Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium

Researching livelihoods and services affected by conflict

The mental landscape of post-conflict life in northern Uganda

Part 2: Defining the mental landscape

Working Paper 89

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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

Acknowledgements and author contribution statement

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Conception, design and planning of the research
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Implementation of experiments
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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.

1 Northern Uganda's war and post-war life

Northern Uganda has been a post-conflict region since the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) left the area for good in 2006 as part of peace talks. It has thus been well over a decade since Acholiland (which entails most of northern Uganda, Figure 1) experienced violence directly related to the conflict between the LRA and the Government of Uganda (GoU), a war in which both government and rebel forces committed atrocities against civilians.[1] A final peace agreement between the LRA and the GoU was never signed; however, individual protocols were negotiated and signed during two years of peace talks in Juba between 2006 and 2008. The talks in Juba were marked by tension due to different expectations of the process. For the LRA, the government's admission that northern Uganda had been marginalised marked a huge political success. However, in the end, the LRA's negotiation behaviour in the talks was marked by internal turmoil and government commitments to establish accountability processes were largely not honoured (Schomerus, 2021 forthcoming).

Figure 1: Map of northern Uganda's war-affected region

1 For detailed background on the war, see Branch (2011); Dolan (2009) and Finnstroem (2008).

Reconstruction efforts in northern Uganda since have been significant while also being disappointing (International Alert, 2013). Levine (2016: 31) argues that recovery means 'so much and so little at the same time', highlighting that, while clearly life in northern Uganda has been transformed since the end of the war, 'what is entailed in recovery is also much less than may be imagined' because 'at a household or individual level, this journey called recovery is far from a story of uninterrupted progress, however slow. Individuals and households face almost as many setbacks as they do steps forward... Recovery is thus not only fragile and uncertain but intrinsically unstable'.

On easily measurable indicators, we see that access to services is not improving rapidly and has recently deteriorated (Lacroix and Hagen-Zanker, 2019; Marshak *et al.*, 2017). People perceive that many issues are stuck: post-conflict times have not brought the level of political participation and access to services that people feel had been promised. In part, that recovery is experienced as being frustrating echoes the nature of the conflict. While physical violence was the most obvious symptom, structural violence expressed in political, cultural and economic marginalisation throughout Uganda's history has not obviously ended (Branch, 2010).

Uganda has a long history of political division exercised along ethnic lines. In 1986, the balance of power shifted from governments headed by northern or eastern Ugandans to President Yoweri Museveni (who drew on elites from western and central Uganda and who has been in power ever since). The result was political, social and economic marginalisation of large parts of the country, with the most violent manifestation of this being the war between the LRA (mainly from the Acholi north) and the government. To this day, President Museveni continues to drive a negative discourse on the Acholi in his speeches (Alava, 2019).

Continued marginalisation is visible in different ways. Long-term effects of having been a victim of serious crime are significant (Mazurana and Atim, 2014), and the everyday practices of citizenship are deeply influenced by the experience of violence (Alava, 2019). Access to decent work is hindered by a system that does not consider decent work a serious need (Mallett *et al.*, 2017). Individuals continue to experience violence, with domestic violence a particular concern. One study found that 78.5% of women in northern Uganda had experienced intimate partner violence in the preceding year (Black *et al.*, 2019).

Yet life in northern Uganda is also without question better than it was when attacks were common and most of the population lived in internal displacement camps.[2] But post-conflict life is not just about better infrastructure or measurable improvements. It is also about the perception that things are improving, that expectations are met and about the positive impact such improved perceptions have on behaviour, which in turn further supports a positive post-conflict life. As few northern Ugandans wholeheartedly perceive their situation to be continuously improving, expectations of a post-war shift have largely not been met. These expectations are also fuelled by development programmes.

Expectations are, of course, important, as they are the threshold against which experience is measured and perceptions shaped (Goodhand, 2001). And it is these perceptions that drive behaviour (Maxwell *et al.*, 2017). Behaviour is how people act every day: It is the daily experience of the post-conflict life.

> **Post-conflict life ... is about the perception that things are improving, that expectations are met and about the positive impact such improved perceptions have on behaviour**

2 The first phase of the SLRC identified a number of seeming contradictions between people's perceptions and behaviours, and touched on a number of behavioural questions. For example, despite substantial reductions in violent conflict, respondents did not report feeling safer (Sturge *et al.*, 2017).

2 The behavioural challenges of post-conflict life

This report series looks at the link between people's experience of living post-conflict lives, their behaviour, and the possible influence the war still has on perceptions and behaviours.

