Chapter 15


Magali Chelpi-den Hamer

15.1 Introduction

Preston (1994) defines refugee education in developing countries as the product of three factors:

- refugees articulate certain demands in the host country;
- UNHCR, government and non-governmental actors offer responses;
- the host government has its own views on how to handle refugee caseloads and shapes the legal framework accordingly.

There is no single blueprint, and there seem to be as many forms of refugee education as there are different contexts. Yet whatever form it takes, it inevitably raises the issue of equivalence between two educational systems. If the content is largely based on the refugees’ home country system, how will the learning be assessed and valued in the host country should some refugees opt for local integration? If it is largely based on the host country system, returnees may experience difficulties in getting their education recognized in their home country (Buckland, 2006; Sesnan, 1999). Diplomas, certificates of achievement, progress report sheets and school booklets are usually part of the educational package in any given system, but what happens when a student shifts from one system to another? Is there a certain form of grade equivalence between the two?
Here I draw on the case of Liberian refugees in Côte d’Ivoire to reflect on fifteen years of educational provision. What type(s) of education have been available to Liberian refugees and how has this changed over time? Why was a parallel system of non-formal education set up in the beginning? What issues of equivalence and certification arose when the decision was made to shift to a formal system? To what extent have these issues been tackled? The study covers the period 1992-2007 and is based on documents, ‘grey literature’ collected on site and interviews with key informants. Respondents included former refugee students, parents, refugee school principals, teachers, Ivorian educational officials and INGO representatives.

15.2 Liberian refugees in Côte d’Ivoire

Liberians were crossing the border to Côte d’Ivoire long before the start of the Liberian civil war in 1989. There are strong ethnic, social and economic links between the two countries; intermarriage is frequent and people would cross over for market days, contractual work in the plantations or to visit family or friends.

At the end of the 1980s, civil war erupted in Liberia and people started fleeing to the neighbouring countries. Some 70,000 Liberians crossed the Ivorian border between December 1989 and March 1990, and by the end of 1990 there were 272,000 Liberian refugees in Côte d’Ivoire. At first, the Ivorian policy was generally positive, largely based on the expectation that the Liberian civil war would not last. Liberians were seen as ‘brothers in distress’ and accepted as refugees on a prima facie basis – the mere fact of being Liberian was enough to be granted refugee status and given asylum (Kuhlman, 2002; Niamke, 2005). Rather than favouring their settlement in camps, former President Houphouët-Boigny encouraged them to settle freely among the Ivorian population. Most refugees settled just across the border, within the

---

15. Special thanks go to the Ivorian Ministry of Education for having authorized this research. Exchanges with the former ‘Inspecteur de l’enseignement primaire’ in Tabou were valuable. Many thanks also go to the ROCARE/ERNWACA representation in Côte d’Ivoire, for connecting the researcher to Ivorian scholars and for sharing locally-produced knowledge. UNHCR Tabou and Abidjan allowed access to their internal archives. The IRC facilitated the researcher’s travel to Tabou. Most of all, thanks go to the refugee informants.
boundaries of the Zone d’Accueil des Réfugiés (ZAR).\textsuperscript{16} The main advantage was that they shared similar characteristics with their hosts (in terms of rural background, ethnic group, language and habits), which eased social interactions. Refugees were generally allowed to farm and work provided they complied with local arrangements (Kuhlman, 2002; Niamke, 2005).

The Ivorian Red Cross and Caritas were the first to provide refugees with basic assistance. UNHCR stepped in and became fully operational in 1991 (Kuhlman, 2002; Niamke, 2005). A collaboration agreement was signed between the government of Côte d’Ivoire and the UNHCR in February 1992 and UNHCR was granted permission to open an office (MAE/UNHCR, 1992). Most refugee education was undertaken by the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA), UNHCR’s implementing partner for emergency education.

In the 1990s, numbers fluctuated as the situation in Liberia worsened or improved and the public perception of Liberian refugees drastically shifted. Refugees were staying longer than expected, they were an additional weight on already strained local resources, and the Taï incident in June 1995 had shown that they could be a real threat to their hosts\textsuperscript{17} (International Crisis Group, 2004). After 1999, Liberians were no longer accepted as refugees on a \textit{prima facie} basis and had to apply individually for refugee status. Newcomers who wished to qualify for UNHCR assistance were requested to settle at the refugee camp of Nicla, near Guiglo (Kuhlman, 2002). \textit{Table 15.1} presents the changes in the refugee caseload during the period from 1996 to 2005.

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|}
\hline
Year & Number of Refugees \\
\hline
1996 & 10,000 \\
1997 & 15,000 \\
1998 & 20,000 \\
1999 & 25,000 \\
2000 & 30,000 \\
2001 & 35,000 \\
2002 & 40,000 \\
2003 & 45,000 \\
2004 & 50,000 \\
2005 & 55,000 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Changes in the Refugee Caseload (1996-2005)}
\end{table}

\textsuperscript{16} The ZAR consisted of four departments bordering Liberia in the west and southwest of Côte d’Ivoire – Danané, Toulepleu, Guiglo and Tabou.

