

Transition, connection and uncertainty: IDPs in Kampala

Richard Mallett

If government authorities are to identify appropriate durable solutions for urban IDPs, the concerns and aspirations of those most affected by urban displacement must be considered.

Uganda's long and brutal civil war resulted in the internal displacement of nearly 1.6 million civilians, of whom an estimated 300,000 to 600,000 fled not to one of the country's many IDP camps but to urban destinations. In July and August 2008, through interviews with northern Ugandan IDPs now living in a Kampala slum known colloquially as the Acholi Quarter, I attempted to get a sense of what everyday life meant for the often invisible urban displaced.

Transition

Now here we are like in a foreign land.

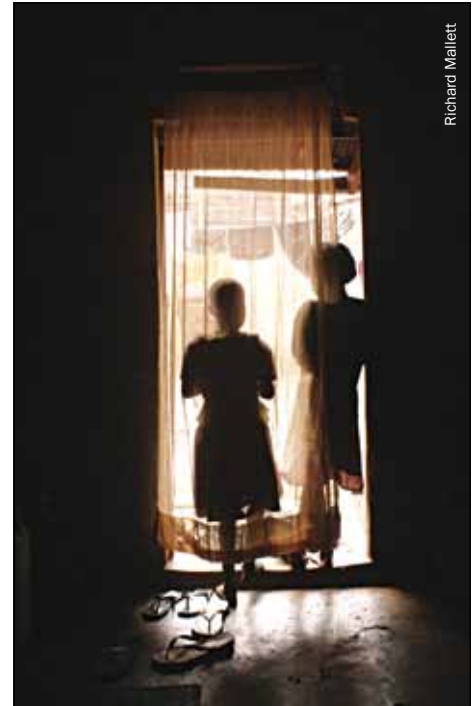
With an estimated 90% of its population displaced over the last two decades, northern Uganda's Acholiland has been the country's worst affected region. Given that large swathes of the north were rendered insecure by Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) insurgencies, as well as the fact that IDP camps were mostly absent throughout the initial stages of the conflict, heading to urban areas constituted a sensible and viable option for many IDPs, particularly if there were some kind of pre-existing connection, such as the presence of a relative.

Considering the abject conditions of many Ugandan IDP camps, urban destinations may appear advantageous but the reality can be very different. For the displaced Acholi, Kampala represents a marked contrast to their northern homelands and former agrarian lifestyles, a contrast which is sharpened by often romanticised 'pre-conflict' memories of the north. Whereas livelihoods and material necessities were previously regarded as 'given' – intrinsically connected with one's land and subsistence activities – access to

even the most essential of amenities is uncertain in Kampala. As one interviewee pointed out, "Life is very, very difficult... everything needs money: rent, water, even toilets."

The lack of land and tenure security not only gives rise to concerns among IDPs regarding their basic economic survival but also hinders successful local integration, as the absence of formal land titles entrenches the idea that their (forced) migration is only temporary. Thus, even in cases where a considerable degree of urban adaptation has been achieved, the Acholi are still confronted by the notion that they are somehow 'out of place', living on land which is not theirs. Of course, there are no simple solutions to such a dilemma, particularly as many in the local host community face similar difficulties with regard to access to adequate housing and employment. Implementing IDP-specific policies could in this case promote further resentment towards the Acholi, thereby exacerbating an already considerable problem of routine discrimination.

However, while it is certainly appropriate to view Kampala as a site of transition, this should not always be framed negatively. Places of destination – and particularly urban ones – offer prospects not just of safety but also of opportunity. Many women and children in the Acholi Quarter engage in the BeadforLife project, making jewellery from recycled materials, for which there is an established market.¹ Furthermore, the presence of displaced communities can also result in positive changes for the host population. In the Acholi Quarter, for example, Meeting Point International (MPI), a community-



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based NGO, is run in part by Acholi IDPs. MPI's services are not limited to the displaced, and include a popular support group for HIV+ women, distribution of free HIV anti-retrovirals, subsidised school fees and – until recently – food donations.

Connection

I tell you, do you think you can leave the Motherland? You cannot.

Although having often experienced trauma and violence, and been physically detached from their 'homes' in some cases for over 20 years, Acholi IDPs in Kampala retain a strong connection with their villages. Most of those interviewed insisted their 'home' continues to be in the north, while the few who were less certain about returning still expressed a strong desire to uphold their connections with Acholiland. Furthermore, there is little doubt that sustaining connections of various kinds with the north – by maintaining verbal or written communication with relatives or friends in the villages, for example – has been central to the Acholi IDPs' ability to adapt to their urban environment.

On a related note, it is perhaps unsurprising that many Acholis opted for settlement in the Acholi Quarter, a 'community' within

Kampala that can facilitate adjustment to urban life, assisting not only with logistical acclimatisation, such as securing shelter and employment, but also representing a site of belonging – a ‘quasi-territory’.

Thus, while the Acholi Quarter is characterised by a lack of amenities, inadequate housing, high sickness levels and low employment prospects, at the same time it has been imbued with meaning, representing the extraterritorial expression of collective Acholi identity.

Aspirations

Leaving this place totally will not happen.

