Secure
Livelihoods
Research
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Researching livelihoods and services affected by conflict

Coercion and control

How information and individuality intersect for South Sudanese refugees in Uganda

Working paper 94

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SLRC publications present information, analysis and key policy recommendations on issues relating to livelihoods, basic services and social protection in conflict-affected situations.
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About us

The **Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (SLRC)** is a global research programme exploring basic services, and social protection in fragile and conflict-affected situations. Funded by UK aid from the UK Government (Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, FCDO), with complementary funding from Irish aid and the European Commission (EC), SLRC was established in 2011 with the aim of strengthening the evidence base and informing policy and practice around livelihoods and services in conflict.

The Overseas Development Institute (ODI) is the lead organisation. SLRC partners include: Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA), Feinstein International Center (FIC, Tufts University), Focus1000, Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI), Wageningen University (WUR), Nepal Centre for Contemporary Research (NCCR), Busara Center for Behavioral Economics, Nepal Institute for Social and Environmental Research (NISER), Narrate, Social Scientists' Association of Sri Lanka (SSA), Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), Women and Rural Development Network (WORUDET), Claremont Graduate University (CGU), Institute of Development Policy (IOB, University of Antwerp) and the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS, Erasmus University of Rotterdam).

SLRC's research can be separated into two phases. Our first phase of research (2011–2017) was based on three research questions, developed over the course of an intensive one-year inception phase:

- State legitimacy: experiences, perceptions and expectations of the state and local governance in conflict-affected situations
- State capacity: building effective states that deliver services and social protection in conflict-affected situations
- Livelihood trajectories and economic activity under conflict

Guided by our original research questions on state legitimacy, state capacity, and livelihoods, the second phase of SLRC research (2017–2019) delves into questions that still remain, organised into three themes of research. In addition to these themes, SLRC II also has a programme component exploring power and everyday politics in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). For more information on our work, visit: www.securelivelihoods.org/what-we-do

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Abbreviations

IDP	Internally displaced person
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
MTN	mobile phone network in South Sudan
PoC	Protection of Civilians site
SLRC	Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNMISS	United Nations Mission in South Sudan

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1 Introduction

Information is a powerful tool, and having access to information can be a lifeline. Being able to gather information is crucial for decision-making, shaping how people experience the world around them, how they move in it and how they engage. And yet, the exact ways in which information is accessed and the role it plays in influencing decisions are surprisingly under-studied – even more so with people who have been displaced.

The most prominent dilemma that agencies supporting refugees – and particularly refugees in camp settlements – face is to strike a balance between giving the best support possible while people are in the camps but not creating a situation in which people choose camp life over other options that are safe, feasible and within their reach. Of course, safe options do not always exist and thus considerations of returning home are often not relevant in active war situations. And yet, often even in early acute stages of forced displacement, agencies are required to think about how to offer the best possible tools for decision-making for people, including the decision about when and under what circumstances they might choose to return home.

It is important to understand how refugees make decisions about leaving a refugee camp. This knowledge need is driven by stark budgetary and managerial concerns – refugee camps are expensive and require much effort to run. It is also informed by learning from other refugee crises about just how destructive it can be to life trajectories if people stay in camps for long periods. Agencies and donors, therefore, are greatly concerned to understand what motivates a return home, and how people weigh their options when considering staying in displacement camps or going home.

Information often plays an outsized role in this imagined toolkit. A first step is, of course, that a situation needs to improve. But a second, less-articulated assumption is that once a situation improves, correct and reliable information about the situation at home will be a main factor for displaced people in weighing their options and in their level of confidence that they will be safe upon returning home. Information about conditions back home have in the past been considered crucial to refugee decision-making, even though, as Koser (1997) argues, information about home is only ever one factor in decision-making. Returns specifically from Uganda to South Sudan are, as Bohnet (2015) highlights, not linear, nor are they necessarily viewed by refugees as a durable option. Various push and pull factors create spontaneous returns alongside assisted returns (Schots and Smith 2019).

This research set out to understand whether there is a connection between how South Sudanese refugees in Ugandan refugee camps access information and how they weigh their options during displacement. This paper tries to move away from seeking to identify a moment of decision-making that is often expected by agencies ('what piece of information will motivate refugees to return?') to a more holistic perspective of how people connect with information and use it to make decisions.

1.1 Argument

The notion that reliable information will shape decisions starts with an assumption that displacement is a communal experience: if, largely, refugee populations share a homogenous reason for being in the camp, then information about that reason can create a communal interest in returning. This paper argues that such a communal view of information usage and impact is flawed as it fails to take into account the extent to which decisions are driven by the individuality of people's stories, experiences and ways of engaging with the world (including through accessing information).

The paper uses the concept of the 'mental landscape' to highlight the many individual paths of decision-making to argue that engagement with information is an individual choice and that decisions are made regardless of available information as a way to regain control after experiencing coercion. The 'mental landscape' – introduced as a concept by the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (SLRC) – captures the many layers of sense-making that people use to interpret the challenges they face, how they memorialise the past and how these memories shape their decisions today as well as how these layers connect to decisions, behaviour and experience of everyday life (Amanela *et al.* 2020b). 'Coercion' is used in this report as a term to capture the South Sudanese experience of being forced into violent situations and being forced to flee from these, which often means running from the forces of the national army or other official security forces. The term expresses the often-expressed sentiment that, as a South Sudanese, life at home is lived under threatening and often hostile conditions.

Displacement experiences of South Sudanese in Uganda are a mix of being at the mercy of such military control and violent coercion, and being an agent in one's own life, which is expressed in making choices about access to services in a refugee camp. Often, personal agency is expressed through the very personal reasons people have for being in the camp. These personal reasons maintain individuality and a certain amount of control in what is otherwise an often coercive and uncontrollable situation.

This paper thus juxtaposes how people actually access information with their individual stories to show that how people make choices is not based on the kind of information they receive, but on the desire to re-establish some control after finding themselves coerced into displacement. A crucial element of the mental landscape is the emphasis on understanding the forces exerted on an individual. In framing narratives around these forces, people make sense of their situation and weigh their options. Creating such narratives is not only human, it is also a crucial part of experiencing some control over life, particularly so in situations where coercion has created the situation in which people find themselves.

Of course, we know that history, memories and experiences matter – but not always in ways that are obvious. This is because wellbeing and experiencing life are complex processes, often not captured by blunt indicators. These narratives and their impacts on decisions and behaviour are also extremely challenging to capture: to make a rigorous empirical point about how exactly experiences shape decisions requires extremely sophisticated research set-ups that are challenging to implement and often just not feasible (Amanela *et al.* 2020a).

The findings of this report are situated within a broader developing discourse that foregrounds agency of displaced populations, particularly of the populations under consideration here, who have a long history crossing this particular border (Box 1). In past crucial moments in the history of South Sudanese refugees, there were often two parallel processes, argues Hovil: the official processes (to return home) and the 'stories of individuals and families who are responding to a situation that holds both promise and threats to their safety and who are creating multiple coping strategies in order to maximise their protection in a context of chronic uncertainty' (Hovil 2010, p.1). Decades of population movement across the South Sudan/Uganda border have contributed to a different understanding of what it means to be a refugee or displaced in a context where the lines of home and away can also be drawn fluidly (Kaiser 2010). With the history of this border so intertwined with the need to escape violence on either side, argues Moro, commonly applied labels do not capture adequately the agency of people when 'refugees and IDPs are active agents in efforts to improve their situation' (Moro 2019). This paper builds on the understanding of individual agency to argue that use of information is an expression of agency and individualism that is often neglected.

Box 1: Uganda as a host country for South Sudanese refugees

It is estimated that Uganda, as Africa's country with most refugees, continues to host close to 1 million South Sudanese refugees, including in some of the world's largest refugee camps in the north of the country: Bidibidi and Rhino Refugee Settlements. Since the beginning of civil war in South Sudan in late 2013, Uganda and Sudan have been the main countries receiving refugees. Uganda's progressive refugee policy – which grants refugees free movement, the right to work to own property and to use national services – has been praised as innovative, foregrounding protection and offering a thoughtful response to the particular history of population movements across the South Sudan/Uganda border. UNHCR (2020) estimates that fewer people will arrive in the coming year, with 10,000 expected to arrive in 2021 but an estimated 100,000 returning. By the end of 2021, UNHCR estimates that Uganda will likely host close to 800,000 South Sudanese refugees. While Uganda's hosting model seems to have worked overall, there have been tensions with host communities. Most recently, a violent dispute broke out between host communities and refugees which left at least ten people dead (Okiror 2020). In previous years, host communities have regularly reported that they had not received promised compensation for giving up some of their land so that refugees could farm.

