



CONFLICT AND STABILITY ANALYSIS WITH IMPLICATIONS TO TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE IN UGANDA



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A study conducted to understand the current levels of fragility in the Acholi, Lango and West Nile
sub-regions of northern Uganda

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ACRONYMS

ACCS – Advisory Consortium on Conflict Sensitivity
CAO – Chief Administrative Officer
CBOW – Children Born of War
CPD – Consensus Panel Discussion
EAC – East African Community
EITI – Extractives Industry Transparency Initiative
FGD – Focus Group Discussion
GOU – Government of Uganda
HTPs – Harmful Traditional Practices
IDPs – Internally Displaced Persons
IGG – Inspector General of Government
JRP – Justice and Reconciliation Project
KII – Key Informant Interview
LC – Local Council
LRA – Lord’s Resistance Army
MPs – Members of Parliament
MOJCA – Ministry of Justice and Constitutional Affairs
NFA – National Forestry Authority
NTJP – National Transitional Justice Policy
OPM – Office of the Prime Minister
PRDP – Peace Recovery and Development Plan
RLP – Refugee Law Project
SGBV – Sexual and Gender Based Violence
TJ – Transitional Justice
TJRC – Truth Justice and Reconciliation Commission
UBOS – Uganda Bureau of Statistics
UNCST – Uganda National Council for Science and Technology
UNHCR – United Nation High Commission for Refugees
UPE – Universal Primary Education
UWA – Uganda Wildlife Authority
WAN – Women’s Advocacy Network

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report examines the key drivers of conflict at the community level in the post-conflict regions of Acholi, Lango, and West Nile in northern Uganda, and identifies effective mechanisms for constructive social change processes with implications for transitional justice in Uganda. It represents a significant step towards identifying and analyzing key obstacles to positive peace and reconciliation in the region, ensuring that post-war recovery and reconciliation initiatives are conflict-sensitive and aligned with the socio-political and economic needs and aspirations of the communities. Through observational analysis and empirical data from participants, the report identifies strategic and effective mechanisms to foster transitional justice that value local realities, capacities for peace, and forms of agency within the communities.

Specifically, Chapter 2 explores the conflict drivers that continue to hinder positive peace, discussing the prevailing manifestations of overt conflict, including widespread land and boundary disputes across the post-conflict region. Other manifestations include clashes between communities and environmental regulations enforced by government officials, such as the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) and National Forestry Authority (NFA), youth disenfranchisement, domestic violence, gender-based violence, and conflicts between communities and former combatants. The inadequately addressed legacies of the war with the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) have been driven by new and long-standing grievances that keep post-war communities in a state of latent conflict, where trigger events could lead to a rapid escalation of violence. As grievances grow, so does the potential for trigger events in Acholi, Lango, and West Nile to lead to greater unrest and more organized forms of violence, potentially spiraling into a return to conflict if unaddressed.

The subsequent chapter 3 explores Transitional Justice (TJ) as a pathway to sustainable peace in Uganda, advocating for TJ processes to be considered part of the broader peace and conflict transformation agenda. It cautions against narrow conceptualizations of TJ as solely addressing past injustices, instead arguing for a transformational approach to justice that tackles day-to-day violent manifestations of conflict in post-conflict Uganda. This includes investigating structural inequalities that underpin poverty and conflict, and providing remedies, redress, or accountability for economic and social rights violations. The research found that in the three sub-regions, economic and social rights must be prioritized because they matter to victims and post-conflict communities. Addressing these rights through the reparative component of TJ can respond to real-time local needs while mitigating potential violence (negative peace) in the future. Victims often require time-sensitive relief, as the adage "justice delayed is justice denied" suggests.

Local perceptions of TJ processes are complex and often diverge from conventional understandings of TJ trajectories. The research highlights that TJ implementation should move beyond traditional notions of addressing past injustices and instead tackle the multifaceted nature of violence, including domestic violence, gender-based violence, youth exclusion, and disenfranchisement. These forms of violence are often intertwined and can persist or even escalate during transition periods, underscoring the need for a more nuanced approach to TJ. To be effective, TJ mechanisms must be contextualized within the interconnected challenges of justice in transition and violence in transition. This requires anticipating how past conflicts can manifest in new forms, and designing mechanisms that address these emerging challenges. By adopting a more holistic and adaptive approach, TJ practitioners and policymakers can better address the complex needs of post-conflict communities and promote sustainable peace.

CHAPTER ONE

1. INTRODUCTION

The cessation of overt violence in northern Uganda nearly two decades ago has not brought about lasting peace and stability to the region. Despite significant investments in post-conflict recovery and development through the Peace Recovery and Development Plans (PRDP I and II), underlying tensions persist, threatening to undermine the fragile peace. Current discourses of justice for post conflict communities across the world, and most certainly Uganda, underscores the critical importance of Transitional Justice (TJ) in promoting recovery, reconciliation, and nation-building. TJ can facilitate dialogue and address national development challenges, but its success hinges on consideration of regional and sub-regional conflict drivers.

This study, examines the conflict dynamics in Acholi, Lango, and West Nile, revealing latent conflicts manifested in inter-community tensions, land disputes, and boundary conflicts. These indicators exacerbate existing frustrations, including feelings of neglect and unaddressed grievances stemming from the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) conflict. The research suggests that justice remains elusive for many, and community grievances are likely to escalate given the current social unrest. To gain a deeper understanding of Uganda's fragility, conflict, and peace, it is essential to examine the intersections of vulnerabilities and consider the complex relationships between shocks, stresses, and influences. By doing so, policymakers can develop more effective strategies to promote sustainable peace and address the complex needs of post-conflict communities.

This study coincides with significant developments in Uganda's TJ landscape, notably the Government of Uganda's (GOU) approval of the National Transitional Justice Policy (NTJP) and implementation roadmap in June 2019. This milestone signals the GOU's commitment to supporting post-conflict communities and provides a framework for addressing peace, justice, and reconciliation in Uganda. Against this backdrop, this research analyzes conflict dynamics and trends in Acholi, Lango, and West Nile, with the aim of informing TJ discussions and providing a holistic perspective on post-conflict expectations and sustainable peace.

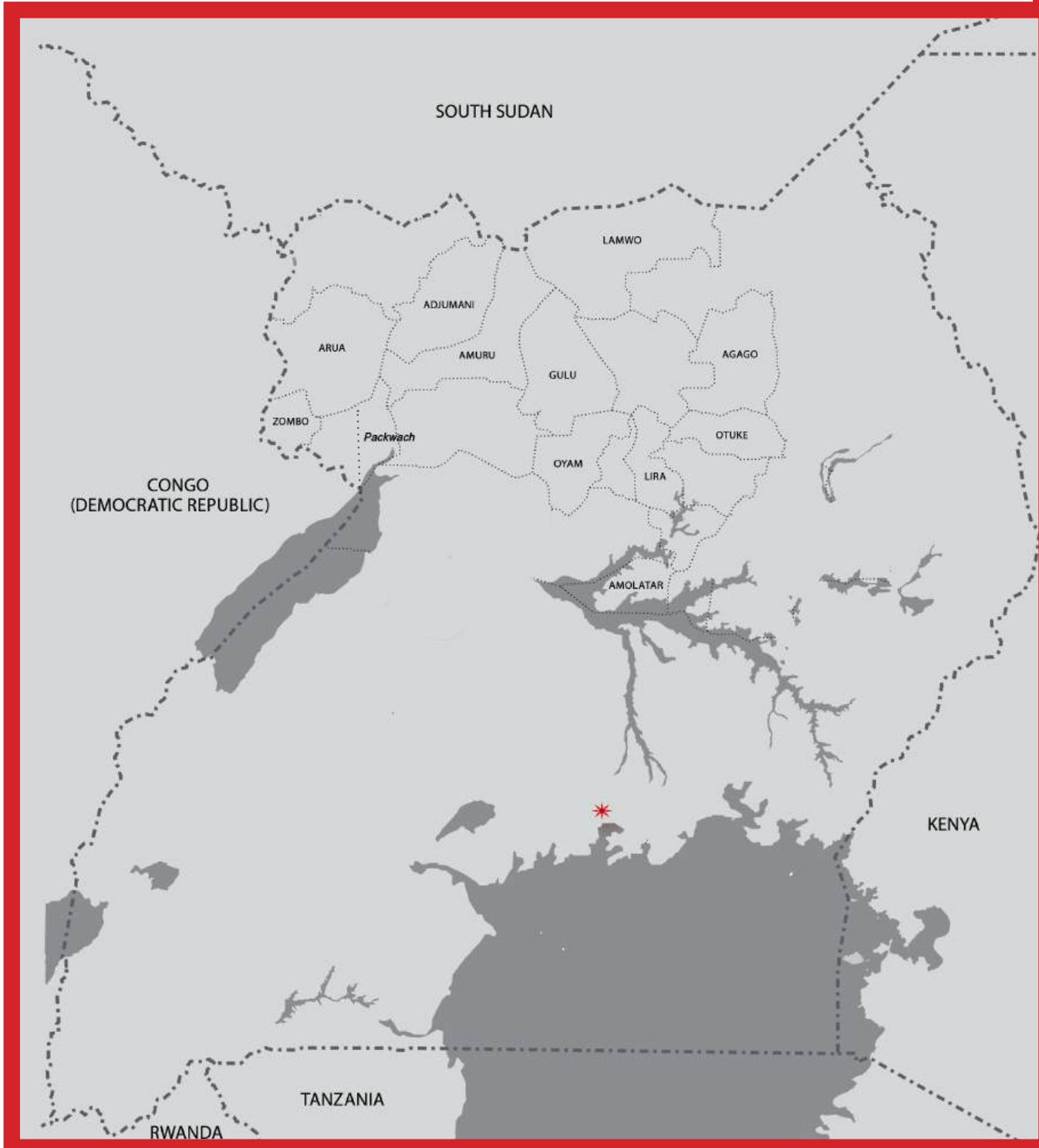
The study underscores the imperative of context-specific TJ measures, tailored to the unique historical and political context of each affected community. It advocates for a flexible approach, wherein TJ mechanisms are sequenced and adapted to accommodate evolving conflict dynamics and incorporate a broader range of stakeholders, particularly victims and their communities. By adopting such an approach, TJ can effectively address the complex needs of post-conflict communities and promote sustainable peace.

This research highlights the importance of adopting a transformative approach to TJ, one that moves beyond formal trials and prosecutions to incorporate local accounts of conflict and justice. By acknowledging and addressing economic, social, and cultural rights violations, TJ can effectively promote sustainable peace and address the complex needs of post-conflict communities. Furthermore, the study highlights the imperative of examining historical and structural factors that underpin conflict, as well as the diverse experiences of marginalized groups, including women, children, and children born of war. By integrating these innovations, TJ can develop a more nuanced understanding of conflict and its impact, ultimately fostering more effective and inclusive peacebuilding processes.

1.1. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to examine conflict and stability trends in select districts of Acholi, Lango, and West Nile. The overarching objective was to conduct a conflict and stability analysis, thereby catalyzing the transition from transitional justice policy to implementation and promoting sustainable peace in Uganda. Specifically, the research aimed to identify barriers to peaceful co-existence and non-violence, and explore the implications for transitional justice policy implementation in Uganda.

Location: The study covered 12 districts across Acholi, Lango, and West Nile regions in northern Uganda, selected to represent a mix of factors influencing peacebuilding. These factors included the presence of peacebuilding institutions, urban-rural dynamics, remoteness from peacebuilding centers, concentration of forced migrants, and areas with latent or overt conflicts. The selected districts, which broadly correlate with pre-2000 borders, include Gulu, Amuru, Lamwo, and Agago in Acholi; Arua, Zombo, Adjumani, and Pakwach in West Nile; and Lira, Otukey, Oyam, and Amolatar in Lango.



A map of Uganda showing areas of the research: Photo Credit: RLP

Sampling: A purposive, maximum variation sampling method was employed to engage relevant stakeholders, including community leaders, women, youth, forced migrants, former internally displaced people, and persons with disabilities.

