

IS Academy

Human Security in Fragile States



Labour questions in post conflict Northern Uganda

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The IS-Academy

The IS-academy on Human Security in Fragile States is a collaborative research project between the Disaster Studies chair at the faculty of social sciences, Wageningen University, the Peacebuilding and Stabilization unit at the Dutch ministry of Foreign Affairs and the five major Dutch NGOs Cordaid, ICCO, ZOA refugee care, OxfamNovib and the Netherlands Red Cross.

The Academy's mission is to better understand the processes of socio-economic recovery and the roles of formal and informal institutions in conditions of state fragility.

The research comprises several PhD trajectories and a number of short-term research projects, and is geared towards catalyzing cross-fertilizing exchange between the domains of policy, practitioners and academia in the field of socio-economic recovery in fragile states.

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RESEARCH BRIEF #3

Labour questions in post conflict Northern Uganda

This research brief is about the ways in which aid actors in Northern Uganda could better take into account local labour questions. Interventions are based on the assumption that 'able-bodied' households avail of an abundance of labour. They usually require a contribution to community labour and they are averse to financing labour-saving projects. This research shows that in reality, labour is increasingly scarce. Households are engaged in intricate informal labour exchanges, and the current increase in polygamous marriages is a signal of labour shortage. The research brief is based on ongoing systematic fieldwork in Pader district¹ and informed by discussions and observations in Kitgum district. It is part of a PhD study² on food security and agricultural services in Northern Uganda.

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Context: Return and resettlement in fragile contexts

Following decades of massive forced displacement and internment, it is estimated that 95% of the local people in Northern Uganda have returned back to their villages of origin or are in 'satellite' camps³ close to their homes. This process is complicated by the presence of a multiplicity of actors: the state trying to re-assert its legitimacy, local governments with inadequate resources, and United Nations (UN) agencies and International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) working with substantial budgets and maintaining a dominant presence. The result is an amalgam of interests, activities, mandates, and capacities.

Various development frameworks such as the Peace, Recovery and Development Plan (PRDP)⁴ boast of an overall goal of consolidating peace and security, and laying the ground for recovery and development in Northern Uganda. Under this framework, sub projects for instance the Northern Uganda Agriculture Livelihoods Recovery Programme (ALREP), have a major focus on agriculture, increasing household income and ensuring food security for the formerly displaced population. In other reviewed project and planning documents, a focus on agricultural production is seen as the key to poverty eradication, spurring economic growth and consolidating peace in a region with a history of over 20 years of conflict. This perhaps can explain the substantial investment in the agricultural sector and efforts to 'kick start' production.



With the signing of a cessation of hostilities in 2006, the displaced population started moving back home from the IDP camps.

On the assumptions of labour availability

Recovery projects are predominantly based on prevailing narratives of local empowerment and community asset creation in the form of access roads, markets, stores, and transfer of agricultural inputs and extension services, in exchange for labour. Following a public works component, agricultural inputs are transferred mainly through (1) direct purchase by the



Road construction, the most common form of public works, provides a visible and tangible means for agencies to support local development plans.

agency in question and transfer to the people and/or (2) through a market based scheme where people can exchange vouchers for seeds and tools, in a seed fair. The implicit assumption is that the rural population does not have income but has labour to exchange for investment in rural infrastructure and agricultural inputs; an assumption that does not always hold true. This research brief therefore addresses this assumption by paying attention to the question of how and in what way labour plays a role in shaping rural livelihoods in the Acholi⁵ region, Northern Uganda.

The question is explored by following a group of households through their return and resettlement. Data was collected by means of a survey undertaken early 2011, participant observation and detailed recurrent household interviews as well as key informant interviews with local council leaders, local elders, Pader and Kitgum districts production directorates, United Nations and humanitarian agencies.

Box 1: Why public works dominance?

Various NGO and local government staff described the logic behind public works preference

In the district and sub county development plans, roads are highlighted as a priority. These are linked to issues of improving security and market accessibility. NGOs also need to be seen as supporting these development plans. To influence behavior and attitude change (break the so called dependency syndrome associated with the camps), individuals and groups are required to earn agricultural inputs and contribute to meaningful development in the community.

Informal labour arrangements and markets

Currently, provision of agricultural inputs dominates aid programming. Seeds and tools are important and have received significant attention in much of the literature on post conflict societies. Particularly, they play a crucial role in 'kick starting' production in the initial 1-2 seasons/years after return or resettlement. Very soon however, labour becomes the key bottleneck and is partly addressed through traditional/informal labour sharing arrangements between (cooperating groups of) households. Based on ethnographic research in Pader district, it is quite clear that these arrangements and informal labour markets play a critical role in ensuring household food production and food security in later years of return.