1.2 Research methods

This research used mixed methods – a survey plus interviews – in several locations. A structured survey of South Sudanese refugees in Bidibidi refugee settlement and surrounding locations in northwestern Uganda was conducted in mid-2018 with 500 respondents (Poole 2019). Also in mid-2018, 45 semi-structured/unstructured interviews and discussions were held in refugee camps and other locations in northeastern Uganda with a high percentage of refugees. These interviews were conducted by a multi-lingual South Sudanese researcher and transcribed in teamwork into more detailed notes from memory or short notes each evening. To protect respondents, exact location of the interview or respondents' origins are not noted here.

The purpose of these two methods was to provide an indicative picture of how people access and evaluate information and what considerations come into play when they assess their choices of whether or not to stay in the camp or return home. The structured survey was conducted in 2018 by ODI's Humanitarian Policy Group, with specific questions on information access inserted by SLRC, including on levels of information usage, types of information used, specific reasons why people became refugees, strength of networks/connections with the refugees' home villages and how much importance people gave to national versus local developments.

2 Information: access and use

Information is generally an important policy tool. A huge number of programmes that seek to bring about change in behaviour or social norms work with the assumption that providing better information is the crucial pathway. That assumption continues to be widely challenged, but the challenges sit alongside the fact that information does have the power to shape or even control opinions and thus guide the behaviour of populations. A further striking gap in programmes or policies that rely on information is that they pay little attention to how information is accessed and verified – or what information people consider important enough to pay attention to.

To understand how people interact with or access news and information, we asked a number of questions in a structured survey (with 500 respondents) about means of communication, prioritisation of information needs and levels of interest in different types of information. The survey results indicate that access to information and means to verify the information or news are patchy. Strikingly, so is people's interest in information. This might point towards an effect of displacement on people's interest or ability to connect, or towards a process in which choosing how to be informed is a way to maintain some individual control over an uncontrollable situation, including as a way to manage painful emotions connected to receiving certain kinds of information. This is discussed in more detail below in Section 3.

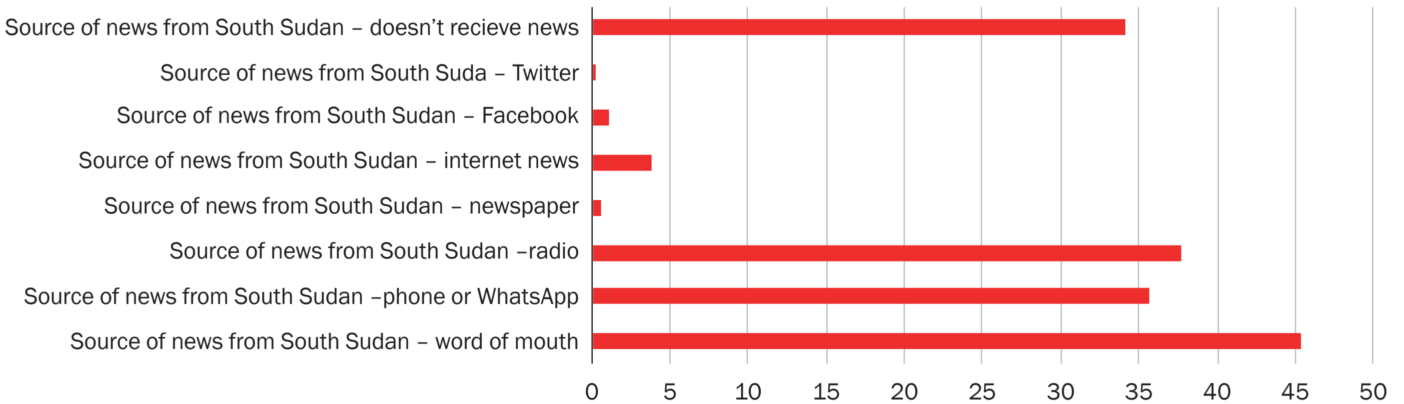
To establish what means of communication people have, we asked whether their household owned a mobile phone. Almost two-thirds of respondents answered 'yes' (62.8%, with 37.2% answering 'no').

2.1 Receiving information from South Sudan

Of the people surveyed in Bidibidi Refugee Settlement, 35% had not received any news from South Sudan at all. Of those who had received news, 45% received it through word of mouth, 37% from the radio; and 36% via WhatsApp (Figure 1).

The high number of people without news points both towards the extent to which displacement causes disconnect from personal networks, and possibly also towards people seeking actively to disconnect (as we see below when asking how people seek to access news and information). Information sources tend to be personal, such as family members still based at home. Sources can also be via word of mouth more broadly, which comes with problems. As one respondent noted,

Figure 1: Since you came to Uganda, how have you gotten news from South Sudan?



'someone comes from there and that is second-hand news, which may not be the right news' (Respondent 19, man in his forties).

People's most pressing news need is detailed information about their home area. News from the village was most important to more than 70% of respondents, and not important to about a quarter, with hardly anyone choosing the more moderate options of how important village news was to them (Figure 2).

When asked about news from the village, the most important news was information that the village was safe, followed by news that the family was safe and that there would be assistance when returning to the village (Figure 3).

Figure 2: Is news from your village important to you?

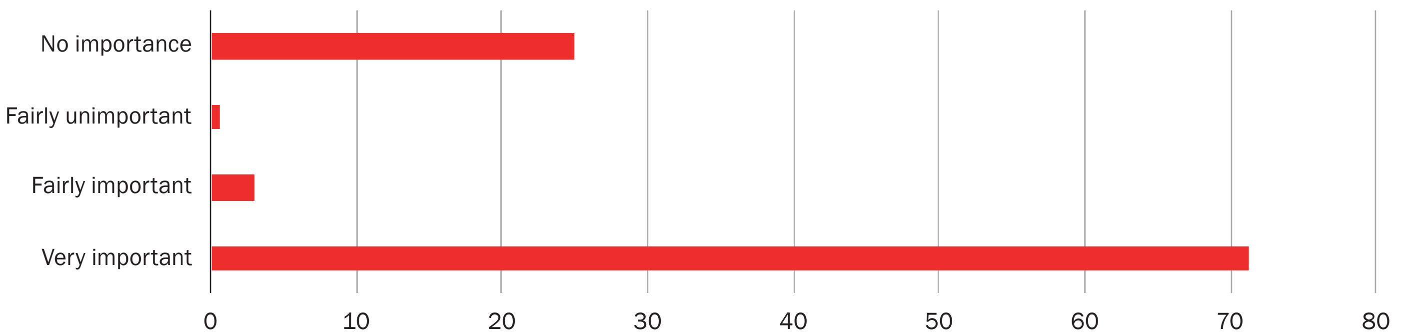
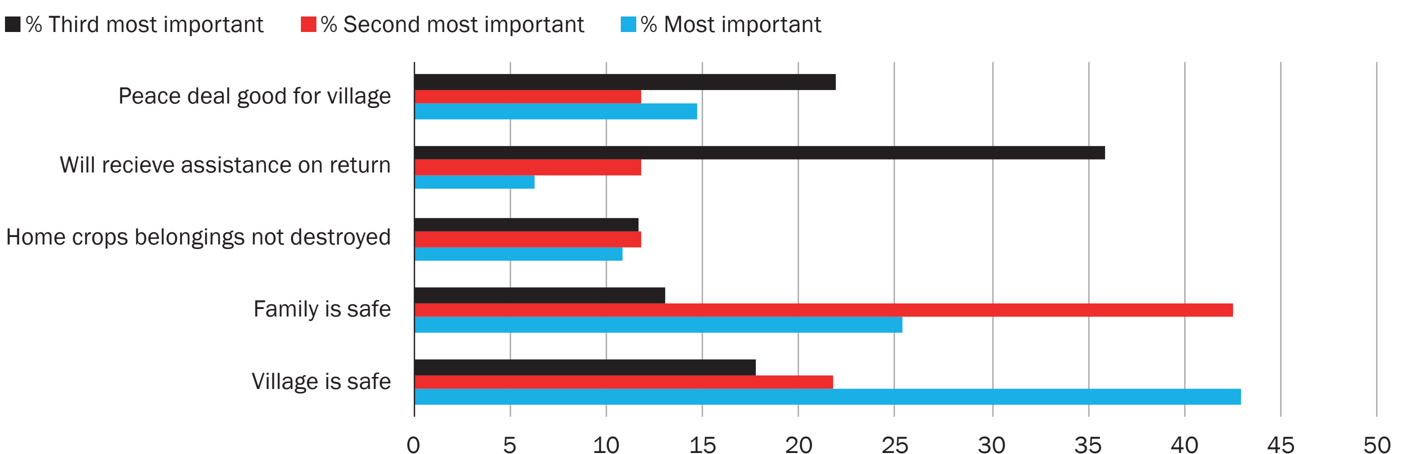


Figure 3: What kind of news about your village is the most important to you?



