

New Places, New Opportunities: Displacement, Return and the Rural Economy in Casamance, Senegal

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Much of the long-term human displacement in Casamance, Senegal - scene of West Africa's longest-running civil conflict - has taken place over relatively small distances in the narrow band of territory between the south bank of the Casamance River and northern border districts of Guinea-Bissau, reflecting the confined area in which the conflict itself has unfolded and its complex local geographies. Following protracted displacement in the 1990s, however, the 2000s have seen an increasingly sustained dynamic of return to the Guinea-Bissau border area of Casamance. This is driven by economic and social desperation among the displaced, improved security conditions, and international aid for reconstruction. Return is, like displacement, characterised by surprisingly complex dynamics operating across relatively small areas. The reoccupation and exploitation by villagers of habitable and agricultural spaces has to accommodate ongoing security concerns (risks of attack, robbery and landmines), new and contested patterns of land tenure, an overgrown landscape and wrecked infrastructure. Economic activity also shows an evolving relationship between rural and urban livelihoods, reflecting strategies among returnees aimed at minimising economic and security risks. Social change, driven by an apparently younger demographic and different expectations among returnees after years away, has further impacted on village life. But arguably the most important dynamic in the return process is the reconfiguration of political structures from sub-village up to regional level. In some cases, entrepreneurs have sought to take advantage of the opportunities provided by return (including uncertain land tenure regimes and access to international aid) to reshape political space in their favour. Building on field research conducted over a decade, the chapter considers the emergent economic landscape of the border area. From a theoretical perspective, it argues that this and other displacement economies can be understood through the concept of relational space, formulated in human geography by David Harvey and Doreen Massey but not previously applied to displacement settings. The value of this concept lies primarily in the ways in which the quotidian dynamics discussed can be situated in political spaces from the local to the global.