\textsuperscript{17} The Ivorian town of Taï was used as a launch pad for organizing violent raids across the border on the Liberian side. In June 1995, armed groups from Liberia attacked the town and thousands of Ivorians were forced to flee to safer areas. Given that several refugees who had settled in and around Taï had been involved in these cross-border raids, the Ivorian government decided to shift from a ‘no camp’ policy into a policy of organized settlement, to prevent further retaliation. A refugee camp was created near Guiglo, relatively far from the border, to host the refugees who used to live in Taï. However, spontaneous settlement along the Liberian-Ivorian border continued to remain the norm for Liberian newcomers between 1995 and 1999 (Kuhlman, 2002).
Table 15.1  Refugee caseload in Côte d’Ivoire, 1996-2005

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Liberia</td>
<td>327,288</td>
<td>207,014</td>
<td>148,910</td>
<td>135,649</td>
<td>117,749</td>
<td>122,846</td>
<td>43,000</td>
<td>74,180</td>
<td>70,402</td>
<td>39,919</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RoC</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>357</td>
<td>453</td>
<td>510</td>
<td>575</td>
<td>583</td>
<td>539</td>
<td>560</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sierra Leone</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1,089</td>
<td>1,596</td>
<td>1,773</td>
<td>1,779</td>
<td>2,116</td>
<td>360</td>
<td>334</td>
<td>339</td>
<td>339</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rwanda</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>231</td>
<td>266</td>
<td>258</td>
<td>287</td>
<td>302</td>
<td>304</td>
<td>257</td>
<td>247</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DRC</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>181</td>
<td>192</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: UNHCR, 2005

What makes the Ivorian case interesting is that UNHCR phased out assistance twice: the first time between 1997 and 1999 after the end of the first Liberian civil war, and the second time after 2005, following the end of the second conflict.\(^{18}\) Were lessons learned from the first phasing out applied to the second one? The following sections describe the types of education made available to Liberian refugees over the entire period.

15.3 From 1992 to 1999: wide adhesion to a parallel education system

A report commissioned by the UNHCR evaluation and policy analysis unit in 2002 deplored the fact that UNHCR policy in Côte d’Ivoire was unsuited to local integration from the beginning: firstly, it continued care and maintenance for too long, and secondly, it set up an unsustainable parallel education system which forced UNHCR to largely abandon refugee children when it phased out in 1999 (Kuhlman, 2002). Given that the Ivorian government had shown relative openness toward Liberian refugees and willingness to comply with its obligations under the Geneva Convention, this was interpreted as a missed opportunity. In this section, analysis shows that local integration was not an option at the beginning of the 1990s.

A mix of rationales was advanced in the early 1990s to support setting up informal schools for Liberian refugees.

- From the parents’ perspective, sticking to the Liberian curriculum was all the more important as the other option, shifting to the Ivorian curriculum, meant a switch from English to French as prime language of instruction. Given that the anglophone culture was valued by Liberians and the American way of life was viewed as a model by many, parents feared that their children would lose

\(^{18}\) The first Liberian civil war ended in 1996 and was followed by a period of relative stability. In 1999, a second civil war started which came to an end in 2003.
both their ability to speak English and their cultural identity if they enrolled in Ivorian schools. Also, not knowing the language, parents would have been unable to follow what their children were learning at school (Niamke, 2005).

- Age limit was cited as a constraint by refugee youngsters who wished to continue their education in Côte d’Ivoire. Ivorian schools were not accepting children above 12 years old in Grade 1 and above 15 in Grade 6. There was no such limit in the Liberian system (Niamke, 2005).

- From a more pedagogical perspective, Liberian teachers argued, not without reason, that Liberian students, especially the ones enrolled in the higher grades, would have difficulties in integrating into French-speaking classrooms, and hence needed an English language education.

- The Ivorian government anticipated difficulty in integrating a massive influx of Liberian children into the existing infrastructure, given that there were already not enough schools in the ZAR to meet all the Ivorian demands for education. It was therefore not opposed to the setting up of refugee schools, especially since it did not expect this parallel system to last long-term.

- The UNHCR perspective lacked clarity in the beginning. In early 1991, it made a plan to have refugee children absorbed into Ivorian schools, but this never materialized and refugee schools were created instead (Kuhlman, 2002). Why this initial idea was never implemented is unclear. I can only guess that given the lack of infrastructure in the ZAR, the government was reluctant to support a choice in programming that would have negatively affected access to education for Ivorian residents. From a more practical perspective, UNHCR may have chosen not to add another source of tension to an already stressful situation, and if the most vocal refugees wanted to stick to an education system they knew, the wisest move was probably to support existing initiatives.

