DISCUSSION PAPER / 2021.05

Sharing The Little There is.

Towards A Durable Refugee-Host Relationship In Northern Uganda

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August 2021

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the nature of the relationship between South Sudanese refugees and their Ugandan hosts. Situated in northern Uganda, a context characterized by chronic underdevelopment and poverty, it examines if and how peaceful coexistence between nationals and refugees is maintained. Overall, their relationship can be described as 'cordial'. However, based on extensive fieldwork, including interviews with refugees, local leaders and settlement authorities, three critical challenges are identified. Most importantly, the management of land currently is and will remain a critical challenge. While unstable conditions in South Sudan do not yet allow a safe and voluntary repatriation, other barriers are impeding the South Sudanese to fully integrate with their Ugandan hosts. More specifically, the rural settlement approach discourages refugees to settle independently; and legal ambiguities refrain refugees from obtaining citizenship. Nonetheless, there is a relatively high degree of *de facto* integration, as the refugees, supported by Ugandan nationals, come up with their own coping strategies.[1]

1. INTRODUCTION

In the beginning of 2017, the Government of Uganda (GoU) and the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) signalled that the reception of South Sudanese refugees in the north of the country had reached a 'breaking point'. Reception facilities were not only overwhelmed, but also severely and chronically underfunded (GoU & UNHCR, 2017). Moreover, through the sudden population increase, combined with drought, food shortages and widespread unemployment, more and more tensions involving South Sudanese refugees and the surrounding local population were being observed, undermining Uganda's open-door policy (Summers, 2017). Already in 2014, Refugee Law Project cautioned about 'looming conflicts with the host communities on issues of land, sharing water points, school facilities and toilets' (2014: 9). Afterwards, refugee numbers skyrocketed, with, in March 2017, an average of more than 2800 arrivals in Uganda each day (GoU & UNHCR, 2017). Four years later, still around 900 000 South Sudanese refugees are settled on Ugandan soil (UNHCR, 2021).

Giving asylum to more than 1.4 million refugees, coming from neighbouring countries and the wider region including South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Burundi, Uganda has turned into the largest refugee hosting country in Africa, and the third largest in the world (OPM & UNHCR, 2020). The country is globally praised for its progressive policy framework, granting refugees freedom to work, freedom to move and access to social services. However, while praise for this progressive approach is given to Uganda's national government, its daily impact is borne by local communities and individuals living in the refugee hosting areas. In a context that is characterized by poverty and underdevelopment, many of the challenges the refugees face apply to the host community as well (International Refugee Rights Initiative, 2015). Therefore, this paper explores the nature of the relationship between South Sudanese refugees and their northern Ugandan hosts.

Driven by the humanitarian incentive of organisations, research on forced migration has long suffered from 'refugee-centrism', '*with hosts either not considered or treated as secondary or incidental*' (Chambers, 1986: 246). More than three decades later, the situation has steadily improved; and host populations and refugee hosting areas more generally, are increasingly considered in research as well as support. Recently, an important step has been the signing of the New York Declaration (2016) and the introduction of the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF). Since the large majority of the world's refugees are hosted in countries in the Global South, the CRRF has as one of its main recommendations that 'the Global North should ease pressures on host societies' (Hansen, 2018: 132). Uganda was among the first countries to roll out the CRRF and can be seen as its role model (UNHCR, 2017). A key component of the CRRF in the country has been the Refugee and Host Population Empowerment (ReHoPE) Strategic Framework, aiming to stimulate the resilience and self-reliance of both refugees and hosts (UN, GoU & World Bank, 2017). Through the 'Settlement Transformative Agenda', refugees are now integrated into Uganda's National Development Plan (NDP). The Agenda has six components, including peaceful coexistence between refugees and host communities (World Bank, 2016).

[1] I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments and feedback on earlier versions of this paper. Moreover, I am grateful for the support of my supervisors, Bert Ingelaere and Kristof Titeca. Fieldwork activities have been funded by Fonds Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek (FWO) (Long Stay Abroad) and my institute (IOB).

Especially in the northern Ugandan context, refugees and hosts are not parallel communities. Rather, boundaries between 'camp' and 'non-camp' are fluid. More specifically, Jansen and de Bruijne (2020) use the term 'humanitarian spill over', arguing that the presence of refugee camps and humanitarian actors results in possible spill overs on the everyday life of people living around the settlements. In other words, even if refugees are confined to camps or settlements, their presence flows further into the localities of non-refugees (*ibid.*). Studies that include 'the host' typically look at the impact of the presence of refugees and relatedly, humanitarian actors, in terms of socio-economic (Betts, Chaara, Omata & Sterck, 2019; Kreibaum, 2016; Maystadt & Verwimp, 2014; Ruiz & Vargas-Silva, 2017) and environmental conditions or security (Berry, 2008; Black, 1994; Jacobsen, 1997). The label 'host' covers a lot of heterogeneity; and individuals, households and wider groups experience the arrival and presence of refugees differently, with host populations including both 'winners' and 'losers' (Maystadt & Verwimp, 2014). For some, refugees are perceived as security threats, environmental burdens or competitors on the labour market, while others sympathize with the newcomers and see the demand for their products increase.

Overall, the label 'host community' deserves more critical reflection, on what the term means and how it can be applied (Rodgers, 2020: 2). In this paper, 'host' refers to northern Ugandan nationals who are living in close proximity of the South Sudanese refugees, either in rural areas or in town. Later in the paper, it will be discussed that labels such as 'refugee', 'host' or 'returnee' are oversimplifications of complex realities (Andrews, 2003; Bakewell, 2000), especially in the northern Ugandan - South Sudan borderlands where mobility and migration have always been part and parcel of the social landscape (Allen, 1996).

The contribution of this paper is twofold. Firstly, based on extensive fieldwork, including interviews with Ugandan nationals, South Sudanese refugees and other key informants, the nature of the refugee-host relationship is described and situated into broader regional histories. Three important sources of tension are identified. To begin with, there is a high dependency on natural resources that have to be shared between refugees and the local population. Moreover, there are chronic shortages of land in and around the settlements; and landlords do not feel appreciated for their efforts done. And finally, people living close to the settlements often feel insufficiently consulted and respected by external actors such as OPM and the agencies. To guarantee further peaceful coexistence in and around the settlements, these sources of tension need to be properly addressed (see also IRRI, 2019).