Importance of news from South Sudan had a stark division of prioritisation, with 30% of people assigning no importance at all to news from South Sudan and just under 70% assigning great importance (Figure 4).

When asked what kind of news was most important to people about South Sudan, the most important topic was the signing of a peace deal, followed by the security situation. When asked about the second most important kind of news, 'situation of the South Sudanese people' was chosen by a third of respondents (Figure 5).

2.2 Verifying news

The means of news verification highlight that connections in camps do not neatly map onto existing home networks. When asked how they verified information received from home, 40.8% of people said they had called people in the village, with only 4.6% of people asking people from home whom they had found in the camp. More than a third of respondents (37.3%) said they had no means of checking news and rumours, and 14.5% felt they had no need to check any information (Table 1). Other news sources or social media played a marginal role as a means of verification: 2% checked the internet to verify news and 0.6% turned to Facebook. Other surveys have established that people consider rumours as strongly contributing to violence and instability (Barnabas *et al.* 2019), so the limited possibilities of verifying information are worrying.

Verification is particularly complicated as people have a strong sense that they need to see everything with

Figure 4: Is news from South Sudan important to you?

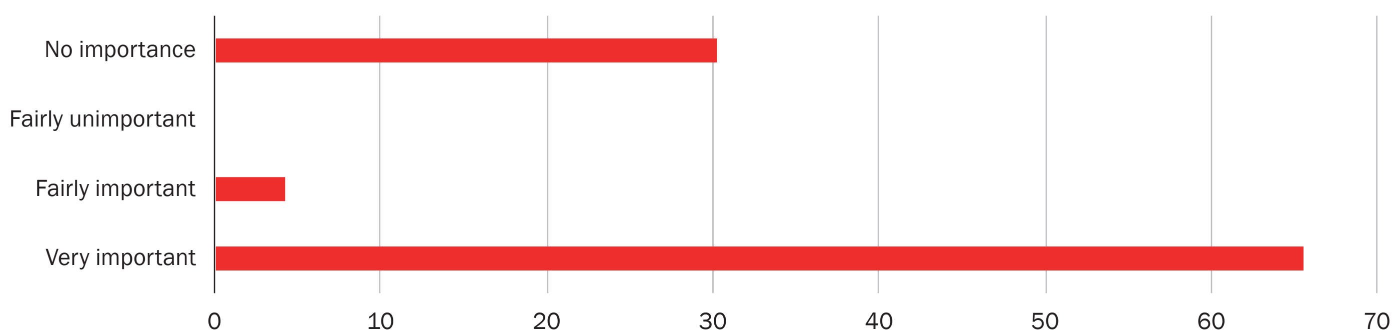


Figure 5: What kind of news about South Sudan is the most important to you?

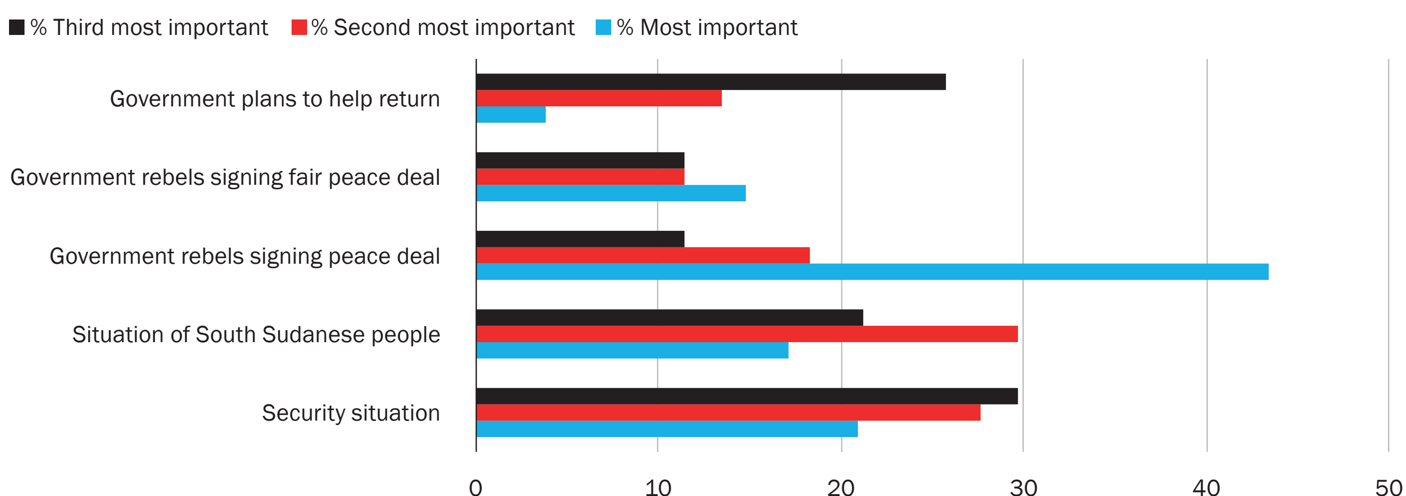


Table 1: When you hear about news in your home village, which means have you used to verify information?

	Called people in village		Asked people in village		Checked Facebook		Checked internet news		Can't check		Don't need to check	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Full sample	141	40.8	16	4.6	2	0.6	7	2	129	37.3	50	14.5

their own eyes to truly believe it. This also applies for future predictions of a situation improving, which makes it difficult to see what could be a credible impetus for people to seek to change their situation, as one respondent explained:

> ***I am just here. Well, I will stay until UN tells me that my country is now ok and then I will go. But me, myself, with what I saw with my eyes, I will not make that mistake of going back there. Things in South Sudan cannot be predicted. War can happen at any time of the day or night. That country is not secure to all. I hear people sleep in Juba with one eye open and the other one closed. So why risk my life?***
> (Respondent 19, man in his forties)

2.3 Staying connected

Staying connected is a definite challenge to people, due to physical barriers (bad roads, for example), insecurity on the journey or lack of access to remote means of communication (given that one third of households have no mobile phone). But even with access to a phone, charging and credit may not be accessible or affordable. As one man explained: 'Where will I get money to maintain a phone here in Uganda? Airtime, charging, in the camp it's not easy to maintain' (Respondent 43, man in his forties).

Communication with people remaining in the home village was limited: 46.2%% never communicated with anyone left at home, while 23.5%% communicated at least once a week and 21.4%% at least once a month (Table 2).

There are several reasons for limited or no communication with the village. Some people do not have the means to communicate and some do not want to. In some cases, there is nobody left in the village.

> ***Life here is not good, but what can I do? If my mother was to be in [in my home town], I would have gone back there. But [my home town] is now a desert, no one is there as per now. I heard houses are all destroyed and burnt down by the army. No tree is left by the government soldiers.***
> (Respondent 10, man, age 23)

Another respondent explained why he was simply not interested in hearing news:

> ***I don't get any news and I don't want to hear any news from there because there is nothing new apart from robbery, killing people at night, unknown gunmen, gunmen killed three people, these are the only news that you get.***
> (Respondent 43, man in his forties)

Verification means and information chains are thus very patchy. The combination of inability and disinterest in engaging with news at home can be read as disengagement, but might also be an expression of finding ways to control an uncontrollable situation.

A mental-landscape perspective might suggest here that people's choices about how interested they are in information from home are shaped by making sense of a situation. The sense of being entirely at a situation's mercy is a very difficult framing with which to maintain a spirit of life being worth living. It is this most human of activities, the sense-making, that makes it difficult to see how better information alone about an improving situation back home will have a profound impact on people's decision-making. In fact, rather than seeking to predict what it is that might shape people's decision to leave, understanding their reasons for being or staying in a camp offers a different framing that points towards the need to understand the role of individuality.

Table 2: How often do you communicate with people who are still in your home village?

