

Displacement in Casamance, Senegal: Lessons (Hopefully) Learned, 2000–2019

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Abstract

The paper reflects on fieldwork conducted since 2000 with displaced communities in Lower and Middle Casamance, Senegal, amid arguably West Africa's longest-running civil conflict. While this is a small conflict in a geographically confined space, Casamance presents a microcosm of dynamics common to other displacement situations in Africa. In this context the paper explores how the understandings, lived experiences and practices of the displaced transcend normative categories used by aid actors to define and manage such situations. Five thematic areas are examined: enumeration of the displaced; complex mobilities, both rural-urban and transnational; historiographic understandings of displacement; political manipulation of displacement situations; and the dynamics of return and reconstruction. The paper concludes by summarising failures of understanding in these areas among much of the aid community, and their consequences. It argues that well-grounded and socially nuanced understandings of displacement may inform more effective aid interventions and enhance the peace process.

Keywords

internally displaced persons, refugees, Casamance, Senegal, returnees

Introduction

The starting point for the paper is the well-established taxonomy of human displacement, embedded in international conventions and national laws and largely internalised by international aid agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). This taxonomy and the understandings that it reflects are typically framed as normative categories and binaries: forced or voluntary migration (one of the most problematic binaries given the often complex, multiple motives for mobility); a refugee (someone legally recognised under specified terms as having been forcibly displaced across an international border) or internally displaced person (IDP, someone displaced within their own country); citizen or foreigner; home or refuge; and displacement or return. A recent critique of global refugee policies adds a further binary to this list, that of vulnerable or self-reliant/resilient refugees, arguing that this can be disempowering in that – again – political and humanitarian actors determine who falls into these categories and on what terms (Krause and Schmidt 2020). These binaries are in turn sometimes underpinned by a simplistic understanding of war or peace, the latter reflecting formal agreement between opposing parties rather than actual security conditions on the ground.

The international instruments on which such categories are founded include those of the United Nations (the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees) and, relevant to the paper, the African Union (the 2009 Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa, or 'Kampala Convention'). The 2016 New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants and the resulting 2018 Global Compact on Refugees have if anything served

to reify such categories further. Clearly such instruments serve the interests of the international community and of governments in both the Global North and South in defining and controlling those among the displaced who can stay and those who should (preferably) leave (Agier 2008). Overall then, the categories stated have become deeply institutionalised in the thinking and operations of much of the aid industry, making them hard to challenge amid long-established practices of humanitarian relief, asylum processes, registration and identity cards.

Academics necessarily adopt the same language in most cases; they are to some extent stuck with the categories described (Ray 2017) even as they try analytically to move beyond them. Critical scholarship on the displaced however considers complexities and nuances in the understandings, representations, identities, lived experiences and practices of those concerned, often explored through ethnographic or other similarly grounded approaches. This large canon of literature spans decades and it is not the intention to review it here. Research influential in framing the author's work includes Allen's (1996) collection on the Horn of Africa; Black's work, particularly in West Africa (e.g. Black 1991; Black and Sessay 1997, 1998); Hammar's (2014) collection on 'displacement economies' in Africa, in which the author participated; Bakewell's (2002, 2018) research on the Angola/Zambia borderlands; and work elsewhere in Africa on land tenure issues in situations of displacement and return (e.g. McGregor 1998; Unruh 2011). Collectively this research has been helpful in understanding in the Casamance context what resources, broadly defined, are available to the displaced: material, social, political and symbolic and indeed the possible trajectories for their flight, settlement or return.

Most of these studies focus on refugees, which underlines the relative under-reporting, under-recognition and under-researching of the situation of IDPs, the majority of displaced people globally (UNHCR 2020). In Africa the same shortfalls from a policy perspective are highlighted by Likibi (2018) in his reflections on the implementation of the Kampala Convention. Some observers (e.g. Schaar 2019) have criticised the recent Compact for perpetuating such failures to address the less visible problems of IDPs. A particular omission in research and intervention has been urban areas, where most IDPs globally now reside. In the early part of the period discussed in the paper, the literature on urban IDPs was quite thin (Evans 2007) but significant progress has been made since. One key problem area was just identifying those in question although advances have subsequently been made through the Tufts-IDMC profiling study (Jacobsen with IDMC 2008; Davies and Jacobsen 2010), whose African case studies comprised Khartoum (Sudan) and Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire). The Overseas Development Institute project 'Sanctuary in the city? Urban displacement and vulnerability' (Haysom 2013) further extended understandings of urban IDPs, with Nairobi (Kenya) and Yei (South Sudan) as African case studies. The wider academic literature has likewise expanded in the past decade or so through detailed, field-based studies of urban IDPs (e.g. Jacobs and Kyamusugulwa 2018), a research area likely to continue growing.

