the proposition that persons who returned recently had much more difficulties than persons who already spent several years in Sri Lanka. It would be interesting to research the parameters which facilitate this process in addition to the findings of this thesis.

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