While households work individually, they also work the land collectively. A distinguishing feature of Acholi rural livelihoods is the traditional social form of collective labour. Mainly managed by *rwodi kweri* (designated hoe chiefs), the system and practices allow for negotiated access, control and (re-)distribution of labour for agricultural subsistence production within a village. This system functions as a safety net, ensuring access for each household to at least a minimum amount of tilled land. The system is mostly based on family, clan, kinship and/or social relations.

Most of these informal arrangements are not commoditized and take various forms. For instance:

- *Pur awak* is gardening initiated by a land owner approaching the designated chief. The owner provides food and drinks in return for the work done. Most of the respondents said that this system is dying out after displacement.
- A *Pur aleya* refers to rotational gardening (groups of people preparing each other's land in turns) and is most commonly practiced in the second cultivation season, which is important for labour intensive crops such as sesame. These crops have to be planted on newly opened (virgin) land. Here, a household is not obliged to provide any drinks and food.
- *Pur Katala* is a form of communal land preparation where individuals work on a specified amount of work or land in return for cash or in-kind donations. The preference for cash compared to the in-kind payments is somewhat associated with the influx of NGOs. Currently, the rate for a *katala* is about US \$ 1. The rate paid by NGOs for public works averages between US \$ 1.5 - 2⁶ per day worked.

One of the notable functions of the system is that it acts as a social protection mechanism for the vulnerable. Through this social institution, households without 'able bodied' individuals have access to more or less equal amount of land as everyone else in the village/group. At times, the amount of land opened for vulnerable households depends on their capability to tend the garden and other related practices like weeding. It is to be emphasized that although these practices go a long way in increasing production, they are however limited to a certain basic amount of land opening for each of the households involved per season or year. A household's ability to be self-sufficient hinges on the ability to open additional land on their own, hire labour or participate in other activities such as the informal labour markets.

A survey undertaken by this research in 2011, showed the importance of rural labour markets which peak between March to August as key to rural livelihoods, access to seed and food security. Detailed monthly household visits indicate that outside individual cultivation, the majority of the households involved in the survey participate in some form of traditional labour arrangement (mostly rotational cultivation) and also work for a substantial time in return for cash and/or grains, supplementing their food requirements.

Focus group discussions with various groups reveal labour is currently very important given that sometime during the war, in the periods 1985 – 1997, there was a large scale removal of livestock (predominantly cattle) by the Karamajong raids and the Ugandan army. As a result, oxen-based ploughing (which used to be practiced by many households) now has become hoe-based handwork again.

Northern Uganda suffered a systematic loss of cattle in the late 80s

(Appropriate Technology (AT) Uganda's website)⁷

I remember intercropping to the extent you see today starting around the loss of cattle.

(Elderly man)

We received 20 NUSAF⁸ interest forms for our sub county. Only 2 groups chose bee hive keeping, the rest restocking. During the application stage, we received 10 forms. 5 were earmarked for household income projects, 3 for community infrastructure rehabilitation and 2 for new public works. All 20 groups chose to compete for the 5 forms for household income and mainly restocking. Nobody wants the other 5 forms ..(...).I went back to the district and negotiated for an extra form for household income promotion.

(Sub county chief)

However, there is limited attention to the functioning and dynamics of these arrangements and markets based on kin and social relations in the current drive towards improving household food security. Most NGOs prefer to form new farmer groups in the villages.

IDP Camps and polygamy

Preliminary findings show that local people's adaptation to labour concerns seems to move beyond simple livelihood diversification, to be entrenched in the very lives of individuals, their way of life and in some instances to remedy the shortage of labour. People deploy social networks which are expanded through polygamy – a practice that seems problematic to the Christian based NGOs. Polygamy, although not unique to the Acholi culture, provides opportunities for access to labour and risk reduction. Therefore, individuals involved in project activities can be seen to use the resources they get access to, for obtaining second wives. Second wives are mostly located in satellite or transit sites/camps and are mainly engaged in petty trading, while first wives live in the villages and engage in cultivation. To access land for cultivation the wives in the camps negotiate with friends and neighbours.

Aid interventions and modernization agendas

A discussion with staff of various humanitarian agencies reveals that, attention to and investment in household labour does not generate the importance that it requires since it calls for substantial contribution and investment in a household. On average, a household receives seeds and some tools worth US \$ 20-35 per project per year. An ox plough costs about US \$ 60- 66 while a pair of oxen costs US \$ 370-590. One national NGO staff member mentioned that investing in oxen and ploughs instead of seeds and simple farm tools would also force them to report fewer beneficiaries; and 'nobody wants to do that', he added.

