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## Re-examining UNTAG's humanitarian role in Namibia's transition: Life stories of former SWAPO exiles during and after repatriation

Tichaona T. Mazarire\*

### *Abstract*

*The personal stories of former SWAPO exiles reveal how UNTAG's limited role in Namibia's transition had lasting effects that shaped the reintegration processes for former SWAPO exiles in the post-colony. The purpose of this paper is to map the life histories of former SWAPO exiles in order to understand their lived experiences of repatriation and its aftermath. These life histories were obtained through semi-structured interviews that mapped their individual trajectories from 1989 through 2018. The life histories mapped in this paper invite the reader to consider the prospect that the benefits of UNTAG's humanitarian support to returning SWAPO exiles have been exaggerated.*

### Introduction

This paper will address Namibia's transition process (and the immediate aftermath) under the United Nations Transition Assistance Group (UNTAG) with particular attention being paid to its mandate for disarmament, demobilization and repatriation (ddr).<sup>1</sup> To fully understand the impact of the repatriation process (UNTAG) and the subsequent economic reintegration of former SWAPO exiles (including People's Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN)<sup>2</sup> ex-fighters), interviews were carried out between September 2017 and August 2018.<sup>3</sup> These interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions. This allowed

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this paper, disarmament demobilization and repatriation will be abbreviated as ddr, whilst Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration will be DDR.

<sup>2</sup> PLAN was the military wing of the liberation movement SWAPO from 1966 through 1989.

<sup>3</sup> Economic reintegration is defined as a move away on the part of the combatant from the livelihood support mechanism associated with militia networks. Instead as part of economic reintegration, individuals are able to obtain *long-term gainful employment (formal or informal)* or initiate other legitimate income generating activities, including agriculture, which allows them to support themselves and any dependents, cf.

the researcher to map the *lived experiences* of the former SWAPO exiles, particularly during repatriation in 1989 and the period covering the early to mid-1990s. These life histories shed light on the actual experiences of former SWAPO exiles and how this period (repatriation) shaped their reintegration in the aftermath of Independence. The paper will also critically examine the views of the leadership and the overall agenda of the organization Namibian Refugees Repatriated in 1989 (NRRI 1989) the main thrust of which is to seek recourse from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). The paper will also examine why the group (NRRI 1989) emerged more than 25 years after Independence, what led to its formation and what this group's emergence signifies with regards to Namibia's reintegration politics, policies and programmes.

## What was UNTAG?

The United Nations Transition Assistance Group (UNTAG)<sup>4</sup> was formed as a result of the Security Council Resolution 435 (1978).<sup>5</sup> United Nations (UN) Resolution 435 (1978) was the culmination of a series of resolutions that had begun in 1966 when the UN General Assembly passed UN Resolution 2145 (1966) which revoked South Africa's mandate to rule over South West Africa as a trusteeship. UN Resolution 435 (1978) therefore, effectively made South West Africa a direct responsibility of the UN<sup>6</sup>, meaning Namibia's transition to Independence became the primary responsibility of the UN. Namibia, therefore, became "a genuine and singular case of United Nations concern, manifested also by the creation of the United Nations Council for Namibia and the United Nations Institute for Namibia."<sup>7</sup>

According to Niraj Duggal, UNTAG was established to assist the work of the United Nations secretary general's special representative.<sup>8</sup> UNTAG was considered a unique operation at the time, consisting of both military and civilian components.<sup>9</sup> According to Robert Muggah UNTAG was the first DDR operation authorized by the UN Security Council (UNSC).<sup>10</sup>

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Stina Torjesen "Towards a theory of ex-combatant reintegration", *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development*, 2 (3), 2013: 1-13 (2).

<sup>4</sup> UNTAG was created through UN Resolution 632 (1989) on 16 February 1989.

<sup>5</sup> Niraj Duggal, (ed.), *Namibia: A Direct United Nations Responsibility*, Lusaka, United Nations Institute for Namibia, 1987: 216.

<sup>6</sup> Gwinyai Albert Dzinesa, *Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration in Southern Africa. Swords into Ploughshares?*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017: 98.

<sup>7</sup> Henning Melber, *Understanding Namibia. The Trials of Independence*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2014: 8.

<sup>8</sup> Duggal. *Namibia*. The Special Representative to the UN Secretary General Marthi Attisarhi was to oversee the Namibia's transition to Independence.

<sup>9</sup> Duggal, *Namibia* : 216.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Muggah, "Introduction: The Emperor's Clothes?", in: idem, (ed.), *Security and Post-Conflict Reconstruction: Dealing with Fighters in the Aftermath of War*, London, Routledge, 2008: 5. It is important to note that at the time DDR as a concept had not been developed and more specifically UNTAG's mandate was limited to disarmament, demobilisation and repatriation (ddr). Therefore reintegration was not part of

According to Henning Melber, UNTAG had supervisory powers during the process to transform Namibia into an internationally accepted sovereign state.<sup>11</sup> Melber states that UNTAG had about 6,700 members from 109 countries, 4,300 were from the military, 1,500 were police monitors and the remaining 900 were civilians, the total budget allocated by the UNSC for UNTAG to fulfil its mandate was US\$ 373,4 million.<sup>12</sup> According to Duggal, UNTAG's military and civilian components were all under the overall direction of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General (Marti Ahtisaari), who reported to the UN Secretary-General, who in turn briefed the Security Council on the progress of the transitional process.<sup>13</sup> According to Dzinesa, UNTAG had a specific mandate to disarm and demobilize the country's armed groups as part of the overall strategy to create secure conditions for Namibia's transition to Independence.<sup>14</sup> The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) assisted UNTAG through the voluntary repatriation of civilians (including disarmed PLAN fighters) to Namibia to participate in Namibia's Independence elections.<sup>15</sup> Dzinesa argues that the failure of UNTAG's mandate to assist with the long-term reintegration of demobilized combatants meant Namibia's DDR was not an integrated process and so that there was a gap between Disarmament, Demobilisation (DD) and Reintegration (R).<sup>16</sup> Moreover, UNTAG did not ensure the continuity of the DD process to the R through collaboration/cooperation with local bodies.<sup>17</sup> In essence one could say that as UNTAG's mandate was limited in scope, responsibility for reintegration lay solely with the newly elected Swapo Party<sup>18</sup> led government, thereby, allowing that government to practice partisan politics with regards to reintegration policies.<sup>19</sup>

Consequently, the absence of an impartial international body such as UNTAG (under the auspices of the UN) created conditions by which patriotic history could begin to dictate and influence reintegration policies (in post-colonial Namibia) that alienated and largely

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UNTAG's mandate at the time. However, authors like Muggah point to the significance of UNTAG being the first UN-sanctioned operation that included Disarmament and Demobilization and this gave Namibia international significance. The only other DDR programme similar to Namibia's is Zimbabwe's post-conflict demilitarization in 1980, however this process was managed almost exclusively by the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth. The UN did not have a central role as it did in Namibia.

<sup>11</sup> Melber, *Understanding*: 10.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.: 15,

<sup>13</sup> Duggal, *Namibia*: 216.

<sup>14</sup> Dzinesa, *Disarmament*: 97.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.: 97f.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> For the purposes of this paper Swapo Party refers to the ruling party in post-Independence Namibia (post-March 21, 1990), whilst SWAPO refers to the pre-independence liberation movement that led the liberation struggle from 1966 through 1989.