The paper endeavours to apply such critical approaches to the Casamance conflict – largely a story of internal displacement, mostly into urban areas – while also considering how these approaches may inform normative concerns. Casamance is the southwesternmost part of Senegal, sandwiched between The Gambia and Guinea-Bissau and thus forming a semi-exclave of the country. The conflict originated in initially peaceful local protests against Senegalese governance in the 1970s and early 1980s (Evans 2004). Discontent crystallised into two marches in Ziguinchor, capital of the then-single region of Casamance,¹ in 1982 and 1983, led by the separatist *Mouvement des forces démocratiques de la Casamance* (MFDC).² While the first march was largely non-violent, the second ended in considerable bloodshed with the circumstances and death toll among the protestors still contested by the parties involved. Increasingly heavy-handed repression by the Senegalese state followed, driving the MFDC underground. It armed itself and launched a violent insurgency in April 1990; mass deployment of Senegalese forces in response led to full militarisation of the conflict. Factionalism in the MFDC and involvement of neighbouring countries subsequently created a complex, fragmented security environment in a relatively small geographical area (Evans 2004). While the 2000s and 2010s have seen a general improvement in the situation, this has been

uneven in space and time. Some low-level insecurity persists and a comprehensive political settlement remains elusive (Foucher 2019). Even amid what now appears to be a largely peaceful situation, other dynamics are creeping in that may undermine stability and the gains of the past two decades (Evans 2019). These include local resource-based conflicts (principally over timber) emerging partly from illegal exploitation that grew within earlier 'war economies' in Casamance (Evans 2003a). Concerns about jihadist groups starting to infiltrate Senegal, particularly in the south, are much harder to evidence although they are aired by some local and international observers in a context of growing violence in other Sahelian countries (Rouse 2018; Vines 2020). As a stable state Senegal may not see itself as particularly susceptible but it thereby risks dangerous complacency (again) about what may be happening at its territorial margins.

In terms of displacement, the duration of the Casamance conflict to date has seen the situation move broadly from one where tens of thousands of people were uprooted to one where the majority of the displaced have now returned home. The author has conducted fieldwork in Casamance since 2000, starting with his doctoral fieldwork on war economies, rural livelihoods and displacement (Evans 2003a, 2003b, 2005, 2007). Subsequent research focused on the MFDC (Evans 2004), return of the displaced (Evans 2009), cross-border relations with The Gambia (Evans and Ray 2013; Perfect and Evans 2013) and the remaking of the geographies of southern border areas of Casamance amid return and reconstruction (Evans 2014). His most recent, ongoing research examines development interventions to support paddy rice cultivation in a context of social and environmental change (Evans 2017). These substantive projects have been interspersed by shorter visits enabling the author to keep updated with the displacement situation, particularly in earlier study areas, thus giving a long-term understanding of local dynamics.

The paper now considers five thematic areas in turn, framed as lessons (hopefully) learned: enumeration of the displaced; complex mobilities, both rural-urban and transnational; historiographic understandings of displacement; political manipulation of displacement situations; and the dynamics of return and reconstruction. It concludes by summarising failures of understanding in these areas among much of the aid community, and their consequences. It briefly considers the implications of this analysis for aid policy and praxis, arguing that well-grounded and socially nuanced understandings of displacement may inform more effective aid interventions and enhance the peace process.

Lesson 1: Don't Trust the Numbers

Accurately enumerating displaced populations is notoriously difficult. The often chaotic circumstances of their flight and the breadth of such movements over space (places of origin and places of refuge) and time (ranging from a single event to multiple or stepwise movements over years) typically confound efforts to count people. In Casamance there are further, significant problems with such numbers, both practical (i.e. counting mechanisms) and conceptual (i.e. categories). The situation is particularly complicated by the great majority of the displaced being self-settled. Long-term refugee camps in neighbouring countries have figured little, only ever serving a small minority (hundreds) of people (Evans 2007), and where they did exist they closed in the early 2000s. Many of the self-settled meanwhile have been found in urban areas ranging from smaller towns to larger centres such as Ziguinchor; mostly absorbed into the urban fabric, they often take considerable effort to find and identify (Davies and Jacobsen 2010; Evans 2007).

Furthermore, while IDPs and refugees have typically been counted at the point of their arrival (particularly when large movements of people have taken place during crisis events), the slower, quieter return of the displaced is less well recorded (Evans 2007). Returnee figures have tended to be produced on a piecemeal basis, for particular villages or areas of origin, rather than through any comprehensive, Casamance-wide survey. The population in return areas is itself hard to disaggregate. Even in one village it may comprise a mixture of returnees and stayees – those who stayed put throughout, despite conflict and insecurity (Evans 2014). These issues are compounded

by the long duration of the conflict and associated exile, which has engendered considerable demographic change among the displaced. In line with regional trends, Senegal has declining but still high birth rates (UNFPA (2020) gives a figure of 4.7 births per woman for 2017) and its displaced populations are no different in this respect. Anecdotally there also seems to have been a mortality crisis among the elderly displaced, with various informants claiming that the stresses of upheaval and exile have led to many premature deaths of older people (Evans 2014). Among the displaced therefore a demographic shift appears to have occurred, with returnee populations typically larger and more youthful than those who originally fled (Evans 2009, 2014).

Slippage between actual counts, estimates and guesswork is therefore evident in the Casamance data but by all accounts (from local people and aid actors) most displacement related to the conflict took place in the early to mid-1990s, the majority of it internal (i.e. within Casamance), although significant internal and external flows have occurred since. The peak of aggregate displacement probably therefore fell in the late 1990s. A count by the international NGO Caritas in 1998 gave the total number of displaced (IDPs and refugees) as 62,638 (AJAC-APRAN 2000). UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) figures and officials interviewed in 2000 estimated that there were 10,000–13,000 Casamance refugees divided roughly equally between The Gambia and Guinea-Bissau (Evans 2007). This would leave around 50,000 IDPs. Subsequent figures produced by international agencies for much of the 2000s were of a similar order although their origin was unclear. They may well have represented estimates derived from the Caritas count, in some cases revised downwards to account for ongoing return. The uncertainties already noted around the number of returnees and demographic changes in displaced populations mean however that the inevitable inaccuracies in the original count would have been compounded in subsequent estimates.