Subsequently, the future of the South Sudanese refugees in northern Uganda is reflected on, that is, whether or not it is possible for the refugees to locally integrate. It is argued that, paradoxically, although the Ugandan approach allows a high degree of *de facto* integration; two major barriers, more specifically the rural settlement approach and legal ambiguities with regards to citizenship, are hindering the refugees to 'fully' integrate. The study then demonstrates how, to overcome these obstacles, the refugees have come up with their own coping strategies and are hereby supported by Ugandan nationals. This is the second contribution the paper makes.

In the following section, an overview is presented of the methodology applied in this study. In the results section, a description is provided of the nature of the refugee-host relationship, situated into broader regional histories and three key sources of tension are identified. The paper then continues with a reflection on the future for South Sudanese refugees in northern Uganda, obstacles hindering their local integration, and how these obstacles are overcome. The paper ends with a conclusion.

2. METHODOLOGY

The study is situated in Adjumani district, part of the impoverished West-Nile subregion and bordering South Sudan. Being home to around 215 000 South Sudanese refugees and 235 000 Ugandan residents, the district population has almost doubled through the presence of the refugees (GoU & UNHCR, 2021). Fieldwork activities took place between March 2018 and November 2019.

In Adjumani, refugees are settled in one of the 13 village-like settlements across the district. These are operated by OPM, in close cooperation with UNHCR and its implementing agencies. Since food and other assistance is only provided in the rural settlements, the large majority of the refugees are living here, while a smaller percentage has self-settled in nearby town centres or cities elsewhere in Uganda. Two set-

tlements were selected, namely Boroli and Alere settlements, based on their diverging composition. Boroli (Boroli I and II) settlement is home to around 15 000 South Sudanese refugees, from a multitude of ethnicities, all new arrivals from the recent civil war ('new caseload') (GoU & UNHCR, 2019). Because of this multi-ethnic composition, and given that incidents, including fights among the refugees or between refugees and hosts[2] have occurred before, Boroli has the reputation to be one of the 'hotspots' for possible tensions or conflicts in the district. Alere settlement has more than 6000 refugees, both old and new caseload refugees. Alere's refugees belong to four main ethnicities: Dinka, Nuer, Kuku and Madi. Next to these two settlements, other interviews were conducted in Adjumani town, the district's main town centre, where South Sudanese refugees have self-settled.

The findings of this paper are based on research that was conducted for the author's PhD thesis. In summary, 188 respondents participated in the overall study. This includes 114 South Sudanese refugees, 51 Ugandan hosts and 23 external actors (i.e. staff of OPM or the agencies). The sample of refugees includes people from 17 until 67 years old, with slightly fewer women than men. The refugee respondents were purposively selected. More specifically, the author proactively searched for respondents with different profiles and backgrounds, in terms of age, gender, region and ethnicity, among others. In this paper, 'host' refers to Adjumani residents who are living in close proximity of the refugee settlements or in town and hence, experience the presence of the refugees directly. These 51 'host respondents' included, are not representative of the Adjumani district host population.

Key informant interviews were conducted with people involved in ensuring peaceful coexistence within and around the settlements. This includes local Ugandan leaders such as chiefs and elders, police force, OPM, local government members (LC1-LC5), representatives of implementing agencies and refugee representatives such as Refugee Welfare Committee (RWC) chairpersons. These were complemented with in-depth interviews conducted with residents of the two selected settlements as well as with self-settled refugees living in Adjumani town. Interviews were conducted by myself in English, or were translated to Madi or Arabic with the support of a Ugandan (Madi) and South Sudanese (Arabic) research assistant. Additional insights were gained from informal discussions and observations.

3. A CORDIAL, BUT DELICATE RELATIONSHIP

Generally, the relationship between the South Sudanese refugees and their Ugandan hosts can be described as 'cordial'. The respondents, including both nationals and refugees, agreed they coexist peacefully in and around the rural settlements as well as in Adjumani town. Depending on a wide variety of factors, including age, gender and social status, members of the host population experience the presence of the South Sudanese differently. The other way around, the ease with which the South Sudanese integrate, varies across groups and ethnicities, usually in favour of those who originate from villages and towns in the border region with Uganda (see also IRRI, 2019; O'Callaghan, 2019). Taking these differences into account, the aim of this section is to give a general impression of the relationship.

That the relationship is good today, is a joint effort of a myriad of actors, ranging from the Government of Uganda and the implementing agencies, to Ugandan chiefs, elders, Local Councils as well as South Sudanese refugee leaders. Respondents described that, at the beginning of the influx, there were a lot more misunderstandings, quarrels, tensions and incidents, caused by the lack of knowledge of each other's language, cultural norms and habits. There was a general feeling of 'cultural intolerance' (Interview Adjumani Elder, May 2018) between different ethnicities among the refugees, and to a lesser extent also between refugees and hosts.

As things settled over time, and through the efforts of different stakeholders, the relationship between the refugees and surrounding local communities has stabilised. In this section, the paper zooms in on two elements that have strongly influenced the positive nature of the refugee-host relationship. First, the (relatively) progressive policy approach of the Ugandan government allows a lot of daily social, economic and cultural interactions. Secondly, the northern Ugandans and South Sudanese share an important part of their history, including oppression by the colonial authorities and different forms of cross border mobility.

[2] For example, in 2014 fighting broke out between refugees and hosts in a video hall, leading to serious injuries and the death of one refugee (Pommier, 2014)

Situated on the strolling hills of the northern rural landscape, lacking any concrete border or fence, the settlements do not correspond with the idea of the heavily securitised and closed settings often imagined when thinking about refugee camps. Interactions with Ugandan nationals are facilitated, as refugees are allowed to do business, go to markets, visit loved ones and search for a job. As such, there is a vibrant informal market in which both refugees and hosts participate (Food and Agriculture Organisation & OPM, 2018). Formal employment opportunities, however, are few as refugees have to compete on a labour market that is small and saturated.

Public services are shared, this implies that refugees and hosts are going to the same schools and hospitals, they attend social events together and intermarry. Although the refugees are in a vulnerable position, neighbouring Ugandan households and communities are living in similar conditions and are struggling with similar challenges. As such, the boundaries between refugees and non-refugees are blurred; and there is less of a 'gap' between insiders and outsiders compared to other refugee hosting areas.