<sup>19</sup> The newly elected Swapo Party led government considered former South West Africa Territorial Force (SWATF) and Koevoet fighters as having fought on the 'wrong side' of the liberation struggle and therefore did not deserve to be assisted economically in the post-colony.

excluded former South West Africa Territorial Force (SWATF) and Koevoet ex-fighters.<sup>20</sup> Patriotic history is a history that is narrow in scope, antagonistic towards academic historiography, re-emphasizes colonial exploitation as well as colonial brutalities and celebrates violent resistance.<sup>21</sup> Through emphasising this political discourse, Swapo Party was able to implement exclusionary reintegration programmes and policies such as the Development Brigade<sup>22</sup>, the *Peace Project* of the late 1990s and the Veterans Act (no.2) of 2008. The Veterans Act (no.2) of 2008 was unambiguously rigid in cementing the 'us' versus 'them' divide that has dominated Namibia's political landscape since Independence in 1990.<sup>23</sup> More pertinently, the rapid withdrawal of UNTAG and its minimalist approach of focusing on security over development, that is, its focus on DD meant the most vulnerable group of repatriated Namibians (SWAPO exiles) were left destitute for years whilst the Swapo Party led government was trying to formulate comprehensive reintegration programmes in the early 1990s. Many of the reintegration initiatives the Swapo Party led government introduced in the early 1990s were developed on a re-active basis or on a trial and error basis while many former SWAPO exiles were desperately trying to make ends meet with limited or no active assistance from the state.<sup>24</sup> In this regard, UNTAG's rapid withdrawal had far-reaching, unintended consequences for reintegration policies in the post-colony and a long-lasting impact on the lives of would-be beneficiaries such as former SWAPO exiles. The life histories explored in this chapter were particularly impacted by the vacuum left by UNTAG's minimalist approach, especially as they

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<sup>20</sup> SWATF was an auxiliary component of the South African Defence Force from 1977 to 1989. Whilst KOEVOET was a counter-insurgency unit of the South West Africa Police. It was made up of both white South African Police officers and Africans recruited locally from Namibia.

<sup>21</sup> Terrence Ranger, "Nationalist historiography, patriotic history and the history of the nation: The struggle over the past in Zimbabwe", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 30 (2), 2004: 215-234.

<sup>22</sup> The Development Brigade (later called Development Brigade Corporation) was a skills training scheme introduced in the 1990s which was meant to counter the skills deficit amongst PLAN ex-fighters through skills training with the ultimate goal of the skills training translating into job opportunities. Cf. Lali Metsola, "The struggle continues? The spectre of liberation, memory politics and "war veterans" in Namibia", *Development and Change*, 41 (4), 2010: 589-613 (592).

<sup>23</sup> Namibian Parliament Veterans Act no. 2 of 2008, <http://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/ELECTRONIC/85755/96197/F550138196/NAM85755%202013.pdf>. The 'us' versus 'them' divide is the notion that the nation is divided into two sides, that is, Swapo party and its supporters on one side and South Africa apartheid regime and local collaborators on the other side.

<sup>24</sup> Rosemary Preston, "Integrating fighters after war: reflections on the Namibian experience, 1989-1993", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 23 (3), 1997: 453-472 (463-464). After PLAN combatants staged protests in 1991 over their economic woes, the Namibian government responded by paying a once-off severance package of R1400 each. The process itself was mismanaged, with reports of undeserving individuals receiving this money, meanwhile close to 40% of eligible PLAN ex-fighters did not receive this amount. In comparison in 1991/1992 the South African government paid out a once off payment of 12,000 Namibian dollars (US\$ 2,600) to former Koevoet and SWATF to cushion them in the transition as they looked for employment (Dzinesa, *Disarmament*: 111). Interestingly there is no record of SWAPO exiles who were not in PLAN receiving the once-off severance package. It appears that from the beginning the focus was on PLAN fighters, evidently other programmes launched later like the Development Brigade primarily recruited PLAN ex-fighters.

experienced the consequences of the gap that was there between the UN-sanctioned DD process and the eventual reintegration programmes spearheaded by the Namibian government. The short to long-term impact of the failure to integrate the DD and R processes is best seen in the life histories of former SWAPO exiles, who narrate their experience of UNTAG (repatriation) and life in the aftermath of Independence under the Swapo Party regime. The paper by no means apports blame to either Swapo Party or UNTAG, but rather attempts to articulate the *lived experiences* of former SWAPO exiles who were impacted by both UNTAG's limited mandate and Swapo Party's post-colonial reintegration policies (or the absence thereof). Therefore, it becomes pertinent to examine these life histories as shown below.

## Stories of SWAPO exiles' individual experiences of repatriation and its aftermath

### Repatriation process

The return of SWAPO exiles was managed by the UNHCR which oversaw the repatriation of close to 40,000 Namibian exiles.<sup>25</sup> The majority (but not all) of these refugees were SWAPO exiles. Under UNTAG the UNHCR's mandate was to facilitate the return of all refugees to their home communities in Namibia.<sup>26</sup> This process was bound to be challenging for the exiles, as many had been absent from their home communities for many years. Whilst some exiles were keen to be reunited with their families others were reluctant or hesitant for various reasons, with uncertainty over their remaining families' political affiliations being the most frequently mentioned reason in the interviews conducted for this research project.<sup>27</sup> Moreover the communities they left, that is families, friends and neighbours, also had to deal with the social and economic realities of accommodating former exiles.<sup>28</sup> In fact, Randolph Rhea suggests that reintegration should be considered as a two way process that involves both ex-fighters/refugees and the communities, as the pace of reintegration of former fighters or refugees will to a large extent depend on the ability and readiness of communities to absorb them back into society.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> John Baloro, "The law and pattern of the repatriation of Namibian and South African refugees: possible lessons for a programme of repatriation of Mozambican refugees", *The Comparative and International Law Journal of Southern Africa*, 28 (1), 1995: 113-140 (115).

<sup>26</sup> Harlech-Jones, Brian, *A New Thing? The Namibian Independence Process, 1989-1990*, Windhoek, Printech, 1997: 85; Ellen Namhila, *The Price of Freedom*, Windhoek, New Namibia Books, 1997: 149-152.

<sup>27</sup> See also Kari Miettinen, Maria Lähteenmäki and Alfred Colpaert, "Exile and repatriation: experiences from the Zambezi region, Namibia", *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, 35 (1), 2020, 19-39; Namhila, *Price*: 148. Some of the SWAPO exiles interviewed mentioned that they were hesitant to return to their families after repatriation as they were not sure whether they were pro-SWAPO or pro-Democratic Turnhalle Alliance (DTA) which was closely aligned to the South African apartheid regime.

<sup>28</sup> Collin Gleichmann, "Returned Exiles in Namibia: The Dynamics of Reintegration and Political Change", unpubl. MA thesis, University of Hamburg, 1997: 50.

<sup>29</sup> Randolph Wallace Rhea, *A Comparative Study of Ex-combatant Reintegration in the African Great Lakes region: Trajectories, Processes; & Paradoxes*, Washington, World Bank, 2014: 19.

Meanwhile, the repatriation and transition process itself was highly organized and well resourced. For instance, the UNHCR was supported by several UN agencies including the World Food Programme (WFP)<sup>30</sup>, World Health Organization (WHO), United Nations Children Emergency Fund (UNICEF)<sup>31</sup> and the United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).<sup>32</sup> In addition to these UN agencies, UNHCR brought in the Council of Churches in Namibia (CCN) as a local partner, both to help with the repatriation process and to provide extra manpower as the UNHCR itself was understaffed. Moreover, the Council of Churches of Namibia (CCN) was trusted by SWAPO exiles as it had consistently supported SWAPO throughout the liberation struggle.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, on paper UNTAG had a formidable strategy for carrying out its mandate, however, one should not accept unquestioningly UNTAG's 'preparedness' to execute its mandate. The success of UNTAG's repatriation process is better measured through the life stories of SWAPO exiles rather than through the reports or articles that asserted or declared the process as a success.<sup>34</sup>

One of the problems of relying on UN reports and research that focused on the major actors during the transition period<sup>35</sup> to gauge the success or failure of an operation the size of UNTAG's repatriation process is the fact that the *lived experiences* of direct participants such as SWAPO exiles are not reflected and often overlooked. Thus the opportunity to learn from such experiences was missed and did not become available to policymakers and researchers. For instance, not much has been written about the minimal support SWAPO exiles received from UNTAG in particular the very modest transitional economic assistance. Transitional economic assistance has been used to describe reinsertion packages when referring to ex-fighters and reinstallation/cash grant (in more recent times) when referring to refugees. Although the terms "reinsertion package" and "reinstallation/cash grant" emerged in the 1990s in the 21<sup>st</sup> century respectively, the

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<sup>30</sup> The WFP provided 9 000 tonnes of food (Gwinyai Albert Dzinesa 2006, "Disarmament, Demobilization, Reintegration, Repatriation and Resettlement (DDRRR) in Zimbabwe, Namibia and South Africa", unpubl. PhD, Johannesburg, University of the Witwatersrand, 2006: 216).

<sup>31</sup> UNICEF provided US \$250 000 to the repatriation process (ibid.).

