

Researching livelihoods and
services affected by conflict

The mental landscape of post-conflict life in northern Uganda

Executive summary

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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 (DFID), 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

Executive summary



The violent conflict in northern Uganda between the government and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) ended well over a decade ago. Life today in northern Uganda has a huge number of challenges but is without question better than when attacks were common and most of the population lived in internal displacement camps. Yet, for many, the idea of a post-conflict 'recovery' is illusory. Northern Ugandans continue to live with a sense of loss, injustice, neglect and a widespread sentiment that post-conflict life has not lived up to its promise.

These perceptions are deeply important, both intrinsically and through their potential influence on behaviour. Unfortunately, this research indicates that it is particularly challenging for individuals in post-conflict settings ever to feel and perceive improvements happening. We explain this through what we call the 'mental landscape of post-conflict recovery'. In northern Uganda, this landscape has developed from experiencing life as a series of challenges, injustices and dead-ends, combined with a communal identity marked by having been at the receiving end of a war without clear closure or resolution.

This report series explores this mental landscape: how people perceive, interpret and experience their circumstances today, and how this is shaped by legacies of the war. To do so, it uses a unique multi-method research design, combining experimental, quantitative and different types of qualitative work. Those developing programmes to aid post-conflict recovery have to grapple with this mental landscape. And this involves rethinking several concepts inherent to such programmes.

Rethinking collaboration and good behaviour

Notions of what is considered good and bad behaviour loom over many aspects of post-conflict life. It is a widespread belief in northern Uganda that the war has influenced people's behaviour, making people and communities selfish and less collaborative.

However, the collective impression that the war has created 'bad' selfish behaviour is not reflected in how

individual people actually behave. In our behavioural experiments, we found the opposite. Just recalling the conflict measurably influenced people to collaborate – those who had recalled the conflict were more altruistic with real money.

But this shift towards altruism is implicit and lacks visibility. And perhaps as a result it does not create a more positive community view of community members. This disconnect between perceived and actual behaviour points to a broader post-conflict dilemma: collective recovery might be hindered by individual perception. Changing perceptions of a group situation through supporting individual behaviour change (as many development programmes seek to do) could be an uphill struggle.

Rethinking inclusion and fairness

Inclusion and fairness are the presumed cornerstones of functioning peaceful societies. But fairness and inclusion are experienced, acted upon and understood in diverse ways by different people. A post-conflict setting can make operationalising inclusion and fairness particularly challenging.

In our behavioural experiments, people's standards of what is considered fair increase when they are reminded of the experience of violent conflict. Moreover, the experience of fairness and inclusion in northern Uganda is greatly influenced by loss and suffering, and hence expectations of reparations. When people discussed fairness, they emphasised that the outcome of an experience is what makes it fair and that a beneficial personal outcome trumps an inclusive and fair collective process. Combined with higher fairness standards, this compounds the difficulty of designing post-conflict programming that is experienced as fair and inclusive, especially when the outcome cannot always be to everyone's liking.

Furthermore, a legacy of perceived broken promises (from both government and non-government organisations (NGOs)) creates a limited window of opportunity within which these outcomes need to be delivered in order to be

experienced as fair. Respondents have a high tolerance when it comes to waiting for fair treatment. Yet, at some point, the expectation of inclusive treatment turns into a broken promise; and the experience of this as unfair and exclusive becomes the more powerful perception.

Rethinking idleness, risk-taking and agency

In northern Uganda, people often attribute a lack of improvement to idleness, particularly among the young. Our research suggests it is helpful to reinterpret this idleness, however, as not a character flaw but an expression of agency. Given the options, experiences and perceptions of people, being idle can be a sensible choice for an individual, while still posing a challenge at the level of broader recovery.

Investing in the future involves a certain degree of risk. Participants in our research expressed that Acholi people in general should take more risks to build a future. But in our experiments, appetite for risk-taking is low, and even lower when people are reminded of the conflict. Although

people might collectively agree that *someone* should take risks, they may not be the one willing or able actually to take these risks.

The experience of life in camps and the post-conflict landscape could have generated such risk aversion and patience. People have experienced that big risks do not automatically bring improvement. Waiting for action from the local authorities or NGOs is a major part of everyday life for most. And previously, in internal displacement camps, waiting was indeed the only option available. During the war, people were often able to express agency only by joining the rebels, so expecting proactive agency to drive development today is particularly controversial.

Yet many post-conflict development programmes revolve around the need for individuals to take on monetary risk (such as accessing credit or spending time and money on a new business venture) or social risk (showing agency by going against established expectations of behaviour). A culturally and contextually appropriate attitude to risk is needed.



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