

Going home: adjusting to life and work after repatriation

Moving back to your home country after a long time away can be difficult. After 20 years in New York, a UN adviser describes returning to Cameroon



Ruth Bamela Engo found different challenges in work and life when she moved home to Cameroon after 20 years in New York.

I moved to [New York](#) in 1984 when my late husband was appointed permanent representative for Cameroon to the UN. At the time, Africa was in a major economic crisis and a drought. The UN general assembly and security council debates were not enough. It was time to engage with civil society.

I soon started working for the UN myself, in Unifem (now UN Women), UN department of economic and social affairs and the office of the special co-ordinator for Africa. I co-founded the Advocates for African Food Security in 1986, was a founding member and president of the UN African Mothers' Association and co-founded [African Action on Aids](#). As a UN staff member dealing with issues related to poverty eradication, I felt uncomfortable when I heard demeaning portrayals of my home country.

I retired in 2005 and headed home to [Cameroon](#). Though I spent over 20 years there, it was not difficult for me to leave New York. I love the city and think it is the most democratic place in the world, but I never thought of it as home. When I lived there I was always under pressure from family and work. My to do list was long and this had an impact on allocating time to social life or sport. At one stage, I ate only junk food because I was too tired to cook. This made me gain weight, sleep less and develop a short temper

There are somethings I do miss about New York: **having water and electricity all the time**, all the great eating places, Broadway, the interaction with people in the street and my friends. You can live alone a whole life in New York, but if you have a good network of friends, they become your family.

But because I had a home and family waiting for me in Cameroon, I adjusted well to life back here. I maintained contact during the 20 years I spent away. I used to go back during the African Cup when all Cameroonians are united in supporting the national football team. But, when I moved back my community found it odd that I wanted to spend Sundays by myself, in a country where the door should always be open, and few people expect a retired senior citizen to work so intensely.

I continue to work for African Action on Aids, and I enjoy being challenged on my work by people who understand the situation on the ground. It hasn't all been easy – after New York the pace of work is slow. It takes a long time to get a report after a meeting and travelling to rural areas where I work is difficult. The internet connection is a nightmare and financial resources to carry programmes are scarce.

Overall, coming back was a joy. **The knowledge we acquire from other parts of the world is useless if we do not invest in our own communities.** Whether we live here or there, the commitment to our own base boosts not only national, but personal, dignity.

Six tips for smooth repatriation

- If you plan to move home one day, keep in touch with family, friends and culture while you are away. Then when you do move back you will feel more connected.
- Repatriation is difficult when you do not have an independent home to go back to. Usually when people first move back they stay with family or friends, but you need to be in a place that enables you to re-organise and face your new life on personal terms and resources.
- Deciding to go back means that you choose to live there, therefore do not behave there as if you were still living abroad. Do not live like a stranger in your own country – eat what people eat, it's part of your DNA anyway.
- **If you go back home with your children, send them to schools where they learn to see the link between knowledge and real life**, allowing them to build a local network for the future.
- One of the most difficult aspects of going back home is that you do not have a local network to support you at the beginning because nobody remembers who you are. You have to spend time creating a network.
- **Do not use your foreign experience to make other people feel inferior. It is psychologically damaging, not only for them, but for yourself ... you will feel healthier and happier if you contribute to improving quality of life beyond yourself and immediate family.**

Ruth Bamela Engo is president of [African Action on Aids](#)

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