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. On the relationship between CCN and SWAPO during the liberation struggle, see also Dzinesa, *Disarmament*; Marion Wallace with John Kinahan, *A History of Namibia: From the Beginning to 1990*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2011. Interestingly, Harlech-Jones notes that in May 1989 during a United Democratic Front (UDF) meeting, Justus Garoeb (leader of the Damara Council) questioned the neutrality of CCN in the repatriation process as he alleged that it was biased in favour of SWAPO. (Harlech-Jones, *New Thing*: 73).

<sup>34</sup> Lise Howard, argues that UNTAG was a success based on interviews with major actors and unpublished UN reports (Lise Howard, "UN Peace implementation in Namibia: The Causes of Success", *International Peacekeeping*, 9 (1), 2002: 99-132). Howard also cites Namibia's generally peaceful environment between 1990 and 2001 as an indicator of UNTAG's success story which created conditions that have created the peaceful co-existence between former foes in post-independence Namibia. However, there is no mention of interviews done with refugees who were repatriated in 1989 with regards to what their experience was or what impact the repatriation process had on their individual lives.

<sup>35</sup> E.g. Howard, "UN Peace".

practice of providing transitional economic assistance to ex-fighters and refugees had already been in existence as early as 1980, particularly in neighbouring Zimbabwe.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, although this study adopts these terminologies from modern reintegration literature, the practice itself is not new to reintegration. Reinsertion packages or reinstallation/cash grants are a form of transitional economic assistance meant to cushion (in this case) returnees in the interim, whilst they are looking or waiting for long-term and consistent forms of income e.g. jobs or comprehensive reintegration packages from DDR sponsors.<sup>37</sup> According to Anton Baare:

cash in the form of lump sums, cash installments or vouchers are considered to be an effective form of transitional economic assistance and recent studies have proven this to be true.<sup>38</sup>

Jairo Munive nods in this direction when he states that:

capital-centred DDR activities are among the best performing ones. Capital-centric intervention refers to start-up grants, in-kind capital transfers and cash injections. In Burundi, for instance, a reinsertion allowance was offered for eighteen months, with the amount depending on rank. A business start-up grant worth about \$US1,200 was also offered. Comparing the results for those who received it with those who did not, researchers found a large reduction in poverty among the former.<sup>39</sup>

In essence Munive argues that in the absence of some form of capital-centric intervention (which in this dissertation is referred to as transitional economic assistance) poverty is likely to continue amongst those individuals who are going through the reintegration

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<sup>36</sup> In 1980 the Zimbabwean government gave a Z\$400 once-off payment demobilization grant as a form of transitional economic allowance to former exiles who had not qualified or opted not to join the newly formed Zimbabwe National Army (ZNA) (Dzinesa, *Disarmament*: 42). Also at the end of March 1980, in accordance with a proposal made by the Prime Minister-designate of Zimbabwe, the Secretary-General of the United Nations requested the High Commissioner to co-ordinate, for an initial period, a United Nations programme for the rehabilitation of returning refugees and displaced persons within Zimbabwe. A United Nations interagency team, led by UNHCR, travelled to Zimbabwe and, in consultation with the new Government, prepared a programme centring on the *reinstallation* needs for up to 660,000 returnees and internally displaced persons over a 12-month period to April 1981. These needs, including immediate assistance in settlement and agriculture, would cost up to \$110 million. In addition, various food needs were estimated at 113,000 tonnes. On 13 April 1980, the High Commissioner appealed to the international community for resources to make it possible for the Government of Zimbabwe and the United Nations system to respond to these urgent needs (UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees*, 24 September 1980, A/35/12, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae68c380.html>).

<sup>37</sup> DDR sponsors could be UNDP, NGO's, donor countries (e.g. Japan) or governments sponsoring their own DDR programmes.

<sup>38</sup> Anton Baare. "An Analysis of Transitional economic Reintegration", Swedish Initiative for Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (SIDDR), 2005: 18, <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.465.4709&rep=rep1&type=pdf>

<sup>39</sup> Jairo Munive, "Unpopular capital interventions deserve a chance. Rethinking Theories of Change in DDR programs", Danish Institute for International Studies, 2016: 4, [https://pure.diiis.dk/ws/files/428685/Rethinking\\_theories\\_of\\_change\\_for\\_web3.pdf](https://pure.diiis.dk/ws/files/428685/Rethinking_theories_of_change_for_web3.pdf)

process.<sup>40</sup> In Namibia's case, this would be referring to SWAPO exiles who were repatriated between 1989-1990. UNHCR's transitional economic assistance has been viewed as having been far from adequate. The process appears to have been rushed and not well thought through. The failure to provide basic necessities such as proper clothing for returning SWAPO exiles was already in a way indicative of the UNHCR's misplaced priorities, which placed more emphasis on transporting and returning SWAPO exiles to their home communities than on their actual welfare. No one felt this neglect more than the SWAPO exiles themselves which makes it all the more important to get first-hand accounts of what really transpired during and after repatriation.

## Stories of repatriation and its aftermath

Saki (not real name) left for exile from Ovamboland in 1979 at the age of 13. Upon arrival in Angola, he was classified as a minor and he was sent to Kwanza Sul (where he remained until the age of 15). At Kwanza Sul, he went on to complete his primary school and afterwards in 1981 at the age of fifteen he received a scholarship to complete his high school in Czechoslovakia.<sup>41</sup> Saki was enrolled into a technical high school and assigned to train as a fitter and turner, which he completed in 1986.<sup>42</sup> Upon obtaining his high school diploma, Saki and three other SWAPO exiles returned to Angola; noting on his arrival:

After arriving back in Luanda in August 1986, I joined Ndilimani [SWAPO traditional music band] as a rhythm guitarist and as a dancer. So we performed in Angola at SWAPO rallies at the camps especially when the president [of SWAPO] is coming to address. We also went to Congo, Kinshasa in 1987. We also went to Congo Brazzaville where we recorded an album. In 1987 August after returning from Congo Brazzaville we were told we would be going for military training. In December 1987 we started our [military] training and six months later we completed the training. I was trained as a communication officer. After training, I was assigned first south of Kunene river and later reassigned east of Ondjiva [in Angola]. We were supposed to monitor enemy movements from October 1988 to March 1989.<sup>43</sup>

Prior to implementation of UN Resolution 435 (1978) Saki did not engage in battle with the SADF, however, he was part of the contingent of PLAN fighters who were attacked by the SADF on April 2, 1989 whilst they were retreating back to Angola.<sup>44</sup> This was the only incident where he engaged in actual combat. After being disarmed and demobilized by the UN in Angola, Saki, along with other SWAPO exiles, was handed over to UNHCR for repatriation. Having presented Saki's life history prior to repatriation, it is now imperative to analyse his experience of UNTAG's UNHCR's repatriation process and how it reflects on UNTAG and the idea that it was a UN success story.

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<sup>40</sup> Munive, "Unpopular".

<sup>41</sup> Saki transcript 15: 2 (18/07/2018).

<sup>42</sup> Saki transcript 15: 2 (18/07/2018).

<sup>43</sup> Saki transcript, 15: 4 (18/07/2018).

<sup>44</sup> Saki transcript, 15: . 3 (18/07/2018).

Saki laments the failure to provide for even the most basic of needs such as clothing and the inadequacy of the transitional economic assistance they received from UNHCR which was wholly inadequate to prepare for life in the 'real' world. In fact, Saki believed that UNHCR would cover their welfare needs whilst there were waiting for something more substantial to come through from Swapo Party. Saki narrates:

... we were called and told you are not going back home as soldiers but as refugees...for me that was a disaster, I did not like it...we had questions regarding this scenario but we were told implement first and ask questions later...a day before you go you went to a place where there was a bundle of clothes...unfortunately, I only found a blue T-shirt that was too short and a short (pants) as many of us could not find a trousers...I resorted to nature for a belt, taking the bark of a tree to tie my shorts as we were not allowed to take our military belts.<sup>45</sup>

Indeed, the process of repatriation in Angola was a humiliating one for Saki who felt that resources would have been better dedicated to meeting his most basic needs could rather than to the somewhat 'disorganized' process of repatriation. Saki, like many other SWAPO exiles, was expecting, at least in the interim, that whatever UNHCR could not do for them Swapo Party would surely provide, especially economic assistance. Therefore, there was an expectation that Swapo Party would take care of their welfare once they were released from the temporary camps.<sup>46</sup> For Saki, after he was released from the camp in Ongwediva into the care of his sisters, he was not bothered by the paltry transitional economic assistance he received from UNHCR as he believed that Swapo Party would soon call him, he recalls:

... we were used to the arranged life in camps in exile, so I thought SWAPO would organize something for us. I was expecting the SWAPO government or party to call us to assign us either to school or to work. We knew after Independence we had to work but expected to be called and SWAPO to give us new assignments. I thought since I was trained in communication in the military I would be called to join the new army but that did not happen...<sup>47</sup>

It becomes evident from Saki's situation that living in SWAPO's camps in exile created a certain level of dependency on the part of SWAPO exiles towards SWAPO that made many exiles like Saki incapable of thinking independently or taking initiatives that could improve their livelihood.<sup>48</sup> Arguably, with both UNHCR and Swapo Party failing to provide (economically) for the exiles, the families and communities of exiles ended up doing so. At this stage, Saki and other former SWAPO exiles found themselves helpless and eventually

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<sup>45</sup> Saki transcript, 15: .4 (18/07/2018).