2.1 Methods and data used for this report series

This paper is part of a series of reports using qualitative, quantitative and experimental behavioural research. This includes:

1. more than 100 open-ended interviews with authorities, citizens and NGO staff
2. systematic collecting of individual stories using the SenseMaker® tool
3. three rounds of the SLRC large-n structured survey on livelihoods, access to and experience of basic services, exposure to shocks and coping strategies and people's perceptions of governance, conducted in northern Uganda in the Lango and Acholi sub-regions in 2013, 2015 and 2018
4. a 'lab in the field' set up to conduct experimental behavioural games with 700 participants.

Combining storytelling with experimental games allows us to contribute to the knowledge on how the experience of violent conflict shapes people's choices. We asked people about the stories and experiences that are important to them, using these stories and the experience of telling them as a prime to establish a control and treatment group for a behavioural experiment. We asked half the people to tell us a story of importance to them from the time of the conflict (the treatment/'conflict-mindset' group); the other half was asked to tell a story that had happened very recently (the control/'present-mindset' group). Qualitative interviews with games participants and others allowed us to contextualise our experimental findings.

A detailed description of all methods used and the research design can be found in 'Part 1: Research on behaviour and post-conflict life in northern Uganda – the research design' (Amanela *et al.*, 2020a).

2.2 Key concepts in behavioural mechanisms of post-conflict life

When seeking to examine the experience of post-conflict life, three concepts are particularly relevant to northern Uganda: collaboration, fairness and idleness/agency. These concepts are set out briefly here; they form the focus of Parts 3, 4 and 5 in this report series.

Collaboration and good behaviour in post-conflict life

> **There is a discrepancy between people's perceptions and their behaviour. This is unexplored in programmes seeking to help improve life after conflict**

It is a widespread belief in northern Uganda that war has made people and communities selfish and less collaborative. Perceptions are that the war has created this 'bad behaviour'. The quest for collaboration and the notion of 'good social behaviour' is deeply linked to the experience of the loss of Acholi culture – which is deeply collaborative – that has been part of the war and particularly during times of displacement (for example, Rodriguez, 2004). This perception is often linked with an understanding that, as a group, the Acholi are not recovering from conflict because the war has made them behave in ways that do not benefit the community and allow recovery to happen. This impression in turn likely influences not just how people experience recovery, but also how they behave more broadly. Contrary to these perceptions, our behavioural research with Acholi participants does not show that war has made communities less willing to work together – if anything, it finds the opposite. This discrepancy between people's perceptions and their behaviour is unexplored in programmes seeking to help improve life after conflict.

Inclusion and fairness

Fairness – or the feeling of being treated unfairly – is a deeply ingrained driver of the conflict and tension with the GoU, which is widely considered as not having treated the Acholi fairly.

Fairness is also a major focus of development programmes today. Together with inclusion, fairness is identified as being a crucial part of conflict prevention (World Bank / United Nations, 2018) and a characteristic that most programmes aim to achieve in both their programme design and day-to-day operations (i.e. meaning that beneficiaries experience the programme as fair). Thus, development programmes generally aim to be inclusive, which is often demonstrated through a programme design considered fair in terms of processes and fair in terms of targeting of categories of people, for example women or ethnic minorities. These are important facets, but we also find that what matters for a programme to be experienced as fair is outcome fairness. Whether an individual feels they personally benefited from a programme can shape perceptions of fairness, just as procedural fairness does. This poses a design challenge for processes that might be designed to be experienced as fair, and yet cannot deliver the same outcomes to everyone.

Yet, the experience of fairness does not happen only on a personal/individual level, as someone can experience a process as a member of a group. Often in programme design, the group experience is weighed as being more important: after all, programmes tend to be targeted at groups (or categories of people). But even in societies where social connections and group belonging are very strong, as is the case in Acholiland, the individual matters.

How the individual experiences a situation might be directly linked to their own individual memory of the violent conflict: our research shows that recalling an individual memory does influence how an individual behaves. We also find that people's standards of what they consider fair change depending on whether or not they have anchored these standards in their individual memories of the time of the conflict.

Box 1: The importance of identity

Fairness and inclusion are deeply complex experiences that are simultaneously shaped by group and individual identity, experiences and narratives.

