The mental landscape of post-conflict life in northern Uganda

Part 5: Rethinking idleness, risk-taking and agency

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Cover photo: Mareike Schomerus.
Oriang Village, Uganda.

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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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 mental landscape of idleness, risk-taking and agency

'Things are becoming dark,'[1] was how one respondent in northern Uganda described his prospects. He explained that his future held no promise since he was not able to change his present without means to access education or to become self-sufficient. His only choice was to wait for things to change.

What felt like the only option to him tends to draw negative attention from others: in northern Uganda, youth is often reprimanded for being 'idle' (Atim *et al.*, 2019). One argument about idleness is, however, that it is less of a character flaw, but rather a symptom of the lack of employment opportunities. Yet a common view is that the youth are not willing to put in work today to build a better tomorrow – that idleness is thus chosen 'bad behaviour'. This observed bad behaviour is then lumped together with the judgement that today's youth are only interested in quick wins, are living for the moment, are not willing to invest in the future and that instant gratification for them trumps long-term improvement. Some respondents argued that the war has contributed to such behaviour, with youth unwilling to take on responsibility and families unable to convey values that would keep youth from being idle.[2]

In this report, we look differently at the phenomenon of idleness, agency and willingness to take risks. Rather than seeking to establish whether idleness is caused by individual characteristics or structural barriers, we entertain the possibility that idleness is a way of expressing agency, and that this behaviour is part of a particular post-conflict behavioural challenge. We aim to unpack through what mechanism the experience of war might continue to contribute to idleness. We look at idleness not as a symptom of an economic system unable to support employment options for all – even though these structural reasons for youth not being able to find work exist and require attention. It is also important to note that, where work is available, it can be so low-paid and precarious that investing time and effort in it is not worthwhile (Mallett *et al.*, 2017). Instead, we look at idleness as expression of how people assess their options and risks to improve their future, how people's experience of time influences their decisions, and whether tension between group and individual identity contribute to a mechanism that manifests itself as idleness.

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1   Male lab participant 2.
2   Religious leader 1.

1.1   The aim of this report series

This report series uses behavioural insights to think differently about what we call the mental landscape of post-conflict life. The series seeks to fill a research and policy gap in understanding the mechanisms that connect perceptions, decisions and behaviour as they relate to situations of violent conflict.[3] Understanding these mechanisms is an important starting point for policy discussions, which are currently focused on the need for programming that supports inclusion, community building and investment in the future (Nixon and Mallet, 2017). Yet, how to define and achieve all of these in a 'post-conflict' environment is under-researched (MacGinty and Richmond, 2016; Sow, 2015; Ejumudo, 2014; Stahn, 2012; Bos *et al.*, 1998), and evidence on the lived experience of these contexts can help promote more effective, sustainable policy and programming strategies.

Our starting point is that the experience of lives after violence is deeply shaped by what we call the mental landscape: 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. Looking at how the mental landscape directly influences people's behaviour is a way to show that perceptions do indeed matter.

1.2   The mental landscape and risk-taking and idleness

In this report – the fifth in the series, *The mental landscape of post-conflict life in northern Uganda* – we argue that to understand idleness requires insights into how individuals weigh their options, what payoff they expect in the future from choices made today, how they experience the passing of time and how this links to changes they see in their lives. Again, we find a contradiction here: people perceive that young people in particular are idle because they cannot get a quick win and are unwilling to invest in the future. We find, however, that people are willing to forego quick payoffs if they can see that waiting will be measurably worth it. Because people are willing to wait for payoff – and the war has amplified many people's sense that they are due a payoff[4] – waiting becomes a defining feature of individual life, which might in turn make the possibility of payoff less likely. This is because none of the options for action taken today seem to have the credible potential to change the future towards a better outcome. By examining how people link considerations of time and benefits, we suggest that, in the context of northern Uganda, waiting is, in fact, a sensible choice.