The situation today is similarly unclear, reflecting some disengagement from displacement issues in Casamance by the international community. The conflict is not a major cause of geopolitical concern and evidently there are bigger problems elsewhere in Africa, so there is less interest in counting those affected in Casamance. The most recent UNHCR report (2020, 75) gives zero returns for “IDPs of concern to UNHCR” and “Returned IDPs” in Senegal at the end of 2019 although these figures are explicitly framed around protection and assistance under UNHCR’s mandate rather than actual numbers of people. By contrast, for the same point in time the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC 2020) – an independent research and advisory organisation and part of the Norwegian Refugee Council, a humanitarian NGO – gives an estimate of 8,400 IDPs resulting from conflict and violence in Casamance. The very different figures from these two organisations reflect their respective foci, underlined by the fact that UNHCR sources much of its IDP data from IDMC (UNHCR 2020) but presents it differently according to its own mandate. Relative to data from recent years however the latest IDMC figure represents a sharp fall. In the methodological notes to its reports the organisation admits the considerable uncertainties underlying this data, stating that it was derived from a total of 24,000 dating back to 2009, subtracting estimated returns (following the earlier logic noted above) to give 18,000 at the end of 2018 (IDMC 2019). This was then significantly reduced to the current figure, provided by the Senegalese government, of 8,400 (IDMC 2020). The IDMC bemoans the lack of information about the methodologies used to collect all such data, stating for the current IDP total that it “has low confidence in this figure” (IDMC 2020, 2).

This points to a further source of doubt in the data, namely that neither organisation has a particularly substantive or permanent presence in the countries concerned. Indeed, IDMC works wholly through in-country partners, which may change over time, in its data-gathering and advisory activities. UNHCR meanwhile covers The Gambia and Guinea-Bissau mostly through its West African regional office in Dakar. Its direct representation in the respective countries has been intermittent during the period under discussion (partly due to organisational rationalisation) but it currently has a national office in Banjul and a liaison office in Bissau. UNHCR has however continued to work with governments and other partners in both countries when required, for example when the Gambian political crisis of December 2016–January 2017 caused many to flee temporarily from The Gambia into Senegal, ironically including parts of Casamance. UNHCR has also advocated for ‘local

integration' (as one of its stated 'durable solutions') for long-term Casamance refugees in both countries but with mixed success. Guinea-Bissau moved from a somewhat *ad hoc* approach to a blanket grant of citizenship to Casamance refugees in 2018, with financial and administrative support from UNHCR (Maclean 2018). In The Gambia such integration was subject to more variable approaches under Yahya Jammeh, who came to power in a *coup d'état* in 1994 and was then President from 1996 to 2017 (Evans and Ray 2013; see also below). Even subsequently UNHCR (2018, 1) only notes that "sensitization and advocacy will continue" on matters of integration there, including land tenure.

Still, the data from both organisations reflects broader realities on the ground in different ways. Most IDPs, at least those who want to return to their rural home areas, have very probably done so. In that sense the remaining population – possibly accounting for less than one-fifth of those IDPs originally displaced – may no longer be 'of concern' to UNHCR but evidently it still exists, whatever the uncertainties in the latest IDMC figure. An example of such issues comes from one of the author's doctoral study areas, Boutoupa-Camaracounda rural community (now commune),³ southeast of Ziguinchor and bordering Guinea-Bissau. Out of its 24 constituent villages, 18 were totally displaced in mid-2001 (Evans 2007) and in a recent follow-up interview in the commune's headquarters (7 August 2019) a local government leader claimed that 11 villages were still to return. The picture may however be more complicated as earlier fieldwork suggested that certain displaced villages were effectively written off, with their populations having moved more or less permanently to larger ones in the area – a further factor potentially confounding accurate displacement figures. Whatever the case some IDPs still live, as observed in the earlier study (Evans 2007), a difficult and precarious existence in Ziguinchor and elsewhere (interview with chief of partially displaced village, Ziguinchor, 2 August 2019). They may be subject to some interest and intervention from the state, international agencies and NGOs although this is sporadic and piecemeal (interviews, Lower Casamance, August 2019), following a long-term pattern of stop-start support (Evans 2007).

The figures for refugees are similarly mired in uncertainty, as the next section explores in more depth. According to UNHCR (2020), The Gambia and Guinea-Bissau together now host a total of 6,160 refugees of any origin. The majority can reasonably be assumed to come from Casamance but these figures may be underestimates in that again they only capture those 'of concern' to UNHCR. There may also still be reluctance by some among these populations to register themselves as refugees, particularly in The Gambia, given the uncertainties noted about the security that such status has actually provided. Comparing these figures with the earlier estimates, coupled with field research, suggests however that significant (if smaller) refugee populations from Casamance remain entrenched across its northern and southern borders (Evans 2014; Evans and Ray 2013). They appear to be kept in place by informal or formal local integration processes acting over long periods, encouraging them to stay put; and deep-seated mistrust and animosity against the Senegalese authorities, discouraging return.