	At least once a day		At least once a week		At least once a month		Less than once a month		Never		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Full sample	22	5.1	101	23.5	92	21.4	16	3.7	198	46.2	429	100

3 Individuality

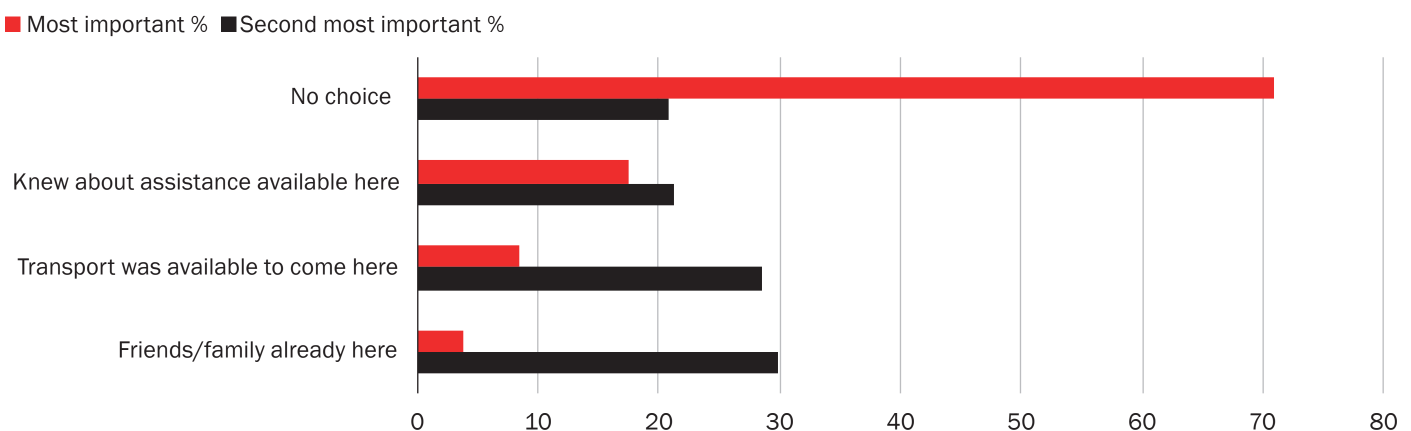
Individuality might be the greatest challenge for programmes aiming to support groups of people. More recently, there is justifiable drive towards a better understanding of how people forge and use social connections for their survival. Some research finds that the camp creates new connections, due to the shared experience of displacement and the relational approach as a crucial part of survival (Stites *et al.* 2021). However, this creates a tension with the individualised experience, foregrounded by the mental-landscape perspective. We also know from studies in other areas just how much the individual becomes the mediator of their own life in balancing out personality and environment in situations of drastic change (Connor Schisler and Polatajko 2002).

3.1 Individual experiences of camp life

Just as the levels of access to and interest in information vary considerably, so do the reasons for why people find themselves in a refugee camp and how they assess the situation and their options once there – the two elements are likely connected. When asked about the most important reason for coming to the camp, it was clear that a large majority of our sample felt they had no choice or that they were coerced (Figure 6)

When people are asked in more detail about the reasons for coming to the camp, reasons are both unsurprisingly uniform and deeply personal. War, or specific incidents of violence experienced by the respondent or by others, are a main driver of displacement – expressed in people's sense that they had no choice in coming to the camp. People have experienced killings, lootings and ever-rising food prices. Sometimes these many harrowing experiences build up until one event becomes a decision-making tipping point:

Figure 6: When you left South Sudan, what were your most important reasons for coming to this camp?



> ***What made me now decide to come to the camp is when two brothers were killed at night just near my house. Just like 30 m away from my house. They were my close neighbours. The gunmen came at around 4–5 in the morning and knocked at their door. By saying open the door, the two brothers, the boys refused to open. Then the gunmen started pushing the door. As the two boys were also pushing from inside so that the gunmen should not open. What happened was that the gunmen just shoot inside through the door and the two brothers got shot. One died instantly on the spot and the other one went and died in the hospital. Just two hours after being taken to the hospital. From that time, I then told my husband to do something for us, to move away from that place. But my husband told me that there is nothing to do about it. The only thing he can do is to take us to the camp. That is why I am here with the children, as you can see.***
> (Respondent 7, woman, age 41)

Another respondent – a trader from Darfur – recounted how he was in his shop on 12 July 2016:

> ***I was there when [national security forces] were looting the market. Not only my shop but the whole… market was looted at day time around 3 up to 6. Military vehicles were coming to carry food items, everything from the market and shops was taken by security forces. Then after that I decided to come to the refugee camp to start a new life which I have never had before in my life. I thought of going to Sudan but I said if I go there, I will be killed by the Sudan government. And I also thought of going to Darfur, but I may not reach. So, I just decided that it is better for me to come to the camp since South Sudan is no longer good for human life and businesses are all looted, it is better for me to come to the camp. Because the camp is for everyone who is seeking for safety, not only for South Sudanese alone.***
> (Respondent 8, man, age 39)

While 70% of respondents said they had no choice in coming to the camp, how they view and organise life once they have arrived highlights their search for choice and agency. Seeking a shift from having no choice towards making choices becomes part of how life is organised. This also means that the mental landscape might shift towards people developing a perspective that gives them more agency and allows them to find ways of dealing with the harrowing memories of brutal coercion.

Effectively, people create an environment for themselves in which they can have choices, but such choices might involve disconnecting from events (by losing interest in news) or choosing not to make another choice. There are a number of reasons why people experience loss of agency. The brutality of war and the experience of violence can make it a relief to hand over decision-making and agency, as one man explained:

> ***Going back to South Sudan is an automatic thing as it was automatic for us to come here. If tomorrow UN says to us that your country is now ok, peace has come back, we are going to repatriate you, I will pack and go. Why not? I will go. But now on my own, I cannot do that. I cannot go back to South Sudan on my own.***
> (Respondent 18, man, age 29)

Life in the camp of course offers protection, but this also makes it very challenging to see that leaving might one day be an option again. Having spent some time in the UN's protection of civilians (PoC) sites, one man's experience of camp life is that leaving camp poses an immediate threat to life. This creates a humiliating and coercive experience:

> ***While we were in the PoC, life was not good because if it happens that you come out of the PoC camp, you will be killed. So there was no movement at all. All these three years, we were just in the UN premises under the protection of the UN, like little rats who are hiding in their holes because of the fear of the cat.***
> (Respondent 17, man, age 41)

The experience of alienation at home is often profound, deep and painful – it is very clear that even information about positive changes at home will not be adequate to counter the impact of that experience. Agency is expressed in withdrawing from choices to return right now, and later to make choices on the modalities of return. One woman's story highlights this: her husband was a Nuer government soldier; both of them are originally from a predominantly Nuer area but had been living elsewhere in South Sudan for many years. He was shot dead by other government soldiers in front of her and her three children in August 2016 in the middle of the night. The next morning, government soldiers prevented her from burying him. A friend helped her and her children to escape on a Ugandan army truck which ultimately took her across the border and to the camps. Because her experience was so harrowing on so many levels, she is alienated from her home:

> ***Up to this day, I have not gone there [where I lived in the past years] and I will not go there. I will not go to [there] and if there is peace, I need to be taken direct to [to my home area], not to [my home of the past years].***
> (Respondent 16, woman in her thirties)

Another reason why there might be little interest in connecting with information from home is because of where the situation people currently find themselves in sits within their life histories. Displacement is not an isolated disruptor that can be countered with isolated moderation. Displacement is a continuum that is evident in both hard numbers and the experience of people. Of the 500 people interviewed in the structured survey, 73% had been internally displaced in South Sudan before coming to Uganda.

The repeated experiences of war and violence create a timeline of premonition where it is impossible for people to see that improvement might come. Premonition is a powerful part of the mental landscape. Notions of what might happen shape people's decisions, and clarity of this premonition translates into the agency to make a choice on where to be: 'I'm quite sure that there will be war again in South Sudan. That is why I have decided to go and be with my children in the camp' (Respondent 22, man, age 31).

3.2 Personal reasons for being in the camp

Even while choices are influenced by a lack of options, it is striking that many people live in camps for deeply personal reasons. Some people are there because they just have no other way to meet their basic needs, and even the most basic service provision is still better than what many had experienced at home.

One woman's story illustrates how service and survival needs intersect with personal situations. She recounts how, having been married for many years, she realised that her husband was not a South Sudanese, but a Ugandan (from a people that is spread across the border). When he suggested relocating to his home area after 2013 to be safer, she found herself living in abject poverty with his mother in Uganda. Realising that her children would not be able to survive in his home area with her husband's family, and she would not be able to survive in South Sudan without her husband, she chose to take herself and the children to the refugee camp. Here she found herself grouped in with others she did not know and was contemplating leaving her children with her husband to return to her home town in the Equatorian part of South Sudan. But these many layers of decision-making, including the dilemma whether to leave her children with a husband who was not able to provide, translated to her being effectively stuck in the camp (Respondent 14, woman, age 29).