People also navigate a second contradiction regarding norms around risk-taking. Investing in the future involves a certain degree of risk, for instance when accepting a micro-finance loan. The injunctive norm – what people think is 'good' behaviour – and actual behaviour – what people most commonly do – differ when it comes to risk-taking. In our research, participants expressed that Acholi people in general should take more risks to build a future. However, at the individual level, appetite for risk-taking is low in general, and even lower when people are reminded of the conflict. The result is that there is little observable behaviour that could create the effect that others would mimic the risk taking they see.

From this, we can see how 'idleness' could be a logical choice in the post-conflict environment. On one hand, people are willing to wait to invest in the future. On the other hand, they are willing to invest in the future only if they can do so with little risk. Waiting and doing nothing might be a smart choice – until the right investment comes around. The mental landscape of a post-conflict environment in which developmental promises have not yet come true might suggest idleness as a unique expression of agency within a communal context.

> The mental landscape of a post-conflict environment in which development promises have not yet come true might suggest idleness as a unique expression of agency

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3   This gap has been duly noted regarding behaviour in other contexts. See, for example: Sniehotta *et al.* (2014).

4   For an insight on how this links to perceptions of fairness in Acholiland, see Amanela *et al.* (2020a).

1.3   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.*, 2020b).

To study time preferences and discounting we looked at risk preferences, meaning how people use choice over lotteries with equal probability (Eckel and Grossman, 2008); this is used to test for risk appetite (risk-seeking versus risk aversion).

To study preferences, we employed a convex time budgets (CTB) design (Andreoni *et al.*, 2015). This is used to test for time discounting by measuring delay discounting, which is the tendency to discount value in future (e.g., a lower subjective value of money at a later date relative to an earlier date). This tendency is often reflected by a preference for small rewards received sooner over larger rewards received later.

2   Does idleness express northern Uganda's post-conflict challenge?

Understanding how people make trade-offs between the present and the future is crucial to understanding a wide range of important behaviours such as saving for the future, investing in education, investing in children, diet choices, drinking or smoking. Research generally shows that people living in deprived conditions or poverty tend to prioritise present needs over future needs, to be more impulsive, and more pessimistic about their futures than those living in wealthier conditions (Adams and White, 2009; Robb *et al.*, 2008; De Wit *et al.,* 2007). As a result, poverty and deprivation, argue Haushofer and Fehr (2014: 862), 'may have particular psychological consequences that can lead to economic behaviours that make it difficult to escape poverty' and result in less savings, less investment in education or children or poor health decisions.

We use this insight as a starting point to consider whether similar mechanisms are relevant for post-conflict life. Is a particular consequence of the post-conflict environment that it makes it more difficult to escape the conditions of deprivation? We have already found in our research that there seems to be a quality of the post-conflict environment that makes it hard to perceive that things are getting better – even if objectively speaking, some things are (Amanela *et al.,* 2020c).

In our interviews, respondents argued that the war has contributed to idleness and a lack of agency. People link the experience of displacement in the camps to what they call 'Acholi dependency syndrome'. A common explanation is that this is the result of receiving humanitarian aid for so many years:

> *They used to be provided almost everything. Most of them have become lazy, they can't do much work. They only depend. That's why you find people begging; their future would have been very different from other people's future, only that they are lazy. Acholi culture was not like that, it was developed during the war when people were in the camp, all was provided, all the food.*[5]

This experience, so the argument goes, today translates into unwillingness, particularly among youth, to take on responsibility or work, and families unable to convey values that would keep youth from drug abuse.[6] The argument usually is that there is a chain of causality which starts with youth displaying poor characteristics

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5   Female respondent 1.
6   Religious leader 1.

because they are only interested in quick payoffs. Hence youth are not pursuing employment and earning opportunities that fit into a catalogue of expected good behaviour (as in honest work and proper education, rather than sports betting and substance abuse). Instead, they hang around idle doing nothing, thus forfeiting a better future and contributing to a deteriorating social fabric and missed opportunities for improvement in northern Uganda as a whole. Youth were often described in this way:

> *Youth are taking alcohol seriously, especially in this region, not even minding about what to do tomorrow. If he or she takes it today, they will forget to do something developmental for tomorrow... He finds himself if tomorrow I wake up just healthy, he is finished, not even minding that they have to go and dig. What should I do that I have something developmental. They just come from the village and just seated under the verandah. Laziness.*[7]

Similarly:

> *with youth we have a lot of gambling, there is this issue of playing card, they don't have anything to do, they are lazy, they don't want to go to the garden. They like to earn something in a day or an hour. With the garden you have to wait sometimes four to five months.*[8]

This portrayal of causality relies on an underpinning judgement of what is good behaviour for youth: to be active, take entrepreneurial risks, display willingness to work hard in the present for a better future and to overcome structural barriers of high unemployment.

However, in the context of northern Uganda's post-conflict life, idleness might be more than just an expression of an economically deprived region with few opportunities for youth. Reinterpreting idleness as a sensible weighing of risks and payoffs allows us to gain broader insights into the challenges of moving on from a post-conflict setting.

In a post-conflict environment, recovery efforts often implicitly suggest the need for individual action. Programmes tend to emphasise the need to make individual behavioural choices and for those choices to be beneficial for broader programmatic aims of recovery.

Such aims could be for individuals and communities to become enterprising (to allow economic development driven by individual choices), resilient and self-sufficient. Often, overcoming idleness is inadvertently portrayed as the secret missing ingredient to conquer real and perceived obstacles: if only people made good individual choices, recovery would follow.

This suggests that making such choices is down to the individual's willingness and ability to overcome a damaging legacy, seeking to counter a generation's experience of growing up on humanitarian provisions.

> Often, overcoming idleness is inadvertently portrayed as the secret missing ingredient to conquer real and perceived obstacles

But individual behaviour change is not that easy and does not so readily contribute to changes for a group. A number of questions remain: is the willingness to contribute to post-conflict recovery expressed only through activity? Is the ability to do so simply a question of personal characteristics or is it more broadly rooted in group behaviour?

Northern Ugandans often talk about how they lack choices or a voice in what happens to them in relation to how they are treated by government, international NGOs, or with regard to their current situation. For example, respondents talked about development programmes that were implemented without community consultation. Individuals often mention being at the receiving end of failing administrative processes without access to recourse. Some feel at the whim of someone else, and are experiencing the knock-on effects of this. One teacher explained his heavy drinking with the fact that he had not been paid for a whole year and getting drunk was his only way of dealing with this:

> *Sometime I may take alcohol and become even more stupid... So sometimes the problem also arises from the local government, because they employ people and do not pay them.*[9]

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7   Acholi leader 1.
8   Acholi leader 2.
9   Male teacher 1.

These various insights express a dilemma that is very real to people every day: in many ways, they are not able to take responsibility for their situation since it hinges on so many other variables. In other ways, seeking to change a situation also expresses responsibility and agency, which in this context is particularly tricky.

The notion of agency is a thorny issue in northern Uganda. During the war, agency of the northern population was contested: did people join the LRA voluntarily? Were they victims of abductions? Was there a middle ground? Can children be seen as having agency if they participated in violence (Akello *et al.*, 2006)? Joining the rebels in the past was in some cases also an expression of agency. It was a way to, for example, take revenge for having seen family members killed at the hands of the government army: 'They will say what can I do, they would join Kony to take revenge – kill as their family members were killed.'[10] Issues of agency are also at the centre of the International Criminal Court trial of LRA commander Dominic Ongwen (Baines, 2009). Whether or not his prosecutors can prove agency will be the deciding factor in whether or not Ongwen is found guilty of crimes against humanity.

With such a contested history of who pursued what kind of initiative during the war, taking a risk now by developing initiative might feel threatening for some. In post-war northern Uganda, claiming agency might come across as reminiscent of having had agency during war in supporting or even joining the rebels. Even expressing agency today might mean taking a risk. Showing ability to do something could easily be construed as taking responsibility which is still experienced as a high-risk strategy because, in the past, the experience of risk-taking was not positive. In post-conflict northern Uganda, this history and current developments mean that it is not always very clear which risks are good risks to take.

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10 Female lab participant 2.