Lesson 2: Complex Mobilities Confound Normative Categories

Further problems in categorisation and enumeration arise from complex human mobilities, of which forced displacement forms only part and overlaps with other movements – a long-standing problematic in the literature on the displaced elsewhere in Africa (Gale 2006). Bakewell (2002) underlines the policy problems that can arise when static categories are misapplied to the long-term displaced, whose identities and relationships with place have changed over time. In the area considered here, Lower Casamance especially has long had a mobile population, both internally within Senegal (typically rural-urban migration) and across international borders (Foucher 2002; Evans and Ray 2013). As a geographic space Casamance is no more than about 100km north-to-south so any given point within it is never more than 50km from the border with The Gambia and/or Guinea-Bissau. Indeed, migration of various kinds has particularly shaped the society of the Diola, the majority ethnic group of Lower Casamance (Foucher 2002; Lambert 2002). The methodological

problems of grappling with such dynamism became apparent early in the author's field research when trying to identify IDPs from Boutoupa-Camaracounda rural community who were residing in Ziguinchor (Evans 2007). Some had been displaced *sensu stricto* from their rural homes by the conflict while others were already in the town as earlier migrants for reasons of work or education. Defining some people as IDPs is also difficult in this context because over the years rural-urban migration has moved from a circular pattern towards more permanent settlement in towns and cities (de Jong 1997; Lambert 2002).

Furthermore, the geographies of displacement in Casamance are often very local, reflecting those of the conflict itself (Foucher 2007). When significant swathes of the western border zone with Guinea-Bissau were affected by violence in the 1990s, many moved only a few kilometres from rural areas into towns or more secure villages, or from the suburbs of Ziguinchor into its urban core (Evans 2005, 2007). Proximity to areas of origin allows 'commuting' by some of the displaced to their homes or farmlands by day, returning before nightfall to their places of refuge (Evans 2007). This brings risks of hostile encounters with MFDC guerrillas, or of such movement being blocked by the Senegalese army, or from landmines; access may therefore be erratic and many have been unable to visit their lands for years or decades for these reasons. Still, commuting has allowed some to maintain their original rural livelihoods to a certain extent, alleviating the poverty incurred from displacement. Such practices again challenge notions of static populations and a simple binary between IDPs and returnees.

Similar challenges to fixed categories are seen at transnational level. As noted above, refugees from Casamance perch on its international borders, northern and southern. They may carry identity cards for more than one country (Senegal plus The Gambia or Guinea-Bissau) and/or carry UNHCR-accredited refugee cards (Evans 2014; Evans and Ray 2013; Maclean 2018). Such identities are deployed by refugees according to context, whether to cross borders or to confirm eligibility for aid (Evans and Ray 2013). This is familiar from other Africa settings, where for example Bakewell (2007, 1) distinguishes between "heartfelt and handheld notions of nationality" in relation to identity documents. Jansen (2008) also notes how refugee status, while reflecting genuine humanitarian needs, can be an instrumental means to access resources from states or the international community, whether honestly or dishonestly. In Casamance such strategies are unsurprising in what is, even without problems arising from the conflict, a situation of poverty and political marginalisation for many (Evans 2003b).

The consequences of not grasping the complex realities of status and identity are, as in Bakewell's (2002) example, sometimes apparent in Casamance. Allocation of aid without careful attention to local political circumstances has occasionally exacerbated tensions within communities by favouring returnees over stayees (see below). International agencies have sometimes also failed to identify key local actors or have chosen to work around them. An example of this became apparent in an interview with a member of one such agency (Ziguinchor, 19 July 2010) who in turn asked the author how he had managed to find IDPs from one rural community among the much larger urban population of Ziguinchor. The answer – that this was difficult but as a starting point the IDPs studied were, like other such groups in the town, organised around their rural council acting in exile – seemed alien to the agency in question and the author's assistant had to provide contact details for the relevant local government structures. This is in line with broader failures of recognition and understanding of the organisational structures of the urban displaced by the aid community, despite the value that such structures may have in helping the displaced navigate their situation (Haysom 2013; Jacobs and Kyamusugulwa 2018). It should be added though that such issues in the aid industry transcend conflict situations. As another example, an official of the state *Agence Régionale de Développement de Ziguinchor* (interview, Ziguinchor, 24 July 2009) complained how regional development coordination and planning were hampered by a tendency for aid actors to bypass his agency and work directly with recipients such as villages or schools. This points to troubling double standards: such behaviour would not be tolerated in Western countries with their tough planning controls.

Lesson 3: Local People Have Their Own Historiographies of Displacement

Another common feature of displacement situations is that a standard narrative is constructed around them: they result from a particular conflict, which started at a given moment in time and maybe ended at one too, even when such timelines do not match the messier realities on the ground. A related point sometimes missed is that while belligerent parties habitually differ in their political accounts of a conflict, local understandings of violence and displacement may be more variable and rooted in histories deeper than the immediate situation. In some areas of Casamance there is a considerable mismatch between how displacement is understood in wider official narratives (and hence by most aid actors) and how it is understood locally. Local people thus have their own historiographies as well as geographies of displacement.