Some rationales were more emphasized than others (the lack of infrastructure is likely to have weighed the most heavily in 1992 in the decision to set up a parallel system of education), but in the end there was wide agreement to non-formal education by all actors. This situation triggered a form of humanitarian assistance which conferred legitimacy on a parallel education system in Côte d’Ivoire using the Liberian curriculum.
A common mistake is to assume that refugees follow a similar path, including a similar educational trajectory, and hence that they can all benefit from a standard assistance package. In fact, multiple patterns exist. Some refugees might choose to return to their country of origin after some time, others might decide to settle where they are, and others might move on elsewhere. They might enrol in informal schools upon arrival, or choose to integrate into local schools, or simply drop out. This multiplicity of options is rarely taken into account in the design of assistance, and UNHCR support for refugee education usually takes a unitary form. This case study is no exception. There was no single educational pattern for Liberian refugees: some enrolled in the ADRA refugee schools upon arrival, some went to Ivorian schools and registered in first grade, some went to private and/or faith-based institutions and some simply dropped out. Yet support for refugee education took a single form, based on the most common educational path.

In 1992, ADRA started providing primary and secondary education free of charge to refugee children. In 1996-1997, they were serving 75,000 children: 65,000 at primary level and 10,000 at secondary level (ADRA, 1998). The bulk of the teaching was done in English, using the Liberian curriculum, and schools were staffed by professional teachers and volunteers with certain academic requirements. (Volunteer staff had usually at least completed Grade 9 to teach at primary school level, and Grade 12 to teach at secondary school level.) In rural areas, classrooms were built using temporary materials (mud, wood and papoo). In urban areas, buildings were rented. ‘Home-made’ end of year examinations validated the learning for Grades 1 to 8 and 10 to 11 and allowed students to go to the next levels in the ADRA schools. Grades 9 and 12 students were encouraged to take the WAEC examination (Dillard, 2003). For post-secondary education, UNHCR offered a few scholarships to the most deserving students.

In 1994, technical education was undertaken by the German Cooperation and several vocational schools were opened in the main towns of the ZAR (Danané, Guiglo and Tabou). These schools were initially created to offer skills training to out-of-school refugees and were mainly staffed by refugees. In practice, they were open to everyone, and many Ivorian youngsters got free vocational training by enrolling in these institutions. The schools provided short training courses in electricity, mechanics, carpentry, masonry and accounting. They delivered certificates of participation for six-month courses, certificates
of achievement for nine-month courses and certificates of proficiency for eighteen-month courses. These were not formally recognized under the Ivorian system, but the certificate of proficiency was largely perceived by local entrepreneurs as being equivalent to the *Certificat d’aptitude professionnelle* diploma (usually delivered after two or three years of technical education in a given skill); several graduates could therefore practice their skills in the local economy. Entry requirements varied over time. In the beginning, having completed secondary school was necessary to enter these schools, and students had to hold the WAEC Senior School Certificate. After a few years, entry rules were relaxed and everybody could enrol. Different groups were created: students who could not read or write only did practical training; those with basic literacy skills were taught practice and a bit of theory; for students who had gone to junior or senior secondary school, the learning was more theoretical than practical.

The interview fragment below is a good illustration of the internationally-driven education set in place in the 1990s to respond to the refugee situation. It is illuminating in two ways. On the one hand, it shows that such education provision enabled a number of refugees to go quite far in their schooling and to get valuable practical skills that they can use for finding work today. Francis completed his secondary education in the ADRA refugee schools, then started masonry at T-Tech, the vocational school in Tabou, and currently earns his living using this skill. On the other hand, it shows how refugees have to adapt to changes in response, not necessarily the way they want. They have little leverage for shaping a response that is supposedly geared to answering their needs, and they seem to endure change rather than to participate in it.

With the end of the first Liberian war and the start of UNHCR’s repatriation programme, a large number of refugees repatriated to Liberia between 1997 and 1999. There was little funding available for the remaining caseload, and budget cuts led UNHCR to rethink its response in terms of refugee assistance. The Ivorian government was pushed to accept the idea of local integration for the remaining caseload. The following section describes the main difficulties such a shift generated.

15.4 From 1999 to 2001: resisting change

Local integration meant the end of refugee schools, the integration of the remaining children into existing Ivorian structures and a switch from a parallel system to formal education. It was defined as “allowing
refugee children to have access to primary education under the same conditions as nationals” (Ministry of Education, 2001b). It was aimed at refugee children who were likely to stay in Côte d’Ivoire after 2000 and who were not listed for resettlement in a third country, and was initially scheduled to happen in the autumn of 1999 after Liberian children had taken three months of intensive French. It was eventually delayed two years, due to many difficulties in implementation.