Displacement is also interlinked with often complicated family support structures. One woman explained that:

> ***We are three in our family, my brother, I and my sister. My sister remains there with my mother because our father died a long time ago. And my brother took his two wives and other children to [a city in East Africa]. And the child he gave me to come with has no mother. So, I told him, 'why don't you take the children, your child and the ones of my sister and I remain here with mine because I don't want to go to the camp?' My brother just forced me: 'no you have to go to the camp'. So he took me with the NGO car to the border... and then we walked from there.***
> (Respondent 26, woman, age 22)

Giving up trying to resist the situation thus becomes a physical and emotional survival mechanism. Telling harrowing experiences of looting, killing and raping by government soldiers in his home area, one man explained that it was better to run off alone:

> ***Many people were killed. Others were even put inside the houses and then the houses set on fire. That was the situation which led many of us to take refuge in Uganda. When we talk of conditions to be alive and to be killed, to me it is better I and my family remain alive than to be killed... We came with nothing, all taken away from us. If you resist you will be killed. It is better you give to them what you have, to save your life.***
> (Respondent 27, man, age 40)

The camp can disrupt connections, but can also replace networks. With so many family support structures destroyed, people seek support within the camps if they are able to. The war often intersects with disrupted family life, which then pushes the option of displacement for unexpected reasons. One woman explained that her husband died, but she had married that husband against her family's will. Thus, her husband's family was not supporting her and she was not welcome to return to her home village, leaving staying in the camp as the only option for her and her children (Respondent 38, woman, age 33). Another women recounted that, after her husband's death from sickness, her mother advised her to go to the camp:

> ***The relatives of my husband are not there so my mother told me go with these children to the camp because I as an old woman cannot do anything to help you. So, I'm going to the camp to see if there is school so that my children go to school and study.***
> (Respondent 25, woman, age 26)

Agency within established structures is often rooted in personal connections and networks. These offer support and also access to information and can be severely disrupted by displacement. One young woman who had chosen to stay in a town in Uganda, rather than in a camp, explained that she did not have a network of South Sudanese friends because people were anxious about visiting, since they could not afford to host each other:

> ***There are many South Sudanese here in [in the town], but it has never happened that I visited them in their places. We find ourselves with them in the market, but none of them has come to visit me also.***
> (Respondent 1, woman, age 29)

Even in the camp, networks and old connections are disrupted as things are re-ordered into the structures of camp life. Another woman explained how she had experienced that situation:

> ***Life here is not good, my son; I'm just staying alone. Better when I was in [South Sudan] – my old friends could come to me. We could drink our coffee together, unlike here in the camp. The life in the camp has made me feel unhappy because of what I said. In [South Sudan], I could go to funeral places with my old friends. Here, there is no one I can talk to. I am really missing my old friends in [South Sudan].***
> (Respondent 4, woman in her fifties)

She had decided, she said, to use her UN allowance to pay for transport back to [South Sudan], regardless of her personal safety.

Others stay in the camp because they have to heal, physically and emotionally. Camp is a place where stories of suffering can be told and are asked about, explained one woman originally from a predominantly Nuer area. She saw her husband arrested, and then never heard from him again, and was gang-raped in front of her three daughters by the men in uniform who took her husband. She remembers regaining consciousness in a shop where someone she did not know was taking care of her and her daughters:

> ***I just found myself there in a small drug shop, taking medication. I was treated for three days and then from there I joined the people who were going to the camp. That is why I am here. When I was treated, all my children were with me. I did not pay the treatment. I don't know who paid it. The owner of the drug store just told me, sorry madam for what happened to you and said you can go, madam, no problem. The owner is a South Sudanese. I don't know if my husband is alive. It is God who knows. Yes, I am here with my children in the camp. Life here in the camp is not bad because we are free of fear and we don't think that something will happen to you… I don't think of going back to South Sudan as per now. If I start thinking of what happened to me in [South Sudan], I think of killing myself, so don't remind me of [South Sudan].***
> (Respondent 5, woman in her early thirties)

3.3 Motivation for going home

Motivations for going home come from different sources and are not neatly aligned with information that the situation at home is improving. What others – who might also have decided against following news from home – are doing is important: 'I will go when everyone is going, but not now… If there is a total peace, and people are going back, then I will go' (Respondent 10, man, age 23). Another respondent argued that he would not go home until international actors such as the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) had asked the South Sudanese people about how they wanted to be governed and that the answers would shame the old leaders into staying away for good:

> ***And that is the time when those leaders of South Sudan will not step in South Sudan anymore. Not because they are going to be killed but because of the shame they have caused and mess and failure to rule and guide their people.***
> (Respondent 15, man, age 39)

People use their time in the camp to rebuild and will postpone returning until they feel they are able to build on what they have been able to achieve in the camp. One young man argued that 'we will be here as long as we can… Before we go [home] I need to see if I can put something [in place for myself.]' (Respondent 31, man, age 29). Camp life thus takes on the trajectory of progress and thus the attractiveness of a return to uncertainty is low. Another young man told of his wedding in the camp:

> ***I know I am young but what can I do? I'm alone. I wanted to get into school but there is no way for me to do that. This is why I decided to get a wife. I have not paid anything to the relatives; her family is here in the camp. They told me there is nothing they can ask from me. If things get better in South Sudan, that's when we can talk. They just handed her to me without any price.***
> (Respondent 41, man, age 23)

The experience of putting hope in the long-distance future has two likely effects. On one hand, it allows people to maintain hope and the belief that time will be kind to them. On the other hand, it may defer decision-making until certainty arrives – despite the fact that such certainty is unlikely. This creates a situation in which the threshold of what type of information people might find constructive for their decision-making is increased:

> ***I don't think about going back, no. Unless there is total peace and people have to go first. If I hear there is nothing, I shall be the last person to move out of the camp. I shall be the last person to move.***
> (Respondent 24, man, age 30)

> ***I'm not seeing anything good for South Sudan in the nearest future. Because when you expect something good to happen tomorrow, bad happens. It's going from bad to worse, day and night; things are changing. Situations are worsening. And it has become beyond people's control; I can't control it.***
> (Respondent 23, man, age 30)

4 Improving understanding through the frame of coercion and control

Displacement experiences often are mixed. There are harrowing experiences of being at the mercy of military coercion and the victim of violence. This is coupled with the search to regain some control over life, and decisions in an uncontrollable situation. This reasserting of control from a situation of coercion can be seen in the way refugees make conscious choices about what to know (such as what information to expose themselves to), how to choose their life situation based on where they can have access to services, or with which issues to engage, including what information to access. In the midst of war and turmoil, people choose which personal issues to prioritise within the uncontrollable situation of forced displacement, such as sorting out marriage or visa arrangements for emigration.

This mix makes it possible to contrast the experience of life under coercive war conditions with measures that people take to reassert a sense of control in an uncontrollable situation. Narratives matter in this situation as they are the expression of agency or lack thereof in one's life. These narratives might be retrofitted to allow people to make the mental shift from the answer most gave – 'I had no choice in coming to the camp' – to creating a situation for themselves, a mental landscape, that they experience as one in which they extract themselves from coercion towards having some control over their lives and some agency in their choices.

The starting point is coercion, violence, threat. But even the experience of coercion is not straightforward: it is experienced individually, through the eyes and needs of family members as well as broader communities. It can be experienced as a brutal limiting of choice, as expressed by this young woman who was able to find a place to stay in a town in northern Uganda: 'Because of the war, I have nothing. I have no choice, only to come and stay with the children' (Respondent 1, woman, age 29).