The influx of refugees in the north goes hand in hand with the arrival of (inter)national organisations; and by consequence, increased investments and job opportunities (see also Moro, 2004: 425). Due to the sudden population increase, pressure on resources, services and infrastructure (e.g. health centres) has grown. At the same time, new buildings are constructed or old ones renovated, boreholes are drilled and services improved. The impact experienced by Adjumani residents is not unequivocal; and there are both 'winners' and 'losers' across social, economic and environmental domains. More specifically, the 'winners' are those who are able to benefit from the presence of the refugees and humanitarian partners. For instance, Ugandan employers benefit from a cheap source of labour, business(wo)men see the demand for their products increase, and hotel and restaurant owners happily feed and accommodate humanitarian staff. Hosts on the losing end, however, are usually those with weaker socio-economic profiles and as such, they are not able to reap such benefits. Rather, they experience more competition for natural resources, heightened competition on the labour market or perceive that prices of food or other goods have increased. Whether people are overall 'winners' or 'losers' in this respect, might shape their attitude towards and relationships with the refugees.

New provisions, such as boreholes and buildings, are supposed to be sustained in the long-run, after the refugees have returned home (Krause, 2016). In this sense, the Ugandan approach has been strategic as infrastructures in the remote and marginalized northern region have been introduced, renewed and improved (*ibid.*). Since the introduction of the ReHoPe Framework, the allocation of resources follows the 70-30 rule, determining that 70% goes to the refugees and 30% has to be invested in affected host communities. Both refugees and Ugandans alike argued that the increased presence of international actors and the Ugandan police force has increased feelings of security, especially compared to the years of the insurgency of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA).

The progressive policy framework upheld by the Ugandan government is a first major factor that positively influences peaceful coexistence between the refugees and the local population. The possibility for the refugees to move in and out of the settlements and to engage in socio-economic activities, is stimulating a lot of daily interactions with local citizens, while it is also easing pressure on surrounding villages. This would probably even improve, if refugees are no longer required to live in the rural settlements, but could rather disperse across villages, towns and cities, depending on the location they prefer. The settlement approach is discussed later in the paper.

Secondly, and more fundamentally, people in the northern Uganda - South Sudan border region share an important part of their history together, including oppression by colonial authorities, forced displacement and non-conflict related forms of cross border mobility. In 1914, the border between the two countries was agreed between the British Protectorate of Uganda and the Anglo-Egyptian condominium of the Sudan, after the Belgians troops had left the area. The border cuts across several ethnic communities, implying that the same ethnicities can be found at both sides of the border, including the Madi, the majority ethnic group of Adjumani district, and the Acholi (Allen, 1996). In fact, over time, researchers as well as local residents have wondered whether it would not have been better if West-Nile belonged to South Sudan, instead of being part of Uganda (Leopold, 2009). People and communities in this border region share the

same characteristics (Storer, O'Byrne & Reid, 2017) or even a 'border identity' (Merkx, 2002).

In previous decades, people in northern Uganda and South Sudan had to search for refuge on each other's territories, in both directions. Because of repeated cycles of conflict, including the First (1955 – 1972) and Second Sudanese Civil War (1983 – 2005), for many of the current South Sudanese refugees, this is not the first time they are living in exile with their Ugandan neighbours. But also the other way around, after the ousting of Idi Amin, a large part of the West-Nile population lived as refugees in Southern Sudan (Harrel-Bond, 1985).

Likewise, people have crossed the border for non-conflict related reasons, to engage in trade, to search for livelihood activities, to enrol for education or to intermarry. Because of the physical location of the northern region, far away from the Ugandan centre, it is easier for the local population to interact with South Sudan and eastern Congo, than with Kampala (Titeca, 2009). Since migration has always been part and parcel of the social landscape, labels such as 'refugee', 'returnee' or 'host', but also national and ethnic labels such as 'Ugandans', 'South Sudanese' or 'Madi' are reducing realities that are much more complex and entangled (see Allen, 1996). Such labels do not take into account any individual experiences, or how people define themselves more generally (Andrews, 2003).

As a consequence of this shared history, many of the South Sudanese refugees can fall back on previously established social ties. The familiarity with the people and places of Adjumani or neighbouring districts has facilitated local integration: ties with host community members have been maintained and refugees could join family members in Uganda that never repatriated. Few respondents explained how they could return to the same piece of land they had received from Adjumani residents during their previous period in exile (Second Sudanese Civil War). By then, a whole generation of Southern Sudanese grew up in northern Uganda and got introduced to its education system, established social ties and border spanning businesses, that were continued during periods of peace in between. Although years have passed, these 'experienced' refugees are still familiar to their country of refuge and hence, can navigate the Adjumani settlements more easily (Vancluysen, 2021). Oftentimes, the respondents referred to their familiarity with the district and its settlements, or by contrast, to negative experiences in Kakuma or elsewhere that had influenced their current choice to come to Uganda. Northern Ugandans that took refuge in Southern Sudan in the 1980's, generally see the current reception as a form of reciprocity for their neighbours.

4. LOOMING TENSIONS

Although the refugee-host relationship is generally cordial, conflicts do certainly occur, among the refugees themselves or between refugees and Ugandan nationals alike. This varies from quarrels and minor disputes to deadly fights, with the violent clashes of September 2020 in another northern district[3] – causing the death of ten refugees - as the gravest incident so far (Okiror, 2020). According to the refugees, hosts and external actors interviewed, a number of looming tensions can be identified. These are critical factors that need to be properly addressed in the near future, to avoid that they result into more widespread violence or instability in a later stage (see also IRRI, 2019). Overall, these tensions are not flowing further from enmities towards each other, but rather, they are caused by the conditions of structural underdevelopment characterising the northern Ugandan region.

The sharing of natural resources is the main source of tension. Adjumani residents are mostly worried about the land they have given for the refugees to settle and the impact of the sudden population increase on their environment. However, most of the complaints coming from Ugandan nationals do not refer to the presence of the refugees as such, but rather to the approach of external actors such as the Ugandan government, UNHCR and the agencies. These critical factors will now be discussed in more detail.