Also, donors rarely allow for more than US\$ 100 investment on livelihoods per beneficiary household per project (and this includes the cost of staff, logistics and office). Sharing an ox-plough and oxen is only meaningful for a maximum of five households per pair of oxen.

Humanitarian agencies' focus on 'able bodied', 'willing' individuals is a practice that seems to entrench vulnerabilities in the same communities that are targeted. While some households are able to benefit, labour-poor households are not well positioned to take advantage of such programme preferences that exist among humanitarian agencies, donors and the Government of Uganda (GoU). This is a result of the dominance of a paradigm centered on combining technological inputs transfer with the rehabilitation of agricultural and rural infrastructure through public works activities. The trend is also explained by the preference for salient modernization and technological change agendas in the food security sector. Local narratives that drive interventions claim of the need to introduce 'better' and 'modern' agronomic practices that are considered labour intensive by the local community.

In several other programmes aimed at improving the livelihoods of vulnerable categories, the logic of public works is similar. Relatives and friends commit their labour, in return for food or inputs transfer to the Extremely Vulnerable Individual (EVIs)⁹ households as they are commonly referred in the north. This is meant to strengthen traditional social safety nets for the EVIs.



Seed fairs are considered much of a novelty in the current context. In 2010, more than 4 NGOs organized approximately 15 seed fairs in Pader district. These targeted over 4800 households. In comparison, only 2 animal fairs were held. In many of the seed fairs attended in late 2010 and early 2011, this study found out that people preferred to have animals or livestock included in the fairs, in addition to the seeds and tools on sale.

One of the major findings so far is that the assumption that labour is the poor man's major and readily available resource in Northern Uganda does not hold. There are competing demands for household and community labour. Individuals have to balance between various own activities and NGO projects.

Following an amalgam of various factors, ranging from practical and logistical difficulties associated with various modalities of working to organizational cultures and unreliable climate, the household does not always benefit from committing their labour in public works and related aid interventions. The series of cases followed up under this research show clear indications that in terms of self-assessment of food sufficiency, households do not increase the area under cultivation. Most of the households actually struggle to maintain average acreage under production in the same season/year they participate in public works, thus impacting on their long term food security status. For households that are able to command enough labour to participate in the public works, the benefits from such programmes hinge on several factors including favorable input prices in the seed fairs and opportune weather conditions – some of which are factors which cannot be guaranteed by the interventions.

Conclusion

The research shows that:

- The mismatch between intervention practice and people's everyday life is exacerbated, partly due to a blind spot to the social cultural context and the assumption of labour as a

never ending resource.

- Where local labour arrangements do receive attention, they are used as indicators of the local community's willingness and interest to be re-organized into groups introduced by the government and humanitarian agencies and not as historically embedded institutions of social relations that (re)distribute labour within villages. NGOs organizing groups parallel to the existing traditional systems create competition for the labour between various projects and activities.
- Although polygamy is difficult to work with or acknowledge for the many Christian NGOs in Pader, it is a local way to address the shortage of the labour resource. Local people appropriate project resources in ways that make most sense to them and out of knowledge of the context or circumstances they find themselves in.
- Well intended interventions may unknowingly reinforce vulnerability and inequality by focusing on certain categories of people and through public works preferences.

IS Academies are an initiative of the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The IS Academy on Fragile States focuses on the interlinkages between socio-economic security and the development of political and institutional structures. This Academy is a collaboration of academic, governmental and non-governmental actors. Disaster Studies of Wageningen University provides academic direction.

Notes

- 1 Pader district was split in the course of the study, resulting in Pader and Agago districts. In the context of this brief, the term Pader refers to the district after the split.
- 2 The research is part of the larger programme 'IS academy on human security in fragile states'. More information on this IS academy can be found at: <http://fragilities.org/>. The author can be contacted through winnie.wairimu@wur.nl or wwwairimu@gmail.com.
- 3 These are small temporal settlements set up to decongest the population from the then 'main' IDP camps. They provided access to agricultural land during early years of return and resettlement as they are located nearer to people's villages of origin. Currently, they form lower-level trading centres.
- 4 For more details refer to http://www.prdp.org.ug/content.php?Submenu_id=56
- 5 The larger Pader and neighboring districts (Gulu, Agago, Amuru, Nwoya, Lamor and Kitgum districts are inhabited an ethno-linguistic group referred to as the Acholi people and thus geographically denoted as Acholiland'.
- 6 All currency conversions are as at March 2011
- 7 http://www.atuganda.or.ug/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=53&Itemid=59
- 8 Northern Uganda Social Action Fund (NUSAF) is a World bank funded special project under the PRDP framework and uses basically the same approaches of community infrastructure and promotion of incomes. Additionally it focuses on conflict management
- 9 Most documents show this includes older persons, child and female-headed households, chronically ill and persons with disabilities