Concrete obstacles to making a decision about whether to stay in the camp are manifold, with the most obvious one being the need to hear news about reliable peace and a secure environment back home. But making such news and information reliable and trustworthy requires many elements that have gained in importance due to the experience of coercion and loss of control. Lack of trust in the leadership to make peace sustainable is one, so obstacles are weighed on several scales: obstacles to return right now, obstacles posed by previous experience with the leadership, and the cumulative experience of coercion. A 47-year-old man from a predominantly Dinka area explained these layers in the following way:

> ***I don't think if there will be a real peace that [our leaders] can agree on. One thing to stop all that is happening in South Sudan is the problem with our leaders... They only think of their positions and their families abroad, but they are not thinking of the problem of those who are in the country. They have side-lined the problem that the country is facing and its citizens... They brought their personal interest to the table, which sometimes will not help and will not bring peace. They should think of their citizens first, and the country. If they don't do that, no peace will come.***
> (Respondent 12, man, age 47)

Being on the receiving end of services extended to refugees does not make up for the loss of control. On the contrary, argue Mosel and Holloway, as receiving services can add to the feeling of loss of control:

> ***The mere fact of receiving emergency relief can have negative as well as positive effects – giving recipients back some dignity, while simultaneously reminding them of their dependency and lack of dignity.***
> (Mosel and Holloway 2019)

Because a sense of control and independence is so crucial, people seek to establish control in other ways. When debating how to encourage refugees to return home, this element is often overlooked. That need for and acceptance of service clashes with the experienced loss of control, as one woman in her 50s explained:

> ***Food is there. Money is also given to me. And the UN has built for me a nice house, but I just don't want and don't like staying here. I told my brother's son to take me back to [South Sudan] but he told me that there is still war and I should not go. I said to him it is better for me to go and die home, not in the camp. Even if they killed me there, what will they get out of killing me? If it is the soldiers or unknown gunmen robbers, what will they get out of killing me?***
> (Respondent 4, woman in her fifties)

4.1 Regaining control in an uncontrollable situation

There are numerous ways in which people seek to counter coercion and regain some control over their lives. Displacement is a personal retreat from structural militarism. It can thus be reframed in people's narratives and experience as an expression of agency within a coercive system. One man, who recounts his past as a soldier in an SPLA division, explains how his own choices towards displacement formed a way of expressing his agency within the militant and brutally controlled environment. Having been stationed in an area greatly affected by fighting (and which was also his home area), he said:

> ***All my friends with me in [the area] died and no one is looking after their families. The government doesn't care. They only need you when you are still alive. But when something happens to you, they don't care about your family, your children, that is the end of you. So, it is better to leave work and look after my children when I'm still alive, like this.***
> (Respondent 6, man, age 37)

Moving away towards camp life is for this respondent also an expression of a commitment towards friendly co-existence because, in the camp, previously existing animosities between groups could not continue. In the confined environment of the camp, he was more able to live and project the peaceful life that he wanted, particularly as being from the Dinka people and as someone who in the camp environment can be heard openly criticising the government:

> ***The reason as to why peace is not coming is that the leaders, they don't want to bring peace because they are getting money out of this conflict. So, if they bring peace, they will not get money like now. But all this will come to an end where everybody will be happy in South Sudan... Tell them the truth as I told you.'***
> (Respondent 6, man, age 37)

Another way to regain some control is to keep options open – which is a known survival strategy for refugees able to handle their situation flexibly. Options require information and communication, however, so with both sometimes hard to access, choices can be limited. One man was ready to travel back and explained how access to communication facilitated his choices:

> ***I was not coming to stay but I'm just registering my presence with the UN because tomorrow, anything can happen at any time in South Sudan. So that it will be easier for me just to come where I was registered. But if there is nothing I will be in South Sudan and I can just hand over my card to someone in need. I will leave it with somebody who has a phone so they can communicate and when there is a need for screening, I will come.***
> (Respondent 32, man, age 35)

Entering the limiting but more controlled environment of the camp was not seen by respondents to be an improvement, but it was a way for them to put a stop to things getting worse – it was their own stabilisation policy. Having stabilised their own situation made waiting for improvement an act of control, rather than of misplaced hope or of wasting time. One woman who had been waiting at a Uganda/South Sudan border post to be allocated to a camp with her children expressed this in the following way:

> ***We are just sitting here and there is no information on when we will leave this place. I don't think of going back because of the situation we are in now. I will wait and see because there were people before us who came here and they stayed here and they were taken. So, I am waiting my turn.***
> (Respondent 25, woman, age 26)

Such waiting also allows for some linearity of problem-solving to be re-established: It is an escape from an uncontrollable complexity, which one respondent described:

> ***There are problems after problems. Looting at night is still there. People cannot go to their gardens because they fear. So we only stay indoors and the situation of hunger is terrorising.***
> (Respondent 26, woman, age 22)

For young South Sudanese displaced into Uganda, argue Schiltz *et al.* (2019), becoming accustomed to a future that is filled with waiting for progress that might never happen is a crucial, if devastating, part of their experience.

Stabilisation, in this sense, allows for the unpacking of sequencing, to see positive change as a series of linear steps. Allowing more information to enter this personal stabilisation process might complicate matters more, so shutting out information seems like a reasonable strategy. One man explained that, when he was still in South Sudan, he used to worry every day about his own survival and about the wellbeing of his family who had already left for the camp. Finally, becoming a refugee allowed him to take one step after another towards improving the situation:

> ***I came alone. My wife came a long time ago and she is in a different camp – I don't even know which camp she is in. I'm not thinking of going anywhere, I just want to go where I can stay and after that I'll begin to think about where my wife and the two children are so that I can ask for reunion. If they also take me to the same camp that they are in, I'll be glad to be there.***
> (Respondent 24, man, age 30)

When such linearity was not yet established, then waiting in the controlled environment of camp life became a plausible choice: 'If I go now and my husband is not there in [South Sudan], I will be arrested on his behalf. I don't have any decision now to make' (Respondent 33, woman, age 29). One way of regaining control is to hand it over for everyday decision-making. Having been stripped of the ability to shape their own lives, people resigned themselves to not being able to make decisions on matters they could not evaluate or influence. One woman explained that this came as a relief to her: 'Me, I don't choose which camp to go to. Where I'm taken, I will be ok with it. Because what I want is the life of my children and my life and I get something to eat' (Respondent 25, woman, age 26).

Making do with life in the camps and its hardships is thus also a way to regain control, including making a conscious choice to seek out camp life:

> ***At first, when people were running to the camp, I said 'I will not run [away to the camp]'. But of late it was serious when everybody left the village to the camp. That is when I discovered that I need to do something and decided to take my family to the camp. The question of how long this will last, I cannot answer.***
> (Respondent 28, man in his forties)

In this framing, placing oneself in the camp is a way to counter coercion by taking control over one's location.

Camp life, with its myriad human interactions, also offered a re-creation of control over social matters that leaders particularly had lost in situations of acute violence. In a camp, social life can to some extent be recovered and re-ordered – and in many ways re-ordering is necessary. One community leader explained that the camp had given him back the possibility of solving his community's problems, an ability he had lost in South Sudan's situation of war, where he simply was not able to offer any solutions:

> ***If there is a problem, I can take it to the camp commander. One of the problems was water; people used to fetch water from the stream which is not healthy but there was no clean water. Now they put clean water there with pipes, so they now have taps in***

> ***every block, that clean water can reach everyone. It's not yet working but we are hoping by two-three weeks everyone will have clean water.***
> (Respondent 35, man, age 55)

4.2 Preserving memories and creating history

Reaching this moment of stabilisation and control reorients towards creating narratives for the next generation. One man described this process clearly: how he was making sense of the current situation as one that happened to him, so that he could tell future generations about this period in South Sudan's history. Maintaining focus on that gave him reason to live, and the camp gave him an environment in which to start the telling of the story:

> ***And I have a lot to tell you that we are here just because of children. We would not have come to the camp if families were not there. If it means all of us have to die in South Sudan, we are ready for that. Though we are here, we will still not forget what happened to us from 2013 to 2016... We will tell all the young Nuer about it. Life in the camp is not easy at first, but now, we are ok with it.***
> (Respondent 15, man, age 39)

Others situate their individual current displacement within a long communal history shaped by displacement. A young man from the Dinka people felt that his basis for a positive change had been destroyed as a result of South Sudanese divisions:

> ***If you go to South Sudan now, you will see that everything or every person not from the Dinka tribe is not friendly to Dinkas. Even the dogs don't like Dinkas. There is no understanding that not all Dinkas are the same. Given the past hatred and atrocities, it will take a strong leader to unite the people of South Sudan. Kiir will not be able to unite South Sudan because he has already destroyed it – let alone uniting South Sudanese. He cannot manage to unite Dinkas as tribes because there is already a problem between the Dinka of Bor and the Dinka of Upper Nile and the Dinka of Bahr el Ghazal.***
> (Respondent 13, man, age 39)

He then explained that his personal situation and what he had observed would make it more likely that he would permanently relocate to Uganda:

> ***I came in 2014 because of the war which destroyed [my] town in 2013. My house was completely destroyed, cattle looted and my people killed... I came through Nimule to the reception centre... and that is why we are brought to this camp. This refugee camp has been here since 1992; we even found all the refugees here of that time from 1992; when they signed the peace agreement, they did not go back. They are like citizens of this country. They are mainly Kuku and Madi tribe and I think they are at the border. They can even switch to this side or the other side. No one can ask them. They remained here; they did not go back to South Sudan. How can I go back? Where will I start from if I go back?***
> (Respondent 13, man, age 39)