Agency and idleness

Another key concept in many post-conflict programmes is agency. On one hand, we assume a lack of agency is a crucial part of the conflict experience – being at the receiving end of violence, insecurity and uncertainty. On the other hand, in post-conflict programming, agency is emphasised and programme beneficiaries are encouraged to actively pursue change, along with associated risks. The observed opposite of agency is idleness: people not taking action to improve their livelihoods or invest in the future. It is a common complaint in northern Uganda that young people in particular are idle or 'lost' (Alava, 2019). We suggest, however, that a more useful way to understand agency is to situate idleness in the realities of post-conflict life.

Idleness can alternatively be interpreted as patience: it is a readiness to deploy agency as soon as it has a chance to lead to positive outcomes, rather than backfire.

The notion of agency is a particularly difficult one in northern Uganda. During the war, developing agency was often seen as a troubling characteristic. At the very least, displaying agency could make life difficult since it was linked to possibly being a rebel, as it remains a contentious question whether people were forced to join the LRA or joined out of their own agency (Schomerus and Allen, 2006). Developing agency today can thus feel threatening or risky, and yet many attempts at post-conflict recovery clearly require agency for programmes to work. We find, however, that respondents were broadly very risk-averse and more willing to postpone decisions into the future, rather than take a risk today. This points towards a particular quality of post-conflict lives.

Box 2: Idleness of populations

So-called idleness of populations in post-conflict settings can be re-interpreted as patience: it expresses a readiness to deploy agency as soon as it has a chance to lead to positive outcomes, rather than backfire.

The particular quality of a post-conflict environment

Our examination of behavioural mechanisms linked to collaboration, inclusion and agency point to a broader post-conflict dilemma: the post-conflict environment seems to have a particular quality to it that makes it difficult for individuals to *feel* and *perceive* that their lives after conflict are improving. This is because people's perception of the behaviour of their community is negative, even if individuals behave in 'positive' ways. It is because there seems to be a link between the experience of conflict (or at least the memory of it) and what is considered fair, with standards increasing due to the memory of conflict. And because people are more comfortable postponing decisions that might bring improvement – but could also make their situation worse – change happens at a slower rate than expected.

These particular mechanisms are part of the mental landscape of post-conflict life. They create the particularly challenging characteristic of the post-conflict environment: **even if the situation is improving, this is only meaningful if people perceive this improvement to be happening.** If the particular behavioural mechanisms of the post-conflict setting make this perception shift difficult, how can recovery be supported?

3 What is the mental landscape of post-conflict life?

What we call the mental landscape of post-conflict life is the combination of how people experience their lives after violence, how they perceive and make sense of their current situation, the tools they use to interpret the challenges they face, and how they connect their experiences today to legacies and memories of the war. This mental landscape shapes people's decisions, behaviour and experience of their everyday lives.

That being a post-conflict society is also a mental state was frequently brought up in our interviews. For example, one response highlighted that post-war life brought mental freedom and, with that, possibility:

> ***'Out of the freedom we can now do some actions. We can think mentally. You can wake up and know to go and do something to make you better. All because of freedom.'***[3]

3.1 Realities of post-conflict life

Recovery and life post-conflict are usually imagined to bring significant change, such as improved security, increased economic opportunities and better access to services. We see from our research on livelihoods and access to services, however, that recovery has indeed been slow and more challenging than expected. The war's legacy is visible in structural, institutional and psychological challenges.

Long-term impacts can be social, personal, or even psychological – such as an often-mentioned loss of identity and culture or deterioration of trust within the community (Mallett *et al.*, 2016; Vorhoelter, 2014). References to a lost Acholi culture are common (Vorhoelter, 2014), which is seen, for example, in how elders, and traditional and cultural leaders no longer exert wide authority over the youth, who are viewed by the elders as having lost their culture as a result of war: 'This war is going to remain with us, because if you don't have the culture, you will be finished.'[4] Alcoholism is a well-known concern (Otim *et al.*, 2019).

Everyday challenges

When talking to people in northern Uganda about life today, a number of common concerns are regularly mentioned (Table 1). At times, these are presented as an effect of the war; at other times, they are framed more broadly in the challenging history of northern Ugandan development.