Data Collection / Fieldwork: Fieldwork commenced in January 2024, with a one-day training

workshop for selected researchers. The team conducted fieldwork in Acholi (January 14-20, 2024), West Nile (January 21-28, 2024), and Lango (January 30-February 5, 2024). Data collection involved Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), with daily and weekly reflection meetings to review instruments, data, and share field experiences. The study's methodology included 90 Key Informant Interviews across 12 districts, 12 Focus Group Discussions with 180 participants, and 3 Consensus Panel Discussions with 45 key stakeholders.

Ethics: The research team developed and refined the research instruments, consent forms, and protocols, which were used to obtain administrative clearances from the Chief Administrative Officers (CAOs) of the 12 study districts in October 2023. Ethics approval was granted by Lacor in November, and final approval from UNCST was received on December 23, 2023 (Reference number SS2147ES).

Data Analysis: Data from FGDs, KIIs, and CPDs were analyzed separately and then triangulated to identify patterns and recurrent themes. A coding framework was developed using a hybrid approach, combining deductive codes (based on conflict and transitional justice frameworks and study topic guides) with inductive codes (emergent themes from the data). The transcribed data were entered into NVIVO software and analyzed using a framework analysis approach, allowing for comparison across data sources.

1.2. Study limitations

The study acknowledges several limitations that impacted the scope and depth of the research. The purposive sampling of 11 districts in Acholi, Lango, and West Nile, although strategic, limits the generalizability of the findings to the entire region. The qualitative methodology, while providing rich insights, precluded the collection of quantitative data, which would have helped quantify trends and scales of issues.

The research team took steps to create a conducive environment for open discussions, including separate FGDs for women and men. However, cultural taboos and fear of shame or exposure likely resulted in underreporting of gender-based violence and other sensitive issues. Additionally, the study coincided with political tensions surrounding the Balalo pastoralists, making it challenging to explore certain conflict dynamics with the necessary depth.

The research approval process, particularly the wait for clearance from the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST), delayed the fieldwork, ultimately limiting the time available for data collection and analysis. These limitations notwithstanding, the study provides valuable insights into conflict and stability issues in northern Uganda, highlighting areas for future research and policy attention.

1.3. Contextual Domains for Peace and Stability in Uganda that Impacts the Sub-Regions of Study

Uganda has made notable strides in promoting peace and stability, with significant progress in post-conflict reconstruction and economic growth. The country's GDP has grown steadily, driven by sectors like agriculture, tourism, and infrastructure development. However, these gains have not been evenly distributed, and regional marginalization persists, particularly in post-conflict areas like Acholi, Lango, and West Nile.

These regions, once ravaged by conflict, continue to grapple with poverty, limited access to basic services, and inadequate infrastructure. The north, for instance, lags behind the rest of the country in key development indicators, with poverty rates significantly higher than the national average. This perpetuates a cycle of inequality, fuelling grievances and undermining national cohesion.

The country's economic productivity is often skewed towards urban centers like Kampala, while rural areas struggle to attract investment. This spatial inequality reinforces existing power dynamics, exacerbating feelings of exclusion and marginalization. Addressing these disparities is crucial to ensuring sustainable peace and stability in Uganda.

1.3.1. Poverty

Poverty and inequality in Uganda's regions are potent drivers of conflict and instability, threatening the country's fragile peace. The north and east, including Acholi, Lango, and West Nile, are particularly vulnerable, with multidimensional poverty affecting 62.9% of the population in the north (UBOS, 2022). As one study notes, "The northern region recorded the highest levels of multidimensional poverty... compared to other regions of Uganda" (UBOS Multidimensional Poverty Index Report, 2022).

Climate-related shocks like droughts, floods, and pests exacerbate poverty, potentially sparking conflict over scarce resources. This is particularly concerning in regions like Acholi, Lango, and West Nile, where persistent poverty and unemployment can reignite tensions. Unemployment, particularly among youth, is a ticking time bomb, with national unemployment jumping from 9% to 12% between 2019/20, and youth unemployment hitting 17% (Uganda National Labour Force Survey, 2021).

The consequences are clear: "Unemployment, particularly among youth, creates a vulnerable pool for recruitment into criminal or extremist groups, threatening regional stability" (Study findings). Addressing these inequalities is crucial for sustaining peace and preventing conflict in Uganda. As the data shows, urban areas and females are disproportionately affected, highlighting the need for targeted interventions to address these inequalities and promote inclusive growth.

1.3.2. Forced migration

Uganda is currently hosting approximately 1.95 million refugees, making it Africa's largest refugee-hosting country and the third-largest globally (UNHCR, 2023). This number is expected to rise due to ongoing conflicts and environmental challenges in neighboring countries like South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Sudan (OCHA, 2023; UNHCR, 2023; World Bank, 2023). The refugee population, comprising mainly women, girls, and youth, faces significant challenges, including sexual and gender-based violence, limited access to resources, and tensions with host communities.



New arrivals of refugees at a reception centre in Adjumani District; Photo credit RLP

Refugees experience conflicts over land, domestic violence, and discrimination, exacerbating mental health issues (RLP, 2022). Decreasing global funding threatens humanitarian assistance, impacting refugees' ability to establish secure livelihoods (OCHA, 2023). Conflicts arise over resource competition,

as seen in Lamwo, where refugees were accused of raiding crops.

These issues are intertwined with conflict and stability in Uganda, particularly in northern Uganda, which hosts the largest number of refugees. The country's progressive refugee policy, allowing refugees to work and access public services, is strained by the sheer number of arrivals (UNHCR, 2023). Climate-related shocks and environmental degradation further exacerbate tensions, highlighting the need for long-term support and sustainable solutions (IPCC, 2022; World Bank, 2023).

The strain on resources is particularly pronounced in northern Uganda, where poverty rates are already high, and social indicators are poor (UBOS, 2022). The influx of refugees has put pressure on local services, including healthcare and education, and has led to increased competition for resources such as land and water (RLP, 2022).

1.3.3. Gender inequality and discrimination

Uganda's progress in promoting gender equality is hindered by persistent challenges, manifesting in various forms across the country. Despite the 1995 Constitution and other legal instruments recognizing women's rights, institutional bias, stereotyping, and historical imbalances limit their participation in leadership, while weak electoral laws and flawed processes perpetuate inequality (FCO, 2019). Women often lack access to basic resources like land and housing, with 62% of women not owning a house and 69% not owning land, compared to 47% and 53% of men, respectively (UDHS, 2016).



Ladies at a roadside market trying to earn a living in Gulu District; Photo credit RLP

These inequalities are further entrenched in regions like northern Uganda, where the legacy of conflict and displacement has exacerbated existing gender inequalities, creating a complex web of instability. The normalization of violence in this region contributes to high rates of SGBV and HTPs, such as early and forced marriages (UBOS, 2016). Limited access to land, resources, and economic opportunities perpetuates cycles of poverty and vulnerability, undermining women's rights and hampering post-conflict recovery and stability.

The intersection of poverty, lack of education, and limited economic opportunities fuels tensions, potentially reigniting conflict. Women's limited participation in decision-making processes further marginalizes their voices, exacerbating grievances (RLP, 2022). Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach, including policy reforms, education, and community engagement, to promote women's economic empowerment, education, and leadership, and foster a more inclusive and resilient society.

1.3.4. Conflict and transitional justice

Transitional justice is a vital component of Uganda's path to sustainable peace and stability, particularly in northern Uganda. Civil society representatives in Uganda and scholars have emphasized the need for inclusive and victim-centered approaches, highlighting the significance of understanding women's experiences in conflict. In recognition of its importance in promoting accountability, reconciliation, and healing, the Government of Uganda initiated transitional justice processes in 2007. However, implementation has been slow, and the drafting of a Bill remains ongoing (Kasande, 2023).



The Acholi traditional justice mechanism of stepping on egg to welcome back a community member home; Photo credit RLP

Thomas Obel Hansen (2024), examined the impact of international standardization of transitional justice on local processes, noting the risk of a superficial "tick-the-box" approach. The involvement of international actors, such as the International Criminal Court (ICC), has elicited mixed reactions, with some arguing that it promotes accountability and others contending that it obstructs peace talks (Hansen, 2024; Nouwen, 2012).

1.4. Outline of the Report

The proceeding chapters of the report analyses the above domains in detail by examining findings on conflict and stability from the perspectives of participants and stakeholders in Acholi, Lango and West Nile in order to give detailed clarity to the context under study:

Chapter 2 examines the factors that drive conflict at the sub-regional levels of Acholi, Lango and West Nile. It discusses these factors in terms of the first-hand experiences and perspectives of the participants while paying credence to the context specificity of the issues at play and intersecting.

Chapter 3 collates the lessons for Uganda's transitional justice and concludes with a forward-looking opportunity to achieving sustainable peace in the sub regions of Acholi, Lango and West Nile, ending with a conclusion to the study.

CHAPTER TWO

2. SUB-REGIONAL DRIVERS OF CONFLICT IN ACHOLI, LANGO AND WEST NILE

I think peace is broad in definition, but to some extent I would say peace is when people are settled, people are allowed to do what they can do in terms of taking care of their livelihood. People are given some level of freedom and liberty. That one, I can consent, it is there and it is to a good level. But I can also say in terms of other issues – Adjumani, I can't say is peaceful for almost 40 percent because of ongoing issues in the community. Well, there is no running up and down, we don't hear sound of gun fire but there is a big population of people who don't sleep in the night owing to a lot of factors.¹

Our analysis reveals that communities in Acholi, Lango, and West Nile remain in a state of conflict, driven by latent factors that manifest in various ways. Frustrations over resource distribution, historical grievances, and overt violence – including boundary disputes and gender-based violence – are just a few examples. These conflicts are often cross-cutting, interconnected, and, if left unaddressed, risk escalating into larger socio-political and economic crises.

This chapter delves into the sub-regional drivers of conflict, exploring the firsthand experiences and perspectives of communities in Acholi, Lango, and West Nile. By examining these context-specific issues, we aim to shed light on the complexities of conflict in northern Uganda and pave the way for sustainable peace.

2.1. Land Disputes: A Ticking Time Bomb

The return of displaced communities to their ancestral lands has sparked a new wave of conflicts in Acholi, Lango, and West Nile. As new actors lay claim to land resources, struggles over boundaries and ownership have become increasingly common. Research findings reveal that contested land is a key driver of conflict, with community leaders across the sub-regions warning that it's the most likely cause of a return to violent conflict if not addressed thoroughly (Kasande, 2023).

In Lango, the land question is viewed as a structural issue, fueled by factors such as land grabbing by wealthy individuals, corruption within judicial systems, and inadequate enforcement or implementation of land laws or regulations. As scholar Pauline E. Peters (2013) notes, "land grabbing is a manifestation of power imbalances and competing interests." These factors have created a perfect storm, exacerbated tensions and fueling conflicts over land. The powerful and influential often exploit vulnerable communities, while weak institutional frameworks and corrupt judicial systems fail to protect community rights, further entrenching inequalities and grievances (Ntamutumba, 2018). As participants in Amolatar noted, "The overburdening impact of land is likely to create conditions where violence can emerge and thrive." Similarly, in Acholi, contested land in Amuru is seen as a potential flashpoint for renewed violence.

The interplay of these factors – land grabbing, corruption, and inadequate enforcement – has created a complex web of conflicts that threaten to undermine peace and stability in northern Uganda. As scholar Chris Huggins (2014) emphasizes, "addressing land disputes is critical to preventing future conflicts and promoting sustainable peace." The stakes are high, and the consequences of inaction could be devastating. Urgent attention is needed to mitigate the risks and create a more stable future for these communities, including strengthening land governance, promoting transparency and accountability, and supporting community-led initiatives to resolve land disputes and promote coexistence.

Across northern Uganda's study areas, including Acholi, Lango, and West Nile, the erosion of customary rights has emerged as a significant threat to peace and stability. Years of displacement and conflict

¹ Key Informant Interview with Agwe Solomon, peace activist, Adjumani January 22, 2024.

have disrupted traditional land governance systems, leading to a loss of historical boundaries and unclear ownership.