Following the signing of the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement between the Government of Uganda and the Lord’s Resistance Army in August 2006, the security situation in the north has seen significant improvement. Despite the LRA’s continuing refusal to sign the Final Peace Agreement, there remains cause for cautious optimism, reflected by the shifting focus of peace operations from protection to return, recovery and reconstruction. By May 2009, approximately 823,000 IDPs – 60% of the total – had returned to their villages of origin, while a further 244,000 (18%) were in transit sites.²

For the thousands of urban-based IDPs, however, returning ‘home’ is by no means a straightforward or even viable recourse. People are hesitant to return ‘empty-handed’, without sufficient funds or the equipment necessary to rebuild their lives and resume an agrarian existence. Moreover, although Uganda’s ‘National Policy on IDPs’ does not limit resettlement assistance to people in camps, support to those in urban areas has not been forthcoming – a point raised on several occasions by the Refugee Law Project (RLP). However, even if support were to be extended to the displaced in the Acholi Quarter, there are no guarantees that people will return, at least not initially. Kampala offers services that may not (yet) be found in the north: health care, better-paid

work and, importantly, children’s education. Despite the general consensus among interviewees that the superior quality of education in Kampala is something they would like to continue to take advantage of, the loss of cultural identity – assumed to be inevitable after years living in Kampala – is regarded as profoundly problematic. Decisions, therefore, are not straightforward.

Subsequently, while Uganda’s urban IDPs must be included – as fairness, logic and obligation dictate – in the government’s return frameworks, so too must the authorities recognise the particular complexities associated with urban displacement, and (re)consider durable solutions accordingly.

Finally, questions also surround the future of the Acholi Quarter itself. As many individuals intend only ever to return to the north as ‘visitors’ – particularly the elderly not wishing to embark on the lengthy processes of reconstruction and reintegration – there are hopes that the government might intervene and improve the slum through much needed infrastructural repairs and

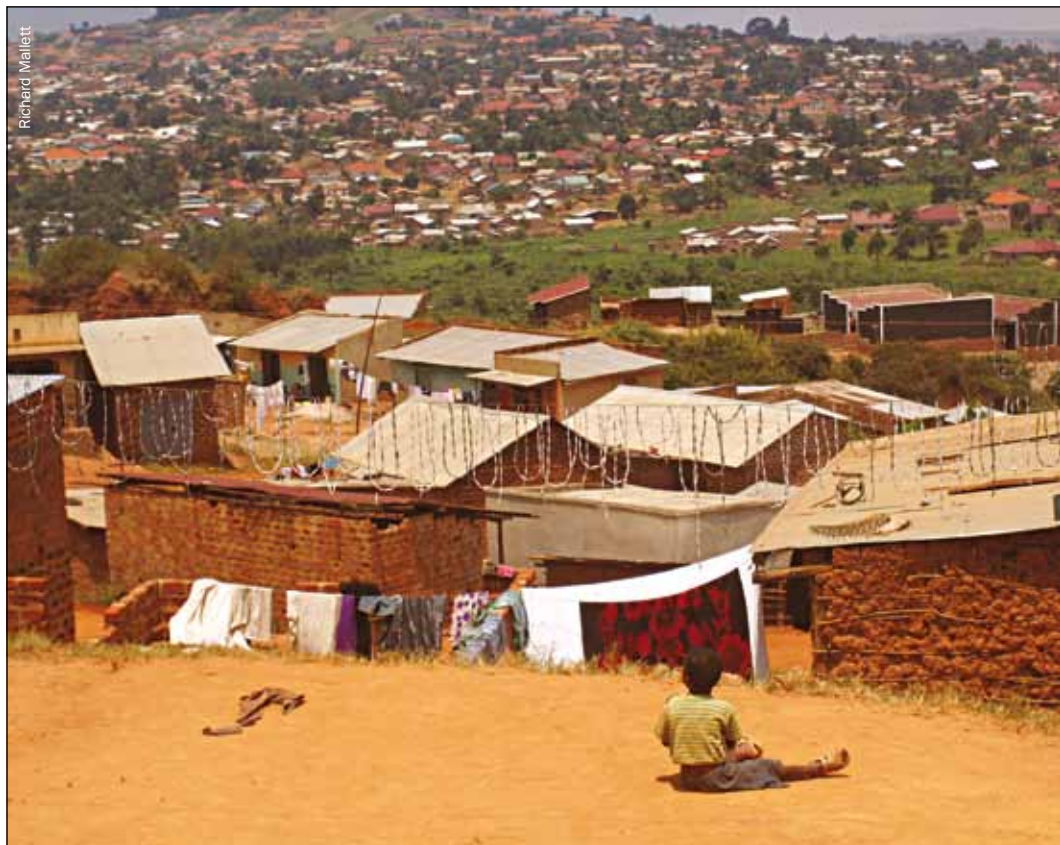
developments. Conversely, there is arguably a very real possibility of the government stepping in with different intentions. Fears of forced relocation, as articulated by a number of interviewees, are perhaps not altogether misplaced. In October 2008, an RLP update on urban IDPs stated that in the Acholi Quarter, “some [of the IDPs’] homes have been demolished at the demand of neighbouring landowners who want them out”,³ and there continues to be national press coverage of forced evictions occurring throughout the city.

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1. <http://www.beadforlife.org/>

2. Inter-Agency Standing Committee Update on IDPs Movement, May 2009
<http://tinyurl.com/IASCUgandaMay09>

3. Refugee Law Project ‘Govt Stalls Urban IDP Profiling’, A Special Bulletin on Urban IDPs, October 2008
<http://www.refugeelawproject.org/others/idpspecialbulletin3.pdf>



Strings of beads made from recycled materials (BeadforLife project) hanging to dry, Acholi Quarter, Kampala.