3 Male respondent 19.
4 Female respondent 14.

Table 1: Most commonly mentioned everyday concerns (108 qualitative interviews)

Concern mentioned	Number of coded interview passages
Drug and alcohol abuse	74
Generational issues	60
Acholi/communal exclusion by the government	58
Land disputes	52
Personal school fees / staying in education	51
Idleness	39
Threats due to proximity of South Sudan border	33
Crime	31
Violence / domestic violence	28
Price fluctuations	24
Education levels	24
Livelihood	22
Access to health services	21
Return of war / LRA	19
Infrastructure	13
Early marriage	8
Diseases	8
Bride price	3

People have the perception that there are many disputes about land and that these are often rooted in land having been unoccupied during the years of displacement.[5] These wrangles over land, either within or between families and sometimes with government, influence day-to-day life (Hopwood and Atkinson, 2015; Sjögren, 2014; Atkinson and Owor, 2013; Obika and Mogensen, 2013). Other types of disputes can be long and ongoing due to haphazard access to justice (Macdonald, 2017). Despite much improvement, infrastructure continues to be poor in northern Uganda.

Physical safety

Armed violence associated with conflict is now rare, but crime is not (Table 2).

Table 2: Frequency and percentage of households that experienced crime per district

		Wave 1		Wave 2		Wave 3	
		Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Lango	Dokolo	44	53.7	47	53.2	61	74.7
	Lira	123	66.5	95	57.4	105	59.5
	Alebtong	54	54.0	52	49.1	46	43.7
	Amolatar	27	43.5	24	35.1	42	66.2
	Otuke	28	68.3	21	49.8	27	66.7
	Apac	95	56.9	80	49.2	93	56.8
	Oyam	105	56.1	110	59.3	120	65.7
	Kole	49	42.6	60	50.1	69	56.5
	Total	525	55.9	489	52.2	564	60.2
Acholi	Gulu	147	61.3	167	67.9	166	71.8
	Amuru	54	54.0	62	69.7	83	79.3
	Nwoya	25	61.0	29	61.8	25	58.2
	Kitgum	77	51.0	94	66.9	102	68.8
	Lamwo	58	56.9	64	62.6	68	69.1
	Pader	67	54.5	81	68.6	94	74.4
	Agago	109	67.7	97	58.9	115	70.7
	Total	537	58.5	594	65.4	653	71.4
Total		1062	57.2	1083	58.7	1218	65.7

Note: The increase in the proportion of households having experienced crimes across the whole sample was statistically significant between wave 2 and 3 at the 0.1% level.
Source: Lacroix and Hagen-Zanker (2019); Mazurana and Atim (2014).

Perceptions of safety have not improved to the extent that might be expected with armed violence much decreased (Tables 3 and 4).

Table 3: Change in the perception of safety within the neighbourhood, across waves by district

	Wave 1 (2013) – Wave 2 (2015)			Wave 2 (2015) – Wave 3 (2018)		
	Lango (%)	Acholi (%)	All (%)	Lango (%)	Acholi (%)	All (%)
No change	46.28	45.70	46.00	48.41	44.68	46.65
Less safe	23.11	28.86	25.89	21.85	29.29	25.34
More safe	30.61	25.44	28.11	29.74	26.04	28.00

Source: Lacroix and Hagen-Zanker (2019).

5 Land conflicts are regularly cited as a major concern. However, there might be a discrepancy between perceptions of how many land conflicts exist and are unresolved and actual numbers. Atkinson and Hopwood (2013) show that overall numbers of disputes are declining and about half of land conflicts are resolved within six months.

Table 4: Change in the perception of safety outside the village (by sub-region)

	Wave 1 (2013) – Wave 2 (2015)			Wave 2 (2015) – Wave 3 (2018)		
	Lango (%)	Acholi (%)	All (%)	Lango (%)	Acholi (%)	All (%)
No change	51.43	48.42	49.98	55.74	44.45	50.44
Less safe	19.85	26.13	22.88	21.77	30.03	25.65
More safe	28.72	25.45	27.14	22.49	25.52	23.91

Source: Lacroix and Hagen-Zanker (2019).

Food security

Livelihood and food security are challenges (Mazurana *et al.*, 2019). Food security has been declining recently. We measured food insecurity by the Coping Strategy Index (CSI) which estimates the severity of different coping strategies employed by a household when they do not have enough food. After dropping in wave 2 from 9.9 to 6.7, the index came back up to 8.9 in the final wave, that is households became more food insecure again.