<sup>46</sup> The temporary camps were reception centres run by CCN on behalf of UNHCR which housed repatriated former SWAPO exiles temporarily whilst they waited for family, relatives or friends to come and take them to their home communities.

<sup>47</sup> Saki transcript 15:5-6 (18/07/2018).

<sup>48</sup> Thinking independently was discouraged and considered suspicious in exile by SWAPO henceforth the dependency syndrome many SWAPO exiles showed soon after Independence with the phrase 'SWAPO will call me' being used by many SWAPO exiles who found themselves unemployed and without an income after repatriation (cf. Martha Akawa Akawa, Martha, *The Gender Politics of the Namibian Liberation Struggle*, Basel, Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2014: 120).

began to face a backlash from their families and communities who felt they were a strain on their own limited resources. Based on Rhea's suggestion of reintegration being a two way process between returnees and communities (see page 6 -7), there is a need to prepare local communities with the required skills and resources to be able to cope with such an influx of returnees whom in most cases were unemployed.<sup>49</sup> For instance there was clearly a lack of adequate economic resources on the part of families of former SWAPO exiles. Moreover, rural and urban communities to where some of the former SWAPO exiles returned, lacked job opportunities. Therefore, there was pressure on former SWAPO exiles to move to bigger cities like Windhoek to look for employment. Poverty or shortages were not new to non-white Namibian communities as this was a wider societal problem and a consequence of two centuries of colonial occupation (including apartheid) that even the *Remainers* had been battling with throughout South African occupation.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, communities and families of former SWAPO exiles were not trained (i.e. provided with the social skills) by either the UNHCR or its local partner CCN to handle former SWAPO exiles who may have experienced war trauma or other war-related issues.<sup>51</sup> Such initiatives would not necessarily have been the responsibility of Swapo Party as it came to power after Independence in March 1990, but rather that of UNHCR (under the ambit of UNTAG) or its local partners such as the Council of Churches of Namibia (CCN). Moreover, even if that had not been the case, normally the transitional economic assistance that SWAPO exiles received from UNHCR camps would have cushioned them for at least a year.<sup>52</sup> However, this was not the case, as the pot, bag of beans, R10, panga and a few food tins distributed at the reception camps/centres could barely sustain them beyond a few weeks. Saki recalls his despondency as his family and community's patience began to wane:

...then it started that we started getting frustrated and our families and community also started getting frustrated at our continued unemployment and hope that SWAPO would come to take us and give us jobs.<sup>53</sup>

Saki was not alone in being supported by friends and family who were beginning to become frustrated at the slow pace of economic reintegration.<sup>54</sup> Helvis, a Cassinga survivor (who was also interviewed), also faced economic hardship for the first two years after repatriation. She explains:

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<sup>49</sup> Rhea, *Comparative Study*: 19.

<sup>50</sup> 'Remainers' is a term that is used widely to refer to Namibians that did not go into exile during the liberation struggle (1966–1990).

<sup>51</sup> Therefore economic scarcity and the absence of requisite skills to deal with SWAPO exiles led families and communities to quickly lose patience with SWAPO exiles adding to the frustrations that the exiles themselves were already experiencing at the slow pace of their economic reintegration in the aftermath of repatriation.

<sup>52</sup> Although the UN provided cash of R10, this barely covered the cost of living at the time for more than a few days. And cash was particularly important as the food items they received (from UNHCR) were limited to the canned goods and a bag of beans which were unlikely to last beyond a few weeks.

<sup>53</sup> Saki transcript 15: 5 (18/07/2018).

<sup>54</sup> Long-term unemployment among former SWAPO exiles meant they remained economically dependent on family and friends, leading eventually to frustration among these individuals and the subsequent break down of relationships.

When we came in 1989 the UN gave us R10, a hoe, pot without a lid and then we were sent away without a proper reintegration plan... After we were sent away I got help from friends, comrades [who got jobs first] and neighbours. These people eventually got tired and began [derogatory] name calling and accusing us of failing to get jobs...<sup>55</sup>

Whilst Helvis (above) may have initially had financial and material assistance from friends and family, Ellise, a fellow former SWAPO exile, endured several months of hardship after being repatriated. She sums up the attitude of society towards her thus:

...I did not get any help from anyone after repatriation, people did not even budget for us, *in fact, many assumed that we were already dead*. They were avoiding us and they simply did not understand us especially because we came back with nothing and were poor.<sup>56</sup> (emphasis added)

These accounts raise another subject worth discussing; the absence of a safety net for repatriated SWAPO exiles. Either a reinsertion/transitional economic package from the UN or a comprehensive reintegration package from the newly elected Swapo Party government would have cushioned unemployed SWAPO exiles in the short to long-term.<sup>57</sup> For instance, according to Dzinesa, the Zimbabwean government gave a Z\$400 once-off demobilization grant as a form of transitional economic allowance to former exiles who had not qualified or opted not to join the newly formed Zimbabwe National Army (ZNA).<sup>58</sup> Such assistance was not provided in Namibia. Although the Swapo Party led government had moved swiftly to form the integrated Namibian Defence Forces (NDF) (in the spirit of reconciliation) and institutions like the Development Brigade in the immediate aftermath of Independence, the majority of former SWAPO exiles (including respondents to this interview) were not recruited into the Development Brigade nor seconded to the NDF.<sup>59</sup> This meant that those who did not get a 'call' from Swapo Party to come and serve in the NDF or Development Brigade were left on their own to survive without comprehensive transitional economic assistance until they had secured employment. This has led to former SWAPO exiles apportioning blame to both the UN and Swapo Party for not having done enough during the transitional period and the immediate aftermath. Helvis points to those whom she blames for her economic woes in those difficult years after repatriation:

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<sup>55</sup> Helvis transcript 5: 4,5 , 7 (23/02/2018).

<sup>56</sup> Ellise transcript 4: 6 (05/02/2018).

<sup>57</sup> A safety net in the form of a gratuity payments would have been a lifeline and rescued former unemployed SWAPO exiles from extreme poverty in the 1990s and 2000s. This safety net arguably only became available through the passing of the Veterans Act of 2008, which for the first time had a provision for gratuity payments to be paid to veterans of the liberation struggle. In spite of the legislation's limitations it is a form of safety net that continues to be a lifeline to the poorest among SWAPO exiles.

<sup>58</sup> Dzinesa, *Disarmament*: 42.

<sup>59</sup> From the estimated 45,000 Namibian exiles who returned, only 10,000 (including ex-SWATF and ex-Koevoet) were absorbed into the NDF (Metsola, "Struggle": 592). Meanwhile only 4,000 PLAN ex-fighters (mostly men) of the eligible 16,000 had been recruited into the Development Brigade by 1992 (Rosemary Preston, D. Kandando, C. Solomon, J. Andima and R. Bogosi, *The Integration of Returned Exiles, Former Combatants and Other War-Affected Namibians*, Windhoek, Namibian Institute for Social and Economic Research, 1993: 14; Preston, "Integrating": 465).