4.1. Sharing The Little There Is

There is a large dependence on natural resources in daily life, including for cooking, shelter, as well as for livelihood activities such as the production and sale of charcoal and bricks. This goes for the local population as well as the refugees. Natural resources that formerly belonged only to local inhabitants, now

[3] Madi-Okollo district

have to be shared by a population that is twice as large as before the influx. In an environment so heavily under pressure, tensions and disputes are inevitable.

In everyday life, disputes arise during the collection and consumption of resources for daily needs, such as firewood, grass or water. The South Sudanese complain about the defensive attitude of local residents and mention incidents whereby refugees were verbally and physically threatened, or even assaulted, when searching for grasses or wood near the settlements. As such, women and children are increasingly vulnerable since, because of unsustainable rates of deforestation, they need to go further and further away from their settlements. At boreholes, tensions sometimes also run high, as people quarrel or fight while queuing for water[4].

Lacking any alternative sources of income, the refugees also strongly depend on natural resources for their livelihood activities. Given that Adjumani's labour market is small and saturated, they try to supplement their ratio through the production and/or selling of firewood, charcoal, bricks, stones and grasses, among others. While the refugees' use of resources to meet daily needs is generally accepted by the local population, money-generating activities are regarded differently. The right to make profit out of the natural resources in place, is seen as something that belongs to the 'sons of the soil'. Put differently, locals prefer to sell their products to the refugees, instead of the other way around.

More fundamentally, local individuals and communities worry about the long-term impact on their natural environment. While in northern Uganda, ecosystems were already under pressure, the arrival of thousands of South Sudanese has led to a stark increase in the rate of land degradation and loss of woodland in and around the refugee settlements (IBRD & FAO, 2019), such that it is easily visible and tangible for local residents. According to a report by UNDP (2018: 11), 75 percent of the trees in Adjumani district was cut and sold to use in the reception of the refugees in 2017, while only 40 hectares have been replanted.
In the refugee-hosting areas, there is a general willingness among Ugandans to share the little resources they have, given local norms and rules regarding the use and conservation of natural resources are respected. Respondents, however, express concern that refugees treat the environment with less respect than they do, for example, by harvesting grasses prematurely, or cutting trees they are not allowed to. At the same time, during the interviews, a few Ugandans reflected on and recognised the environmental impact they had themselves, when they were in exile in Southern Sudan in the 1980's.

To avoid any long-lasting environmental impact, a variety of remedial programs are put in place, though they are criticized to be working too slow (UNHCR, 2018), or not being sufficiently adjusted to the local context. The environmental pressure urgently needs to be tackled in a more sustainable way, but local communities regret not being involved, by external actors, in the planning and implementation of program activities. Their involvement, however, is essential in terms of local knowledge, as well as to guarantee ownership and sustained maintenance. According to the Ugandan respondents, there is need for incentives and proper follow-up, as for people who struggle to make ends meet, long-term investments such as tree-planting are not attractive.

4.2. No More Land

The cornerstone of Uganda's framework is its self-reliance policy. In a nutshell, refugees are given a piece of land and as such, are expected to become self-reliant over time. Yet, the self-reliance policy departs from two wrongfully taken assumptions. Firstly, it assumes all refugees to be farmers, or to have experience doing cultivation, not taking into account any previous activities, interests or preferences (Krause, 2016). Secondly, the framework is based on the premise that ideal conditions are in place to attain self-reliance, but they are not (Schiltz, Derluyn, Vanderplasschen & Vindevogel, 2019). More specifically, the refugees are left with plots of land that are too small or of too little quality to allow sufficient agricultural production.

The land on which the South Sudanese refugees are settled is customary land, defined in the 1998 Ugandan Land Act Chapter 227, Section 3 as 'governed by rules generally accepted as binding and authoritative by the class of persons to which it applies'. The land is given by local communities and individuals

[4] For example, the deadly clashes of September 2020 arose at a borehole

for free, for the time the refugees are present. Agreements are negotiated between customary landowners (e.g. clan leaders, individual landlords) and the Ugandan government, represented by the Office of the Prime Minister. If all stakeholders agree, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) is agreed upon, setting out the conditions of the agreement (Interview with OPM representative Adjumani, February 2019).

Since the majority of the northern Ugandan population also depends on agriculture as a main source of livelihood, land has become a 'minefield of potential conflict as refugee communities have very few enumerated rights around a very valuable asset' (Action Against Hunger and Institute de Relations Internationales et Strategiques, 2017: 12). Unanimously, our informants declared the management of land currently is and will remain the most critical challenge, not only for the refugees, but equally for local communities and settlement authorities (see also UNDP, 2018; World Bank, 2016). Being a 'hot topic' in Uganda since a long time, the sudden population increase through the inflated refugee numbers is now bringing additional challenges and frustrations emerge at both sides.

The Ugandan government depends on the goodwill of the local population, since all Adjumani settlements are located on customary land. Nevertheless, frustrations were widely expressed by clan chiefs and even more so by individual landlords. To begin with, concerns were raised that when drafting the agreements, not all the right stakeholders (i.e. landlords) have been consulted; and there are sometimes disagreements on ownership. Taking into account that many of them are illiterate, the landlords are in an especially vulnerable position as the conditions of the agreement are not clear to them. Lacking copies or access to the original MoU itself, landlords worry how and when their land will ever be returned to them. Examples were given of landlords that tried to consult OPM staff members for information or to file complaints, without getting access to them – while hundreds or even thousands of refugees are settled on their land. This is not only the case in Adjumani, as similar grievances are expressed in other northern districts, including Yumbe (Candia, 2018) and Lamwo (IRRI, 2018)

Most of all, local landlords feel unrecognized for their efforts and disillusioned by false expectations and the 'promise of development' that was made to them (see also O'Callaghan, 2019). Although the landlords are not expecting any monetary compensation, they anticipate other forms of 'positive reciprocity' from the government and implementing partners (UNDP, 2018), in the form of scholarships for their children, support in terms of health care or more community-wide benefits.