Access to services

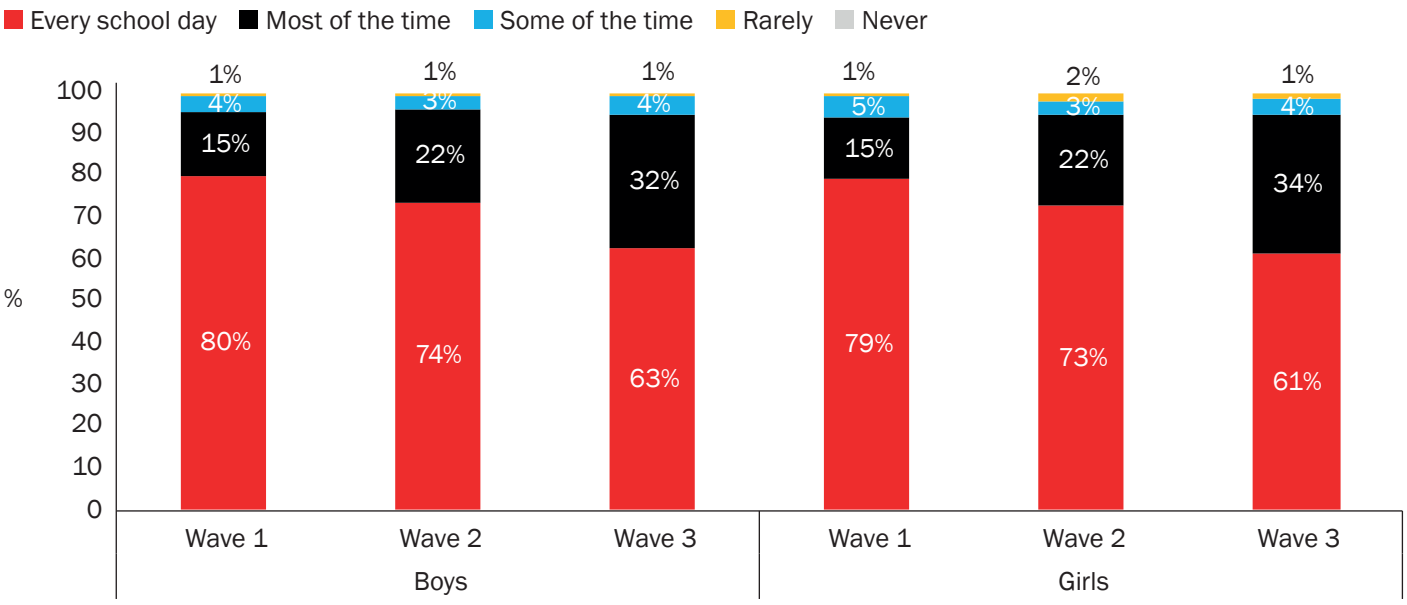
Access to health services deteriorated between 2015 and 2018, with journey length to health centres slightly increased (Lacroix and Hagen-Zanker, 2019). School attendance figures have dropped (Figure 2) and quality of education is low (Atim *et al.*, 2019; Lacroix and Hagen-Zanker, 2019). Missing out on educational opportunities is another common point highlighted as a long-term war effect (Atim *et al.*, 2019).

People's willingness to make their political voice heard through protest is low. In Acholiland, almost 70 % of people say they were unlikely or highly unlikely to participate in a protest (Lacroix and Hagen-Zanker, 2019). Trust in the decisions made by government is low: in all three survey waves, we see that respondents are highly critical of the government's decisions, with the percentages of people agreeing that the government's decisions reflected their priorities at least in some areas never reaching 50% and the percentages of respondents answering 'agreeing to a large extent' never exceeding 15%. There were differences in perception, however, of local and central government, with respondents consistently less approving of the central government (ibid.). The formal courts are fully trusted or trusted only by 5% and 35% of respondents respectively (ibid.).

Talking about the war

While there might be no more direct war-related violence, the war still has a looming presence. People talk about the war regularly, with only 30% of respondents saying that they never speak about the war (ibid.). They also feel that their lives today continue to be shaped by the war's legacy. When we asked 'To what extent do you agree with the

Figure 2: School attendance for girls and boys, 2013–2018



Source: Lacroix and Hagen-Zanker (2019).

statement: "What happens in my life today is because of the GoU/LRA conflict"', almost half (45%) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed, and this figure rose to 61% if the respondent had been displaced during the war (Table 5).

When asking specifically if the conflict still influenced how people took decisions today, we find that 43% of previously displaced respondents agreed, compared to 37% of non-displaced people who felt that their decisions are still shaped by the conflict (Table 6).

