Technical Report for IDRC

Doctoral Award

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Research question:

My research focused on the question of how current national and international discourse, structures and relations between various actors, impact the agency of the victims of conflict in northern Uganda. Essentially, my question examined how people who have been victims of violence and who have been displaced by conflict exercise agency within a context of deep inequality and oppression. Though there are a variety of ways that people exercise agency in their daily livelihood strategies, in this study, I am most interested in the ways groups of people exercise political agency in order to influence broader structures and processes that impact their lives. This could include political processes, legal processes, international and national opinion and forms of intervention, etc.

Methods:

In order to understand the issues that were most relevant to the population of displaced people I preferred to use open-ended discussions with a large number of people of different ages, sex and geographical residence. In most cases, interviews were conducted between an individual, me and my interpreter. Interviewees were randomly selected by walking through the camps in various directions and randomly stopping to request an individual’s participation. Interviews were conducted from early morning until early evening in order to ensure that even those who travel out to their fields or to other parts of the camp would have a chance at being selected. We also purposely selected some interviewees including camp leaders, cultural chiefs (Rwodi) and elders, local political leaders, women’s leaders and health workers. Most interviews lasted between one-and-a-half and two hours and began with some basic questions about their personal history and experience of the conflict and displacement. Later the discussion would become more informal and the interviewees were encouraged to ask questions of us. The general purpose was to gather a narrative about the person’s experiences and particular concerns. In a few cases, return visits would occur where we would delve more deeply into an individual’s views and history.

In addition to individual interviews, a number of group discussions were also conducted. The group discussions were meant to encourage debate and discussion among the respondents so that the range of opinions and priorities regarding various issues could be examined. It should be pointed out, however, that most groups included people from similar backgrounds and did not randomly select people in order to bring together a diverse group. Discussions were also somewhat open-ended; however, topics that had been identified as salient for individuals were usually the main focus.
A number of interviews were also conducted with people from the region who were not living in the camps. These interviews were conducted in the district towns or in Kampala. The nature of the interviews was similar to the interviews conducted with individuals from the camps. The structure of the interviews was open-ended with some attention given to personal history and experience of the conflict. Along with interviews of people from the region, personnel from a number of national and international organizations were consulted. Interviews with personnel from both national and international organizations focused on understanding how the organizations worked with the populations. Specifically, I focused on organizations that had programs dealing with human rights, protection, gender issues, reconciliation and reintegration of abductees, or other types of socio-political work. Political, cultural and religious leaders were also consulted and in some cases I engaged in more than one interview with a respondent in order to develop a better understanding of their work and perspectives. Informal discussions with national and international personnel also took place on a regular basis adding a great deal of insight to information gathered at more formal interviews. In total over one hundred and thirty formal interviews were conducted along with a large number of informal discussions.

**Calendar of activities:**

August 20-25th, 2005 - Arrived in Kampala, Uganda. During these few days I met with people from the partner organization, the Center for Basic Research as well as a number of other organizations. I also worked out the final details for my research permit in order to ensure all my paper work and approvals were in order before making arrangements to travel to northern Uganda.

August 26-28, 2005 – Travelled to Gulu where I looked into arrangements for accommodation and met with a few individuals from local and international organizations. I also made arrangements for a research assistant.

August 28 – September 14, 2005 – Travelled to Kampala. Met with a number of organizations and individuals and obtained certain relevant documents and reports.

September 14 – November 7, 2005 – Travelled to Gulu. During this period I focused on travelling to camps around Gulu district and spending a few days in each interviewing a variety of residents. While in Gulu town I would meet with individuals from various international and national organizations, as well as religious, political and cultural leaders. I also interviewed some residents of Gulu town and would also use the time to review documents as well as field notes.

November 7 – November 15, 2005. – Returned to Kampala. My return to Kampala was slightly earlier than planned due to the security situation in northern Uganda which was preventing me from traveling to the camps. In addition, I had also fallen ill and took a few days in Kampala to recover before making travel arrangements to leave.

November 14 – December 15, 2005. Returned home and reviewed and analysed field notes and data. I also continued to read some background literature and documentation.

September 1 – November 12, 2006. I wrote a paper based on preliminary thoughts regarding my fieldwork which I presented at the American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting in San Jose, CA.

November 13 – 20, 2006. Participated in the AAA Annual Meeting in San Jose, CA.

November 21, 2006 – January 31, 2007. I completed an article based on the paper presented in San Jose which I submitted to the Canadian Journal for African Studies. The paper has been accepted pending revisions.


February 13 – 15, 2007. – Traveled to Kampala and prepared paperwork to renew research permit.

February 15 -17, 2007. – Traveled to Gulu and made arrangements for accommodation and research assistant.

February 17 – 25, 2007. – Picked up renewed research permit and met with a number of organizations. I also made arrangements for a research assistant who could work with me upon my return to Kampala.

February 25 – March 25, 2007. Traveled to Gulu and then traveled to a number of camps in Gulu, Kitgum, and Pader districts interviewing various residents. Also met religious and political leaders in the district centers.