...I blame the UN, the government and SWAPO. They were all responsible for our well-being. When we came here, we came under the UN. After we arrived here SWAPO had offices, *they were supposed to look after us*, but they never did. All three did not do their job... (emphasis added)<sup>60</sup>

This period is likely to have been the most trying period for many former SWAPO exiles, and the life story of Selma (not real name) a former SWAPO exile and PLAN ex-fighter who was married to another PLAN ex-fighter, Jeremiah (not real name) exemplifies how the repatriation and post-repatriation period led to untold suffering for many. According to Preston et al., the majority of former SWAPO exiles found themselves in a hostile economic environment where family and friends could only provide minimal support.<sup>61</sup>

Selma and her husband Jeremiah were one such couple who lived in a very hostile economic environment as described by Preston et al.<sup>62</sup> Selma is a female PLAN ex-fighter whose life history was mapped for the purposes of this paper. She was born in Ohangwena region and her highest educational qualification prior to going into exile was grade 10. She left Namibia in 1985 for exile in Angola where she received infantry military training at Tobias Hainyeko Training Centre (THTC) and afterwards was trained as a political commissar at Juba military camp before being deployed to the front to fight under PLAN. Prior to repatriation, Selma was able to obtain her grade 12 certificate in Lubango through night school, and that was the level of education she had reached when she returned to Namibia. Selma was repatriated to Namibia on the 14<sup>th</sup> of July 1989 from Juba military camp in Angola and by then she had a boyfriend (Jeremiah), whom she married in September 1989 soon after repatriation. Jeremiah was also a PLAN ex-fighter who had been trained in Libya as a pilot in the 1980s.<sup>63</sup>

After repatriation and their subsequent marriage, the harsh economic realities of post-colonial Namibia began to dawn on Selma and her husband. According to Selma things became difficult socially and economically after the birth of her first son Lukas (not real name) in 1990. By then her mother-in-law, who was accommodating them (in rural Northern Namibia), had begun to get frustrated at the slow progress on economic reintegration, particularly their ongoing unemployment and lack of income, she notes:

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<sup>60</sup> Helvis transcript 5: 7 (23/02/2018). It is interesting to note that Helvis appears to suggest that Swapo party and the government are the same entity. This shows the degree to which the lines between political party and the government are blurred, a misconception most likely brought about by the Swapo Party's use/adaptation of dominant forms of nationalist histories (e.g. patriotic history) which blur the lines between the two leading to the assumption that 'SWAPO is the government' and the 'government is SWAPO'. In addition Helvis's insistence that Swapo party was supposed to 'take care of them' after repatriation through their local offices points to the expectation that Swapo Party would continue to take care of SWAPO exiles the way they did in exile, a sentiment shared by other SWAPO exiles such as Saki.

<sup>61</sup> Preston et al., *Integration*: 8. According to Jaremeý McMullin, in the early 1990s unemployment figures for ex-combatants stood at 80% whilst the figure for the general population was 35% (Jaremeý McMullin, *Ex-Combatants and the Post-Conflict State: Challenges of Reintegration*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

<sup>62</sup> Preston et al., *Integration*.

<sup>63</sup> Jeremiah spent eight years training in Libya whilst studying and training to be a pilot.

My mother in-law was wondering what was wrong with us as we were not able to get jobs like other returnees. Others like my husband's brother got jobs in a very short time as he had been a bodyguard of President Sam Nujoma in exile. This pressure forced us to come to Windhoek to look for jobs.<sup>64</sup>

Selma's ordeal of facing alienation from close family members and being perceived as a pariah is similar to what the other respondents mentioned in this paper (Helvis, Ellise and Saki ) went through in the aftermath of repatriation. The absence of a safety net for SWAPO exiles who were not fortunate to get jobs meant not only economic hardship for the exiles but it also strained relationships with family members with whom they were supposed to have been bonding and renewing ties. Selma describes below the dejection she felt:

... people did not see us as human beings, or that our lives would become better one day. In fact, I think that people assumed that *we had died in exile and were not coming back*. It played a role in the alienation and suffering we had. They [sic] was no communication and we felt they did not understand us and neither did we understand them.<sup>65</sup> (emphasis added)

The prolonged unemployment and poverty of exiles like Selma and Jeremiah ultimately led to ill treatment from family or relatives into whose care the UNHCR had initially released them. This led to Selma and her family becoming destitute and living like beggars in post-Independence Namibia, wiping away the euphoria that had come with liberation. Selma suggested that those years immediately after Independence were more painful than exile. Below she describes experiences whilst looking for a job in Windhoek in the 1990s:

In fact, I remember the time we were staying in my husband's brother's house after moving from the North where my mother in-law had become frustrated with us. My brother in-law and his wife would send me to Hartlief [wholesale butchery] to go and buy meat and I would walk with my child Lukas on my back, only to come back and you eat pap with milk whilst they ate with meat that you went to buy. They would lock the kitchen door to stop you from getting access to food. You would only enter the kitchen when you cook for them, even water you had to get it from outside. Eventually, we started stealing food and would eat it at night. *For me, that was more painful than exile*, because we were staying with family members who were ill-treating us (Selma transcript).<sup>66</sup> (emphasis added).

Moreover, this suffering and deprivation was not limited to former SWAPO exiles such as Selma but was also experienced by children such as Lukas whose health suffered due to poor nutrition. Selma narrates how they struggled to provide Lukas with proper food:

Once my brother in-law and his wife went to work we would start hunting for food in Windhoek so as to feed our son and ourselves. During one of the trips going around town looking for food, I came across a cousin who was making tombo (Oshiwambo traditional beer). Lukas my son had to drink tombo because of hunger and my cousin out of pity would give me four fat cakes and I would secretly steal two extra just to make sure I had enough to feed my son for the next day.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Selma transcript 7: 5 (29/05/2018).

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.: 6.

The life story of Selma exemplifies the painful day-to-day struggles that unemployed former SWAPO exiles like Selma and her husband had to go through. In Selma's case the suffering her family experienced continued for five consecutive years after Independence, with relief only coming in 1995 when her husband got a job as a messenger at Eros airport. His employer later helped him translate his pilot certificate from Arabic to English eventually landing him a job with the Namibian Air force in 1996. Selma's husband, Jeremiah was not alone in struggling to have his qualifications recognized. Preston et al. notes that there was widespread dissatisfaction amongst former Namibian exiles over the absence of a rating system of equivalency that could fairly gauge their foreign qualifications.<sup>68</sup> In many instances, recognition of foreign qualifications was at the employers' discretion.<sup>69</sup>

The eventual employment of Jeremiah meant that it had taken five years for Selma and her husband to achieve economic independence and stability of some sort. The shortfall in economic assistance provided by UNHCR to returning SWAPO exiles which was supposed to have been made up by the Swapo Party led government was never really covered. Programmes and projects such as the Development Brigade or recruitment into NDF were limited to a few SWAPO exiles whilst the majority were expected to "spontaneously" reintegrate. Meanwhile, the reality is that this was a difficult period for many former SWAPO exiles as they experienced economic hardship with no hope of a 'rescue' from the UN or the government. At the same time close family and friends became more and more hostile to the exiles the longer their economic dependence endured, leaving most of them destitute in the post-colony.<sup>70</sup>

Even those who anticipated hardship in the aftermath of Independence, such as Clifton, who had gone to great lengths to save up his money were eventually sucked into the vicious cycle of poverty that unemployed former SWAPO exiles found themselves in post-colonial Namibia. This has been little documentation of this aspect society in the post-colony, and very little of that documentation refers to the circumstances and conditions in which many exiles had to live. Unlike most SWAPO exiles who were in SWAPO camps, Clifton was not repatriated from Angola or Zambia, but from the United States of America. He was based in Boston where he had been studying under a scholarship given to SWAPO exiles by the African American Institute.<sup>71</sup> Prior to this, Clifton had served in exile as a nurse at a SWAPO camp outside Lusaka between 1977 and 1982. He had also obtained a nursing diploma from nursing school in Namibia (1974-1976) before going into exile. Upon his return, Clifton was one of the many educated SWAPO exiles' who had been prepared to

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<sup>68</sup> Preston et al., *Integration*: 15.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Namhila, *Price*: 183.

