

Reconstructing 'home' in northern Uganda

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An understanding of shelter in situations of displacement and return must take into consideration both material and non-material dimensions. As well as undertaking movements in specific geographical landscapes, IDPs and returnees move in social spaces.

At the height of the war between the Government of Uganda and the Lord's Resistance Army, close to 90% of the Acholi population was displaced and living in more than 150 forced encampments known as 'protected villages', many within a 30-kilometre radius of their home. As a result, the same techniques, materials and styles for erecting shelters in the camps were used as in people's homes. However, space constraints in the camps resulted in families having to place their houses extraordinarily close to each other. As Acholi compounds traditionally are dispersed, having to live

in such close proximity was experienced as a violation of their usual living patterns. Related to the lack of space was the fact that, due to the potential fire hazard, in the camps people were not allowed to have fireplaces – one of the central elements and gathering points of Acholi homes. Furthermore, the fact that the shelter was not built on ancestral land precluded it from being a 'real home'.

After peace talks in 2006, people were instructed to 'return home'. On marriage, an Acholi woman normally travels to her husband's ancestral land but many women and their husbands met while in the camp

and, because of the distance between the IDP camps and their husbands' ancestral land and the restrictions placed on their movement outside the camp, there was little opportunity, or reason, for the women to visit their husbands' original villages. One woman described leaving the camp and arriving at her husband's ancestral land not as returning home but as "starting a new home". Grammatically it is not possible for a woman to speak of home without specifying whether she is referring to her natal home, *gang-wa*, or the home she shares with her husband, *gang-a*. The message, 'return home', thus fails to capture the gendered nature of home for the Acholi.

Most people initially erected satellite camps between the camps and their ancestral land. The first step was for the men to clear a path to their former villages and erect temporary grass structures which offered a minimal degree of protection. After some time the men would often bring their wives with them to assist in the creation of temporary shelters. Once the grass and the branches which formed the structure had been cut, a temporary hut could be erected in a matter of hours.

In order to continue to collect food rations, for the first few months people would move between the camp and their area of origin. After the closure of the camps and the satellite camps, many family members settled close together on their original land and either built houses in the same compound or close to each other. This was for reasons of perceived safety and security, as well as practicality. From a practical perspective, the clearing of the bush – which had grown tall during the long absence of human settlement – in order to build houses was difficult and time-consuming. This initial arrangement of shelter in the immediate aftermath of returning to ancestral villages after the war did not take into account the gender, age or marital status of the occupants, nor did it reflect the normative set-up of Acholi homesteads.

The material elements which make up an average traditional Acholi house with a grass roof are a tree trunk, mud bricks, palm poles and palm leaves, bundles of grasses

and innumerable jerry cans of water, plus nails and aluminium sheets for the front door. On leaving the camps, many of the returnees brought with them the door from their house in the camp. The building work is done by hand, with a specific division of labour and the sourcing of raw materials determined by gender and age. Women fetch water, men make bricks, women cut and bundle the grass for the roof, men erect the roof, and women smear houses with a combination of mud and cow dung. Building a house requires time and resources and is reliant on reciprocal social relations. A house does not exist as an independent entity but is inextricably bound up in the physical and social landscape in which it is placed.

Conclusion

An understanding of shelter in situations of displacement and return must therefore take into consideration both the material and non-material dimensions of houses. The complexity of the relationship between people, place and belonging is exaggerated by displacement. How people perceive of and engage in the erection of shelter in their particular corner of the world has to be taken into account in planning for and ensuring the sustainability of solutions. In particular, external actors involved in return and reintegration processes must place greater emphasis on recognising and understanding social networks as key drivers in influencing and facilitating how people find and construct shelter. As shelter is mediated through social networks, broken family ties as a result of protracted displacement often complicate the matter of what and where 'home' is, especially for women. More attention must be paid to the social and gendered nature of shelter alongside its physical components.

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