This is evident in the Balantacounda, an enclaved rural area along the southern border of Middle Casamance (Evans 2013). Villagers interviewed there (July 2009) situate their experiences of the violence of the Casamance conflict in a deeper history of insecurity dating back to the Liberation War in neighbouring Guinea-Bissau, formerly Portuguese Guinea. Locals recall that in the late 1960s, when the War was at its height, significant cross-border cattle raids began, conducted by guerrillas of the *Partido Africano da Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde* (PAIGC, the party of liberation) and other groups fighting in Guinea-Bissau. These raids may have been driven partly by the Portuguese strategy of undermining food production, including deliberate destruction of agricultural infrastructure in PAIGC-held areas (Galli and Jones 1987), creating food shortages. Insecurity displaced many in the Balantacounda with local informants recalling that the Senegalese government had to deploy troops in the area to repel the raiders. Cattle-raiding has continued intermittently ever since and has been undertaken in the period of the Casamance rebellion by the MFDC and other elements acting along the border, often opportunists operating under the cover of the conflict. Local memory does not therefore perceive the start of the rebellion as such a significant break from the past.

Alternative understandings of the conflict can be found elsewhere in Casamance. In part of the Gambian border area, Nugent (2007) argues that historical experiences of violence among some ethnic groups (including Diola sub-groups) dating back to the nineteenth century leave them largely uninterested in the Casamance nationalist project of the MFDC. It is apparent to the author from talking with members of one group that Nugent cites, the Karoninke, that most want nothing to do with the rebellion and wish to be left alone by all concerned (personal observation). A similar situation is found among the majority of the Diola of Oussouye (in the far southwest of Casamance), who again do not support the rebellion (Tomàs 2005). The Enampor area meanwhile, lying west of Ziguinchor, was largely 'demilitarised' by both the MFDC and Senegalese forces under pressure from local people (Evans 2005). While none of these areas has managed wholly to exempt itself from the conflict and its impacts, they show, like the Balantacounda, how insecurity and displacement are experienced and understood locally in relation to deeper historical and social contexts. Again, such nuances risk getting lost in simplistic understandings among the aid community (Bakewell 2002). The displaced have usually lost much, so it seems perverse to deny them their own histories too.

Lesson 4: The Displaced Are Used in Bigger Political Games

In Casamance as elsewhere in Africa (and globally), displaced people are used by national and sometimes local governments for political ends (Hartnack 2009; Milner 2009). This is particularly true of refugees, whose situation in countries of asylum is typically bound up with national-level concerns. These include availability of material resources including not just humanitarian support but also land; social cohesion; security and stability; geopolitics including relations with donors and neighbouring states; and the political fortunes of whichever party is in power. In Casamance such factors evidently underlie the political dynamics into which the displaced get drawn in various ways.

First, refugee flows sit within the wider, sometimes fractious relationships between Senegal and its neighbours in the geopolitics of the conflict (Evans 2004; Evans and Ray 2013; Perfect and Evans 2013). Both Guinea-Bissau and The Gambia have at times been accused by Senegal of supporting MFDC elements materially or harbouring their rear bases. A second, related issue is that the line between 'refugees' and 'rebels', and between their settlements and encampments respectively, near the borders with Casamance is blurred. This has served all three countries concerned in different respects at different times. Third, Abdoulaye Wade, President of Senegal from 2000 to 2012, was somewhat duplicitous in how he constructed the Casamance conflict at international level. On the one hand, Wade insisted that it was a little local difficulty; a domestic problem that could be contained and resolved without foreign involvement. On the other, he involved Guinea-Bissau directly in the fighting and got considerable international aid to deal with the humanitarian and developmental consequences of the conflict and for his 'peace process'. These points deserve closer scrutiny.

The early part of Wade's presidency saw the Bissau-Guinean government move, in a surprising realignment linked with internal political changes (Foucher 2003), from covertly supporting or tolerating the MFDC to a more hostile position (and thus pro-Senegal), at least against the hardline guerrillas camped on its territory. Attacks by Bissau-Guinean forces, with Senegalese material support, against these elements in winter 2000–2001 were coupled with expulsions of refugees believed to be associated with the MFDC hardliners (Evans 2003b, 2013). The author witnessed the deeply unhappy return of some of these refugees to Ziguinchor – hardly the 'voluntary repatriation' as a durable solution advocated by UNHCR. Ongoing, coordinated military action on the Bissau-Guinean side of the border and (by Senegalese forces) in some southern rural areas of Casamance improved the security situation in the latter, facilitating subsequently return where there had previously been mass displacement.

In this context Wade gained significant donor support for return and reconstruction through much of the 2000s. As local observers note, he did this by conflating 'peace' in Casamance with mostly voluntary return of the displaced, mainly IDPs plus a considerably smaller number of refugees (Evans 2014). While however such return and reintegration are integral to a credible peace process (Fagen 2009; O'Neill 2009), they are not in themselves a substitute for a durable political settlement. Such sophistry enabled Wade to sidestep thornier political issues, perhaps deceiving at least some of the international community, notably the lack of any comprehensive political resolution of the conflict. Indeed, he made this less likely through a strategy of divide-and-rule against MFDC factions, particularly in areas north of the Casamance River, which fomented deadly internecine violence and the assassination of certain high-profile government figures (Evans and Ray 2013). The peace accord of December 2004, while not without meaning in political and security terms, was thus more a reflection of improvements on the ground than a driver of them. It was arguably just a performance of seriousness about the peace process – by some elements of the MFDC as well as the Senegalese government – to the international community in order to obtain more aid. Outside of this, some of the better-informed and networked aid actors ended up doing, piecemeal at local level, the real work of the peace process in the absence of constructive engagement by the Wade government.