<sup>71</sup> African American Institute (AAI) offered higher education scholarship programs in the United States to support African scholars (including SWAPO exiles) gain a higher education and skills that could be applied in post-colonial Africa, see <https://www.aaionline.org/who-we-are/history/>

contribute to the new nation of Namibia.<sup>72</sup> He had two masters degrees, in Public Health (1983-1985) and in City Planning (1986-1988) from Boston University. On paper, Clifton did not appear to be the type of exile who would have required transitional economic assistance, but his life story in after Independence highlights how even the elite, highly educated exiles were as vulnerable as the rest of the former SWAPO exiles. Although Clifton had siblings, when he returned to Windhoek in 1990 he had nowhere to go. His mother had passed away in 1982 whilst he was in Boston. He therefore turned to a friend who lived in Katutura for accommodation whilst he was looking for a job which initially he assumed would have been relatively easy to find with his two Masters degrees.<sup>73</sup>

He notes:

I had saved up enough money to help me get on my feet when I returned to Namibia... When I came back to Windhoek, I had no relative in Windhoek but a former classmate and friend with whom I stayed with in Katutura. I slept in the living room and when there were more people I slept in the kitchen. In the mornings I would take a taxi and start from one side of the town to the other side asking if there were vacancies. And then I would repeat the same process until the little money I had saved whilst in Boston was running out. Then I would take a taxi in the morning and then walk back and it eventually got to a point where I had to walk going and coming back from town... My savings ran out and this friend of mine, this lady, began complaining that I was not contributing to the household, the complains increased over time and it became very uncomfortable staying there such that I had to leave.

This snippet from Clifton's life history although brief provides previously undocumented evidence of the challenges that even the highly educated among returning SWAPO exiles experienced. What is clear is that a vicious cycle of economic hardship began to harm social cohesion. Relationships with family and friends, who had initially helped former SWAPO exiles on their return, became strained under the pressure of the exiles' economic dependence.<sup>74</sup> Without any comprehensive transitional economic assistance or an alternative sources of income provided by the government, most exiles found themselves alienated and isolated from family and friends who soon became frustrated with their continual dependence on the limited resources.

## SWAPO exiles and the cycle of economic hardship in the early 1990s

According to Tapscott, the reintegration difficulties that returnees face following repatriation are due in part to the limited mandate of repatriation agencies such as the UNHCR.

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<sup>72</sup> There was an expectation from those Namibians who remained, that former SWAPO exiles would obtain gainful employment in the immediate aftermath of Independence. Moreover, there was an expectation from their families that they would take care of them financially once they obtained employment (Preston et al., *Integration*; Namhila, *Price*:192). Therefore, there was pressure on former SWAPO exiles to obtain employment and to take up the financial responsibility of looking after their extended families.

<sup>73</sup> When Clifton returned to Namibia in 1990 he had three brothers but none of them resided in Windhoek. Two of them resided in Swakopmund, whilst the other resided in Grootfontein. He therefore, had no relative in Windhoek that he could stay with, hence his decision to stay with a friend in Katutura.

<sup>74</sup> Namhila, *Price*: 166.

Typically, their mandates end with the physical translocation of refugees.<sup>75</sup> In Namibia's case, given the UNHCR's mandate during the transition to independence under UNTAG, this would mean UNHCR's mission was considered accomplished once SWAPO exiles were released to family and friends.<sup>76</sup> However, as the life stories of former SWAPO exiles above show, the same families and friends who jubilantly welcomed and embraced them eventually became frustrated with their unemployment and failure to contribute economically to the households that were hosting them. As noted earlier in this paper, most of the immediate families, relatives and friends of former SWAPO exiles were barely making ends meet for themselves and the having former SWAPO exiles staying with them long-term meant resources were stretched which often led to tensions and sometimes the complete breakdown of relationships.<sup>77</sup>

However, it is significant that the majority of former SWAPO exiles were generally naïve as to how their reintegration process would work in the post-colony. For instance, many assumed that because SWAPO had given them assignments in exile, that this would be the case in post-colonial Namibia. For example, Saki points to how he was patiently waiting for Swapo Party to *call* him and give him a new assignment in the NDF under its communications unit as he had been trained in communications under PLAN, but the *call* never came. Jeremiah (Selma's husband), who had been sent to Libya by SWAPO to train as a pilot, also never received the *call*. These two cases illustrate that some former SWAPO exiles did not immediately become disillusioned with the realities of post-colonial Namibia, where the majority of them had to take the initiative to reintegrate themselves and break the cycle of dependence on SWAPO which had begun in exile. Ellen Namhila also points to the same phenomenon when she describes how difficult it was for former SWAPO exiles (in the early 1990s) to break the dependency syndrome, having been used to SWAPO looking after their most basic needs.<sup>78</sup> However, to break the dependency syndrome required former SWAPO exiles to engage in gainful economic activities such as employment (in the public or private sector) or self-employment. This then leads to the question as to whether the Namibian economy was ready to accommodate former SWAPO exiles attempting to self-reintegrate.

According to Tapscott, 45-55% of all returnees (including former SWAPO exiles) were unemployed two years after repatriation (in 1991).<sup>79</sup> Unemployment figures amongst PLAN ex-fighters (in the early 1990s) was even higher, with conservative estimates

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<sup>75</sup> Chris Tapscott, "A tale of two homecomings: Influences of the economy & state on the reintegration of repatriated Namibian exiles, 1989-1991", in: Tim Allen and Hubert Morsink, (eds.), *When Refugees Go Home: African Experiences*, London, Currey, 1994: 251-259.

<sup>76</sup> The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) assisted UNTAG through the voluntary repatriation of civilians (including disarmed PLAN fighters) to Namibia to participate in Namibia's Independence elections (Dzinesa, *Disarmament*: 97).

<sup>77</sup> The life stories of Selma and Saki after repatriation show how relationships with family and friends broke down due to the dependence of the former on the latter.

<sup>78</sup> Namhila, *Price*: 191.

<sup>79</sup> Tapscott, "Tale": 254.

placing them at 80% in comparison with 35% of the general populace.<sup>80</sup> Government initiatives that created employment for SWAPO exiles particularly the newly established NDF or the Development Brigade absorbed a limited number of PLAN ex-fighters leaving the rest to look for positions in the public or private sector.<sup>81</sup> The private sector was particularly limited for, as Lali Metsola noted, the Namibian economy is dominated by a capital-intensive private sector that contributes substantial revenue to state treasury but offers very few employment opportunities.<sup>82</sup> Meanwhile, there were many obstacles in hindering former SWAPO exiles competing for those jobs that were available. For instance, employers were often sceptical of former SWAPO exiles' qualifications especially those from socialist countries (e.g. Eastern Europe, Cuba and parts of Africa) which were often non-accredited or accredited by the host country.<sup>83</sup> These qualifications were often viewed by employers as mere solidarity qualifications.<sup>84</sup> Take for example Helvis (not real name), she notes that although she had a teaching diploma qualification from Zambia (which qualified her to teach from grade one to twelve) officials at the ministry of education insinuated that her qualifications were fake, particularly as her diploma described her as being qualified in *basic education training*.<sup>85</sup> Moreover, there was widespread discrimination among employers (private sector) against former SWAPO exiles who were perceived as Swapo Party supporters.<sup>86</sup> All this, combined with a global recession that affected Namibia in the early 1990s meant that finding employment was a near insurmountable task for most former SWAPO exiles.<sup>87</sup>

An objective assessment of the circumstances that the majority of SWAPO exiles faced reveals that a pattern of economic hardship emerged which pushed many former SWAPO exiles like Selma and her young family to the brink. For instance, the assumption by UNHCR that SWAPO exiles would be accommodated and taken care of by family members was not true for all SWAPO exiles, as relatives and friends soon became frustrated by the slow economic reintegration process often ill-treating them, verbally abusing them and in some instances even starving them. Selma and Clifton's plight exemplify how short-sighted this assumption was. Such scenarios could well have been avoided had a comprehensive transitional economic/reinsertion package been prepared for at least the first two years. Moreover, the failure of UNTAG's UNHCR and/or the Swapo Party led government to monitor, evaluate and follow up on the welfare of repatriated refugees meant many former

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<sup>80</sup> McMullin, *Ex-Combatants*.

<sup>81</sup> 13% of SWAPO exiles absorbed into NDF.

<sup>82</sup> Lali Metsola, "Reintegration of ex-combatants and former fighters: a lens into state formation and citizenship in Namibia", *Third World Quarterly*, 27 (6), 2006: 1119-1135.

<sup>83</sup> Chris Tapscott and Ben Mulongeni, *An Evaluation of the Welfare and Future Prospects of Repatriated Namibians in Northern Namibia*, Windhoek, Namibian Institute for Social and Economic Research, 1990.

<sup>84</sup> Preston et al., *Integration*: 15.

<sup>85</sup> Helvis transcript 5: 3 (23/02/2018).

<sup>86</sup> Preston et al., *Integration*: 15.