The camp recreates existing structures from home, but also reshapes them as individual experiences to counter existing narratives. One member of the Dinka people recounted how he had fled from attacks on cars targeting travelling Dinka people. He was trying to escape the fighting in Juba in 2016 to return to his home area:

> ***But there was no way for me to go with my family to [my home area]. Because there were a lot of insecurities along the roads leading from Juba outside. And Equatorians were killing Dinkas on the major roads leading out of Juba. They will stop a car on the road and ask the driver: 'Is there MTN in the car?' MTN – this is the brand name that all the tribes in South Sudan have given Dinkas. It means that Dinka is everywhere, because if you can hear on the advert of MTN they say 'Yello – everywhere you go'. If the driver said no, then they will get people out of the car. When they get a Dinka tribe, they will kill all of them, plus their children. That was becoming a problem to the Dinka tribes who were travelling to Juba or out of Juba... So that was why I decided that since I cannot go to [my home area], because of fear of my life and my family's, it's better for me to come to the camp. Some people are thinking that all Dinkas are bad people and are the ones who are in government. Others also think that all Dinkas have money but that is not true. I am not working with the government; I do my own things for my family. I was doing my small business of bringing fish [to the market] for business and sending our children to school.***
> (Respondent 19, man in his forties)

Another respondent explained that he had come to the camp because his father had been accused of being a rebel:

So, they came, the government, three times, looking for my father to kill him. The third time when they came, I ran for fear of my life. As you know, in South Sudan, if the person wanted is not there, they will just grab you and kill you, the brother or so. So, I thought, as he is not here, they will come after me. So, when they come after me, something wrong may happen to me and I thought I had to go to the camp. (Respondent 24, man, age 30)

4.3 Life in the camp as a way of controlling the situation

While for many respondents the camp is a place of transition, it takes on a meaning of a place of regaining control, a place where it is possible to make choices even about how to shape the transition.

Location is – partially – a choice, as it is not impossible for people to go back to their home villages. But there is little there for them, as one man explained:

Some people do go to [my home area] and clean around their houses, and I was there one week ago. I found everything had been destroyed, houses burnt down, some doors and windows removed, so things are not good in [my home area]. There are no soldiers anymore there. All the goats, sheep that we left there are taken. Not that the people who are going there are cleaning because they want to go back. I don't think anyone can go back there soon because things are not good in South Sudan. But still we are hearing of people being killed, murdered; there are also unknown gunmen. Unless there is peace, people will not go back.
(Respondent 41, man, age 23)

The story of one young man for whom the camp is a liminal space in which to reorient his life is illustrative in this respect. Having escaped in late 2016 after the violence of July 2016, he travelled with his brother's family to the camp. His brother had been settled in a country outside Africa since 2007 and had asked him to accompany the family from South Sudan via the camp in Uganda to gain refugee status with him. For this young man, his own life in the camp is a transitory administrative matter as part of family arrangements:

If [my brother's family] go to [the country outside Africa], I will go back to [South Sudan]. I don't want to remain here in the camp. Had it not been because of my brother' family, I would not have come to the camp… It may take a long time, but I don't know how long the whole process will take. I will have to wait till my brothers' family go and then I can go back to [South Sudan]. I can't leave them alone here in the camp and return… It is just a condition which makes me to be here, the condition given to me by my brother to see his family off to [the country outside Africa]. He is the one making me stay in the camp… If the process is like taking long to the extent of one to two years, I will just tell him that I'm going back to [South Sudan] and then he will see what to do about his family because I can't stay for two years in the camp.
(Respondent 30, man, age 38)

Others are putting their locus of control on the benefits their children are gaining in the camp. They have paused their own life, needs and ambition and project improvement into the future:

Because my children are getting good education, I don't think of going now before anything is good there. Children are the future of any nation and of any person. Why should I take a risk to take them back to [South Sudan] where there is no education system, no food, no hospital, and the security is not good? I will never make that mistake in my life.
(Respondent 9, woman, age 31)

This respondent's own loss of control is mitigated by the fact that she has been able to travel to South Sudan to check on things at home:

I have decided to be in the camp with the children for the above reasons I have mentioned. But I can go and see my husband in Juba and come back to see my children. He usually comes and see the children. Not that I am the only one going there.
(Respondent 9, woman, age 31)

For others, remaining in the camp is a way to manage complicated social dynamics within South Sudan that are less pronounced outside. One woman explained:

I decided to come to camp. I'm here just with my son. My family decided to not come to the camp and my family were the ones who advised me to come to the camp. I'm not thinking about going back to [my home area], even if there is peace. I will go to any other place in South Sudan. Because the people will not like me and my son. The problem is my son, who is a Dinka, not me. Since my husband was transferred,

> ***I have not communicated with him and he does not know that I'm here in the camp because his child was going to be killed by my people. If he heard of it, I don't know what he will think about my people.***
> (Respondent 39, woman, age 27)

4.4 Control through avoidance

One way to maintain control is to actively accept the situation. This might make it more difficult to offer change – such as a return – as an attractive option, but creates a sense of not being entirely at the mercy of coercion. Not even considering a return was a common sentiment, adopted as a way to regain control over an uncontrollable situation, as expressed by a man who also highlighted just how difficult life in the camp was: 'I do not have any predictions as to when things will get better in South Sudan. I'm just staying, not putting in mind when I will go back to South Sudan' (Respondent 27, man, age 40).

Refusing to engage with information is another way to maintain such control. There is an assumption that people want to know as much as possible, but staying uninformed is also a choice to avoid having to grapple with the magnitude of the situation. One person, when asked why he had not connected more with other people in the camp, explained that he did not want to know how many people were in the camp and if he knew many of them. Ignoring the magnitude was a way to control his own devastation: 'The number is very great… I don't know the number. Since I came to this camp, I have not moved around to know how big it is' (Respondent 18, man, age 29).

Another respondent explained that, after hearing a speech by President Kiir that he did not find credible, he disengaged:

> So, from his speech, I just know that people are going there to waste their time, not to bring peace. I did not now follow the news of Kiir's demands. I just switched off the radio because I'm not happy.
> (Respondent 17, man, age 41)

Simply avoiding having to start again – with all the emotional energy as well as material resources such a re-start would require – is another way of maintaining or regaining control: 'If you decide to go back to South Sudan, you will not know where to start from' (Respondent 18, man, age 29). Not returning is thus not a sign of lack of agency, but an expression *of* agency: it is to make a conscious choice in a situation where choice has been violently curtailed:

> ***The second reason I remained behind is that I wanted to see if things could calm down. It is not that I'm taking them and coming back. I'm completely relocating and staying with my children there in the camp.***
> (Respondent 23, man, age 30)

Another man argued:

> ***many things happened in [my home area]. And most of them are done by the government soldiers. Things like raping, killing, looting, disappearance of people, up to now whereabouts are not known. These are all things making people fear… Of course there is nothing we can do as civilians… The only thing for us to do as the civilians is to run away and to leave them the country if they want to stay as the government.***
> (Respondent 24, man, age 30)

4.5 Countering coercion through individuality

One way of countering coercion is to seek control over what is most private to oneself: emotions, experience, narratives and interpretations of the situation. These can take various forms. One man in his early forties who holds the rank of major in the SPLA recounts his war experience as having to strip his uniform due to being from the Nuer people and seeking shelter in a UNMISS PoC. But his main motivation for seeking shelter in the camp was not the most recent experience of war and violence – it was the legacy of war on his personal life. He had joined bush fighting at the tail end of the Sudan war that ended in 2005 with the CPA and was adamant that he would not repeat the experience of being a bush fighter, even if his life was under threat and needed defending: 'I went to the bush when I was 18 years old and I know how tough life in the bush is. Why should I go to the bush again? That was enough for me' (Respondent 17, man, age 41).

Regaining control is connected to accepting that a current situation is miserable. Accepting this is not resignation, but a counter to coercion that has created the terrible situation. If you accept the situation, then coercion loses its power: 'What will you do to change things around? Nothing. Just be at peace with the condition and accept it' (Respondent 28, man in his forties).