“I was 23 in 1994 when I arrived in Côte d’Ivoire. I settled in Boubele. I used to go to school in Liberia, I was in Grade 8, but there was no secondary school in Boubele, it was a small village. So I was forced to enrol to Grade 6 ... I did not know anyone in Tabou where the secondary schools were, so I could not stay there at first. After a while, I managed to stay at a friend’s place, and I could enrol in Grade 8 in the ADRA junior secondary school in Tabou ... In 1999, I took the Grade 12 WAEC exam and I passed. It took a long time to receive our diplomas because of security problems in Liberia but I finally got mine in April 2000 ... At about the same period, the UN said that we now had to integrate and the ADRA schools were closed down. Primary students were asked to enrol into Ivorian schools and if secondary students like us wanted to continue schooling, they had to do so in Liberia ... I did not want to go back. I had lost both of my parents in the conflict, and I had nothing in Liberia, no property. I did not know anyone who could help me, to get to Ghana for instance, to go to university ... So after finishing high school, I stayed in Tabou. I was tutoring several students who were attending private refugee schools. When those schools closed down, I entered the bush and I started fixing charcoal to make a living ... Eventually, T-Tech re-opened in 2005. I had to make a few savings first to be able to pay for my expenses after I would re-enter school, so I joined T-Tech in March 2006 and started studying general construction. I did a 9-month course and I got a certificate of achievement in October 2006. I wanted to go on and continue to proficiency but T-Tech closed and I could not continue ... Presently, I work with masons. Because most of the training at T-Tech was theoretical, I now want to practice the theory. I do not refuse the job, I like it, even if masons do not always give me the money they owe me.”

(Francis A., personal communication, April 2007)

In terms of pedagogical content, there are no major differences in the two systems except the use of a different language of instruction. Both Liberian and Ivorian systems avoid the use of local languages in the lower grades, and children learn French or English at school without necessarily practising it at home. In both systems, primary school lasts
six years and each level’s content is more or less equivalent (Tchagbalé, 2001). Three national examinations are held in the Ivorian system at primary and secondary level, and two in the Liberian system.\textsuperscript{19}

In 1999, Liberian children were expected to switch from English to French as language of instruction. Such a shift was likely to have less impact on the youngest children but raised serious concerns for students who already had a few years of schooling in the refugee schools. The main pitfall indeed was that they risked being set back a few years in their education when switching to the Ivorian system.

In addition to pedagogical concerns, there were also some logistical issues: the timing was too tight, refugees were informed in June 1999 of the plan to integrate in October the same year, and there were too few teachers and insufficient infrastructure to absorb all children. One can only wonder why the option for integration was rushed given such unpreparedness. To give a few figures, it was anticipated that 20,000 Liberian children would integrate and estimated costs amounted to US$16 million (ADRA, 1999b; IRIN, 2001). This included the building of 450 classrooms, 250 teachers’ housing units, sanitation and canteen facilities, the costs of hiring and training teachers, monthly salaries (US$127 per month) and the purchase of teaching equipment (IRIN, 2001).

Côte d’Ivoire could not face this situation alone. Yet, as government officials kept stating that Ivorian schools were financially unprepared to absorb 20,000 Liberian children, donors were slow to commit to a share of the cost (Ministry of Education, 2001\textsuperscript{f}; US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, 1999).

Until the last minute, it was unclear how children would integrate, and the modalities of implementation remained vague. Was UNHCR expecting the youngest Liberian children to enrol in the first two levels of the Ivorian system (CP1 and CP2)? That would have meant finding places for an additional 9,000 students, a quite unrealistic prospect given the existing Ivorian educational infrastructure (ADRA, 1999\textsuperscript{b}). Since the 1999/2000 school year was quickly approaching and there was as yet no plan to build additional classrooms in the existing Ivorian schools, ADRA

\textsuperscript{19} The CEPE is held at the end of Grade 6 (Certificat d’étude primaire élémentaire), the BEPC at the end of Grade 9 (Brevet d’études du premier cycle) and the Baccalaureate at the end of Grade 12, opening the door to post-secondary education. In the Liberian system, the Junior High School Certificate is held at the end of Grade 9 and the Senior High School Certificate at the end of Grade 12.

“In collaboration with the Ivorian government, we matched Ivorian schools statistics with our estimates of Liberian children who were likely to be integrated into Ivorian schools ... We then compared the statistics with the capacity of the existing structures and it came out that there is a general lack of classrooms and teachers to absorb them all. We estimate that there is a need to build 444 additional classrooms and to hire 517 primary and secondary school teachers to cover all the needs ... Most of the additional infrastructure is aimed at integrating refugee children in the two first grades of the Ivorian system, CP1 and CP2. Given that these two levels are already overcrowded in most Ivorian schools, additional classrooms are needed at CP1 and CP2 level for facilitating the integration of refugee children ... The situation is quite different for the other levels. In rural areas, there are fewer children enrolled in the higher levels and there are even fewer refugees likely to enrol. The existing structures are therefore nearly enough to absorb all refugees” (ADRA, 1999d).

It was eventually decided not to switch directly to local integration but to adopt a one-year transition period. ADRA schools were used during that time, which meant that refugees could still be educated in areas where there were no Ivorian schools, but concrete measures were slow to come and the one-year transition period became a two-year transition phase. Even then, at the start of the 2001/2002 school year, many Liberians were still resisting the mere idea of local integration. Transition had failed to ease the shift from one system to another.