<sup>87</sup> Rosemary Preston, "Returning exiles in Namibia since independence", in: Tim Allen and Hubert Morsink, (eds.), *When Refugees Go Home: African Experiences*, London, Currey, 1994: 260-267.

SWAPO exiles like Selma, whose relationships with their families collapsed, ended up destitute with nowhere to go for assistance.

The lack of a comprehensive transitional economic/reinsertion package would have had such consequences if the Swapo Party led government had been able to provide jobs or alternative income such as gratuity payments to unemployed former SWAPO exiles. However, the evidence suggests that public sector jobs were offered to a limited number of former SWAPO exiles. Moreover, initiatives such as the Development Brigade under the Ministry of Lands, Rehabilitation and Resettlement (MLRR) were not properly managed and the skills they provided did not match job markets demands.<sup>88</sup> Some former SWAPO exiles interviewed for this paper such as Saki indicated their willingness to go back and finish their education (after repatriation), but could not, as there were no scholarships specifically targeting unemployed former SWAPO exiles. These factors combined with minimal or no family support meant some former SWAPO exiles were pressed from all sides with little or no hope of economic reintegration in the early 1990s. Under these circumstances economic hardship was inevitable and, from the mid-1990s, these disgruntled former SWAPO exiles took to the streets to demand government employment. The economic uncertainty of those early years delayed the economic reintegration of many former SWAPO exiles. Many of them were not able to escape the poverty trap which left a lasting impact on their economic reintegration trajectories with the effects still visible today. It is from this vantage point that some disgruntled former SWAPO exiles have, over the last decade (2010s), begun to question who was supposed to be responsible for their welfare in the aftermath of repatriation.

### Namibians repatriated in 1989: confronting past injustice or strategic lobbying?

The economic hardships experienced by former SWAPO exiles following repatriation as exemplified by the life histories narrated above cast a shadow over the legacy of the UNHCR's repatriation process under UNTAG. Consequently, a discourse critical of the UNHCR's repatriation process has emerged in the last decade (2010s) leading to the appearance of at least three groups seeking 'full' compensation from the UN for what they perceive as a poorly executed repatriation process. The groups: *Namibian Refugees Repatriated in 1989*; *Concerned Group of Refugees Repatriated in 1989* and *Committee of Refugees Repatriated in 1989* have petitioned the UN to provide answers as to why there was no adequate transitional economic assistance. Of these three groups, the largest and most influential is *Namibian Refugees Repatriated in 1989* for which the abbreviation NRRI 1989 will be used for the purposes of this paper. NRRI 1989 claims to

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<sup>88</sup> Preston, *Integration*: 14; Metsola, "Struggle". Preston ("Integrating": 469) also notes that many of the former SWAPO exiles who were given land and resettled under the MLRR land resettlement scheme were still living in abject poverty and some still staying in the tents provided by UNHCR during repatriation three years after repatriation due to lack of financial support from the MLRR.

have registered up to 20,000 members from across the country's thirteen regions.<sup>89</sup> The group is currently led by Ueshitile Peyolo Shekupe who is also a PLAN ex-fighter. The organization has both PLAN ex-fighters and non-combatant former SWAPO exiles. PLAN ex-fighters would not normally be included in the refugee category (in NRRI 1989) as combatants are usually not labelled refugees. However, due to the framing of Namibia's cease-fire agreement, PLAN ex-fighters alongside other non-combatant (civilian) former SWAPO exiles were to be repatriated as refugees, i.e. returning to Namibia as civilians under UNHCR. Consequently, all the organization's (NRRI 1989) members regardless of whether they fought with PLAN or not identify themselves as refugees.

The NRRI 1989's triggered a heated debate about the comprehensive UNHCR transitional economic package that they claim they should have received in 1989 during repatriation but did not. To understand why NRRI 1989 are making these claims today, one must look at how UNHCR currently handles repatriation. Transitional economic assistance is today used by the UNHCR as a means of helping refugees to re-establish themselves when they return to their home communities after conflict. For instance, it has been reported that between 2016 and 2017, UNHCR distributed a total of US\$1.2 billion (in cash assistance to refugees) in partnership with governments, UN agencies, NGOs and the private sector.<sup>90</sup> Included among these cash assistance programmes is a reinstallation grant. Among those who recently benefited from the reinstallation grant is 47-year-old Mohamed Noor Omar, who ended up in Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya after fleeing civil war in his native Somalia in the early 1990s. Mohamed returned to Mogadishu in 2017 and received grants totalling US\$1,600 which he has since used to buy a fishing boat; he makes US\$7 to US\$10 a day depending on the catch, this income is sufficient to meet Mohamed's basic needs.<sup>91</sup> When one compares the reinstallation grants of US\$1,600 that Mohamed received from UNHCR and the R10, pot, blanket, axe and bag of beans that SWAPO exiles claim to have received after repatriation, one begins to appreciate why NRRI 1989 feels cheated and betrayed by the UN. Chairman of NRRI 1989 Ueshitile Shekupe argues:

What we are asking on the level of refugees is why we were not properly repatriated... the issue is on the UN document on repatriation and resettlement of refugees... UNTAG just dropped us at the camps... A lot of our families were dead by the time we came back. So there was need for assistance... we were supposed to be left self-sustained... what did the UN agree with the South African administration?... what happened to the budget allocation from UNTAG. What was the money allocated to refugees used for?<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Angola transcript 3: 11 (public relations officer of NRRI 1989) (10/02/2018).

<sup>90</sup> UNHCR Staff, "Cash assistance gives refugees the power of choice", UNHCR, 09 December 2019, <https://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/2018/8/5b6c40f04/cash-assistance-gives-refugees-power-choice.html>

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ueshitile transcript 1: 5 (04/12/2017).

With the UNHCR supporting refugees in the 21<sup>st</sup> century with comprehensive economic packages such as the reinstallation grant, NRRI 1989 have found a basis for their demands of the UN. To that end Ueshitile Shekupe notes:

...we are petitioning the UN Secretary-General...we want an audited report of the budget of the repatriation agreed on the ceasefire... we want to see the report which said mission accomplished in Namibia which convinced the Security Council to order the withdrawal of UNTAG.<sup>93</sup>

Similarly, NRRI 1989 Public Relations Officer Vaino Angula argues that refugees elsewhere in the world have been treated far better by UNHCR than the SWAPO exiles were. The meagre transitional economic assistance SWAPO exile refugees received has become a rallying point from which NRRI 1989 continues to push for compensation. Vaino Angula states:

...refugees in Sudan and Syria who were repatriated under the supervision of the UN received packages and were resettled properly...even though some of us were PLAN fighters we were repatriated as refugees, so the same courtesy of rehabilitation and resettlement that refugees got in South Africa, Angola, Mozambique financially was and is supposed to be extended to us. Are you telling me that if you were sick after repatriation a R10 was going to take you to hospital? — of course not!<sup>94</sup>

Figure 1: War Veterans Petition Ban Ki-moon. Courtesy of *New Era* <sup>95</sup>



Former SWAPO exiles repatriated in 1989 marching towards UN headquarters to deliver a petition on their dissatisfaction with the 1989 repatriation process.

<sup>93</sup> Ueshitile transcript 1: 6 (04/12/2017).

<sup>94</sup> Angula transcript 3: 10f. (10/02/2018).

<sup>95</sup> Staff Reporter, "War veterans petition Ban Ki-Moon", *New Era*, November 11, 2016, <https://neweralive.na/posts/war-veterans-petition-ban-ki-moon>

The resettlement issue that Angola raises is linked to the UNHCR's local partner, CCN which set up the Repatriation Resettlement and Reconstruction Committee (RRR Committee) to facilitate and assist with the repatriation process locally. According to Dzinesa, the "RRR's principal task was the reception and short-term care of returnees prior to their departure for homes or other chosen destinations."<sup>96</sup> One could argue that the words *Resettlement* and *Reconstruction* within the phrase RRR were to a large extent misleading considering the committee's task was limited to reception and short term care of returnees. Consequently, organizations such as NRRI 1989 use these terms to justify their claims that UNHCR, through its local partner CCN, did not complete what they had promised, i.e. resettlement of and reconstruction for former SWAPO exiles. Another word that has been used by NRRI 1989 is *Rehabilitation*. This of course was not used by UNHCR nor its local partner CCN but was derived from the former Ministry of Lands, Resettlement and Rehabilitation (MLRR) whose programmes were intended to address the long-term need of returnees and internally displaced people.<sup>97</sup> Although it is difficult to quantify the efficacy of this ministry, published research suggests it had minimal impact on former SWAPO exiles, with only a few thousand PLAN ex-fighters initially benefiting from programmes such as the Development Brigade Corporation (DBC) or from the land resettlement programme.<sup>98</sup> Surprisingly NRRI 1989 has steered clear of confrontation with the Namibian government or MLRR's programmes arguing that their contention is with UNTAG's repatriation process and not with Swapo Party because Swapo Party only formed a government in 1990 after Independence and was not yet in power in 1989 when repatriation took place.<sup>99</sup> The NRRI 1989 chairman states:

We do not want the Namibian government involved. We told the government we do not want them involved as we do not want this to become a political issue, *because it is an international issue.*<sup>100</sup> (emphasis added).