> *'Well you know, we should be considered important. Because without us, the UN cannot bring the refugees here. They put the refugees on land and the land belongs to us. So I should be considered more important than any implementing agency. Because the implementing agencies also work because I was there. If I could not be there, where would you be? If I could not give land to the refugees, where would you be? So I must be considered important and be taken care of. And they are not doing that.' (Interview with landlord Adjumani, May 2018)*

> *'From the beginning they say that they promise something for you. They deceive you and say we will do for you A B C D. And after giving the land, the indulgements are not there. People feel dissatisfied. They say ah, I have wasted my land. [...] As we speak now, they say no more land, until you have fulfilled what you have promised.' (Interview with landlord Adjumani, May 2018)*

The statements above illustrate to what extent the landlords are disappointed and frustrated by their (lack of) interactions with OPM, UNHCR and the implementing agencies. Because of their contribution in the reception of the refugees, the landlords want to be considered as stakeholders and respected for their generosity. Yet, they feel side-lined as they are never consulted, by OPM, nor by the other external actors.

Another major source of concern is that through the massive population increase and the related deforestation, natural landmarks and boundaries have disappeared; and therefore, landlords are worried about demarcation and ownership. Given that record keeping is largely inadequate (IRRI, 2018), the landlords wonder if and how, after a future repatriation, their land will be returned to them. Some land-

owners, mostly from older generations feel embittered towards the Ugandan government, as during earlier periods of displacement, incorrect transactions occurred and land was wrongly distributed to 'politically connected individuals' (IRRI, 2019: 12).

Although self-reliance is the core objective of Uganda's policy, after more than six years, the majority of the South Sudanese are still dependent on external support. Taking into account the population increase and the protracted nature of the South Sudanese instability, an enlargement of the settlements, or a partial, or more radical shift away from the settlement approach, is needed for self-reliance to be more widely attained. While the respondents are generally accepting to let the South Sudanese locally integrate, disappointment and mistrust in the Ugandan authorities is refraining (some of the) landlords from giving additional land, as explained by the representative of Adjumani's landlords association.

> *'They[5] have refused, as we speak now. They say no more land, until you have fulfilled our conditions of agreement and what you have promised. So in the future, the refugees may not get land. What they do currently, they will say the refugees can get friendships with the host, so that this person will give you land. But this is not sustainable. Something should be done specifically. This land is for the refugees, it is OK. So that people respect it and if they return, it comes back to the owner.' (Interview with landlord Adjumani, May 2018)*

As such, the dissatisfaction of the landlords towards OPM, UNHCR and the implementing partners is starting to negatively affect the refugees and their agricultural activities, since some of the landlords openly argue they are no longer willing to give more land to the growing South Sudanese population. One of the landlords interviewed, argued he has only given 50 out of the 360 acres he owns, but refuses to give any more, because he does not see any incentive to do so.

Similar complaints have also been raised in other refugee-hosting areas. In Nakivale settlement for example, in South Western Uganda, Ahimbisibwe (2013) found that conflicts between refugees and the local population were due to unclear land boundaries, issues of unresolved land ownership, poor land allocation management of the settlement authorities and allegations of land grabbing, among others. Likewise, Bjørkhaug (2020) argues that land distribution is Nakivale is unsustainable; leading to dissatisfaction towards government authorities. Also in Lamwo district, IRRI (2018) came to similar conclusions.

Prior to the large influx of 2016, households were given plots for housing and agricultural use (UNDP, 2018) - an approach for which the country was widely praised. Due to the sheer size of the incoming population, this policy could not be maintained and in the Adjumani settlements for example, plot sizes have generally reduced to 30 by 30 metres, which is not enough for both housing and cultivation. Furthermore, the land that the refugees receive is usually land that was vacant before, hence, it is often rocky, or unsuited for meaningful agricultural production (Bohnet & Schmitz - Pranghe, 2019). South Sudanese pastoralists have over time managed to build relatively large herds of cattle, increasing the demand for land and sometimes causing incidents of trespassing on agricultural plots of neighbouring local households.

In order to supplement their monthly ratio, the refugees enter into informal bilateral agreements, to rent land from the host. The land is usually let out either for a fixed amount of money, or in exchange for a portion of the produce. However, lacking any form of documentation, the refugees are vulnerable; and disputes arise on the precise conditions of the agreement. Incidents are reported of land that needs to be returned too early, after a lot of effort had already been invested to clear the land (Vancluysen & Ingelaere, 2020). In order to formalize the process and avoid disputes of this kind, suggestions are now put forward to draft written agreements, supervised by the Local Council I chairperson (Interview with LCI chairperson, April 2018).

As such, the settlement authorities are left with a daunting task in terms of land management: how to improve the fertility of the soil (FAO & OPM, 2018) and guarantee plots of land to the refugees that are sufficiently large for both housing and cultivation, while appreciating host communities and especially

[5] 'They' referring to a number of landlords in Adjumani

landlords for their generosity. During a conversation early 2019, one of OPM Adjumani's representatives mentioned the possibility of closing certain settlements and to relocate the refugees to other locations in the district where land is still in abundance. An alternative solution, however, would be to partially or even fully shift away from the settlement approach; and let the refugees settle where they have more and better access to alternative sources of livelihood. This is further discussed in section 5.

While the current bilateral agreements are no panacea for the structural land demands of the rural northern districts in the near future, they are certainly beneficial for South Sudanese as well as Ugandan households and families. Refugees can negotiate for a plot that suits their needs, while landowners receive monetary or in kind benefits. The vulnerability of the refugees would, however, reduce, if the agreements are more formalised, under the supervision of the LC1 representatives or other relevant actors.

4.3. 'Marginalized, But Doing The Right Thing'[6]

Although the main objective of this study is to explore the nature of the refugee-host relationship, many of the host respondents argued that their most important concern is not the presence of the refugees per se, but rather, the way in which the reception is orchestrated and imposed by outside actors, who are blamed for their lack of sensitivity to and interest for local ideas, opinions and preferences. So, whereas the local population recognises the benefits related to the presence of the refugees, especially in terms of infrastructure and service delivery, they feel 'overlooked' as stakeholders in terms of decision-making and in the planning of activities.

Frustrations are mostly expressed towards the Office of the Prime Minister. During previous refugee influxes, things did not always proceed properly, leading to feelings of suspicion or distrust towards the central government (IRRI, 2019). For instance, as described earlier, local landlords, households and communities feel vulnerable as they have given so much land to the refugees. It was often argued that the open-armed attitude and generosity of the local population to a strong extent had been instigated by 'the promise of development' made by representatives of OPM. At the start of the influx, they emphasized the presence of the refugees would be beneficial for the region's development, but sometimes the local population felt they were too strongly pushed to follow this logic (see also O'Callaghan, 2019; Vogelsang, 2017).