In Acholi and parts of Lango, years of displacement have led to a loss of historical boundaries, with many customary rights undocumented. The passing of elders who knew land boundaries has left a knowledge gap, and young people are unclear about their rights to customary land. This has created opportunities for exploitation, with some individuals claiming the best land upon return, often at the expense of rightful owners (Onegi, 2012).

Corrupt individuals seeking personal gain have exacerbated land conflicts, prioritizing land sales over socio-cultural values and heritage. Poor implementation of land tenure systems, low awareness of land laws, and misinterpretation of regulations have fueled these conflicts. As a result, communities are vulnerable to exploitation by commercial enterprises, threatening their livelihoods and cultural heritage.

The loss of customary knowledge and weak land governance have created a perfect storm, undermining peace and stability in these regions. Addressing these issues is critical to securing community rights, promoting sustainable development, and preventing future conflicts.

2.1.1. Communal land ownership versus individual interests

The interplay between communal land ownership and individual interests is a potent source of conflict in northern Uganda. As one community member noted,

I think our land laws need to really be specific because land is communally owned and we are divided into sub-clans so the whole of Adjumani is made up of small-small sub-clans governed by clinical chiefs. So you find somebody who belongs to another sub-clan and is not under a particular clan chief can be denied land that he acquired in another sub-clan area even if they may acquire this land through purchase.²



Community members during communal digging in Amuru District; Photo credit RLP

² Key Informant Interview with Agwe Solomon, peace activist, Adjumani January 22, 2024.

This quote highlights the tension between customary and statutory land laws. While Ugandan law recognizes both communal and individual land ownership, the lack of specificity in land laws creates ambiguity and opportunities for exploitation. In Acholi, Lango, and West Nile, 76% of land is owned communally under cultural leaders, yet individual interests often clash with communal rights.

The complexities of sub-clan dynamics further exacerbate conflicts. As the community member pointed out, individuals from one sub-clan may be denied access to land in another sub-clan area, despite having purchased it. This raises questions about the limits of communal ownership and the rights of individuals within these systems.



Young girls getting involved in fish harvesting in Agago District; Photo credit RLP

The coexistence of statutory and customary law, as stipulated by the 1995 constitution and 1998 Land Act, is intended to provide a framework for land governance. However, the lack of clarity and inconsistent application of these laws fuels conflicts, particularly in contexts where customary norms prioritize communal over individual rights. Ultimately, the intersection of communal land ownership and individual interests in northern Uganda highlights the need for nuanced land governance that balances competing rights and interests.

The tension between customary land tenure and development aspirations is palpable in northern Uganda. As participants noted in several FGDs, customary land tenure can hinder development projects, as claims and disputes often arise when public services or individual interests seek to utilize large tracts of land. A key driver of this tension is the growing awareness of land's economic value, leading some clan members to prefer freehold tenure and land titling over customary ownership. This shift is reflected in the higher prices commanded by titled land, creating a complex dynamic where individual interests may clash with communal norms.

The coexistence of customary and statutory systems often leads to confusion and conflict, particularly when disputes arise. As Saferworld et al. (2013) highlight, the lack of clarity on decision-making authority can pit individuals against families, clans against clans, and communities against authorities

or investors. These conflicts are intricate and context-specific, reflecting the diverse and nuanced nature of land governance in northern Uganda. The interplay between customary and statutory systems requires careful navigation to balance competing interests and ensure equitable development outcomes.

The legacy of displacement in northern Uganda's war continues to drive land conflicts in Acholi and Lango. As participants noted, families abandoned or lost land, leaving young children to inherit without clear boundaries or understanding of proper land usage. Ronald Artkinson (2010: 333) highlights the concerns surrounding land access, including the loss of knowledgeable elders and the vulnerability of widows and orphans.

These intergenerational conflicts are often fueled by internal family dynamics, with siblings contesting land divisions made by parents years earlier. Despite initial agreements, disputes resurface, straining relationships and overwhelming local authorities.

Societal norms around marriage and inheritance further complicate land ownership. Children born out of wedlock face challenges securing land rights, while returning women who were abducted or grew up in captivity struggle to reclaim land ownership. Female-headed households, orphans, and child-headed households are particularly vulnerable to land denial by male relatives.

The contours of these conflicts are complex, reflecting the devastating impact of war on social fabric and land governance. Addressing these issues requires nuanced understanding of local contexts and sustained support for vulnerable groups.

2.1.2. Politicization of land conflict: A recipe for Instability

The politicization of land conflict in northern Uganda has become a potent tool for mobilizing support and fueling instability. As the central government pushes for investment and agro-business, local communities perceive this as exploitation, sparking suspicion and resentment. This has created a tug-of-war between central and local governments, with private investment becoming a contentious issue.



A typical homestead in a satellite camp in Gulu District; Photo credit RLP

As one KII respondent noted, “The government’s push for investment in our land is like a replay of the past, when they forced us into IDP camps under the guise of ‘protected villages’.” This perception is rooted in history: the forced displacement of Acholi and Lango populations during the LRA insurgency has long fueled views of government exploitation (Hovil and Lomo, 2004).

FGD participants echoed these sentiments, highlighting how politicians capitalize on these tensions, using accusations of land grabbing to rally support and further their ambitions. The 2021 general elections saw candidates promising to defend land against multi-national companies and wealthy investors, tapping into deep-seated anxieties. This rhetoric has become a recurring theme, with politicians across parties and regions leveraging land issues to maintain power.

The consequences are far-reaching. Land grabbing rumors spread fear and anxiety, particularly in rural areas. As conflicts escalate, investment projects are damaged or undermined, perpetuating instability and hindering development. The manipulation of land issues for political gain has created a toxic environment, where trust is eroded, and tensions simmer.

In this context, land is no longer just a resource, but a highly charged political tool. Addressing these conflicts requires a nuanced understanding of the complex power dynamics at play and a commitment to prioritizing community interests over political expediency.

The legacy of displacement continues to shape perceptions, with many viewing government efforts as attempts to exploit and control land. The creation of new districts has exacerbated tensions, often perceived as politically motivated and divisive. As one community leader noted,

The conflict is between the Acholi community and Madi communities because they claim that the borders belong to them...because administratively Amuru claims that area is under Amuru. And I think from historical point the administration of Elegu border was under Gulu in Amin’s time even. But now when it comes to who are the landowners of that place and even if you go back historically you will find that it is owned by Madi people... and now because our district has been set up based on tribal settings that is where the conflict comes in. And there is a lot of mistrust. There is a lot of mistrust because when policies come, for example if it is physical planning of Elegu town and some houses are said to be on road reserves and the owners of the houses (who are Madi people) will say they are being targeted by the Acholis (who are the administrators) and so they are getting persecuted³.

These divisions have fueled mistrust, with local communities questioning the motives behind government decisions. In West Nile, participants highlighted how new districts have entrenched party politics, further polarizing communities. The struggle for resources, staff allocation, and boundary definitions has pitted districts against each other, as seen in Acholi’s Amuru and Lamwo.

The historical context is crucial: the forced displacement of Acholi and Lango populations during the LRA insurgency has long fueled views of government exploitation (Hovil and Lomo, 2004). As one participant observed, “They were removed from their land, and now we’re seeing a replay of that history.”

2.1.3. The Balalo cattle migrants: A New Frontier of Conflict

The influx of Balalo cattle keepers in Amuru and Nwoya districts has sparked tensions with the Acholi community, who claim their communal land is being encroached upon. The Balalo, originating from Ankole – Mpororo, ancient Bunyoro, parts of Congo, Karagwe in Tanzania and Rwanda and other regions speculated about during the interviews, have moved to northern Uganda seeking grazing land. However, their presence is seen as a threat to local livelihoods and ancestral claims.

Participants highlighted how individual clan members are selling or hiring out land to Balalo cattle keepers without community consent, fueling land conflicts. This has created a sense of dispossession and marginalization among the Acholi, who feel their land is being exploited for economic gain. As one

3 Key Informant Interview with Kareo Scholar, CSO activist, Adjumani January 24, 2024.

participant described,

Look at the place called Obira [in Nwoya district]; very few people ganged up and grabbed the entire land of the Payira people that have settled there through time immemorial. What is their interest? Economic interest. They went ahead and hired out land to the Balalo. Others have sold part of it [to the Balalo] and when you go there, you only get powerful people. And you are not supposed to complain. The moment you are settled inside [the fenced land] as a rightful member of the clan; you are supposed to leave without question. I went there and I found, I think a city is springing up there. When you go there and see the kind of buildings by these big people in government, you can't believe. I was there last weekend.⁴

This narrative highlights the power imbalance and lack of transparency in land dealings, exacerbating tensions between the Balalo and local communities. The above quote lays bare the intricate web of power, economics, and identity driving land conflicts in northern Uganda. It reveals how a small group of powerful individuals, driven by economic interests, have exploited communal land for personal gain, hiring it out to Balalo cattle keepers. This has sparked tensions with the Payira people, who've lived there for generations, and raises concerns about cultural erosion and dispossession.



A community dialogue to discuss the Land question in Amuru District; Photo credit RLP

This dynamic is reflective of broader trends in Uganda, where pastoralist communities like the Balalo often face resistance and marginalization (Kubik, 2019). The Balalo's presence has disrupted local customs and livelihoods, fueling perceptions of cultural insensitivity and exploitation (Muhumuza, 2018).

The presidential directive to evict the Balalo, while a response to community concerns, has been slow to implement, suggesting a lack of political will to address these tensions (Uganda Presidential

⁴ Remark by a community leader in Amuru during FGD in Gulu city, January 16, 2024 RLP office, Gulu.

Directive, 2023). This has reignited fears of land grabbing and cultural erosion among the Acholi, who've historically faced displacement and marginalization (Hovil & Lomo, 2004).

The perceived lack of follow-through on the eviction order has further entrenched suspicions that powerful actors are prioritizing economic interests over community rights. As participants noted, this is seen as another attempt to take away Acholi land, eroding their identity and sparking further conflict.

By the time of this research, the situation remained volatile, with competing interests and power dynamics at play. The Acholi community's fears are not unfounded, given the historical context of displacement and marginalization. Addressing these tensions requires a nuanced approach that balances competing interests, prioritizes community rights, and acknowledges the complex history of the region.

2.1.4. Cross Border Boundary Conflicts

The research notes that land conflicts are escalating along borders, fueled by competition for resources and weak security. In northern Uganda, Karamojong pastoralists cross into Pader, Kitgum, and Otuke districts, sparking tensions over grazing land and livestock theft. Similarly, individuals from South Sudan exploit resources in Amuru District, including sand, timber, and land for brick-making.

The lack of robust border security enables these activities, while illicit small arms exacerbate violence. These cross-border conflicts are often rooted in historical patterns of resource competition and mobility, but are intensified by contemporary dynamics. Addressing these conflicts requires strengthening border security, promoting regional cooperation, and supporting sustainable resource management. It also involves addressing the root causes of resource competition and supporting communities to manage shared resources peacefully.



A typical social gathering setting of a Karamojong pastoralists in Karamonja ; Photo credit RLP

In Lango, conflicting interpretations of land boundary maps fuel disputes, often relying on physical features rather than accurate demarcations. This ambiguity leads to prolonged disputes and violence among neighbours. In spite ongoing efforts to register and demarcate land boundaries in Lango, local government participants pointed out that powerful political actors with vested interests, like MPs have sometimes resisted boundary extensions on their lands, in cases such as in Abim and Otuke – an

action interpreted by the participants as a display of political prowess. The participants in the Amolatar district cited the rampant problem of illegal land acquisition where land titles were reportedly acquired unlawfully without the consent or knowledge of rightful owners, as observed in communities like Baruli and Namasale in Amolatar district.