The emphasis by NRRI 1989 chairperson Ueshitile Shekupe on the international nature of their petition is a strategy to further side-line the Swapo Party led government, which they suspect wants to block their bid for compensation from the UN. Furthermore, the NRRI 1989 leadership suspects that in the event of them receiving compensation from the UN, the Namibian government would attempt to be made responsible for its administration.

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<sup>96</sup> Dzinesa, "Disarmament": 218. This task included installation of cooking and sanitary facilities, water and electricity supply in reception centres, transportation of returnees from entry points to reception centres and then to their respective homes or special centres run by CCN member churches, as well as provision for special categories including orphans, the elderly and disabled.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.: 241. Also falling under MLRR was the Development Brigade later called Development Brigade Corporation (DBC), a skills training programme which recruited unemployed ex-fighters equipping them with skills in preparation for the job market.

<sup>98</sup> See Preston et al., *Integration*; Preston, "Integrating"; McMullin, *Ex-Combatants*; Metsola, "Reintegration"; Dzinesa, "Disarmament", idem, *Disarmament*. None of the PLAN ex-fighters interviewed for this project were recruited into the Development Brigade or its successor the Development Brigade Corporation (DBC)

<sup>99</sup> Ueshitile transcript 1: 6 (04/12/2017).

<sup>100</sup> Ueshitile transcript 1: 6 (04/12/2017).

Such deep mistrust is the result of widespread speculation amongst the NRRI 1989 members that Swapo Party may have received funding from UNHCR for their reintegration (in 1989 or 1990) and misused those funds. Meanwhile in 2016, in response to NRRI 1989's petitions, the UNHCR office in Windhoek categorically denied retaining any funds from the 1989 repatriation process and, ironically, referred NRRI 1989 back to the government arguing it was and still is the Namibian government's responsibility to integrate them into society.<sup>101</sup>

Thus, it is imperative to unpack NRRI 1989's complex case. In many ways the group represents a disadvantaged demographic of former SWAPO exiles, with its ranks swelled by the unemployed, low income earners and retirees (all former SWAPO exiles) that had low income jobs.<sup>102</sup> The majority of the economically disadvantaged former SWAPO exiles who were interviewed for this research project are registered members of NRRI 1989, whilst those former SWAPO exiles interviewed who have achieved a better standard of living showed little interest in the organization or dismissed its cause altogether. For instance, Lovisa (not real name) a former SWAPO exile and manager at a local bank suggested NRRI 1989 was a lost cause, she argued:

I think that money was never there. In fact when you properly interrogate these people they have no real argument. It's just like the struggle kids, someone is using them for political mileage. For me I don't go with the crowd, I reason. For me NRRI 1989 or RRR is a lost cause, they are wasting their energy they should rather ask the government to give them what belongs to them. The UN era is over, Martti Ahtisaari probably forgot [she chuckles]. They should ask for help from their government.<sup>103</sup>

In many ways the economically thriving former SWAPO exiles view their comrades in NRRI 1989 as opportunists rather than having a genuine cause. For Lovisa, this group represents former SWAPO exiles who failed to make it in life and are desperately seeking security for their retirement. While this could be dismissed as lack of empathy or insensitivity coming from the bourgeoisie or someone detached from reality, there may be some credence to this view. For example, the group's insistence on describing themselves as refugees 25 years after Independence gives rise to suspicion because some of the members identify themselves variously as refugees, PLAN ex-fighters and freedom fighters. It is argued that when making demands to the government they are PLAN ex-fighters or freedom fighters but when in NRRI 1989 they conveniently become refugees. This fluidity causes suspicion about their motives, prompting the likes of Lovisa to be dismissive of their cause. However, Ranger, in assessing the identity shifts among returnees in Zimbabwe, suggests that returnees' fluid identities are mechanisms they use

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<sup>101</sup> Faith Sankwasa, "UN says no funds for Namibian refugees from Angola", November 10, 2016, Namibia Press Agency, <https://www.nampa.org/index.php?model=feature&function=display&id=129560>

<sup>102</sup> Ueshitile Shekupe states that the majority of NRRI 1989 members are impoverished former SWAPO exiles, (Ueshitile transcript 1: 6).

<sup>103</sup> Lovisa transcript 8: 9 (22/04/2018).

for 'integration'.<sup>104</sup> In light of Ranger's assertion it would not be far-fetched to consider the fluid identities of NRRI 1989 members as an innovative mechanism they have adopted for reintegration purposes in the post colony. In this way, one could view former SWAPO exiles' shifting identities as coping mechanisms, especially when one is aware of the dire economic conditions in which most of the exiles live. As pointed out earlier, many of the former SWAPO exiles interviewed who are members of NRRI 1989 belong to the group that suffered economic marginalization in the early 1990s with most of them having been entrapped in economic hardship/poverty in the first decade after Namibia's Independence. Although UNTAG withdrew in 1990, it is important to realize that, of that group of SWAPO exiles who they assumed would *spontaneously* reintegrate into society, many are still economically disadvantaged today. In other words, this group of former SWAPO exiles (NRRI 1989) represents the returnees that never really caught up economically with the rest of Namibian society. This notion is best summed up with the words of Ueshitile Shekupe who states that:

...when I left the country I was a contract labourer and I fled the poverty, but yet 28 years after Independence I am still in poverty.<sup>105</sup>

Therefore, it appears that former SWAPO exiles in NRRI 1989 have been driven by decades of marginalization as well as the limitations of reintegration programmes. That so many are still living in poverty after 28 years as noted by Ueshitile Shekupe is arguably more of a reflection on the Swapo Party led government's reintegration, politics, programmes and the state of the national economy over the last three decades than it is of UNTAG.<sup>106</sup> These three factors are more likely to have pushed members of this group to shift their focus from government to the UN with the hope of obtaining restitution that might do for them what the Namibian government has failed to do.

In conclusion, NRRI 1989, regardless of its opportunistic tendencies, has come about because of what appears to have been a rushed repatriation process resulting from a compromised mandate that did not prioritise the welfare of SWAPO exiles. Very little attention was given to the actual needs of SWAPO exiles during and after repatriation. The minimalist approach of DD by UNTAG had unintended negative consequences on thousands of SWAPO exiles repatriated by UNHCR. However, by understanding the current (21<sup>st</sup> century) trends and practices employed by UNHCR when reintegrating refugees (e.g. reinstallation grants), NRRI 1989 has created a platform on which a conversation can be held regarding what happened during repatriation (UNHCR – transitional economic assistance) and its aftermath (Swapo Party government – reintegration policies). The life histories that have been explored present us with the grim reality of the suffering that many former SWAPO exiles experienced during and after repatriation, and presents us

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<sup>104</sup> Terrence Ranger, "Studying repatriation as part of African social history", in: Tim Allen and Hubert Morsink, (eds.), *When Refugees Go Home: African Experiences*, London, Currey, 1994: 279-294 (289).

<sup>105</sup> Ueshitile transcript 1: 6 (04/12/2017).

<sup>106</sup> McMullin is noted for the notion of reintegration back into basic poverty (Jaremeey McMullin, "Reintegration of combatants: were the right lessons learned in Mozambique?", *International Peacekeeping*, 11 (4), 2004: 625-643.

with an alternative narrative of the impact of UNTAG's mission and the Namibian government's reintegration policies. By comparing themselves to other refugees in different parts of the world, NRRI 1989 members are demanding recognition of the paltry nature of the transitional economic assistance (from UNHCR). Therefore, considering the *lived experiences* and sentiments of former SWAPO exiles presented in this paper, perhaps, it is time to reconsider how successful UNTAG really was in accomplishing its mission.

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