Why did the transition fail? In the beginning of the first year of transition (1999/2000), refugee schools were not operated as they had been before. The idea was to “initiate refugee children to the Ivorian curriculum by using French as teaching language”, and French became the main language of instruction (UNHCR, 2001b). Most of the Liberian teaching staff did not have their contracts renewed; francophone educators were hired to help diffuse French language in everyday teaching practice. In September 2001, after two years of transition, less than five per cent of the expected number of Liberian children enrolled in Ivorian schools (UNHCR, 2002). The number increased slightly after sensitization
campaigns on the subject were introduced (UNHCR, 2001c), but local integration was hardly successful and only a minority of Liberians opted for it (2,700 children vs. the expected 20,000). Several factors might explain why the transition failed.

Firstly, most teaching staff in the transition schools were not qualified teachers and had limited pedagogical skills. They were hired by ADRA in December 1999 and went through a one-week accelerated teacher training. They were not bilingual, yet they were put into the difficult position of facilitating the integration of English-speaking students into French-speaking classrooms. The assumption behind was that by teaching an adjusted Ivorian curriculum for a year, it would be easier to integrate the Liberian students into the Ivorian equivalent grades the following year. Such a plan was unlikely to succeed without good pedagogical follow-up.

The number of school-age children in the ZAR had significantly increased in certain areas due to the displacements of population and the emergence of rural hubs which did not exist before the refugee influx. Despite these population dynamics, the carte scolaire remained unchanged in the 1990s, although the number of Ivorian schools no longer matched the number of school-age children in the ZAR. There was no Ivorian school in Gozon or in Nero Village, in the region of Tabou, and when ADRA schools closed down for good there, in 2001, access to education became problematic. Integration may partly have failed because no realistic alternative was found for ensuring the continuity of education in places where Ivorian schools were non-existent or simply too far to reach.

In terms of infrastructure, despite repeated indications by the Ivorian government that it would not be able to absorb all refugee children into the existing schools, financial support for building up additional classrooms did not arrive until late 2001, when UNHCR finally committed to fund the construction of 90 classrooms (UNHCR, 2001b). Such an announcement would have been expected at a much earlier stage, given the number of Liberian children who had to integrate, the limited number of places available in Ivorian schools and the unavoidable delay between words and action. In July 2002, three years after the start of the transition phase, only 55 per cent of the 90 classrooms were completed (Ministry of Education, 2002).
Between 1992 and 2001, UNHCR bore the bulk of the costs of refugee education, but the funds were mainly allocated to teachers’ salaries and basic school equipment for the ADRA schools. There was no budget available for strengthening the capacity of existing Ivorian schools. In hindsight, we can only regret this lack of anticipation in planning.

Last but not least, many refugees resisted integration. The same mix of rationales advanced in the early 1990s resurfaced in 1999-2001 to favour the continuation of refugee schools. Parents feared acculturation and the loss of English because of the use of French in the classroom, and teachers argued that the language switch would have a negative impact on students’ performance. New rationales were also brought up in 1999. Refugees were particularly unhappy not to have been consulted before the decision to shift to integration was made. They strongly felt that they had no choice and that integration was imposed on them. Driven by a certain willingness to preserve their freedom to choose which education system would fit them best, they made a series of propositions to UNHCR. They suggested that a careful assessment be done to determine who would be affected by integration, and that integration only target refugee students who wished to stay in Côte d’Ivoire for a long period of time, while other alternatives should be found for those who planned to return to Liberia (UNHCR, 1999a). They also suggested that bilingual educators be hired in schools where refugee children would integrate. This was quite a hint in favour of multiple responses for refugee education. Their recommendations were listened to but not really taken into account. UNHCR-driven support for refugee education limited itself to a single option, and refugees who did not want local integration were simply told to find other sponsors if they wished to continue their education under the Liberian system (UNHCR, 1999b).

Liberian teachers were among the most vocal opponents of this shift. They were losing many privileges in the process – their jobs, their main source of income, food rations from the closing of World Food Programme school canteens and a degree of prestige among their peers. Not surprisingly, they were keen to defend their status. Some of the former ADRA staff who did not get rehired during the transition phase sued the INGO over payroll and benefit issues (ADRA, 1999c). Some engaged in ‘counter-campaigns’ of information to discourage parents from sending their children to Ivorian schools, and some created parallel schools,
which continued to teach the Liberian curriculum without authorization from the Ivorian educational authorities.

It would however be misleading to limit teachers’ mobilization to the defense of vested rights. Some of them genuinely believed that integration was a mistake under the proposed conditions. The timing was short, the new teaching workforce inexperienced, the needed infrastructure non-existent, and too little pedagogical attention had been given to the issue of equivalence between the two educational systems. Having realized that integration was unavoidable, several refugee teachers lobbied for a gradual phase-out over several years, from 2001 onwards, during which, every new intake of Grade 1 pupils would enter Ivorian schools, while only the pupils enrolled in higher grades in 2001 would continue in the Liberian system. The Ivorian government was also in favour of such a gradual change, one of the central arguments being that parents should not be forced to opt for local integration. It suggested that the ADRA system be maintained for a longer transition period, and then taken on by private Liberian schools officially registered at the MoE for continuing to provide education to refugees who did not wish to “integrate” (Ministry of Education, 2001e).