Because short-term solutions are impossible to imagine, the timeframes naturally get longer to allow for an often-optimistic version of possibilities but giving those enough time to mature. Time is shaped by the experience of its linearity, meaning for things to change it is necessary to see linear steps being taken towards improvement. If

these are not visible, then the possibility of improvement is pushed further into the future:

> ***When you start building the foundation, then you can anticipate when you will finish this house. But in this period [of war in South Sudan since 2013], the foundation has not been dug so how can we anticipate [when the house will be finished or when peace will come]?***
> (Respondent 28, man in his forties)

> ***It is natural that, with such levels of uncertainty and limited change, timeframes become longer with plans for return pushed further into the future: 'I don't predict any peace soon at all in South Sudan and if I'm not mistaken we are going to spend more than ten years in the camp'***
> (Respondent 22, man, age 31).

Time as imagined by humanitarian agencies and time as experienced by refugees can work to different clocks. Agencies are keen to see the amount of time spent in displacement reduced to a minimum while, for refugees, controlling how they imagine time is a crucial counter to coercion. With the experience of time and how it interlinks with violence being cyclical – meaning passage of time has been experienced as bringing the next round of violence – time is used to calculate expectations and inputs in different ways. One man explained how, after 2013, he had decided to stay in Juba, but then left after 2016, realising that the next round of violence would only be a matter of time. In addition, time and intensity work together in his sense-making. Therefore, since he has no control over the next level of intensity of violence, he chooses to take control of time:

> ***The number of people who died in 2016 is more than the number of those who died in 2013. So if I say I remain for the third one, maybe I will die. Who knows? There will still be another war to come. It is better I come with my children to get educated. All this time from 2013 up to 2016, and even now, there is no school for children in South Sudan.***
> (Respondent 18, man, age 29)

Longer timeframes also allow the retention of hope. One respondent explained that he had resigned himself to understanding that the government would be exploitative for a while but that even this period would come to a natural end. Having spent his life in the army and left to live in the refugee camp, he was maintaining hope that he would be given the opportunity to clear his name, having been accused of being a tribalist rebel. In the distant future, he saw the hope that he would be vindicated:

> ***I will claim my rights when the army is organised. But for now, let them eat the money or let them say I am a rebel. But there will be a time when I will prove to them that I am not a tribalist to follow Riek for his own interest. It is ok, but if they are saying 'rebel', does it mean rebels don't have rights as to why they are in the bush? They have rights. If you ask them, they will tell you why they are in the bush. It is because they are fighting for their rights, which have been denied to them by the government. If a new government is set in place, I will go back to the army to claim my pension and benefits. Yes, why not? Kiir's government will go very soon and you will see. You will come and believe me. He will not remain in power for ever.***
> (Respondent 17, man, age 41)

5 Conclusion and implications

How can we understand how the use of and access to information intersects with people's decisions about their lives in the camps? Decision-making processes change for people throughout their displacement experience, based on the context in the camp, the context at home and their own way of making sense of the situation and finding ways to maintain some level of individualised control over a situation that many have been coerced into.

What this research has shown is that neither use of information nor decision-making about one's life is linear. Within the experience of forced displacement, agencies often imagine a linear relationship between people's reasons for displacement, their interest in going home and just how much information from home shapes their decision towards returning. But these connections are not linear; imagining them as such fails to take into account that people create narratives around their situations that then shape their next steps. This 'mental landscape' might allow people to regain the feeling of some control and agency by choosing how to make sense of their situation, and how to imagine their future.

This is likely a positive survival mechanism for people that at the same time poses an operational challenge for agencies seeking to use information to support refugees in the best way possible to make the best decisions for their current situation. However, if one expression of agency is – as we saw – for people to disengage from information, to be selective about what they engage with and to pay little attention to news as the basis for their decision-making, then providing information might not be experienced as much support.

There are a number of operational and scholarly implications of these insights. There is a much bigger need to emphasise the experience of the individual, as individualised access to information and individual situations matter. However, this cannot mean a complete disregard of the reality of structural constraints and coercion that people face. To unpack these individual experiences and mental landscapes, and the impact they have, poses a profound research challenge as it requires sophisticated, longitudinal research set-ups. These would warrant the inclusion of experimental behavioural work and much more rigorous examination of the link between narratives, reported behaviour and observed behaviour.

An emphasis on individuality is challenging for practice, as programmes targeted at communities inevitably have to disregard certain levels of individuality. This is not accidental, or because people's individuality is not

considered. It is because agencies seek to understand their programmatic options that can – when it is safe to return home – support refugees constructively in that decision. Programmatic options that are currently common are assisting with the return, offering settlement support or even offering less support for people living in camps.

Yet, for agencies seeking to support return of displaced people, it is crucial to understand how the mental landscape disrupts the assumed linearity of the displacement experience and how that information might play a very different part in how people engage once displaced. People might be no longer able or willing to engage with information offered to them about conditions back home. For agencies relying on information as a tool, this creates challenges but is also a useful reminder of how deeply individualised experiences of displacement and the consequent choices made are. To use information in ways that can best support refugees in making informed decisions that are right for them throughout their experiences in the camps requires much deeper insight – into how information is perceived, how people make sense of their situation, how they make decisions to regain a sense of agency and what will ultimately be the best option for them throughout the different stages of their displacement.

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Annex: Quantitative survey questions

Q1. When you left South Sudan, what was your most important reason for coming to this camp/village? Give your most important and second most important reason.

a) My family/friends were already here
b) Transport was available to come here
c) I knew about assistance available here
d) When I left South Sudan, I had no choice in where to go
e) Other
f) Refused
g) Do not know

Q2. Since you came to Uganda, how have you received **news from South Sudan**? Select three main sources.

a) Word of mouth
b) Telephone/WhatsApp
c) Radio
d) NGOs/UN
e) Newspaper
f) Internet news
g) Facebook
h) Twitter
i) Other
j) I don't receive any news
k) Refused
l) Do not know

Q3. Since you came to Uganda, how have you received **news from your village in South Sudan**? Select three main sources.

a) Word of mouth
b) Telephone call
c) WhatsApp
d) Radio
e) Newspaper
f) Internet news
g) Facebook
h) Twitter
i) NGOs/UN
j) Other
k) I don't receive any news
l) Refused
m) Do not know

Q4. How often do you communicate with people who are still in your home village? Choose one.

a) At least once a day
b) At least once a week
c) At least once a month
d) Less than once a month
e) Never
f) Refused
g) Do not know

Q5. When you hear about news in your home village, which means have you used to find out if the information is true? Choose one.

a) I have called people who are still in my village and speak freely on the phone
b) I have WhatsApped people and asked for confirmation
c) I have asked other people from my home area who are here with me
d) I have checked Facebook
e) I have checked internet news
f) I have asked authorities/NGOs here
j) I cannot check whether the news is true
h) I do not need to check whether the news is true
j) Other
k) Refused
l) Do not know

Q6. Is news from South Sudan important to you?

a) News from South Sudan is very important to me
b) News from South Sudan is fairly important to me
c) News from South Sudan is fairly unimportant to me
d) News from South Sudan is of no importance to me
e) Refused
f) Do not know

continued on next page

If answered a–c:

Q6a. What kind of news is important for you? Give your most important, second most important and third most important kind of news.

a) The security situation in the country
b) The situation of South Sudanese people
c) That the government and rebels are signing a peace deal
d) That the government and rebels are signing a peace deal that is fair
e) That the government is making plans to help people return.
f) Other
g) Refused
h) Do not know

Q.7. Is news from your village important to you?

a) News from my village is very important to me
b) News from my village is fairly important to me
c) News from my village is fairly unimportant to me
d) News from my village is of no importance to me
e) Refused
f) Do not know

If answered a–c:

Q.7a. What news is important for you? Give your most important, second most important and third most important kind of news.

a) That my village is safe now
b) That my family is safe, wherever they are
c) That my home, my crops or my belongings are not destroyed
d) That I will receive assistance when I return to my village
e) That a peace deal will be good for my village
f) Other
g) Refused
h) Do not know

I will now read out some statements about how you may feel. In each case, you should tell me how often you feel the way the statement indicates using the options on the scale (read out options for each statement).

All the time	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
1	2	3	4	5

If something can go wrong for me, it will. ....

I am optimistic about my future. ....

For each of the following, say yes if you feel they are true:

Yes	No
1	2

When something bad happens to me, I think it is …

Because I’m a man/woman ....

Because of my education ....

Because of my age ....

Because of my ethnicity ....

Because of where I live ....

Because of my experience in the South Sudanese conflict ....

Because I don’t have money/I’m poor ....

Because of the government ....

Because of the rebels ....

Because of who I know ....

Because of bad luck ....

Because of God ....

Because people want to harm me ....

Other ....

....

....

....

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