Participants along the bordering sub regions of Zombo, Adjumani and Amuru have reported contestation with tribal groupings located across international borders between Uganda and its neighbors. For example, between Uganda and South Sudan there are continued tensions over alleged encroachments between communities north of Adjumani and Moyo districts in West Nile and their South Sudanese counterparts. During a KII Adjumani for instance, one community leader analysed the conflict between the Acholi and Madi in the following way:

...during the time, when Adjumani was still under Moyo and Amuru under Gulu, the upper land falls in a Adjumani. But interestingly, after getting Amuru out of Gulu, Amuru started claiming that this land belongs to Amuru, just because the locals who are settled there are the actual people. So, a big conflict. And this issue has not been resolved to date.⁵

This highlights how administrative decisions can intersect with local identities, sparking conflicts. New districts face boundary demarcation challenges, diverting resources from service delivery, with little support from the Ministry of Local Government.

This pattern repeats across newly established districts, pointing to a systemic issue. Addressing these conflicts requires revisiting administrative boundary decisions, prioritizing community engagement, and providing support for conflict resolution and resource management.

The research team came across several reported boundary issues throughout Acholi sub-region. Boundary issues plague Acholi sub-region, with disputes erupting between districts and across international borders. Agago and Abim districts clash over a 3km stretch, while Nwoya and Adjumani contest Apaa, and Gulu, Adjumani, and Amuru dispute Elegu, Lamwo, and Kitgum.

These conflicts often take on ethnic dimensions, like the Acholi-Jonam dispute over Te-Got Apwoyo in Nwoya. Cross-border tensions simmer between Uganda and South Sudan, particularly in Acholi and West Nile, straining community relations and potentially impacting East African regional dynamics.

Conflicts also exists along the South Sudan-Uganda border, particularly in the Acholi and West Nile sub regions which has resulted into strained relations among the two communities – and which the participants during the Gulu FGD believed may in the long run impact relations among the broader East African community. Similarly, the Dinka-Madi tension over Elegu borderland exemplify the complex interplay of identity, territory, and resources. Addressing these conflicts requires nuanced understanding of local histories, collaborative conflict resolution, and regional cooperation.

In Atiak sub-county, Amuru district, South Sudanese traders are reportedly armed, with some engaging in activities like tree cutting and charcoal burning within Uganda. Ugandan authorities' perceived inaction on border security has raised concerns, as Ugandan traders face harassment, killings, and loss of goods in South Sudan. To the participants, it is disappointing that there is a sense that Ugandan authorities have not done much to stop the South Sudanese from carrying arms as they cross the border. Cross-border tensions are further exacerbated by raids from Kenyan Turkana and Pokot groups into Uganda's Karamoja region, neighboring Lango. As one respondent noted, "while disarmament efforts are underway in Karamoja, our Kenyan counterparts have not implemented similar measures, leaving the Karamojong vulnerable to attacks⁶". The agricultural sector in Laperebong and Agago faces threats from external forces, including Karamojong raids, disrupting farming activities and posing risks to community safety. This highlights broader challenges of border security, interethnic tensions, and regional instability (Mkutu, 2008).

5 Interview with District Community Development Officer in Adjumani, January 22, 2014, Adjumani district.

6 Focus Group Discussion in Amolatar, January 30, 2024, Amolatar district.

2.1.5. Game parks and forest boundary conflicts

Communities around forest reserves accuse the National Forestry Authority (NFA) of corruption, sparking conflicts over commercial exploitation of forest land. The Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) also clashes with locals over national parks and natural reserves, cutting them off from traditional resources.

These issues are compounded by poverty and perceptions of collusion between investors and authorities. Border disputes persist between Murchison National Game Park and surrounding districts, including Amuru, Gulu, and Oyam. During the fieldwork in Amuru and Adjumani, the researchers learned that a longstanding grievance has persisted between the Acholi and Madi people over the boundary of Apaa village in Pabbo sub-county that dates back to 2012.

To date, over 30 people have been killed in separate attacks on the disputed Apaa land since 2012 according to local leaders who participated in the KIs and FGD held in Adjumani. Conflicts over the Apaa land date back to 2012 when the government began the forceful eviction of over 6,000 locals occupying the area claiming it is a gazetted East Madi Wildlife Reserve under the management of Uganda Wildlife Authority. Parts of the land are also claimed by the NFA as gazetted Zoka Central Forest Reserve inside the Adjumani district. According to one local leader in Adjumani, the people are confused about what is going on as expressed in the following statement:

At one point the public is told the issue is in the cabinet, the cabinet makes a statement and the next thing again you hear is that this issue has been referred to the Parliament. You would think the Parliament is ready to come up with the final resolution to solve the issue. Then you hear a special tribunal has been set by the President to investigate. While this is taking place, you see a big group of Balalo has entered where there is a conflict. You find there military detach, big barrack is set up in the same area of conflict but the funniest thing is that the community has now developed a belief that somebody other than the two communities is interested in making this conflict go on. The second area that we are talking about is described as East Madi Wild reserve. If you go to the records you will find that it was gazetted to be a wild reserve since 2002. But a wild reserve does not have roads. I mean, yeah, it can have roads for people to access the animals but the roads that are built there to do commercial activities. So that is a serious conflict⁷.

The quote highlights the perceived ambivalence and lack of political will in addressing the Apaa conflict, fueling speculation and mistrust. The government's shifting narrative – cabinet, parliament, presidential tribunal – creates uncertainty, suggesting a lack of clear direction or commitment to resolution.

The concurrent presence of Balalo cattle keepers and military detachments in the conflict area reinforces suspicions of external manipulation, exacerbating tensions. The community's perception of hidden agendas undermines trust in government intentions, as can be seen from the quote below:

Right now, the influx of the Balalo alone in other school of thoughts is seen as a conspiracy to dominate and destabilise our community; so much as we have confidence they will infiltrate in the form of Balalos, they will use our weaker links and parts to infiltrate us and bring a lot of issues. Nowadays, the Balalos are even suing people who cut their fences, suing people who take their cows to graze there such that people have fear now to talk about the Balalo now. How are we going to recover from that? And the question now is 'is there willingness from those other factors that we should actually be peaceful and secure?'⁸

This dynamic is characteristic of "benign neglect" or "managed chaos," where conflicting parties may benefit from prolonged uncertainty (Keen, 2008). The situation demands scrutiny of power dynamics, transparency, and accountability to break the impasse.

7 Key Informant Interview with Agwe Solomon, peace activist, Adjumani January 22, 2024.

8 Key Informant Interview with Zerubabel Abukar, January 16, 2014, Gulu city.

The Apaa land conflict revolves around competing claims of customary ownership and government gazettement. Residents assert traditional rights, while Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) cites 2002 gazettement as a game reserve. However, no legal documentation supports UWA's claim, fueling tensions and mistrust. Despite efforts by government, political, and traditional leaders to intervene, violence persists. President Museveni's 2023 Judicial Commission of Inquiry, led by Justice Bart Katureebe, aims to resolve the dispute, but its effectiveness remains uncertain.

The President's three-point proposal – relocation, restricted stay, or alternative land – is seen as top-down, neglecting community consultation and participation. Locals warn that ignoring their concerns will perpetuate violence, as they're exploited as pawns by powerful interests. The participants have insisted that regardless of all efforts, when people on the ground are not consulted, and continue to be used as political pawns by government, politicians and investors interested in the Apaa land, more bloodshed will follow.

This dynamic exemplifies "elite capture," where powerful actors manipulate narratives and institutions, exacerbating conflicts (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). These "peace spoilers" – reportedly including high-ranking military officials – prioritize personal gain over community stability, using local communities as pawns. This dynamic perpetuates a cycle of violence, environmental degradation, and impunity. Addressing the Apaa conflict requires inclusive dialogue, transparency, and accountability to break the cycle of violence. It also requires dismantling entrenched power structures, ensuring accountability, and promoting inclusive, sustainable resource management (Le Billon, 2001).

2.2. Refugee-Host Community Tensions: Cultural and Resource-Based Faultlines

The researchers found that the Adjumani and Lamwo communities grapple with unresolved tensions between refugees and hosts, fueled by cultural differences and competing resource use. The 2018-2019 conflict between Dinka refugees (Nyumanzi camp) and Madi hosts (Aringapi sub-county) exemplifies this dynamic, rooted in divergent livelihoods: Madi crop agriculture vs. Dinka cattle keeping. This clash over land use – grazing vs. farming – highlights the challenges of integrating disparate communities with distinct cultural practices and economic activities (UNHCR, 2018).

In one of the community leader's viewpoint, he observed the following regarding the conflict between the Dinka and Madi in Adjumani:

There was a conflict around 2018. I think 2019, which was between the Dinka refugee community settled in Nyumanzi refugee camp and the locals of Aringapi sub-county. And for me that was simply because of differences in cultures and the way of life of the two communities. On this issue, the host communities of Madi in Aringapi are predominantly crop agriculturalist and the refugee Dinka communities are cattle keepers. And so, because of this there was conflict that emerged over land usage. The Dinka would graze their cattle in open land which is meant for food crop production of the Madi, hence damaging crops and plantation.⁹

The Adjumani incident highlights how quickly tensions can escalate between refugees and host communities. A violent crime sparked revenge attacks, resulting in deaths and property destruction. In Ayilo I and Ayilo II refugee settlements of Adjumani, a young girl was gang raped and purportedly strangled by a group of Dinka leading to anger and rage from the local community. According to the leaders, several houses of refugees were burnt down by the Madi host community with some registered deaths as a result of revenge. UNHCR's intervention and mediation efforts restored calm, but underlying mistrust persists.

Four years on, communities coexist peacefully, yet social mistrust lingers. Hosts attribute rising crime rates to refugees, fueling accusations and suspicion. The host communities that the research team met have continued to point fingers of accusation at the refugees for the increase in crime rate in Lamwo

9 Key informant interview with community leader, Mawa, Ayilo Camp, January 24, 2024.

and Adjumani districts as expressed in the following statement:

You see why I talked about it is I am trying to bring the issue of bad cultures coming from outside being practiced here. In the past we did not have issue of people being murdered because a bad person wants to pick his property; we believe that majority of the people that are coming from the central are criminals. Hardcore criminals. These are things that in Madi we used not to be practicing them but they are coming up.¹⁰

The above statement shows that the situation remains fragile, vulnerable to triggers that could reignite conflict. Proactive engagement and collaborative problem-solving are crucial to fostering genuine reconciliation and coexistence. This dynamic underscore the need for sustained dialogue and joint initiatives to address shared concerns and rebuild trust (UNHCR, 2018).

2.3. Infrastructure Deficits Fueling Marginalization and Conflict Risks

The poor state of road networks and inadequate healthcare services in Northern Uganda, particularly in rural areas, pose significant threats to the region's stability and development, fueling feelings of neglect and marginalization. This perceived marginalization fuels resentment and mistrust towards the government, exemplifying "horizontal inequality" (Stewart, 2008), where regional disparities in resource distribution spark social tensions. As one participant noted during the CPD below:

I would think that as much as we might have the confidence that there is peace, I don't think peace and development might come just as a result of their confidence alone because there are also external factors that contribute to that. Our history is that the present government, the NRM government fought in the bush and they made a lot of enmity. They fought mostly against the army that had mostly been dominated by the Acholi, so within themselves as the winners (the NRA, the Banyankole, the Baganda or the Banyarwanda) those who fought in the NRA some of them feel that they haven't yet paid enough, some of them would not like to see the Acholi standing on their feet. In Luwero, there was war for only 5 years and some of these people haven't yet recovered from that 5-year war. They feel that they have not yet recovered from war brought by the Acholi so they will not want to see anything good being done here. No wonder, when 5 billion is released to initiate part compensation for the cows; you will find that 500 million will go back down there (that is, to the south). They have released some money for the recapitalisation of cooperative societies, and then a person will tell you that if you don't give me 40% I will not release the money to go to the North. So, we cannot depend on our confidence alone to bring peace and security.¹¹

The participant's account reveals a stark perception: that historical grievances and power dynamics hinder development in Northern Uganda. The notion that some groups may be deliberately withholding support due to past conflicts fuels deep-seated frustrations. This narrative suggests that peace and development are contingent on more than just the absence of conflict, but also on addressing entrenched biases and power imbalances.