While the Ugandan government is widely praised for its progressive refugee policy, its day-to-day impact is experienced by local households and communities surrounding the settlements. Situated in the outskirts of the country, the current top-down approach by the GoU is seen as yet another confirmation of the gap existing between the centre and the northern periphery. People feel as if the goodwill and sustained open-armed attitude of the northern population is too much taken for granted. In line with more generalized feelings of marginalisation in the impoverished northern region, residents believe the services are only there because of the international attention for the refugees, but not for them – despite they are living in relatively similar conditions. This is illustrated by the following citation of one of the chiefs in Adjumani district:

> *'I think the government should be providing the services they are supposed to be providing. The government should not wait for an NGO to come and identify a crisis. People feel like yes, the NGO's might be relevant because we get this. But these things are not supposed to be given because they see another person suffering first, and then they see you suffering [afterwards].'* (Interview with Adjumani chief April 2018)

Also towards the implementing agencies, attitudes are ambiguous; and local communities feel they are insufficiently, if at all, considered as 'stakeholders' and complain about the 'colonialism of compassion' imposed on them (Hyndman, 2000: xvi). The presence of the international humanitarian and development actors has spilled over beyond the refugee settlements, such that they are co-governing the district (Jansen & de Bruijne, 2020). Local leaders, especially chiefs and elders, regret the lack of opportunity to provide suggestions or feedback, or the lack of information on the 'why' and 'how' of current activities more generally. Moreover, NGO staff mostly originates from other, more developed, Ugandan regions. In December 2016, this led a few hundred Adjumani residents to protest in town, demanding the District Local Government

[6] Statement of one of the Madi chiefs interviewed, who stated that: 'Because we are marginalized, that does not mean we should not do the right thing' (Interview Adjumani, April 2018).

for more employment opportunities with NGO's as well as UN agencies (Vogelsang, 2017: 47).

Small community based organisations want to be involved, but there is a mismatch between their working methods and the heavily bureaucratized procedures to cooperate with the international agencies. For example, despite its many attempts, the Adjumani Elders Forum (ADEFO), grouping together respected elders and chiefs from over the district, has not been able to agree on any systematic collaboration with the NGO's despite several attempts. At the time of research, the only form of cooperation in which ADEFO was involved, was an agreement with LWF to organise community dialogues on an ad hoc basis, for which they received a lump sum of 50 000 to 70 000 UGX (+-15 USD). The session in which I participated, the full amount was used for transport and soda and biscuits for the dozens of participants. Nonetheless, according to the agencies, the informal structure of such grassroots organisations, lacking any clear roadmap for activities and financial accountability, hampers any systematic collaboration with them.

In conclusion, in this section, three main sources of tension between the South Sudanese refugees and their Ugandan hosts were discussed. These do not result from intolerance between the two communities as such, but are rather caused by the magnitude of the influx and the nature of the response given by external actors, combined with the regional conditions of underdevelopment more generally. In the next part, the paper reflects on how the relationship, and the plight of the South Sudanese in Adjumani more generally, might evolve in the future.

5. FUTURE RELATIONSHIP

Although in South Sudan, the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS) has been signed in 2018; and a transitional government has been formed in the beginning of 2020, the conditions do not yet allow safe and voluntary repatriation. Due to political disagreements, the implementation of the Agreement is delayed and the ceasefire is violated by its signatories and non-signatories (Panel of Experts on South Sudan, 2021). In a report that was published in April this year, the Panel of Experts on South Sudan (2021: 3) warns that 'urgent engagement is needed to avert a return to large-scale conflict'. At the same time, the country is dealing with a severe protection crisis (OCHA, 2021). Hence, South Sudan is currently at a crossroads: either the violence and local insurgencies it suffers from will further calm down, or looming tensions might escalate, as the country prepares itself for elections in 2022 (International Crisis Group, 2021). In any case, there will be new population movements as refugees will return, or electoral or local violence might cause new forced migration flows.

More than five years after the conflict erupted, the presence of South Sudanese refugees in Uganda and other neighbouring countries has become protracted. In this part, the paper first reflects on how the future of the South Sudanese in Adjumani looks like, and whether any 'durable solutions', as proposed by the international refugee regime, can be achieved. Since, in Adjumani district, there are no large scale resettlements programs in place, we focus on the other two 'solutions', namely voluntary repatriation to South Sudan and local integration in Uganda. Subsequently, we discuss how, confronted with challenges hampering local integration, the South Sudanese have come up with certain coping strategies.

5.1. To Return Or Not To Return

Generally, it is too much taken for granted that refugees want to repatriate, as soon as conditions allow (Bakewell, 2000). To return to the country from which one has fled, however, is not necessarily desired for as in exile, notions of home might have changed. People can find a new home in exile (Turton, 1996), or assign the value of 'home' to two or more locations simultaneously (Eastmond, 2006). Taking into account the shared history of mobility, migration and forced displacement, the distinction between 'home' and 'exile' in the northern Uganda - South Sudan border region is blurred anyway (Hovil, 2010; Kaiser, 2010).

The end of conflict in South Sudan does not automatically imply that refugees have the ability and desire to return from Ugandan villages, refugee settlements and elsewhere. When deciding whether to return or not, multiple factors, other than the absence of conflict, are taken into account. For instance, although the northern Ugandan region is underdeveloped, South Sudan is doing worse: in a recent report on humanitarian needs in the country, OCHA (2021: 12) warns that the years of conflict and related underdevel-

opment have left a 'devastating impact on the country's infrastructure and basic service delivery'. In other words, the South Sudanese would return to a country in which schools and health facilitates are damaged by decades of war.

Moreover, as argued before, for many of the South Sudanese this is not the first time to be displaced. Some of them, especially the old caseload refugees that never returned after the war before independence, have spent more years of their lives in Uganda than in South Sudan. This not only goes for older generations, but also for children and youth. Children were born and raised in Uganda and enrolled in its education system. For instance, a 23-year old female respondent explained she only went to South Sudan once in her life, to meet her grandmother (interview with female refugee, Adjumani, November 2019). Clearly, in such cases, 'home' does not necessarily mean South Sudan.