In The Gambia meanwhile the relationship between President Jammeh and Casamance refugees was particularly complex and erratic. Links between Jammeh and MFDC elements were widely suspected but hard to verify (Evans and Ray 2013). More evident was the use of Casamance refugees as voters for his party in the Fonis, an area of the Western Division (now West Coast Region) of The Gambia bordering Casamance where many refugees had self-settled (Evans and Ray 2013). Conversely refugees were occasionally expelled but more capriciously than in Guinea-Bissau, on the whim of President Jammeh in response to perceived threats to his regime or on flimsy pretexts. These expulsions were in turn sometimes used instrumentally by the Senegalese government. Following an expulsion in May 2003 the numbers 'returning' to Casamance were, according to an NGO worker close to the process, augmented by IDPs drawn in by the promise of aid in what he described as "*une grande escroquerie*" – "a huge swindle" (Evans and Ray 2013, 270). In

the 2010s, changes of leadership in both Senegal and The Gambia have ushered in some different approaches to cross-border issues. Macky Sall, elected to the Senegalese Presidency in March 2012, followed his predecessors' firm line with Jammeh while trying to maintain good relations with a country that largely divides Senegal's national territory. However, Jammeh's refusal to stand down following the presidential elections of December 2016 in which he lost to Adama Barrow saw Senegal play a key role, politically and militarily, in subregional actions to remove him and Barrow took power as Gambian President in January 2017 (Perfect 2017). More stable relations between Senegal and The Gambia have ensued although it remains to be seen if these bring a more coherent Gambian approach to Casamance refugees. Still, better ties between the two countries were seen in the realisation of a long-standing wish from the Senegalese side: the construction of a road bridge across the Gambia River at Farafenni, formally opened in January 2019, facilitating transport and territorial integration between the north of Senegal and Casamance (Perfect and Evans 2013; BBC 2019). Senegal also remains the largest contributor of troops to the regional stabilisation force in The Gambia, ECOMIG (the ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) Mission in The Gambia). Sall was re-elected as President of Senegal in February 2019 with the official opening of the bridge, though not quite complete, brought forward to coincide with his election campaign. His subsequent focus on the Casamance question has however been limited as even before the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020 he was embroiled in other political problems. Sall has thus largely followed the pattern of engagement with Casamance seen in previous Senegalese presidents: it only becomes subject to significant attention when this cannot be avoided (for example because of an upsurge in violence) or when this is politically expedient around the time of elections. Displaced Casamançais are only ever a matter of transient concern in Dakar.

Return has also sometimes been troubled by local-level politicisation of the process, including for IDPs – the majority of the Casamance displaced. The allocation of aid between and within return villages, discussed in the next section, has occasionally been used as a local political tool although this should not be overstated in a context where most donors, NGOs and local structures (notably rural councils and their successors) have acted in good faith. Mandina Mancagne, something of a 'showcase' village just outside Ziguinchor, received substantial aid and visits from the American Ambassador, a result of its political nous and proximity to the town (Evans 2014). This may have brought benefits in highlighting the plight of the displaced but the majority of villages, in the Guinea-Bissau border zone and often out of sight, have seen no such fanfare, receiving some aid but left more to their own devices.

Lesson 5: Return Is at Least as Complex a Process as Displacement

Return and reconstruction have received less attention than displacement in the literature. As a quieter, longer-term process not usually conducted in crisis conditions, return has been less internationally visible (Simon and Preston 1993). Long-standing academic interest in land and other resource access issues among returnees as possible sources of renewed conflict has though more recently sparked greater attention among the humanitarian community (McGregor 1998; Pantuliano 2009; Unruh 2011). In Casamance the sum of many individual return processes (typically by village or *quartier*) has been considerable. The figures, for all their uncertainties, indicate that a few tens of thousands of people (and their children born in exile) returned during the 2000s and beyond. This process has captured a range of experiences, underlain by various factors. Return involves complex interactions between security, enforced by the army or collectively by the community through mass return; individual/household agency; material and geographical constraints; and land tenure issues (Evans, 2007, 2009, 2014). The geographies and related phasing of return have thus been diverse according to local circumstances. The proximity of certain displaced villages to urban places of refuge such as Ziguinchor has allowed 'commuting' by some returnees to reconstruct homes and clear land. Returnees to more remote villages meanwhile have needed to camp, sometimes in rough conditions, with the prerequisite of restored or newly dug wells to enable people to survive and

construct mudbrick walls for new homes (Evans 2014). Far from being a one-off move then, return sits in a continuum with displacement that normative categories again struggle with (Bakewell 2002).

A further complicating factor has been the reconstruction of political communities – often a more subtle process than rebuilding houses and infrastructure and clearing farmland. People may have already been divided before flight by the politics of the conflict, so reuniting them in a rural settlement that is typically more concentrated than before (for reasons of security and to rationalise infrastructure provision) may be problematic. There seems however to be a reluctance to speak about such issues on the ground and there is no evidence of any violence arising as a result. The long duration of displacement may have helped: people have moved on and, as explained above, demographic change means that the returning population has a partially different makeup from that which originally left. Indeed, this more youthful population has often been key in initiating and dynamising the return process (Evans 2014).