The allegation of resource diversion and conditionality ("if you don't give me 40%...") underscores perceptions of exploitation, exacerbating feelings of marginalization. This reinforces the need for inclusive, transparent, and accountable governance to break the cycle of mistrust (Collier, 2007).

The allegations of resource diversion and conditionality have fueled perceptions of exploitation, deepening feelings of marginalization in Northern Uganda. Despite efforts like the PRDP, communities feel neglected, citing poor infrastructure and inadequate service delivery as major drivers of conflict and barriers to peace. Poor infrastructure and the failure of state institutions to deliver basic services was raised as a significant driver to conflict, and a barrier to peace during the consensus panel discussions in

¹⁰ Key Informant Interview with elder, Vusso Paulino January 22, 2024.

¹¹ Interview with key informant, Zerubabel Abukar, January 16, 2024, Gulu city

Arua, Gulu and Lira. These perceptions have resulted in resentment towards state institutions charged with providing services to the people.

During the CPDs organized in Arua, Gulu and Lira, state institutions were seen as failing to deliver basics like healthcare, education, and utilities, sparking resentment. Districts lack capacity to provide services or maintain infrastructure, leaving communities frustrated. As participants noted during the FGDs, the lack of proper roads, education, and healthcare in areas like Zombo, Adjumani, and Moyo exemplifies this neglect, fostering feelings of abandonment compared to the rest of Uganda.

2.3.1. Poor Road Networks

The poor state of road networks in Northern Uganda, particularly in rural areas, poses a significant threat to the region's stability and development, with far-reaching implications for conflict and social cohesion. While cities like Arua, Gulu and Lira showcase pockets of development with tarmac roads, the rural roads connecting communities to these hubs lag woefully behind. This disparity cuts off the majority, perpetuating isolation and fueling feelings of neglect, which remains a pressing concern, with far-reaching implications for conflict and stability.



A hardly impassable murram road in Pagiriya settlement in Adjumani District; Photo credit RLP

After the conflict, PRDP I and II upgraded security roads, improving access to services. However, many rural roads remain in disrepair, with shoddy work and poor maintenance rendering some impassable. This hinders development, driving conflict in Acholi, Lango, and West Nile sub-regions. In West Nile, Moyo, Yumbe, Adjumani, and parts of Acholi and Lango, poor rural roads limit access to services, markets, and opportunities, fueling frustration and feelings of abandonment.

In West Nile, the lack of quality roads linking remote communities to Arua city and beyond fuels discontent. Community leaders feel the government neglects their needs, hindering business and trade. Difficulties accessing healthcare and other services exacerbate isolation and frustration. In Zombo, poor infrastructure sparks mobilization against the district, highlighting the potential for conflict.

The lack of quality roads connecting remote communities in Zombo, Adjumani, and Moyo to Arua city and other parts of Uganda, particularly Kampala, is a potential conflict driver. Community leaders expressed during the West Nile Consensus Panel that the government's neglect of their road infrastructure makes them feel like second-class citizens, hindering their ability to conduct business and trade with neighboring tribes. Long distances to healthcare and services worsen isolation and frustration. Road damages from heavy trailers transporting goods to and from Congo sparks community mobilization and

protests in Zombo – against the district, a significant conflict driver.

2.3.2. Inadequate health services

The unequal distribution of healthcare in Uganda disproportionately affects the poor, marginalized, and geographically isolated, who receive poorer quality care. In contrast, the middle and upper classes can access better healthcare through private clinics or medical care abroad (Lawson, 2004). This disparity is echoed in our study, highlighting the need for equitable healthcare access.



A group of young intern medics in Lacor hospital that is a private hospital providing health services in Gulu District; Photo credit RLP

The study participants reported that health centres in Acholi, Lango, and West Nile are plagued by shortages of staff, low salaries, non-functional facilities, and a lack of qualified personnel. This inadequacy disproportionately affects poverty-stricken communities in remote areas, who face significant barriers accessing essential healthcare services and life-saving facilities.

The participants pointed to shortage of staff, low salaries, non-functional facilities, and lack of highly qualified staff as major hurdles to healthcare delivery. In remote Acholi, Lango, and West Nile, limited access to healthcare and life-saving facilities worsens poverty-stricken communities' struggles. They feel neglected, citing inadequate healthcare provisions as evidence of a broader lack of interest in their wellbeing.

In Amuru, Ligiligi Health Centre struggles to meet growing demand, forcing residents to seek costly alternatives like traditional herbal medicines or local clinics, straining households financially. In Lamwo and Adjumani, refugee influx from South Sudan and Rwanda has pressured healthcare services, hiking costs and exacerbating tensions. Locals in Acholi, Lango, and West Nile feel the squeeze, with many FGD participants citing this as a major strain on Uganda's resources and services.

As noted during a CPD in Gulu town, the strained healthcare system in Acholi poses significant conflict risks. Competition for limited resources, such as hospital beds and medical staff, could spark tensions between locals and the influx of South Sudanese refugees in districts like Lamwo. The perceived

neglect of Acholi's healthcare needs by the government fuels feelings of marginalization, echoing historical grievances. In Gulu, economic strain from high healthcare costs exacerbates vulnerabilities, particularly for households already struggling with poverty and cattle loss from past conflicts. Meanwhile, inadequate healthcare access in rural Acholi perpetuates a vicious cycle of poverty, vulnerability, and insecurity, potentially driving instability in an area still recovering from decades of war.

This instability is further fueled by allegations of corruption among local government leaders, who community members accuse of siphoning funds meant for healthcare. District officials, however, shift the blame to central government funding cuts, claiming they receive inadequate support to meet the region's needs. The disconnect is stark: local officials who participated in this study in Gulu and Arua have mentioned that they feel sidelined in planning processes, making it hard to address pressing needs.

As one elder lamented,

...for example, with UPE, we are just participants of something we were just told works. After the war, they should have consulted us to find out what kind of training our children need. They did not. Now look at the children we are producing [through UPE system].¹²



Children pose for a photo in Pabbo IDP camp in Gulu District; Photo credit RLP

This highlights the frustrations with top-down approaches to development that neglect local context and priorities.

2.3.3. Poor Access to Justice

The pursuit of justice in northern Uganda remains an elusive dream for many, perpetuating a cycle of poverty, powerlessness, and impunity. Despite the laudable efforts of the JLRS reform, launched in 2000, the reality on the ground suggests a significant disconnect between policy intent and grassroots reality. The harsh reality: justice is a luxury many can't afford.

In northern Uganda, poverty and distance effectively bar rural communities from accessing justice,

¹² Interview with community leader, Cyprian Ocen, January 24, 2024, Lira city.

leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Without means to register or pursue court proceedings in town centres, they're often forced to suffer in silence.

In Gulu, participants during the FGDs highlighted the prohibitive costs associated with accessing justice, forcing many to forgo their rights and entitlements. Distance, too, emerges as a formidable barrier, effectively silencing voices from rural areas and emboldening perpetrators. The language of justice, English, further alienates those already on the periphery, creating a sense of disconnection and disillusionment.

Empowering people living in poverty to claim their rights has been cited by participants in the consensus panel of Gulu as fundamental to tackling inequality so that persons in the post conflict region feel a sense of justice has been afforded to them. Structural obstacles to accessing justice are not only related to distances or cost, but also to the fact that court proceedings are conducted in English in urban settings, which can be alienating for those coming from rural areas.

The obstacles to justice are stacked against the poor. Financial costs, location of courts, lack of info, and complex processes – it's like the system isn't designed for them. When corruption and ineffectiveness creep in, it's the vulnerable who suffer most, facing threats to their very livelihoods. In Lango, during FGDs in town, the participants warned that corrupt, ineffective, or inaccessible justice mechanisms can push the poor to desperation. "Once the poor feel threatened, they'll take matters into their own hands," a female participant said, highlighting a ticking time bomb. When justice is out of reach, people feel excluded, ignored, and disenfranchised – a potent mix that can fuel grievances, spark vigilantism, and escalate conflicts.

Similarly, the community stakeholders at the consensus panel discussion in Lira pinpointed the judiciary's inefficiency and lack of accountability as a conflict driver, fueling 'mob justice' when people feel let down by the system. This can spiral into civil unrest and unequal justice, often perpetuating biases and exclusion. Land tenure and property rights are particularly contentious, impacting the poor's ability to cope with economic shocks – and sparking tensions (Odeney, 2013).

Land tenure and property disputes has been pointed out during the entire study as amongst the most common problems faced by people living in the rural areas of northern Uganda, who are often powerless to defend against those with more economic power in informal and formal court systems. This problem is compounded for women, who additionally face gender bias in these systems. The participants also mentioned that reliance on local courts, chiefs, and particularly customary law can leave women vulnerable. Due to a lack of networks, they often face structural challenges when countering unlawful land-grabbing and other breaches of their rights by local leaders. More generally, the interconnectedness between poverty and access to justice is increasingly recognized by stakeholders as a central and essential aspect of post conflict development – and as such a trigger to conflict if not addressed.

2.4. Conflicts with former Combatants of the Lord's Resistance Army

The LRA's brutal abductions left deep scars in northern Uganda, and the return of thousands of former child soldiers now grown continues to create complex tensions. Many locals feel justice hasn't been served, and blanket amnesty for senior commanders fuels resentment. It has been hard for community members to willfully receive LRA returnees who participated in atrocious crimes against their own communities including abduction and forceful recruitment into LRA ranks, maiming of civilians, massacre and destruction of property and yet preach the message of 'forgiveness' espoused by the law. As former LRA combatants and victims return to live in the same communities, unresolved grievances have fueled conflicts between victims and perpetrators, especially because many members of the community believe those who committed atrocities against them have gone unpunished because they have received amnesty and immunity from government.

As these former combatants reintegrate, communities struggle to reconcile their suffering with the perpetrators' presence. This unaddressed legacy will echo for generations, straining stability and fueling grievances.

One participant noted, “They were taken as children, but now they’re adults who did terrible things – how do we move forward?” The lack of accountability and perceived impunity creates a sense of injustice, threatening to reignite cycles of violence and revenge. Community members have found it hard to accept LRA returnees who committed atrocities, including abduction, maiming, and destruction of property, yet preach forgiveness. Unresolved grievances fuel conflicts between victims and perpetrators, with many believing perpetrators have gone unpunished due to government amnesty.



The Lord's Resistance Army high command during the peace talks in Garamba; Photo credit RLP

Returnees face ostracism and blame, hindering reintegration. A community member said:

Former abductees will always stay reminded of what they did in the past. They remain in fear unless people come out to freely talk about what happened in the past. For example, when you say anything you are reminded how you were a rebel. One of my sons was once abducted and now a lot of people call him Ongom Adui (Ongom, the rebel), which severely undermines peace in our community.¹³

Returnees themselves feel abandoned by the government, citing lack of protection during abduction and insufficient support post-return. This neglect pushes them towards community revenge and hatred, undermining justice and reconciliation efforts.

As reflected during a CPD in Gulu, the LRA conflict's legacy highlights that justice is about addressing root causes, not just punishment. Participants emphasized that the current approach has fallen short, marked by a lack of accountability for senior commanders, which fuels resentment and impunity. This is compounded by the stigmatization and ostracism of returnees, hindering reintegration and creating further divisions within communities. Furthermore, returnees receive insufficient support, pushing them towards revenge and hatred, and perpetuating cycles of violence. The limitations of traditional mechanisms, such as mato oput, are also evident, as they struggle to address the scale and complexity of issues, leaving communities vulnerable to renewed instability.

These factors create a conflict multiplier, threatening stability. “Justice is not just about forgiveness, it’s about acknowledging pain and suffering, and working towards healing and accountability,” a participant

¹³ Youth (Okello) during FGD with stakeholders, February 03, 2024, Otuke district.

said. Tackling these issues is crucial to preventing future conflict and fostering stability in northern Uganda.