This gradual transition was never implemented. In August 2001, an agreement protocol was eventually signed between the Ivorian government and UNHCR, under which the government committed to support local integration by directly integrating the youngest refugee children in Grade 1 in Ivorian schools (provided the absorption capacity was enough) and by placing children enrolled in higher grades at equivalent levels (Ministry of Education, 2001a). In practice, there was no standard by which to assess refugees’ educational attainments when they switched to Ivorian schools, ad hoc equivalence was the norm at the primary level, and pupils’ levels were valued differently depending on context. The bulk of the Liberian children were directly put into the first two grades, regardless of the number of years of primary schooling they had had in the refugee system. Rather than ‘integrating’ into the Ivorian system, Liberian children were in fact often restarting their schooling from scratch.

In some cases, students were given the opportunity to catch up a few years if they performed better than their schoolmates, and if they were lucky (having the right teacher and an open-minded school director). “I remember two children from Liberia. When they came to our school, we
had them take a test. One was put in CP1 [Grade 1]; the other was placed in CP2 [Grade 2]. After a few weeks, the teacher came to see me. He told me that the child in CP2 was doing very well and he suggested that he skip a level. We placed him in the following grade, in CE1” (Pedagogic counsellor in Tabou, personal communication, April 2007). In other cases, students were simply set back a few years in their education with the likely consequence that they would drop out if they could not afford the cost of restarting their schooling from scratch.

The abrupt ending of support for secondary education had major consequences for older students. While UNHCR had planned to facilitate Liberian children’s integration into Ivorian primary schools, it had surprisingly made no plan for secondary school students. Refugee secondary education officially disappeared from the picture after 2000, once again sidelined by an international agenda which focused too much on primary education (Chelpi-den Hamer, 2007).

During the first transition year (1999/2000), support for secondary education was downsized to a minimum. UNHCR limited its support to Grade 9 and 12 students enrolled in the ADRA schools, and helped 1,600 students to sit the WAEC examination to obtain Junior and Senior High School Certificates (UNHCR, 1999c). The examinations were held in May 2000, and UNHCR supplied the necessary financial and logistical support, including the payment of students’ examination fees.

Those who were not enrolled in an examination class had very few options and were mainly on their own if they wanted to continue schooling. Direct integration in secondary Ivorian institutions was not possible. No agreement protocol was signed between the Ivorian government and UNHCR for secondary education, and a very high level of written French proficiency was required at these levels (which students usually lacked). What were their options? They could either drop out, or go back to Liberia, or move to a neighbouring anglophone country to continue schooling (provided they had financial means and supportive sponsors), or enrol in one of the private institutions run by refugee teachers which replaced the ADRA secondary schools (closed down in 1999). These ‘écoles clandestines’, as they were commonly labelled, offered an opportunity to continue secondary education under the Liberian curriculum, at Grades 7 to 12. Not surprisingly they came as a relief to many Liberian students who had already invested a lot in
their education. These schools were not receiving external assistance; they were mainly funded by parents’ contributions and tuition fees.

When it was clear that UNHCR was not planning to automatically repeat its support for Grades 9 and 12 students in 2000/2001, several representatives of these ‘écoles clandestines’ approached ADRA and UNHCR staff in early 2001 and asked for support to facilitate sitting the WAEC examination. Demands usually took the form of rather desperate calls: “Your Excellency, we beg that you kindly use your influence to have our children sit for this all important examination at least for the period 2000/2001, by underwriting the cost” (Liberian Refugee Community, 2000). From UNHCR internal correspondence, we can see that there was no clear policy to answer such requests, and opinions conflicted as to the most strategic attitude to adopt. Some UNHCR staff even feared that answering such demands favourably would jeopardize the broader project of integration. Ad hoc responses were eventually formulated, the main advantage being the continuation of the provision of short-term relief for Grades 9 and 12 students, but the clear disadvantage being that of diverging from the official line. In 1999, the central UNHCR administration had made clear that secondary education had come to an end and that refugees who wished to continue their education under the Liberian system had to find other sponsors (UNHCR, 1999b). But in early 2001, the UNHCR Côte d’Ivoire representative emailed her colleagues in Liberia, Guinea, and Ghana about ways to have 846 Liberian students sit the WAEC examination in May the same year (UNHCR, 2001a).