The impact of international aid in this context has often been overstated by those providing it. Interventions in critical areas such as water supply (digging wells), housing (mainly the provision of roofing materials) and roads have definitely facilitated the re-establishment of returning populations. Most return has however been initiated and driven by the populations themselves, in negotiation with the government, security forces and sometimes elements of the MFDC. The displaced have usually showed a great desire to go home, driven significantly by the dire social and economic conditions of exile (Evans 2007). Under such circumstances community organisations (including youth associations) have often organised return, sometimes following other nearby villages, rather than waiting for state or aid actors to do it for them. Similarly return has been largely endogenous in terms of the resources involved (materials, labour); the aid described has certainly helped but it has generally followed rather than led. It is worth reiterating that aid provided to the displaced in their mostly urban places of refuge has been even more limited, here as elsewhere in Africa, reflecting again the broader marginalisation of such populations. Casamance IDPs have therefore had little to lose by returning and much to regain in terms of independence and dignity (Evans 2007). In any case there are limits to what return aid can ever provide and reconstruction of a village necessarily requires the community to take much of the ownership of the process and the space concerned. An exception has been in villages where external aid has supported the necessary removal of landmines, usually conducted by the Senegalese army and other trained nationals but with foreign forces sometimes involved too, prior to return. Failure by returnees to respect this requirement has sadly sometimes had fatal consequences (Evans 2009).

Aid has also had mixed effects as a political instrument: it can carry a positive symbolic value, showing international solidarity with the return process, but as noted it has also sometimes been used to obscure fundamental tensions in the still unresolved conflict. At the most local level aid has occasionally created jealousies against recipients from non-recipients (often returnees and stayees respectively). This is known to be a sensitive issue among displaced populations (Cole 2018). In Casamance poor judgement by aid providers has, albeit rarely, led to vandalism of reconstructed homes and other unintended consequences: for example in Mpak aid caused the *de facto* establishment of what is effectively a separate village of returnees dealing directly with the aid community (Evans 2014). Even in Ziguinchor, incidents were recorded where returnees to a previously displaced suburb, provided with a meal by a local NGO supporting house-building (with international aid) so that they could spend all day working on site, received unwelcome visits from their families living in the town who were also seeking to be fed but without helping with reconstruction (interview with NGO worker, Ziguinchor, 19 May 2001). Arguments ensued, with the visitors being chased away by the returnees, quite contrary to local traditions of hospitality that typically include sharing a meal. Such reconfigurations of local political space and social norms that divide rather than reintegrate different groups are potentially unhelpful in a still fraught social landscape emerging from conflict.

Conclusions

For a small conflict in a geographically confined space, Casamance presents a microcosm of dynamics common to other displacement situations in Africa. To some extent this is due to geography: IDPs are in the majority but the proximity of international borders means that the normative definition of 'refugee' applies to some of the displaced; and other recognisable transnational considerations have come into play including the changing political positions of neighbouring countries *vis-à-vis* the conflict itself. Geography also figures in the physical and psychological distance of Casamance from Dakar – a long road journey even if the new bridge has shortened travel times, and Casamance still feels like a place apart from the rest of Senegal. This situation resonates with the marginality of other areas in Africa where displacement occurs (the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, northeast Nigeria and Mozambique's Cabo Delgado province are current examples). Uneven recognition of IDPs and their plight by their own state is another familiar feature in Casamance. Interventions by aid agencies and NGOs further illustrate issues that go well beyond displacement situations: imperfect, sometimes inadequate knowledge of local circumstances; uneven targeting of needs; failure to recognise or work with local structures, particularly local government; and lack of continuity or sustainability in support. Such problems can be recounted in much development as well as humanitarian activity.

What makes Casamance relatively unusual is that the conflict has unfolded in an otherwise peaceful and functioning state. While this may have some advantages in terms of aid delivery and arguably better general developmental circumstances promoting a gradual shift towards peace, in other ways it may have given the Senegalese government the space only to engage with Casamance when it needs to. The conflict has not posed a serious threat to the state and it has suited successive governments to dismiss it as a minor, domestic problem or as banditry, or largely to ignore it when the situation is relatively calm and bigger political issues are pressing in Dakar. For those displaced however misery is not relative: being in a relatively small number in or from a small area of an otherwise stable country does not make their own losses and traumas any easier to bear.

The lessons recounted for aid policy and praxis are admittedly difficult to apply for the reasons identified at the outset: in a world of humanitarian structures with largely fixed categories and instruments, complexity and nuance are hard for the actors concerned to internalise. States and borders are real in defining people's experiences and particularly their mobilities and geographies, even when their sense of place is challenged by the upheavals of conflict and more subtly when time and demography mean that relationships with place change (Bakewell 2002). These are significant reasons why the displaced themselves often become adept at working with or around national and international structures in creative and entrepreneurial ways, and at manipulating and subverting categories and mustering resources to improve their difficult circumstances (Bakewell 2007; Hartnack 2009; Jansen 2008). In Casamance this significantly includes getting resources to support their return (Evans 2014). A more problematic side emerges however when states in turn play political games with the displaced, subjecting them to yet more caprice and precarity, or when inequitable allocation of aid resources becomes divisive.