Table 5: Perceived impact of the conflict on people's current situation, by displacement

To what extent do you agree with the statement: 'What happens in my life today is because of the GoU/LRA conflict'?	Not displaced		Displaced	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Strongly disagree	133	18.59	89	11.21
Disagree	129	18.03	137	17.30
Neutral	86	12.07	71	8.98
Agree	168	23.46	318	40.09
Strongly agree	155	21.71	170	21.40
Not applicable (there was no conflict here)	44	6.13	8	1.03

Source: Lacroix and Hagen-Zanker (2019).

Table 6: Perceived influence of the conflict on people's decisions today, by displacement

To what extent do you agree with the statement: 'The GoU/LRA conflict still influences how I take decisions today'?	Not displaced (%)	Displaced (%)
Strongly disagree	19.61	12.89
Disagree	25.11	32.81
Neutral	13.2	11.04
Agree	24.03	30.98
Strongly agree	13.02	11.97
Not applicable (there was no conflict here)	5.03	0.3

Source: Lacroix and Hagen-Zanker (2019).

The war's legacy is thus personally felt to a considerable extent (and even more so for people who were displaced). It is important to remember also that this might be a reflection of having lost a family member or friend.

Yet issues and challenges are real. Most people we spoke to placed northern Uganda as an area in recovery,[6] due to higher poverty levels[7] and, as one respondent put it, a 'reintegration process which was half-baked and definitely there should have been government programmes which was never'.[8]

In addition to the disconnect between national and northern politics, there is now a clear chasm between how recovery is experienced more immediately in the urban centres of the north – namely Gulu – and the more rural and remote areas,[9] particularly because some of the population has left to set up life in Gulu or other parts of the country.

With a shift in NGO presence, the north offered fewer employment opportunities just when recovery was expected to kick in:

> ***The region felt the pinch because those projects brought income, [NGOs] were renting premises and refurbishing the infrastructure. In a way their departure at the same time [when war ended], they left people with a void. The people themselves should fill the void. But unfortunately, with the influx of NGOs during that insurgency, people were not prepared to take over when they are gone. So when they are closing one after the other, it was not a gradual process in that they trained and said we are withdrawing and then you can carry on without our support. But many still needed the support of the NGOs to put those skills into practice. So some of the skills are going to waste.***[10]

Leadership

Corruption and lack of trustworthy leadership are regularly referenced as reasons why recovery has been so slow. Few felt that life was stable either locally or on the national political level. While President Museveni is often described as a direct adversary, there is also an understanding that the stability of the country depends on him being in office.[11]

6 Male NGO worker 1.
7 Male NGO worker 1.
8 Male NGO worker 2.
9 Religious leader 1.
10 Religious leader 1.
11 Male NGO worker 1.

Narratives about the causes of the war remain diverse. They range from those who view the war as having been orchestrated by the government to marginalise the Acholi by creating a new political class, to those who think the Acholi themselves are to blame for having lost influence in government.[12]

One respondent argued:

> ***I see signposts of recovery around, but the real impact [on] the lives of the community I don't see. It is true that the government has come out with the recovery programme. I know it's not a one-day thing. It's a process. But those projects are channelled through few individuals who want to recover fast[er] than others... Because peace is not stopping gunshot, that is not peace. What the government did, rampant killing was stopped, move out rebels from the north. Does that define peace? I thought they were discussing something more than just discussing stopping gunshots. If that is what they were discussing, that is not peace. Because peace is in the heart.***[13]

12 Male NGO worker 1.
13 Male respondent 11.

4 How the mental landscape influences life today

4.1 A post-conflict identity

We frequently encounter references to what could be called a 'post-conflict' identity. This is made up of the current situation and the parts of people's everyday lives that are occupied by war memories or long-term effects of the war, along with expectation of what life after the conflict would look like. As noted above, the respondent's reference to peace being 'in the heart', and linking the lack of peace to a disappointing recovery experience, describes a mental landscape that 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 that did not properly end and that did not resolve anything. Sentiments of being excluded from national-level development, and being ostracised and humiliated continue to be common.

Waiting for issues to be resolved, such as the return of still-missing family members, is a common sentiment. In a focus group discussion, the members agreed that:

> ***... people still have the trauma of the war and it is now reducing from the minds of people. And they are not talking [about] it so much and at times they will also forget about it. And some are still talking about their children in the bush [children who had been with the LRA], and people are really looking for them in the group so that they can forget them. And we always counsel them and advise that these people will also come back, one day.***[14]

A shared post-conflict identity is also one of struggle. However, we see from the stories people tell about their lives that this identity of struggle seems to hinder the imagination that recovery and change is possible. Our conclusion is not that what northern Ugandans are struggling with is an attitude problem: positive thinking is not a development solution. Yet, an identity that is deeply infused with an understanding that improvement will be difficult influences how people experience their day-to-day.