2.4.1. The exclusion and struggle of children born war and their mothers

The reintegration of LRA returnees is further complicated by gender-specific challenges, particularly for women who were subjected to rape and forced marriages, resulting in children born in captivity. The stigma surrounding children born of war, pejoratively referred to as 'bush children', is a stark reality in northern Uganda. A 2015 JRP study revealed that 31% of children cared for by Women's Advocacy Network members were conceived through sexual violence in LRA captivity. These children and their mothers face profound challenges, highlighting the need for targeted support and recognition of their unique circumstances. (Opiyo 2015: 3).

These young mothers face unique stigma, as returning with children born of war exposes them to cycles of shame, re-victimization, and economic marginalization, increasing their risk of abuse and violence. Findings from study participants in Acholi reveals that the intersection of gender-based violence, stigma, and economic vulnerability creates a profound obstacle to reintegration and healing, highlighting the need for targeted support and interventions that address these women's distinct needs and circumstances.



A child mother with her children at a homestead in Agago District; Photo credit RLP

Mothers of children born of sexual violence face compounded challenges, including uncertain paternal identity, which blocks land claims for their children and jeopardizes their own access to clan land. Over 50% of women surveyed prioritized securing land for their children, highlighting a critical concern for their future. While in many cases the returning mothers have been initially accepted by the receptor communities, their children are often rejected. Under customary practices, the children's natal clan are not often willing to give them land because under customary law they should receive land from the clan of the father of their child (Ojok, 2021).

As land values rise, traditional Acholi institutions are shifting towards 'patrilineal fundamentalism', excluding those without strong clan ties – a stark departure from past practices. This institutional shift fuels intergenerational and gender-based conflicts, as women and children struggle to secure land rights, sparking potential instability in post-conflict communities.

The invocation of 'Acholi tradition' to exclude women and children born of war from land rights reflects a strategic manipulation of cultural norms, fueling social conflict. As land values rise, patrilineal interests tighten grip on resources, exemplifying how economic scarcity can weaponize cultural identity. This shift erodes social cohesion, deepening vulnerabilities for marginalized groups. As Ojok (2021) notes, such dynamics underscore how post-conflict reconstruction can perpetuate injustices, highlighting the need to address structural drivers of conflict in peacebuilding efforts.

The children are said to serve as constant reminders of the enemies – the LRA commanders. While in most cases the returning mothers have been accepted by the receptor communities, their children are often rejected. There have also been many cases in which young mothers have returned from captivity with the LRA or from the camps and their natal clan is not willing to give them land because under customary law they should receive land from the clan of the father of their child.

2.5. Gender conflicts

The post-conflict recovery process in northern Uganda is marked by tensions between traditional and emerging social realities, as cultural values, gender norms, and intergenerational relationships undergo rapid transformation. This shift has triggered conflicts characterized by destructive relational patterns within families and communities, as women and youth challenge established power structures. The prevalence of domestic violence, cited as a major security threat and source of community disputes by the participants, underscores the depth of these tensions, highlighting the need to address underlying power dynamics and promote inclusive social reconstruction in Acholi, Lango and West Nile sub-regions.

In Acholi, Lango, and West Nile, gender norms significantly influence the distribution and redistribution of resources like land across generations. An Acholi elder highlighted how this process typically unfolds, illustrating the complex interplay between cultural expectations and resource access:

In our culture, when a woman is married into a clan – a different clan, she becomes a member of that clan. She now has the same authority like other clan members to access land in her husband's home. The bride price paid to the woman will be used by the family of the girl to also pay bride price for one of their sons as way of compensation. Upon the death of her husband, traditionally the woman would be 'inherited' by one of her brothers-in-law. Not until that marriage does not work out, the woman remains a member of the husband's clan to the time of her death. Like her, the children inherit land from the same clan.¹⁴

The elder's account illustrates how Acholi cultural practices, like widow inheritance and bride price, tie land access to clan membership, reinforcing patriarchal control and limiting women's autonomy. However, during FGDs and CPDs, participants mentioned that displacement and poverty have disrupted these traditions, leading to increased vulnerability for widows and women. In-laws now often attempt to evict widows from land, and marriage rites are frequently disregarded, with many opting for cohabitation due to financial constraints. Clan cohesion has weakened, shifting bride price responsibility to immediate families. These changes fuel intergenerational and gender-based conflicts, as traditional norms clash with emerging realities, threatening stability and highlighting the need for adaptive solutions that balance cultural heritage with evolving social needs.

Most often, it was reported that the majority of the marriage rites are no longer respected since young boys and girls have chosen to select cohabitation relationship due to the absence of wealth to compensate the bride's families. Life in the displacement camps affected clan cohesion, and responsibility for raising money for the bride price latterly fell to immediate families rather than being spread more broadly within the clan. Failure of marriages due to economic pressure is becoming high, leaving women to run single-headed households.

The shift towards cohabitation and erosion of traditional marriage practices, driven by financial constraints and displacement, has led to rising single-headed households and weakened clan cohesion.

14 Interview with Rosalba Oywa, Acholi elder, January 15, 2024, Gulu city.

This trend is evident in refugee settlements like Adjumani and Lamwo, where child-headed households are increasing, and in urban centres like Gulu and Arua. The absence of stable households, marked by eroding marriage and family values, is seen as a potential conflict trigger, as children struggle to meet basic needs. Marital instability also fuels domestic violence, often leading to separation or divorce, and leaving women with limited options, including contested land access in their natal clans.

The changing landscape of gender relations in post-war northern Uganda has contributed to strained intimate partner relationships and domestic violence. As women gain empowerment through government and civil society roles, men struggle to redefine their societal role, fueling frustration and alcoholism. This can exacerbate conflicts and increase the risk of domestic violence. Additionally, men's past trauma and exposure to violence may also contribute to partner violence perpetration, highlighting the need to address these underlying factors in promoting healthier relationships.

2.5.1. Domestic violence



"Akiba" social group drinking local brew made out of millet; Photo credit RLP

The conflict's aftermath has ravaged northern Uganda's social fabric, leaving communities grappling with alarming domestic violence rates. Displacement disrupted traditional gender roles, with men struggling to cope, while women became primary providers, sparking tensions. In Laperebong, a recent case we came across during the study exemplifies this dynamic: a mother's abandonment of her six-month-old child due to her husband's alcohol-fueled mismanagement of resources. The husband's background as a former soldier from Somalia, grappling with financial mismanagement, exemplifies the broader impact of poverty on family dynamics and conflict escalation. This incident underscores how poverty, trauma, and shifting power dynamics fuel domestic conflict, threatening community stability.

The Laperebong case illustrates how conflict-induced displacement can erode traditional roles, fueling tensions and instability. When men struggle to adapt to changed circumstances, and economic pressures mount, violence often becomes a tragic outlet. The interplay between poverty, trauma, and patriarchal expectations creates a toxic cycle, where domestic violence becomes a symptom of broader societal instability, highlighting the need for holistic interventions addressing these intersecting factors.

Elders we met in the different communities across Acholi, Lango and West Nile identified alcohol abuse as a major red flag for domestic violence, impacting both men and women. As drinking rates rise, so do tensions and violent outbursts, often with devastating consequences. The proliferation of cheap,

sachet-packaged alcohol has amplified domestic violence in post-conflict communities. This trend intersects with poverty, lack of livelihoods, and shifting gender roles, creating a volatile environment where financial stress and substance abuse fuel interpersonal conflicts. Microfinance access, intended to empower, sometimes backfires, enabling excessive drinking and exacerbating tensions. These dynamic highlights the complex interplay between economic pressures, social change, and domestic violence, underscoring the need for holistic interventions addressing these underlying drivers.

2.6. Youth Disenfranchisement and Pushback

The demographic dividend turns sour when youth aspirations clash with traditional hierarchies. Uganda's youthful population, a potential catalyst for transformative change, is instead a pressure cooker of intergenerational tensions. As young people challenge elder authority, seeking inclusive governance and economic opportunities, they're often met with resistance, fueling community conflicts. This power struggle reflects deeper structural issues – limited access to resources, education, and decision-making spaces – leaving youth feeling disenfranchised and ripe for mobilization, either for positive change or destructive agendas.

Participants during the CPDs pointed out that Northern Uganda's youth are caught in a vicious cycle of exclusion and despair, where poverty, unemployment, and limited education opportunities fuel feelings of hopelessness. The weight of war accusations and societal tensions further marginalize them, creating a toxic mix of frustration and disillusionment. This perfect storm of disenfranchisement isn't unique – it's a global pattern in post-conflict zones, where youth vulnerability can be exploited, or alternatively, harnessed for positive change with the right support and opportunities (Amarasuriya et al., 2009).



A group of elderly men have a social chat in Gulu District; Photo credit RLP

The war and displacement have reshaped northern Uganda's social fabric, creating a cultural chasm between youth and elders. Young people, shaped by camp life and conflict, now hold different values and aspirations, often clashing with traditional norms and authority structures. This generational shift can be a catalyst for innovation and progress – or a source of conflict – depending on how these differing perspectives are navigated and harnessed.

The legacy of camp life lingers, shaping a generation with distinct values and behaviors. As youth return to their communities, they're bringing camp-gained skills and perspectives, often at odds with traditional

norms. This cultural dissonance fuels intergenerational tensions, with elders struggling to reconcile the 'camp mentality' with pre-conflict values. The 'kwo me camp' phrase commonly referred to by the older persons to mean 'life in the displacement settings/camps' encapsulates this clash, highlighting the need for communities to navigate these changes and find ways to integrate the experiences of their youth. One elder in Amuru remarked: 'Some of the youth did what they did in the camp, that's why when they tell you *kwo me camp ni weko* in Luo language meaning 'leave that mentality of camp life', they know what camp life is all about.'

This phrase, "*kwo me camp*," becomes a metaphor for the cultural dissonance between generations. The elder's remark suggests that youth, having grown up in camps, adopted survival strategies and norms that clash with traditional values. This isn't just about individual behavior; it's a collective challenge of reconciling past and present, tradition and transformation. Communities must now navigate this shift, leveraging the resilience and adaptability of their youth while preserving social cohesion. The question becomes: how can elders and youth co-create a new narrative, one that honors heritage while embracing the realities of a post-conflict generation?

The 'children of conflict' in northern Uganda embody a toxic convergence of trauma, deprivation, and dashed aspirations. Raised amidst violence and neglect, they've inherited a world of limited horizons and broken promises. This potent mix of poverty, unemployment, and disengagement creates a fertile ground for grievances, ripe for exploitation by extremist ideologies or renewed cycles of violence. The state's perceived neglect only amplifies this sense of marginalization, pushing the region towards a tipping point – will it be a catalyst for chaos, or a crucible for transformative change?

The war has inverted traditional power dynamics, leaving elders feeling powerless and youth empowered, but not necessarily empowered in a positive way. With economic opportunities scarce, youth are leveraging their only resource – land – often through coercion, accelerating intergenerational conflicts. The collapse of bride price systems has eroded elders' authority, stripping them of their traditional leverage. As one elder during a panel discussion in Lango put it:

As a parent you cannot teach your child because you have been rendered toothless by the war. You cannot provide for the family, you don't have even your own cow to pay for bridewealth. When the child wants to marry you have nothing. So who are you to tell the child what to do or not to do?¹⁵

The elder's lament – "rendered toothless by the war"¹⁶ – captures the erosion of patriarchal power and the struggle to adapt to new realities. This vacuum of authority and sense of desperation risks entrenching cycles of violence and exploitation – unless new frameworks for accountability, support, and intergenerational collaboration emerge. Now, the question is: can communities reinvent these relationships, finding new ways to foster mutual respect and cooperation?

The conflict has disrupted traditional power structures, leaving elders feeling emasculated and youth feeling unmoored. The collapse of bride price systems has stripped fathers of their authority, creating a vacuum that's being filled by desperation and violence. This narrative echoes Vorhölter's observation that conflict often leads to a perceived breakdown in social norms, with elders lamenting the 'loss of culture' among youth. (Vorhölter, 2014: 155). In reality, youth are navigating a new reality where traditional pathways to adulthood are blocked. Traditionally, fathers gave the money for bride price and provided the land for a new household to farm. Indeed, Frank Girling, in his study of the Acholi, noted the importance of both the consent of the father and his provision of bride price for sons to marry. In the absence of the father, this obligation falls to the agnatic kin. Men who were brought up in the homes of their mothers were to be pitied, as there would be no one to pay their bride price (Girling 1960: 70). When people were living in the camps, fathers were unable to pay bride price and lost a key mechanism through which they were able to exert control over sons (Vorhölter, 2014). As a result, many youths have turned to banditry and violence as a means of achieving their aims.