March 25 – June 10, 2007. Remained in Kampala where I interviewed some individuals, met with people from organizations and spent a great deal of time looking at archived newspaper reports, parliamentary reports, and other documentation.

June 10, 2007 – present. I have begun working on my dissertation; however, I also accepted a short-term consultancy with the World Bank. The purpose of the consultancy is to carry out a baseline assessment, including a socio-economic analysis, of the communities which will be involved in a Community-Driven Development project funded by the World Bank and the U.K. Department for International Development.

Results:

Though I am still exploring some aspects of the data and its analysis, some tentative results can be briefly described as follows:

a) Through interactions with the international humanitarian community, news media, human rights and political activists, as well as documentary/entertainment media, people from the camps in northern Uganda have come to understand that the most powerful tool of advocacy they have at their disposal is their own suffering. This is not to say that the suffering of the people is not real or even exaggerated, it is to say, however, that the people have learned that their best route of access to the global community
is through the presentation of their suffering. Suffering is the means through which the people in northern Uganda develop links and bonds with the larger world and manage to overcome their otherwise isolated and marginalized condition. In an era where the ‘global’ has completely transformed the ‘local’, how one participates in these changes has ever increasing importance. Populations around the world have differential access to the networks, information, communication and resources that globalization represents. Moreover, the nature of their participation also varies dramatically. In the case of the people displaced by conflict and government intervention in northern Uganda, their participation in the larger world is based on their victimhood.

b) While the recent attention given to the conflict in northern Uganda has arguably assisted in improving the day-to-day lives of the people affected by the war and has possibly helped to bring the conflict closer to an end, the nature of the attention limits the kinds of relations the people of northern Uganda have with the rest of the world. The focus on their suffering, and their own frequent portrayal of suffering, especially physical suffering, creates a one dimensional representation of their state of being. People are suffering, and in multiple ways, but the suffering that is most often communicated has either to do with daily survival, such as the lack of food, medicine, adequate shelter, and employment, or it has to do with the physical impact of conflict, namely different forms of violence inflicted on the body. The people I met in northern Uganda were intent on describing to me the ways in which they or members of their family had been injured, abducted or killed. Though this is understandable given the ever-present threat and reality of violence, it was communicated to me with a definite purpose, and in many cases this purpose was explicitly stated: I should tell the world about their suffering so that the world can help. There is no question that at some level, the people of northern Uganda have come to understand the role of the ‘global’ in the ‘local’. They understand the need for people to witness their suffering and wherever possible they provide physical evidence of that suffering in the form of visible scars and wounds. This type of limited public image and interaction with the larger world reinforces negative stereotypes of people from Africa as dependent victims in need of assistance, unable to assist themselves. It recreates age-old hierarchical relationships and makes it difficult for Africans to create for themselves a more positive and constructive place in the ‘new world order’.

c) The recent trend in international development and humanitarianism to move towards a more participatory and human rights-based approach has in many ways only reinforced the scenario presented above. This is a result of the fact that a rights-based approach often highlights the suffering of the people in order to make a case for the intervention of international agencies and organizations. In this case, it is necessary to collect and represent the tales of suffering and as much as possible these narratives are collected and presented as first-hand stories from the people themselves. The narratives of suffering provide cause for the activities of international bodies and also assist in the provision of funds for these activities; however, the emphasis placed on the presentation of suffering does nothing to improve the position of the targeted population within circles of international influence. On the contrary, it empowers those working to assist the population by justifying their existence and as has happened in recent years, by allotting international agencies, most specifically agencies of the United Nations system, ever greater powers and rights to intervene in the affairs of nation-states.
d) The associated trend to ‘give voice’ to populations assisted by development projects or humanitarian activities and to promote the priorities and desires communicated by the people has created a new space in international discourse and debate regarding the legitimacy of actions taken by international organizations and institutions. Legitimacy is claimed through the proximity of the actions to the stated demands of the people. In practice, the demands of a population are difficult to ascertain. Typically, the population in question is a large and diverse group with a variety of interests. This leaves a great deal of space for debate about what the real desires of the people really are and what actions should be taken.

e) In the case of northern Uganda, the legitimacy debate has largely centered on the appropriate steps that should be taken towards ending the war, and this debate has become polarized regarding the matter of the indictments issued by the International Criminal Court (ICC). Local activists along with many International NGOs have argued that the people of northern Uganda support traditional justice as a means to end the war and therefore are opposed to the intervention of the ICC. On the other hand, some international research groups and agencies have argued that in fact the general population of northern Uganda is not opposed to the indictments or the idea of international legal justice and therefore, the ICC should go ahead with its case against the Lord’s Resistance Army. As the debate gains intellectual and geographical distance from the population in question, the nature of the opposition is transformed to one of impunity versus justice. In most cases, international media have portrayed the idea of traditional justice as a backward and archaic and have dismissed the notion as ridiculous. Each of these debates is relying on a particular discourse and meta-narrative to legitimize its argument. The debate at the local level assumes that ‘traditional’ concepts and practices are to be valued and the priorities of the people given the utmost attention. At the international level, the debate assumes that ‘traditional’ is a synonym with ‘backward’ and the priorities of the local population are subsumed by the needs of the global population.