Even if return to South Sudan is desired for, family members will not return all together at the same time. Hovil differentiates between an official process of repatriation whereby 'refugees are being assisted to return to their homeland' and unofficial processes, referring to the 'multiple coping strategies' of individuals and households that are a lot more complex (2010: 1). Respondents described how after the previous war, children stayed in Uganda to continue their education while parents returned to South Sudan first to monitor safety and rebuild houses (see also Hovil 2010; Kaiser, 2010). As such, the return process is not linear and can last for years, including multiple movements to different locations that are not necessarily 'home' (Kindersley & CSRF, 2019; see also Hovil & Lomo, 2015). Since the splitting up of family members has been and still is an important strategy for the South Sudanese to diversify risks (Vancluysen, 2021), and given that mobility has always been an integral aspect of their social landscape more generally, there is no reason to assume this will change in the future. Hence, even if conditions improve, a certain proportion of the refugees will remain in Uganda at least in the short or middle long term.

Tired and disillusioned by the recurring cycles of conflict and insecurity, several respondents have lost confidence in the future of South Sudan. Besides, old caseload respondents saw how those who did return, came back to Uganda in a bad condition. As such, part of the South Sudanese refugees does not have the wish or ambition to return, and prefer to stay in Uganda instead. This is illustrated by the many permanent structures that are built by the South Sudanese in the outskirts of town, investments that illustrate the mistrust in their country's future. Since conditions in South Sudan do not yet allow repatriation, and given the familiarity with the northern Ugandan context, local integration is an important 'solution'.

Despite the Ugandan policy framework is relatively progressive, especially when compared to other refugee hosting countries in the region (e.g. Kenya), a few barriers are hampering the further integration of the refugees. A first major barrier, is the anchoring of refugee aid to the settlements (O'Callaghan, 2019). Steps have been taken towards a more hybrid approach, as services are largely integrated and refugees have been integrated into Uganda's National Development Plan. Yet, through the concentration of refugees in rural settlements, they are still too much considered as a parallel community. But more importantly, within the settlements, the refugees seldomly succeed to build sustainable livelihoods, because of the lack of land, and the lack of alternative opportunities.

A second major obstacle for local integration is that legal ambiguities are refraining the refugees from obtaining citizenship (Ahimbisibwe & Belloni, 2020; Ahimbisibwe, Ingelaere & Vancluysen, 2017; Zakaryan, 2019). Whereas there is a relatively high degree of *de facto* integration, paradoxically, the Ugandan policy is refraining refugees from being fully integrated. The distinction between refugees and citizens is important to humanitarian partners, to decide who is entitled to support and who is not. Yet, these labels matter a lot less in daily interactions, relations and friendships. Where obstacles against local integration do occur, refugees turn to coping strategies. This is now discussed, in relation to the two examples of the settlement approach, and the difficulty to obtain Ugandan citizenship.

5.2. Overcoming Barriers to Local Integration

5.2.1. The Settlement Approach

Although South Sudanese refugees in Uganda are entitled to *prima facie* refugee status, in reality, the GoU and UNHCR only provide assistance to those who are registered in the rural settlements. In other words, they are seen as the only 'true' refugees (RLP, 2005), while self-settled refugees enjoy 'neither the rights of Ugandan citizens, nor the protection and limited material support of refugees in settlements' (Kaiser, 2006: 604).

In reality, however, the difference between 'settlement refugees' and 'self-settled refugees' is less clear (see also Bakewell, 2014). Similar to the previous influx of Sudanese refugees, people 'bridge the gap between the two, deriving advantages from each' (Kaiser, 2006: 609). Or put differently, refugees commute between the settlements, town centres, cities and elsewhere, depending on their needs, preferences and resources available (Hovil, 2010; Kaiser, 2006; Vancluysen, 2021). Life in town centres and cities is more expensive than in rural areas and self-settled refugees can hardly survive without assistance. To overcome this protection gap, self-settled refugees maintain their registration, and 'commute' to the settlements during days of distribution, to receive their much needed food or cash support. At the time of research, refugees were given 31 000 UGX per month, or 1000 UGX per day, which equals to less than 0.5 USD. Importantly, however, this 'commuting' between the settlement and town requires significant efforts and transaction costs; and a significant part of the support is spent on money for transportation.

In line with an earlier report by IRRI (2018), showing that landowners in Lamwo district feel discomfort towards the settlement approach, Adjumani residents indicate the concentration of refugees in rural settlements is unsustainable, especially now that their presence has become protracted. The Local Council Chairperson of one of the refugee hosting sub-counties of Adjumani district, suggested to gradually move South Sudanese families out of the settlements, starting with those who have the highest needs in terms of land: '*If you have big animal numbers, if you have a big family size or you want to cultivate.. you have to come out.*' (Interview with LC3 chairperson, February 2019). As we discussed earlier, the South Sudanese engage in informal land agreements with surrounding locals, to be able to engage in more meaningful agricultural activities.

Understanding these difficulties, local residents are helping befriended refugees to self-settle, by renting out *tukulus* for reasonable prices or by providing a piece of land to settle on. According to Ugandan regulations, refugees can rent and lease land but not own it but, nevertheless, South Sudanese have succeeded to buy (and build) their own property (personal communication with NGO staff member, January 2021). Many Ugandans are understanding the refugees' desire to stay; and where possible, are helping the refugees to build up their new lives by providing land, financial or other support. Of those refugees that have self-settled in neighbouring town centres, many are doing seemingly well. It allows the refugees to search for alternative livelihood activities, compensating for the over-reliance on agricultural activities (UNDP, 2018). That people want to leave the settlements, indicates these places are far from perfect; but at the same time, the external assistance is much needed, and those who can live without it, are few. Therefore, a better alternative might be the combination of both settlement forms: providing assistance to those who self-settle and helping them integrate in town centres and cities; while also maintaining the settlements as a safety net for those who need them. The key issue at stake is not the form of settlement itself, rather it is more important that refugees are given the freedom to settle wherever they want (Bakewell 2014); and that they 'are able to enjoy safe, secure and dignified conditions of life, whether or not they live in a camp' (Crisp & Jacobsen, 1998: 28).