The question remains: can communities adapt these traditional systems to modern realities, or will the

15 Key Informant Interview with opinion leader, January 17, 2024, Gulu city.

16 FGD with community leaders' stakeholders, January 30, 2024, Oyam Council Hall, Oyam district.

vacuum of authority continue to fuel cycles of violence and exploitation? The stakes are high, as youth seek alternative routes to status, power, and survival.

2.6.1. Intergenerational Tensions

The participants have pointed to the breakdown of family authority and many examples of how youth challenge authority of the elders, causing tensions between the younger and older generation in the communities studied. The elders have decried hostile relationships between parents and their young ones, many of whom were said to have become undisciplined and rebellious against the older generations. For example, the elder below explains his observation of what was going on in Oyam district during the field study:

Some [youth] even felt that they have the right to beat their fathers who didn't want to give them land to sell. Others threaten their fathers to comply with their demands...and now that's the origin of disrespect according to my observation,. It all started during the displacement of people in camps but it has now been escalating and got worse with time.



A christian community during palm Sunday in Gulu District; Photo credit RLP

Youths in parts of Lango (Otuke) reported to be engaging in selling land for economic gains through ventures like motorcycle taxi (*boda boda*) or urban development, which conflicts with traditional views of what elders desire for land use. The elders have complained about the measures taken by youth as violating the cultural means of survival in Lango, which has entrenched youth tendency towards laziness and a dangerous quick-money mentality. During a FGD in Oyam, elders mentioned that the youths have turned violent on them whenever they face economic hardships, demanding their share of land in order to engage in less productive economic activities – including drug and alcohol abuse.

Participants have highlighted the increasing youth insecurity that has been on the rise over the past decade. From the *Aguu* in Acholi, *Fireaters* in West Nile, *Wuk Wuk* in Lango and several self-styled gangs in urban centres and refugee settlements across northern Uganda to glaring outright violence by youth recorded in police reports accessed by the research team, the study points to an imminent danger looming in the post conflict region. In Gulu City and Kitgum District, the prevalence of street children

engaged in drug use and criminal activities is notable:

*The youth feels hopeless. Nobody is there to give them hope. Drug abuse. There is a big community of weed (marijuana) smokers right at the heart of the town and nobody does anything about them. Security passes by. Where you see the eucalyptus tree, that is their ground in Adjumani town. Do you know that even politicians go to them specially to meet them during campaigns? They are being recognized and they are being legitimized. If you are a leader and you schedule to meet people who smoke weed in a very special way this means you are giving recognition in a special way. You are validating them.*¹⁷

The youth have been primarily associated with nighttime crimes such as rape and theft, including stealing animals and crops. And yet their elders have very little say in whatever their young ones engage in. This has been summed up by an observation by one participant during the CPD in Arua in the following ways:

*So right now, it has come to a point where none of the youths can respect their parents and elders, even elders have fear to tell their children 'don't do this or that'. This has reached a point of whereby if they know that tomorrow the police is coming, the parents will send that child to hide in the village. Also, when children leave home and come back with something good and parents and elders don't even ask how the child got those things (the shoes, the watch etc.). This habit has led to the establishment of gangs such as 'Aguu' and the rest have become prevalent. Many youths that have returned from the camp or the bush think that they have the right and they think they are still in the camps. The result is that they have turned the city into a camp and that they will do whatever they want because in the camps they were the ones doing most of the running around.*¹⁸

2.7. Lack of Justice and Accountability by the State



War Monument for survivors of the conflict in Northern Uganda in Bucrcoro, Gulu District; Photo credit RLP

Uganda's fragile state apparatus and coercive governance model have created a perfect storm in the north, where unaddressed grievances and impunity fuel conflict instability. The state's inability to deliver

¹⁷ Key Informant Interviews with Mr. Anyama Ben, LC 5 Chairman, Adjumani.

¹⁸ Remark from an elder during Consensus Panel Discussion in Arua, January 24, 2024, Arua city.

justice and accountability – a legacy of colonial-era divides and post-independence authoritarianism – has entrenched feelings of marginalization, particularly among Acholi communities. As Ganguly and Bajpa noted, weak state structures and strong coercive apparatuses breed dissatisfaction, especially among minorities (Ganguly and Bajpa, 1994). Without legitimate authority and robust institutions, Uganda risks perpetuating cycles of violence, making the north a potential tipping point for national instability.

Seventeen years post-conflict, unaddressed justice needs continue to haunt northern Uganda, hindering survivors' recovery and regional reconciliation. The state's silence on atrocities and lack of acknowledgment fuels misconceptions – like the blanket label of "Acholi people as perpetrators" – obscuring the complexities of suffering across communities. This impunity perpetuates divisions, eroding trust in government institutions and dimming hopes for healing and peace. Participants during the consensus panels mentioned that without truth, accountability, and compensation, the region risks remaining trapped in a cycle of resentment and mistrust, hence undermining sustainable stability.

In northern Uganda, the suppression of dissenting voices and atrocity narratives has created a pressure cooker of unaddressed grievances. As public spaces for sharing truths shrink, frustration festers, fueled by state-imposed silence and impunity. This toxic mix perpetuates a cycle of bitterness, straining relationships and undermining reconciliation. The unmet demands for apology, acknowledgment, accountability, and reparations have become a festering wound, corroding trust in state institutions and deepening regional divisions:

When we attempt to discuss the Burcoro massacre, we're met with intimidation. As a survivor with a disability, I was brutally beaten and left for dead. Yet, no one has apologized or acknowledged my suffering. This lack of acknowledgment hinders my ability to find peace, making forgiveness seem impossible without genuine dialogue.¹⁹

Another community member from Burcoro noted:

I still cry when I think about Burcoro. They killed my brother and two sons, and took my other children. I don't know if they're alive or dead. I'm very angry with the government. They should say sorry. They should help me. I'm hurting, and no one cares.²⁰

The state's unaddressed guilt and institutional failures perpetuate cycles of accusation and communal violence. A local leader from Barlonyo highlights this dynamic, emphasizing the need for accountability:

I don't blame the Acholi people for what happened to us. I blame the Ugandan government. They didn't protect us or our things during the war. It's their job to keep us safe, but they didn't do it. Kony started the war with a few people, but it got worse when the current government was in charge. They did nothing to stop it. I'm telling my community, let's not fight with the Acholi people. We're all neighbors, we share borders, we can work together. The government hasn't done anything to help us since the war. They should have helped us right away, given us money and support to rebuild.²¹

The government's inaction has left deep scars, with victims and survivors feeling betrayed by unkept promises. Many shared painful experiences, highlighting the state's failure to address their suffering, leaving a lingering sense of abandonment and mistrust:

Sometime back The President came to Awach and said sorry for what happened in Burcoro. He promised to help the victims, but nothing happened. It's not right to make promises and not keep them. I was beaten and tortured in Burcoro. Our women were raped in front of us. It's hard to forgive when the people who hurt us are now rich, and the government doesn't do anything. When someone promises to help and doesn't, it hurts a lot. We need the government to keep their promises..²²

19 Remarks by a male participant during FGD with stakeholders, January 30, 2024, Otuke district.

20 Remark by participant during FGD with stakeholders, January 30, 2024, Otuke district

21 Remark by participant during FGD with stakeholders, January 30, 2024, Otuke district

22 Key Informant Interview with community leader / survivor of conflict, January 16, 2024.

To move forward, Uganda must tackle the toxic legacy of accusation, ethnic stereotyping, and mistrust. This requires addressing the unequal distribution of reconstruction resources and prioritizing accountability for conflict-era wrongs. Only then can Acholi and Lango communities begin to heal and reconcile. The path to sustainable peace demands truth, justice, and equitable development – it's time for the state to deliver.

2.8. Conclusion

Northern Uganda's post-conflict landscape is a complex web of intersecting tensions, where unresolved grievances and unaddressed trauma continue to undermine stability. The confluence of land disputes, intergenerational conflicts, domestic violence, and youth disenfranchisement creates a volatile environment, ripe for further conflict.

The disruption of traditional norms and power structures, exacerbated by displacement and poverty, has led to a sense of dislocation and disorientation. As women gain empowerment and youth seek new pathways to status and survival, elders struggle to adapt, feeling their authority eroded. This clash of emerging and traditional realities fuels tensions, threatening to destabilize communities further.

The Apaa land conflict serves as a potent symbol of this instability, highlighting the government's failure to address competing claims and provide accountability. The lack of justice and acknowledgment of past atrocities perpetuates cycles of mistrust and violence, underscoring the need for inclusive dialogue, transparency, and accountability.

To break this cycle, urgent attention is required to address the root causes of conflict, prioritize inclusive governance, and promote economic opportunities. The international community, government, and local leaders must support communities in northern Uganda, fostering a culture of cooperation, mutual respect, and healing.

Ultimately, the people of northern Uganda deserve a chance to rebuild, heal, and thrive. The alternative – inaction and neglect – risks perpetuating a culture of trauma, mistrust, and violence, threatening regional and national stability.

CHAPTER THREE:

LESSONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NATIONAL TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE AS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR CONFLICT MANAGEMENT AND MITIGATION IN UGANDA

3.1 Overview

This chapter distills critical lessons for Uganda's transitional justice (TJ) process, addressing the study's core objective: harnessing TJ as a tool for conflict management and mitigation. Building on preceding analyses, it underscores TJ's pivotal role in bridging conflict and stability concerns in post-war Uganda.

The preceding conflict and stability analysis revealed a striking consensus among stakeholders: TJ is a crucial framework for addressing Acholi, Lango, and West Nile communities' plagues. While opinions on TJ's nature and scope diverge, its relevance as a lens for understanding and redressing conflict legacies is undisputed. This chapter argues that TJ must transcend retrospective justice, serving as a cornerstone for broader peacebuilding and reconstruction efforts in northern Uganda.

These findings underscore the complexity of Uganda's transitional justice landscape, highlighting critical areas for consideration. Key issues emerging from the study include contextualizing TJ within Uganda's intricate power dynamics, breaking the cycle of impunity, and promoting accountability for past wrongs. Equally crucial is fostering inclusive TJ processes that bridge ethnic and regional divides, ensuring equitable access to reconstruction resources and reparations, and integrating TJ with development initiatives to forge sustainable peace and stability.

The complexities of Uganda's transitional justice landscape are further illuminated by grassroots perspectives, which emphasize the need for context-sensitive approaches.

As one key informant queried:

How can TJ be delinked from what is happening here in Acholi? A violent youth who causes havoc in community. You find that the youth did not grow up as a proper Acholi, he only knew camp life. Now these are the adults of the future. If we tackle this youth as a problem then we are missing the bigger issue that TJ could solve.²³

This observation by the Acholi elder underscores the imperative of contextualizing TJ within Uganda's intricate power dynamics and socio-cultural realities, highlighting the intergenerational impact of conflict and the need for TJ processes that address structural factors perpetuating cycles of violence. Corroborating this view, another participant, an opinion leader in Acholi, observed:

So, what is being talked about transitional justice is not something I believe in or even if I say [transitional justice] is justice done during the transitional period, it is very difficult to administer justice during the transitional period either they just say it is not going to be done. What can be done during a transition period is let's say a commercial plan for rehabilitation (don't mind whether they killed your father or your mother) we will just want you to be on your feet. And when people are rehabilitated then you can do your justice, let's just not mind²⁴.

This pragmatic perspective on transitional justice highlights the tension between addressing historical injustices and prioritizing immediate needs of survivors and communities. The participant's emphasis on rehabilitation and economic empowerment as prerequisites for justice underscores the need for TJ

23 Key Informant Interview with Acholi opinion leader, Julius Ojok, January 15, 2024, Gulu city.

24 Key Informant Interview with Acholi opinion leader, Zerubabel Abukha, January 16, 2024, Gulu city.

processes that balance competing priorities and adapt to local contexts.

