

## Northern Uganda: protection in displacement, protection on return

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**In the absence of international or state assistance and protection, community members in northern Uganda stepped in to fill this vacuum both during displacement and throughout the laborious return process following the conflict's end.**

For twenty years, from 1986-2006, northern Uganda experienced a long and vicious civil war. Fought mainly between the Government of Uganda and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), the conflict displaced between 1.5 and two million people across vast swathes of northern Uganda. In the Acholi sub-region, some 90% of the population were eventually displaced, with most forced by the government into internally displaced persons' camps, some for up to a decade. Another significant number – the focus of this article – were displaced to urban areas, particularly Gulu, the main urban centre in northern Uganda, which tripled in population during the conflict.

Over the course of five fieldwork trips in seven years (between 2008 and 2015), I was able to find and follow more than 100 households displaced by the war to Gulu from their rural homes in Atiak sub-county north of Gulu. Interviewing these families in both Gulu and Atiak provided the opportunity to learn how they were able – or at least attempted – to obtain varying levels of protection from the broader Atiak community during their initial flight from Atiak, their arrival in Gulu and (for some) their return home to Atiak years or decades later.

### **Initial providers of protection in Gulu**

When Atiak households arrived in Gulu, they (like others displaced to urban centres throughout the war) faced a situation where assistance for those forced to move to new locations was virtually non-existent. One third of these households arrived during two specific peak periods of violence: 1986-87, at the beginning of the war, and 1995-96, after a massacre in Atiak town in which

some 300 people were killed. In both these instances, a small number of households reported receiving small amounts of food and other necessities from the Catholic diocese, the Red Cross or World Vision. However, the vast majority of households were ignored, not only by their government but by the international community. Thus they were forced to rely on themselves and/or others from Atiak who were already in Gulu in order to survive in an environment very different from the one they had left behind.

Initially, most Atiak households in the research sample who were displaced to Gulu spent their first days or weeks (sometimes even months) living in public spaces: bus stations, churches, hospitals, the police station, and Kaunda Grounds, a large open field west of the town centre. After some time, however, most families reported that they heard of elders who had been settled in town before the war and they would seek out one of these elders to ask them for assistance. Depending on the stage of the conflict, such people were often able to do little more than offer advice or provide potential connections, as their resources were already strained from helping their own immediate families. Still, the fact that this process often occurred meant that people from Atiak often felt an affinity toward others from the area who had been displaced to town because of the war.

Seeking assistance from fellow Atiak people (no matter which of Atiak's 12 clans or 136 villages they came from) helped fill the vacuum created by a lack of humanitarian or state involvement with the urban displaced. Households were able to receive advice about places to rent and job opportunities and, sometimes, how to gain access to a small plot for cultivation. For the households

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I interviewed, this broader community assistance was often crucial to being able to survive and remain in town. In this sense, the Gulu-based Atiak community was the first provider of protection during displacement.

### Protection in town during and after the war

When households were asked in the initial 2008-09 interviews to describe their lives in Atiak before the conflict, people inevitably referred to some sense of community protection and group activity. People knew that if they had a bad harvest, they could almost always find someone to help. If they needed money for school fees, they could sell a goat or cow, or find a clan member or other relative or friend to assist. Clans cleared and planted communal tracts of land together, farmed together and hunted together. This sense of belonging, however strained during displacement, was rarely completely destroyed. And it was not only important during displacement.

Those households which were able and willing to maintain social connections with others from Atiak during their years in town, despite changes and challenges, were the ones most likely to return successfully to Atiak after the war. Indeed, this sense of connection was crucial. For some households, these connections were deeply intertwined with their lives and livelihoods in town. We learned from such households that for people who assisted family or friends in town, it was most often reciprocated when they attempted to return. But even in the absence of specific material assistance, maintaining meaningful relationships with people 'back home' would ultimately provide a form of acceptance and protection when households went back to Atiak.

Atiak households in Gulu, whether displaced during the war or living there from before the war, made sacrifices within their own immediate families in order to provide assistance and protection to those needing help within their extended Atiak community. Such actions tended to be respected by those on the receiving end, and returned when possible.

### Protection in the return process

As the process of return from the camps escalated from 2008-09 onwards, many international observers warned that the return process would engender another conflict: war over land, between households and clans but also between government or commercial investors and clans. A common theme accompanying such warnings was the argument that twenty years of war and displacement had led to 'social disintegration' and a breakdown of Acholi culture.

While the return process was certainly marked by numerous land-related problems, a high proportion of land ownership cases were ultimately resolved, with mediation often performed by community leaders, casting strong doubt on the assertions (or assumptions) of social breakdown in Acholi. Though land disputes still occur, sometimes leading to insecurity and the potential for widows, orphans and others to be denied access to land, these generalised concerns and fears seem to be resolved more often and effectively than often feared.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, only ten of the 61 Atiak households in the research sample who had attempted to return failed to do so. And only five of these spoke of being involved personally in a land dispute (while one other was ultimately able to return after resolution of a dispute). Two of the households who failed to return were actually offered access to land but turned it down as the size or location was not to their liking. Three other households – two female-headed and one male-headed – genuinely experienced land disputes that could not be resolved.

The 51 households who attempted return, almost all of whom had nurtured relationships throughout their displacement with those remaining in Atiak, were warmly accepted back to Atiak. This included 23 female-headed households, 16 of which had returned permanently, and seven of which were moving back and forth between Gulu and Atiak. Narratives of these returns show different forms of protection being provided by community members: married couples being able to return to the exact spot they had left during the war as the

clan had kept it available for them; fathers providing a space for their daughters in Atiak after these women lost or separated from their husbands; and brothers-in-law taking the lead to invite women back whom they knew to be suffering in town.

This is not to say that the return process was without problems. After their return to Atiak some of these urban displaced households faced resentment over their perceived easier or more prosperous lives in town from those who had remained in the area, or a deterioration in the initially positive responses from relatives regarding their return. Still, most households who returned expressed a firm belief that their lives were better because of their renewed connection with Atiak.

Thus, Atiak households, especially those who had maintained relationships with the wider Atiak community over time, were

helped by their community both upon their displacement to Gulu and upon their return to Atiak. And much of this assistance was linked to the concept in Acholi culture of *kit mapore* – the right or fitting way to co-exist with others.<sup>2</sup> This in turn helped to create a situation in which local communities provided protection to their own members through the different phases of displacement.

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1. Atkinson R R, Latigo J and Bergin E (forthcoming 2016) *Piloting the Protection of Rights to Customary Land Ownership in Acholiland: A Research Project of the Joint Acholi Sub-Region Leaders' Forum (JASLF) and Trocaire: Report on the Field-Research Component.*

<http://bit.ly/Trocaire-customary-land-2016>

See also Hopwood J and Atkinson R R (2013) *Land Conflict Monitoring and Mapping Tool for the Acholi Sub-Region*, United Nations Peace Building Program in Uganda/Human Rights Focus [www.lcmt.org/pdf/final\\_report.pdf](http://www.lcmt.org/pdf/final_report.pdf)

2. For an example of how this plays out in Acholi culture, see Porter H (forthcoming 2016) *After Rape: Violence, Justice, and Social Harmony in Uganda*, Cambridge University Press.