In the most drastic descriptions of the post-conflict identity, acute mental health issues were foregrounded, including risks of suicide. Other mental health concerns mentioned were using time spent with the LRA as a threat in a quarrel,[15] or simply displaying behaviour that seems reminiscent of time spent in the bush:

14 Focus group 4 (conducted in Acholi): Palabek.
15 Male NGO worker 1.

> ***There is big difference between those who have stayed in the bush for long. Because there is a difference in how they handle the situation and they want to do it how they did it in the bush. It is not easy to handle their emotions, and something that has happened just lightly [a minor disagreement], the person is talking about killing that person.***[16]

One respondent described his own mental health concerns, which he said were brought on by the permanent struggle to make ends meet:

> ***I used to not be certain in my mind. Sometimes during the night, I can sleep for only three hours. All the night I used to be with open eyes. Sometimes I stand up and used to read the bible and I used to pray the rosary during the night.***[17]

Another respondent simply said 'When somebody talks about the war in the north, I feel so bad and I feel so touched. Nothing is good enough to clean my heart.'[18]

The post-conflict identity was often described as being marked by distrust, fuelled by an idealised version of social life before the war (Porter, 2016):

> ***People treat each other differently because people have become more conscious of who is coming on my land, who is coming in my home, who is trespassing. People are more conscious about what is going on in their place. They ask a lot of questions. People have become much more conscious about what goes on in the places they own. And that is the behaviour they acquired during the war. The neighbour is doing something, but you did not ask my permission, when actually when somebody is not doing any harm or they are using a space that is not used and then people say 'I have plan for that space', but actually there is no plan for that. People do not want to share. In the long run, for lack of a better way to say it, it makes people become selfish. Because they lived in a time when they lacked so much, they had to be provided for, so when they now have something, they feel they have to protect it. People are not willing to give and they feel that whatever little they acquired they have to jealously protect it so that it can benefit them to the most.'*[19]

Everyday references are often rooted in the war experience. For example, the LRA used to come when it rained heavily, so when it rains heavily these days people will reference the danger of gathering in heavy rain.[20] For some, recalling the war is a contradictory experience: one respondent explained that he sometimes thinks the war was good because he is currently being intimidated by his neighbour and that he sometimes finds it difficult not to think 'I will go back to the bush and come back for you people'. He mentioned that it was similar for a friend of his who was also in the bush with him.[21]

Others saw the current situation in a more positive light:

> ***People are nowadays calm. People are already settled... because people are settled, they dig [work in their fields], they brought back houses with front doors [not temporary houses], so people are now very ok.***[22]

For some, greater stability arrived with greater personal safety:

> ***There's a difference because during the time of war you really can't move as well; when you are going to Gulu, you think I might reach or might not reach. I might survive the ambush or not. Nothing was certain until you reach the destination. Even if you are here, the next time you think they might come to attack and enter. Now it's different, at least there's a sign of security.***[23]

Overall, despite some optimism and noticeable improvements, northern Ugandans continue to live with a mental landscape that includes a sense of loss, injustice and neglect. There is a widespread sentiment that post-conflict life has not lived up to its promise to bring opportunities and economic stability for everyone.

4.2 The effect of talking about the conflict

Given the strong presence of a post-conflict identity, we wanted to find out whether there are specific things that continue to fuel this identity. We find in our research that simply talking about the conflict is a powerful experience. We see in our experiments that people behave differently depending on whether or not they have just recalled the times of the conflict: The treatment group showed,

16 Focus group 4 (conducted in Acholi): Palabek.
17 Male respondent 10.
18 Male respondent 11.
19 Religious leader 1.
20 Male respondent 18.
21 Male lab participant 8.
22 Female local authority 2.
23 Female respondent 1.

Table 7: How comfortable do you feel talking about the GoU/LRA conflict?

How comfortable do you feel talking about the GoU/LRA conflict?	Not displaced (%)	Displaced (%)
Very uncomfortable	17.10	39.92
Uncomfortable	17.62	24.46
Neutral	9.10	8.14
Comfortable	28.82	13.96
Very comfortable	22.28	13.07
Not applicable (there was no conflict here)	5.08	0.44

Source: Lacroix and Hagen-Zanker, 2019.

for example, higher standards of fairness (Amanela *et al.*, 2020b). We also find that people have different levels of how comfortable they feel talking about the war; there is a notable difference between those who were displaced during the war and those who were not. People who were displaced feel considerably more uncomfortable than those who were not (Table 7), which poses questions about the appropriateness of programmes that focus around talking and memorising the conflict.