The parallel efforts of the ‘écoles clandestines’ should not be underestimated. In March 2001, four refugee schools (Tabou Bilingual Educational Complex, the Private Refugee Education Secondary School of Tabou, the United Christian Faith Church Institute in Guiglo and the Dr. R.B. Kowa Memorial Night School in Tabou) wrote to the MoE in Monrovia and requested support to have their students sit the Grade 9 and 12 WAEC examination. On 6 March 2001 the deputy minister of education passed their request to the head of the WAEC office in

---

20. On the part of UNHCR, it was a rather last minute attempt to have the educational attainments of the students certified. A formal request had been made to the WAEC Registrar in Accra, Ghana, in early 2001; budgetary provisions had been made at country level to cover the examination costs; and a mock exam was organized in Spring 2001 to check the level of the students who had gone through the ‘écoles clandestines’. Students who passed the mock exam qualified for UNHCR assistance and their exam fees were paid.
Monrovia, and on 7 March 2001 he received a favourable reply: students were allowed to sit the examinations in Harper, in Maryland County, just over the border, provided the schools arranged the necessary logistics for students and examination administrators (the schools had previously agreed to transport the candidates to Harper). Also, as the registration date had passed, the WAEC office in Monrovia granted a grace period of two weeks to have the candidates registered.

Interestingly, UNHCR and refugees’ communication lines ran separately. To judge by the correspondence available, UNHCR Côte d’Ivoire did not seem to have liaised much with Liberian institutions; its main contact was the WAEC Registrar office in Accra. In contrast, Liberian educational district officials, the Liberian MoE and the WAEC office in Monrovia were the main interlocutors for the ‘écoles clandestines’. In 2002, when UNHCR reiterated its support for facilitating the examinations in Côte d’Ivoire despite the fact that the Liberian MoE had officially suspended the giving of WAEC examinations to Liberian refugees outside Liberia after 2000, it did not inform the MoE in Liberia. Instead, it requested the WAEC registrar office in Accra to authorize the administration of the 2002 examination in Tabou “because of the lack of adequate resources to cover transportation to Maryland, feeding and lodging expenses” (Ministry of Education [Liberia], 2002). The chairman of an ‘école clandestine’ informed the MoE in Liberia. Then, the MoE eventually agreed to have the examinations held in Côte d’Ivoire, requesting the head of the Liberian WAEC office to make the necessary arrangements.

What is strikingly inconsistent in this case are the repeated attempts to rescue Grades 9 and 12 students by having them sit the WAEC examination in 1999/2000, 2000/2001 and 2001/2002, compared to the lack of attention given to students in Grades 7, 8, 10 and 11. The next section presents another inconsistent response. Following the resumption of fighting in Liberia, 40,000 Liberians crossed the border to Côte d’Ivoire in 2003 and settled in the region of Tabou. The decision to restore refugee schools came rather unexpectedly. It had been so difficult to introduce the idea of integrating refugee children into Ivorian schools in 1999-2001 that one can only wonder why it was adopted for such a small influx: 75,000 children were benefiting from refugee education in 1997 (ADRA, 1999a), with only a few thousand in 2003 (IRC, 2004).
15.5 From 2003 to 2007: lessons not learned

If lessons had been learned from the 1990s, parents would have been advised to enrol their youngest children in the lower grades in Ivorian schools, private refugee schools would have been the alternative for parents who were not comfortable having their children follow the Ivorian curriculum, and UNHCR would have supported secondary school education to avoid serious certification problems for Liberian youngsters and to limit drop-outs. Sadly, lessons were not learned. Refugee schools were set up in 2003, but only at the primary level, and the option of direct integration for the youngest children was not promoted.

The IRC was UNHCR’s implementing partner for refugee education during that period. It started organizing recreational activities for refugee children in villages where newcomers had settled, and such activities gradually evolved to become a parallel system of education largely based on the Liberian curriculum. In early 2004, 1,600 children were enrolled in the informal schools, most of them very young (IRC, 2004).

In practice, it was difficult to make the distinction between the 2003 newcomers and the remaining caseload from 1999. It is therefore more than likely that the ‘integrated’ refugees also benefited from the assistance geared at the newcomers. Mary’s case is particularly interesting. Between 1998 and 2006, she went through four educational institutions: an ADRA school, a private refugee recreational centre, an IRC school and a private Ivorian institution. Figure 15.1 presents an overview of her educational trajectory. She alternated periods of schooling with periods of non-schooling before eventually integrating into the Ivorian system in Grade 6 (CM2). While a normal trajectory would have enabled her to complete primary schooling in 2004, she lost three years in the process and completed the primary cycle in 2007.