Building on this insight, a key finding of this study is the imperative of reimagining justice in post-conflict settings, one that prioritizes transformation over traditional notions of accountability. Like the above observation from the opinion leader, a case has been made through this study of conflict and stability that suggests the need for a new agenda for practice, – one that offers a concept of justice that is more ‘transformative’ – at least in the case of Acholi, Lango and West Nile post conflict regions of study. This agenda needs to provide an alternative approach to dealing with fragility, conflict and security in post conflict settings more generally. Transformative justice in this sense can be looked at as a concept that can clearly be applied anywhere and at any time to address concerns such as structural and everyday violence (Gready and Robins, 2014), like the ones experienced among post conflict communities of Acholi, Lango and West Nile.



A three legged stool used was used to signify the three pillars of the Juba peace talks; Photo credit RLP

3.2 Recommendations

This study underscores the imperative of reconceptualizing transitional justice (TJ) as a framework that addresses the multifaceted nature of violence, including its latent and overt forms. A key challenge for TJ lies in its implementation during transitional moments, which are often characterized by underlying tensions that can escalate into renewed violence if left unaddressed. As Graeme Simpson (2002) astutely observes, transitional justice mechanisms must be evaluated within the context of the intertwined challenges of justice and violence in transition. Simpson notes that cycles of violence and social conflict frequently resurface during periods of transition, rarely achieving definitive resolution, and that the past often resurfaces in unforeseen ways. This highlights the necessity for TJ processes that proactively anticipate and address these complexities, rather than treating them as unforeseen obstacles to be addressed reactively.

This analysis reveals that the population advocates for a national TJ process that is conflict-sensitive, flexible, and transformative, given the prevailing fragility in Acholi, Lango, and West Nile. Rather than abandoning TJ's core goals, this study argues for a radical rethinking of its politics, priorities, and locus, considering the current conflict and stability landscape. This entails shifting focus from prosecutorial justice to socio-economic realities, and from state-centric approaches to community-driven, everyday

concerns. Mainstreaming TJ into conflict resolution mechanisms presents an opportunity for Uganda to adopt a conflict-sensitivity lens, addressing the ongoing impact of conflict on victims and survivors. Key considerations for tackling this issue include:

1. Conceptually, this study advocates for a transformative conception of TJ that integrates locally specific criminal justice processes, restorative and redistributive approaches, and structural justice mechanisms drawing from the experiences of Acholi, West Nile and Lango sub regions. The National Transitional Justice Policy (NTJP) implementation parameters should address not only physical and psychological violence but also socioeconomic rights violations, including destruction of property, loss of livelihoods, and damage to social infrastructure and the environment, which underpin the population's frustration with government and post-conflict response.

This approach necessitates focusing on the socio-political dimensions of justice, redressing structural injustices that fueled violence, particularly marginalization in northern Uganda. The cases of Acholi, Lango, and West Nile highlight tensions between prioritizing human rights violations and ensuring service delivery, as well as legitimacy and capacity concerns. A transformative TJ approach can balance accountability with institutionalizing peace and effective service delivery, addressing participants' calls for reparations and redress for individual and community harms. This entails adapting TJ processes to local contexts, prioritizing socio-economic realities, and fostering institutional legitimacy through effective service delivery.



An abandoned house that was affected by the Northern Uganda conflict in Amuru District; Photo credit RLP

2. Procedurally, a transformative TJ approach in post-conflict Acholi, Lango, and West Nile necessitates broad-based consultations with affected individuals and groups, ensuring the transitional process reflects the will of the people and prioritizes those directly affected. The National Transitional Justice Policy (NTJP) implementation protocols should be designed through an inclusive process, with active participation and roles for victims and vulnerable groups, mitigating the risk of marginalization.

Creating spaces for debate and discussion is crucial, enabling citizens to shape TJ processes and address the "lack of voice" expressed by participants. This participatory approach can foster ownership, legitimacy, and sustainability, ensuring TJ processes are contextually relevant and responsive to local needs. By prioritizing inclusivity and participation, TJ can effectively address the complex,

interconnected needs of conflict-affected communities in Acholi, Lango, and West Nile.

Furthermore, deliberate efforts must be made to ensure appropriate sequencing and balancing of various TJ processes and objectives, holding together the fragile peace and fostering sustainability. This balancing act should be guided by 'justifiable limitations', ensuring that TJ processes remain gender-sensitive, inclusive, and conflict-sensitive. In the contexts of Acholi, Lango, and West Nile, this means carefully calibrating accountability, reparations, and reconciliation mechanisms to address local needs and priorities, without compromising the overall TJ project's integrity. By doing so, TJ can effectively navigate trade-offs and competing demands, promoting a cohesive and sustainable peace.

3. Substantively, TJ in Uganda must prioritize protecting victims from ongoing violence and ensuring their right to peace. Given the prolonged nature of Uganda's TJ process, equal emphasis should be placed on addressing current violence and preventing future threats, rather than solely focusing on past injustices. This requires TJ to engage with present-day issues, including emerging politics and violence, to prevent further entrenchment of a culture of violence and trauma.

Participants' immediate needs, such as cessation of violations, protection, and security guarantees, must take precedence. This includes addressing specific security concerns of vulnerable groups, including women, youth, children, victims, and survivors. By doing so, TJ can create a foundation for sustainable peace, rather than solely addressing past injustices. In Acholi, Lango, and West Nile, this means prioritizing tangible security measures and protection, fostering a sense of safety and stability for conflict-affected communities.

Interim relief is crucial for direct victims of war, particularly SGBV survivors and those needing urgent physical and psychosocial support. Neglecting these needs can exacerbate marginalization, especially for women and vulnerable groups experiencing everyday violence. In northern Uganda, timely interventions are critical as victims face dire consequences daily.

Urgent relief must be paired with broader socioeconomic measures addressing structural marginalization and exclusion, strengthening social and economic rights of affected communities in Acholi, Lango, and West Nile. This dual approach can foster prospective social justice, ensuring TJ contributes to long-term peace and stability in the region.

To mitigate relapse to violence in Acholi, Lango, and West Nile, forward-looking redistributive measures are crucial. These measures can promote inclusive development and wealth-sharing, addressing sub-regional inequalities and perceptions of impoverishment-driven violence. By prioritizing equitable distribution, Uganda can respond to participants' concerns, fostering stability and peace in these post-war regions. As one participant pragmatically suggested:

The way Justice Owiny Dolo [Uganda's Chief Justice] was saying that instead of people looking for compensation of cows and others, there should be a general compensation in the case of Acholi, give them 2 bulls, 2 heifers and an ox plough. Two bulls for ploughing and the 2 cows to multiply and these would be given to everyone whether the other one had 200 cows or the other one had nothing that would be put aside and ensure that everyone in Acholi has a means of production. Don't go into details of so many things, you will not manage it because the way this thing went you don't need to insist on that issue of transitional justice so much because you will open old wounds that might.... if you are not careful with the kind of corruption and disorganisation that we are in it might start another war especially within the community.²⁵

This perspective underscores the imperative for Transitional Justice (TJ) to prioritize socio-economic compensation, thereby addressing community stability and the root causes of conflict. The participant's argument highlights the importance of contextualizing TJ within broader socio-economic realities, rather than solely focusing on complex justice mechanisms. This demonstrates the participant's

25 Key Informant Interview with opinion leader in Acholi, January 17, 2024, Gulu city.

perspective on the need for TJ to consider socio-economic compensation at individual and community levels.

Considering the diverse socio-economic challenges raised during this study, transitional justice must take economic and social rights more seriously. Economic and social rights are paramount because victims and local populations have prioritized them. A socio-economic focus would enhance TJ's potential to address conflict root causes. The human rights field now stresses the equal importance and indivisibility of civil-political and socio-economic rights. Impunity for violations across these categories can be mutually reinforcing, and highlighting economic and social rights could embed these rights, fostering a fuller conception of justice (Gready and Robins, 2014). In Acholi, Lango, and West Nile, integrating socio-economic compensation into TJ can enhance stability and peace, responding to communities' immediate needs and long-term aspirations.

In Acholi, Lango, and West Nile, examining TJ's approach to economic and social rights is crucial, given the region's history and the relative lack of attention to these issues. Insights can be drawn from other contexts: truth commissions in Liberia, Peru, Sierra Leone, Timor-Leste, and Kenya have investigated and made recommendations on economic, social, and cultural rights (Roger, 2008). The Kenyan Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission's report highlights the significance of land grievances as a conflict driver, with nearly 50% of statements and memoranda received relating to land claims (Gready and Robins, 2014). This underscores the importance of addressing economic and social rights in TJ processes, particularly in contexts like Uganda's, where similar dynamics may be at play.

It's notable that the TJRC's land-related recommendations focus on technical fixes, sidestepping broader redistribution and tenure reform debates. This illustrates TJ's tendency to narrowly frame socio-economic rights, disconnecting them from policy discussions. In Acholi, Lango, and West Nile, TJ should examine growing land conflicts, addressing concerns like those voiced by an Acholi key informant:

Probably the other issue that transitional justice should address is the issue of land. There is a fear and perception in the Acholi sub region that some people [outside of Acholi] want grab away land that belongs to Acholi people. So, the transitional justice process should also bring back confidence to the people that customary land ownership is equal to freehold title or leasehold title...²⁶

The participant highlights land as a critical TJ issue, with fears of external land grabbing fueling tensions in Acholi. To enhance recovery, TJ should bolster confidence in customary land ownership, equating it to freehold or leasehold titles, and tackle power imbalances in land access. Addressing grosser socio-economic exclusions and basic needs can prevent conflict reemergence, focusing on poverty alleviation and marginalization rather than mere restitution. This approach can help victims break past cycles of vulnerability, fostering sustainable peace in Acholi, Lango, and West Nile.

Ethno-cultural justice is crucial in addressing group-based conflicts, recognizing violence was often organized along ethnic, religious, or regional lines. These demands policies promoting national cohesion, tolerance, inclusivity, and accommodation, alongside increased socio-economic opportunities in affected communities. In Uganda's context, this could involve addressing historical grievances and promoting inter-community dialogue in Acholi, Lango, and West Nile, fostering a sense of shared citizenship and equitable development. By doing so, TJ can help break cycles of violence and build sustainable peace.

3.3. Conclusion

In conclusion, Northern Uganda's post-conflict trajectory is precariously poised between fragile peace and simmering tensions. As the region grapples with the lingering shadows of LRA brutality, it is confronted with the imperative of addressing contemporary drivers of conflict that threaten to undermine decades of relative stability. The Transitional Justice (TJ) process, initially heralded as a cornerstone of post-war reconstruction, must undergo a paradigmatic shift to effectively address

26 Key informant interview with Mr. Tebere, January 16, 2024, Gulu city.

these challenges. A transformative conception of TJ, one that integrates locally specific criminal justice processes, restorative and redistributive approaches, and structural justice mechanisms, is essential for tackling the complex, multifaceted nature of violence and marginalization.

This recalibrated TJ framework must prioritize socio-economic compensation, acknowledging the profound impact of conflict on livelihoods, property, and social infrastructure. Moreover, it must be contextualized within the broader socio-economic realities of Northern Uganda, engaging with present-day issues and emerging politics to prevent the entrenchment of a culture of violence and trauma. Inclusive TJ processes, bridging ethnic and regional divides, are crucial for ensuring equitable access to reconstruction resources and reparations.



Rebel leader gathers his troops preparing for the Juba Peace Talks in Garanba; Photo credit RLP

Ultimately, the success of TJ in Northern Uganda hinges on its ability to evolve beyond traditional notions of justice and accountability, embracing a transformative agenda that addresses latent and overt forms of violence, promotes sustainable peace, and fosters equitable development in Acholi, Lango, and West Nile. By doing so, TJ can become a powerful catalyst for building a more just and resilient society, one that is capable of navigating the complexities of post-conflict reconstruction and charting a sustainable path towards peace and stability.

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