Although displaced people were feeling more uncomfortable talking about the conflict, they did not appear to be significantly less likely to speak about it. However, patterns of communication about the conflict seem to vary depending on the perception of government (Table 8). Respondents who thought that the central government's decision did not reflect their priorities were more likely to talk about the conflict, and to talk about it with their friends or family. This indicates a link between feeling alienated from the government today and experiencing this alienation through talking about the conflict. Whether talking about the conflict makes people disagree more with government, or disagreeing with government makes people talk about the conflict is not clear – but the link between disagreement with government and talking about conflict connects two deep experiences of alienation.

Table 8: When people talk about the conflict, depending on whether or not they agree with the government's decisions and priorities

When do you speak about the GoU/LRA conflict in northern Uganda?	Do the decisions of the central government reflect your priorities?	
	No (%)	Yes (%)
I don't speak about it	30.19	36.52
At home with my family	38.25	34.44
With friends	45.06	34.86
At church	4.45	3.92
During political meetings	8.60	8.72
With NGOs	7.72	6.65
At school	1.91	3.24
At the health centre	2.45	2.42
When researchers ask	14.99	22.10
During community meetings	14.15	13.10
When I listen to the radio	13.73	21.12
Other	1.14	0.94
Don't know	1.69	1.62
Don't want to say	2.34	3.16
Not applicable	1.76	3.68

Source: Lacroix and Hagen-Zanker, 2019.

What our findings on the impact of talking about the conflict show us is that, if an act seemingly as simple as talking about the conflict influences behaviour, it might also contribute to a different effect. It might contribute to reinforcing a 'post-conflict recovering identity', which as an identity might be powerful enough to make it more difficult to perceive life as getting better.

5 Conclusion and implications: programmatic challenges of dealing with the mental landscape

The mental landscape of lives after violence is the personal experience of the hard realities of life in post-war northern Uganda, combined with how individuals in a group perceive this reality and how they link it to other experiences from the past and present. The mental landscape is thus both an individual and a group phenomenon. It can differ tremendously from one person to the next, even if they find themselves in similar situations, but it is also a reflection and contribution to the broader experience of communal life.

Yet, a dilemma is that post-conflict recovery programmes target broad categories of people (for example women or ethnic minorities) or seek to improve institutions. Yet, in doing so, they rely on individuals within a group or within an institution to change their behaviour to work towards a better future or a better institution. Programmes aimed at post-conflict change therefore tend to – explicitly or implicitly – rely on individual agency to create such change.

There are obvious issues with this: programmes focus on categories (such as women, youth, disabled, children, and small and medium enterprises), yet individuals within the categories are different in terms of their abilities, worldviews and social relations. Focusing on the individual depoliticises the process of recovery to emphasise agency – putting the accountability on that one 'beneficiary' of a programme to behave in a certain manner. Therefore, support for individuals in these expected behaviour changes would benefit from behavioural insights, yet these are rarely available. Connected to that, while post-conflict programmes may be sensitive to the post-conflict 'context', they are less likely to utilise and adapt contextual behavioural insights beyond 'post-conflict' lessons or perspectives.

The situation in northern Uganda links to current debates on what is necessary to prevent violent conflict from occurring or re-occurring, and what role the type of recovery experienced plays in this. It steers us towards the question of how holistic peace starts and how it needs to develop to avoid the next iteration of conflict due to frustrations with lack of improvement.[24] These debates operate with a number of key concepts, of which the notion of 'recovery' is possibly the most misleading: for many people who experienced a conflict that has spanned generations, there is little to go back to from pre-conflict times. Moving away from the idea of simply rebuilding, the United Nations and World Bank *Pathways for Peace*

24 On the need to study the conditions of peace beyond the absence of violence, see: Davenport *et al.* (2018).

report highlights the need to prevent violent conflict in the first place and suggests inclusion as a key to building fair and sustainably peaceful societies (World Bank / United Nations, 2018). The emphasis on inclusion focuses on the notion of inclusive institutions, but also sets up a tension between how inclusion is created in an institution versus how it is experienced by an individual. To allow programmes and developments to be experienced and perceived positively, it is necessary to understand and take into account what makes up the mental landscape and how the mental landscape might directly influence how people behave and act.

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