5.2.2. Ugandan Citizenship

In a strict sense, local integration can only be durable if refugees are able to acquire citizenship[7] (Crisp, 2004: 2). In Uganda, this is close to impossible, because of legal ambiguities and inconsist-

[7] Citizenship can be defined as 'full membership in a state or community with concomitant rights or entitlements and duties' (Hovil and Lomo 2015).

ent application of legal instruments[8]. In October 2015, the Ugandan Constitutional Court ruled that refugees cannot access citizenship by registration, but they are eligible for citizenship by naturalization. So far, however, cases for naturalisation have not been successful (Zakaryan, 2019; Ahimbisibwe & Belloni, 2020; Ahimbisibwe et al., 2017). According to Cole, this and other gaps in the policy framework are intentionally left open, as they are instrumental in 'balancing competing political, legal and economic decisions in a context with one of the highest numbers of refugees per capita in the world' (2020: 65).

Nonetheless, during interviews and informal discussions, a few respondents mentioned that they or close friends had managed to obtain the Ugandan national ID. For example, being familiar with the local culture and language, one of the respondents explained that he had told the authorities he originated from Koboko, a Ugandan town very close to the border with South Sudan. Others obtained citizenship through LC chairpersons, who sometimes consider that after such a long time spent in Uganda, the South Sudanese should be able to become citizens; and as such wrote the necessary document (see also Cole, 2020).

> *'There are refugees also in town here, who decided to settle themselves in town, like myself. The relation between those in town and the host community is perfect. And even the local councils around, LC1's really appreciate the ones who are in town. They don't have any other problem, they follow the rules and are just like the host. Some of the LC's around are saying there are some of the refugees staying in Uganda for more than 20 years. You are not a refugee, you are now a citizen of the country. So you can do anything that the citizens are doing. You are free to register and get even the national identity card. And there are many of us who got it. Especially in this area here, there are many who got the cards. They can vote and participate in the activities of the host community. Though you fear you are doing it illegally, so you are doing it down, so that others don't know. But at least you have the citizenship.'* (Interview with self-settled refugee, February 2019).

Respondents explained how they used their refugee card to get their much needed monthly ratio, while the Ugandan ID gave them a feeling of security. Similar to other border regions, these people demonstrated a 'handheld idea of nationality' (Bakewell, 2000: 363), that is, they switch between papers and nationalities, depending on the situation they find themselves in. Although the South Sudanese found a solution to overcome this challenge to their local integration, it is up to the Ugandan authorities to clarify legal ambiguities and provide refugees the ability to fully integrate (see also Zakaryan, 2019).

Hence, the examples discussed in this section demonstrate how the refugees come up with their own strategies, to surmount obstacles to their local integration. It was discussed how refugees commute between the settlements and outside locations, to overcome challenges related to life within the settlements. Or, they received or have been able to buy land from the host, while this, according to Ugandan law, is not allowed. Finally, South Sudanese have succeeded to obtain the national ID, though, in principle, the Ugandan legal framework refrains refugees from obtaining citizenship. As such, the national refugee policy is locally modified. For these examples, it can be argued that the actual implementation of the policy on the ground, is a lot more progressive than what is stated on paper.

Importantly, however, strategies such as commuting between the settlement and the actual place of residence, or renting or buying land from the host, require financial, material and social resources that many of the refugees do not possess. As such, they are not durable solutions available to a wide audience, but rather coping strategies that are only possible for the 'happy few'. The responsibility is on the side of the Ugandan government to tackle these obstacles and make local integration a real and durable possibility.

[8] Access to citizenship is determined by: the 1995 Ugandan Constitution (as amended in 2005), the 1999 Uganda Citizenship and Immigration Control Act (UCICA), (as amended as of 2009) and the 2006 Refugee Act.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper studied the nature of the relationship between South Sudanese refugees and their northern Ugandan hosts. Four years after the Government of Uganda and UNHCR signalled the reception of the refugees in the north of country had reached a 'breaking point', it explored how South Sudanese refugees and Ugandan hosts relate to each other; and as such, whether the country's open-door policy can be maintained.

The relationship was first situated into the broader history of the northern Uganda - South Sudan border region. Considering cross border mobility, migration and forced displacement is part of the social landscape, categories such as 'South Sudanese', 'Ugandans', 'refugees', 'hosts', 'home' and 'exile' have become blurred; and their relevance is questionable (cf. Allen, 1996).

Based on the study findings, it was argued that overall, the refugee-host relationship is cordial. Nevertheless, three important sources of tension were identified that need to be tackled properly, to guarantee stability and coexistence in the future. Because of the sudden population increase, the pressure on natural resources, most especially land, has strongly increased. Landlords argued to be dissatisfied, as they do not feel appreciated for what they have done; and moreover, they worry if and how their land will ever be returned to them. More fundamentally, Adjumani residents are sceptical not only towards OPM, but also towards UNHCR and the agencies, as they feel neglected or side-lined in the discussion and planning of activities. This is in line with more general feelings of marginalisation characterising the north, in contrast with the more developed centre and southern region.

In the second part of the paper, we discussed if and how voluntary repatriation and local integration - as 'durable solutions' proposed by the international refugee regime - can be attained by the South Sudanese. It should not be assumed that all South Sudanese desire to return, when conditions allow. Rather, they will engage in more complex strategies, involving continued mobility and/or split return. So far, two major factors are impeding full local integration for the refugees: firstly, aid is still anchored to the rural settlements and secondly, legal ambiguities refrain refugees from obtaining citizenship. We later explained how a relatively high degree of de facto integration is attained nevertheless, as the refugees come up with their own coping strategies. Supported by local individuals and communities, refugees have been given additional land to engage in agricultural activities, or to settle outside the camps. Furthermore, some refugees have also been able to obtain Ugandan citizenship.

South Sudan is currently at a crossroads; and it is difficult to predict in which direction the country will proceed. Either the refugees will be able to return if the country further stabilizes, or renewed violence might spark additional refugee flows. In any case, it is likely that a large proportion of the South Sudanese will remain in Uganda in the near future. Respondents, i.e. refugees, hosts, settlement authorities and NGO staff emphasized the management of land in and around the settlements is the main priority to be tackled. Taking a step back from the rural settlement approach towards more durable integration in town centres and cities, is a second and more fundamental goal.

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