Why did Mary integrate into the Ivorian system in 2006 and not in 2001? The most likely reason is a financial one. The person who had her under custody was jobless between 2001 and 2004 and hence unable to support the costs associated with the shift to the formal system. Another point that deserves attention is that in 2006, Mary directly enrolled in Grade 6 in the Ivorian system, as recommended in her IRC progress report card. This is rather unusual: firstly, pedagogical advice offered by non-formal educational institutions is rarely followed by formal schools; secondly, examination classes are traditionally the most difficult to get into, as they reflect the general performance of the school in the national statistics.
Figure 15.1 Mary’s education trajectory (1999-2007)
When UNHCR switched again to a logic of local integration in 2006 and started to phase out assistance, ending refugee schools was much easier then than in 2001. Firstly, there were fewer refugees to integrate (less than 40,000 in 2006 compared to 123,000 in 2001). Secondly, secondary education had not received any UNHCR support from 2003 to 2006, so the burning issue of high school certification did not arise.
this time. Thirdly, at the primary level, the IRC had several contacts with Liberian education officials in Maryland County which eventually led to a certain form of grade equivalence between the two systems. Children returning to Liberia could in theory enrol in the same grade, provided they produced the IRC student progress report card upon arrival (Ministry of Education Liberia, 2006).

For refugees who wanted to stay in Côte d’Ivoire, there was no formal agreement on grade equivalence between the IRC and the Ivorian system. There was also no transition period to facilitate integration. In some cases, it happened smoothly, as in Mary’s case, but often refugee children could not enrol in Ivorian schools even if they wanted to. The main reason was the structural lack of space in the Ivorian public schools. Liberian parents usually came too late for registration due to lack of information, and the classes were already full. The lack of administrative documents was also mentioned as an entry barrier, yet it might not have been the biggest hindrance. Lack of papers is common in sub-Saharan Africa and many Ivorian children do not have birth certificates when they start school. It is usually tolerated until they reach the first examination class; then their administrative file has to be in order or they cannot sit the Grade 6 examination and continue schooling (Pedagogical counsellor in Tabou, personal communication, April 2007).

15.6 Conclusion

The INEE recommends the implementation of the home country curriculum in ‘short-term’ refugee situations. If refugees become ‘long-term’, it advocates for a refugee education that ‘faces both ways’: educational attainments are recognized in both host and home countries and students’ options are kept open, whether they choose to continue schooling or to enter local labour markets (INEE, 2004). Is therefore the main challenge to distinguish short-term from long-term refugee situations? We should have enough understanding of the complexity of new wars to avoid the mistake of assuming that any crisis will be over soon. UNHCR policy in Côte d’Ivoire was largely based on the expectation that the Liberian civil war would not last. Yet it went on for more than a decade, enough for two generations of children to complete primary school and for many students to reach secondary and post-secondary level.

Lengthy debate on which curriculum to use in response to massive displacements of population may not be the most relevant focus in
our case. Firstly, education has a relatively low effect on the decision to repatriate, contrary to the widespread idea that using the curriculum of the host country may prevent refugees from returning home (Bird, 2003; Buckland, 2006; Sinclair, 2002); secondly, there is the structural inadequacy of both Liberian and Ivorian education systems relative to local labour markets. It would be wrong to assume that Liberian refugees’ ability to find work in Côte d’Ivoire or in Liberia depends on whether they followed English- or French-speaking classes. The transition from school to work is usually quite painful and youth unemployment is a major concern in Côte d’Ivoire and Liberia, with no exception for educated youth. In African countries where data is available, only 5 to 10 per cent of new entrants into the labour market can be absorbed by the formal economy (International Labour Organisation, 2003). What is actually at stake for most youngsters is the portability of employable skills rather than the portability of credentials. Yet the logic of credentials often prevails in the discussions and focuses attention away from more pragmatic issues.

What is striking in this case is the lack of reference in 2003-2007 to the 1992-2001 period. One would indeed expect that a decade of experience would have helped practitioners to be better prepared to respond to a refugee influx, but this was not so. In 2003, practitioners genuinely believed that setting up a parallel system was the wisest solution. In the early 1990s, there was a general agreement by all stakeholders to set up a parallel system of education for Liberian refugees, and the UNHCR initial response reflected that consensus. It indeed created an unsustainable education system unsuited to local integration from the very start, but there was no other realistic alternative. Absorbing 75,000 Liberian children into the existing Ivorian schools was not possible at that time, given the lack of infrastructure in the ZAR. What could have been better planned was the switch from non-formal to formal education in 1999-2001. Instead of a proper transition, this study shows UNHCR shifting the burden of the Liberian children to the Ivorian state, arbitrarily excluding secondary school students from assistance and only partially fulfilling its commitment to strengthening existing infrastructures. Issues of equivalence and certification were only partially tackled and too little pedagogical attention was given to children who already had a few years of schooling in the parallel system. Ad hoc responses were the norm and there was no consensus among the actors involved in refugee education.
Keeping refugees’ options open should be central in the formulation of assistance. Yet internationally-driven support often takes a single form, based on what is wrongly assumed to be the standard pattern. True, given the scale of most refugee influx and the necessity to act fast, it is unlikely that every single individual can be properly attended to, but practitioners can still seek to preserve refugees’ liberty to choose which education system fit them best. This implies acknowledging the multiplicity of refugees’ educational trajectories and taking a more nuanced approach in response, away from a single standard package to a support ‘à la carte’, that takes into account local initiatives and refugees’ individual agencies at the design stage of assistance, and that does not limit support to internationally-driven supply.