Still, the lessons drawn from the preceding analysis can be distilled into advice of sorts. First, after three decades of births, deaths, integration and return among displaced populations it can legitimately be asked who is being counted and why. Without such clarity figures may be (and have been) manipulated or misused for political or material ends. The irony is that the need for such figures is justified partly as a basis on which to assist displaced populations, but in reality the aid available to Casamance refugees and IDPs has been sporadic at best (Evans 2007). Recognition of the self-settled urban IDP population in Casamance, particularly, has been limited and its needs have not been effectively met, as in other such settings (Davies and Jacobsen 2010; Jacobs and Kyamusugulwa 2018). In any case the uncertainties around IDP figures in Casamance are now such that they make meaningful operationalisation of them for assistance purposes very problematic. Identification and

targeting of the 'vulnerable' (with less concern for what the total population may be) is one way forward but risks problems of disempowerment (Krause and Schmidt 2020).

Second, a more grounded understanding of local circumstances is needed. This should incorporate how the displaced view their situation through the lens of local history and development. The risk otherwise is that any aid response is framed by shallow assumptions of alignment with and impacts of a contemporary conflict whereas other, longer-standing local issues related more to isolation (from general infrastructure, services and government) and underdevelopment could be more usefully addressed (Evans 2005). A related issue is sensitivity to the needs of those who have remained and endured the hardships of insecurity and its consequences *in situ* alongside helping the displaced or returnees (Evans 2009). Humanitarian intentions on the part of the international community have however sometimes inadvertently created local schisms, in spite of lessons that should have been learned from other African settings about favouritism towards certain groups over others living in the same space on the basis of normative categorisation (Cole 2018). This is clearly a difficult line to tread but again closer attention to local socio-economic dynamics could help avoid such pitfalls.

A problem underlying both of these points is significantly an institutional one. The interventions of international aid actors are heavily defined and constrained by policies set and managed often at great distance from the realities of the field (in regional offices in Dakar or international headquarters in Geneva, Washington or European capitals). Caught between these and the national (Senegalese) political environment, it is understandable that such actors have little capacity or time to get to grips with the local complexities described, particularly given what may be relatively short-term postings (often only a very few years) of agency staff and even shorter attention spans from the international community. The unfortunate result however is that grassroots knowledge and continuity of institutional memory are lacking among many of those delivering aid. Exceptions include local governments and a few international agencies who have cultivated more grounded understandings and connections, or have worked with the better local NGOs. Anecdotally it appears that more successful interventions are those where long-standing local knowledge and sensitivity to the different parties involved (including elements of the MFDC) have been harnessed. This has often been achieved through the employment or subcontracting (through local NGOs) of Casamançais who have effectively acted as intermediaries between the larger structures of aid and local communities although capable outsiders (including Europeans) on longer-term postings have also effected positive change. This chimes with applied research emphasising the value of developing and harnessing a fine-grained 'political economy' approach to local circumstances in conflict situations (Collinson 2002; Evans 2003a).

Third, greater recognition by the international community of local structures as credible partners, particularly local government (sometimes operating in exile) and planning bodies, would help ameliorate some of the problems described and would show respect for a political landscape that is still somewhat fragile after decades of conflict. A lack of patience and willingness to work with local structures may naturally arise from international agencies' need to achieve results as well as their short-termism. Bypassing these structures is however insensitive and can create upset among the very partners that should be directly involved. The international community talks about the need for better governance, including over local planning and development, but needs to adhere more consistently to its own rhetoric.

Finally, recognition, respect and care for the displaced (and non-displaced), both in exile and on return, go beyond purely humanitarian concerns; they form an intrinsic part of the peace process (Fagen 2009; O'Neill 2009). The broader geopolitical landscape in and beyond Casamance would now seem more propitious to peace than over much of the period of the conflict although arguably other factors may lead to renewed deterioration. Significant displaced populations remain within Senegal or in neighbouring countries even if their need and willingness to return home vary. For many refugees in The Gambia secure 'local integration' may be a better option but this requires the sort of political will recently shown in Guinea-Bissau. In any case the needs of displaced Casamançais

of all kinds cannot be neglected in any credible political settlement to the conflict (which should necessarily involve neighbouring countries), not least because refugee populations may encompass some MFDC elements too. Addressing displacement is not a substitute for a true commitment to sustainable peace; they are flip sides of the same coin.

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¹ Casamance ceased to exist as an administrative region of Senegal in 1984 when it was divided into two new regions, named for their respective capitals: Ziguinchor region to the west, and the much larger Kolda region to the east. The western part of Kolda region was split off as Sédhiou region in 2008. Ziguinchor region more or less equates to what was previously called *Basse-Casamance* (Lower Casamance), Sédhiou region to *Moyenne-Casamance* (Middle Casamance) and Kolda region to *Haute-Casamance* (Upper Casamance). The old names survive in some local and much academic usage and are thus used in the paper.

² This was initially given as *Mouvement des forces démocratiques de Casamance*, without the definite article for the name of the region, taking its name directly from a late colonial era political party. The ‘*la*’ was a later addition and is found in nearly all MFDC documentation that the author holds from about 2000 onwards. The earlier form persists to some extent however, both in the literature and on the ground.

³ As part of local government reforms implemented by Macky Sall early in his presidency, rural communities (*communautés rurales*) – territorial assemblages of villages governed by elected rural councils (*conseils ruraux*) – all became *communes* in 2013.