3 What are risky and risk-averse behaviours in post-conflict recovery?

The discourse on post-conflict recovery implies that it requires change and that such change needs to come from those affected by the conflict, rather than the conflict parties. To achieve such change, it is suggested that individuals need to take risks, such as starting a business, defying social norms or breaking traditions (which carries a social and reputational risk). These are considered good risks by development actors – in fact, they would often not even be articulated as risks. Development discourse also emphasises the need to take risks as part of an entrepreneurial mindset; however, it is a crucial question whether the notion that a post-conflict population is a group of 'entrepreneurs in waiting' is useful (Mallett *et al.*, 2016).

There are a number of risks that are clearly judged as bad, such as taking risks in gambling, engaging in casual sex, drinking or drug abuse, or establishing material relationships based on transactional sex.[11] Sometimes, whether entrepreneurial risks are considered good or bad depends on the outcome: a business endeavour that promised high profits in return for the investment of a family's savings becomes a manageable risk if it pays off and reckless if it does not.[12]

Risk management is part of everyday life, for big and small decisions made by individuals and communities. It is also informed by the social norms and perceptions of other people's behaviour and risk management. Some respondents expressed dismay at their peers' risk-management approaches and linked these to a lack of knowledge. One respondent explained that in the regions in the north where wealth was considered with less care, valuable animals such as cows or goats cross the street without an owner present. Managing risk better would mean crossing the road at the same time as the animals to protect the wealth invested in the animals from being hit by a car.[13] Lack of such careful consideration of risk and mitigation strategies was explained by lack of exposure: '[People] have not been exposed to good things, they have always been living here. They have not seen how other people are living.'[14]

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11 Male lab participant 1.
12 This resonates with our findings on perceptions of fairness being driven by outcomes. See: Amanela *et al.* (2020a).
13 Male lab participant 2.
14 Female lab participant 1.

3.1 Time and risk preference: is idleness really doing nothing?

How do people in northern Uganda weigh their options of how best to achieve good outcomes for their lives in an acceptable time frame and with acceptable risks? To do this requires a consideration of time: people will need to assess whether an action taken today will give them a good payoff now (which is what they might urgently need) or whether it is a good investment for the future. In northern Uganda, people often attribute the lack of improvement to idleness. Fingers particularly point at young people who are not seen to invest in hard work today for payoff later (for example in agriculture or education). However, we find that, in this context, idleness (or waiting things out) might be a sensible behavioural choice for the individual, while posing a broader post-conflict reconstruction challenge.

This part of the study starts from current scholarship that suggests that exposure to conflict may induce fear of being exposed to trauma again in the future, thus creating something that is called 'hazard preparedness'. Hazard preparedness skews decisions towards acquiring assets that can easily be moved in case of unexpected events. If the theory that exposure to conflict creates hazard preparedness holds, then exposure to violence should make respondents seek immediate returns (that are more certain) over future ones (that might never come to pass due to the threat of the hazard). This then raises discount rates, meaning people discount the future as being unworthy of consideration since it might never come to pass in a positive way. Instead, they prioritise the present, as measured in experimental games (Voors *et al.*, 2012).

If this also holds true as an effect of recalling conflict (rather than being exposed to conflict), then we would expect people in the conflict mindset – the group that had been asked to recall an experience from the time of the conflict – to prioritise the present, discount the future, take very few risks to possibly gain a better payoff and seek to reap instant gratification as much as possible. We find this to be only partially true, which points us towards a broader post-conflict challenge in northern Uganda.

In accordance with these predictions of current scholarship, we find that the group in the conflict mindset is more risk-averse than the group of people who anchored their participation in the behavioural games in a more recent experience. This implies that people in the conflict mindset are less willing to pay a higher price for an uncertain higher payoff (p<0.05).

The conflict mindset did have a significant impact on discounting level when it was crossed with whether people lived in a camp or not, meaning that those who had lived in camps were more patient. People who lived in a camp and were asked to recall the conflict (conflict mindset) delayed gratification more, meaning they were more willing to wait to get their money in the future (p<0.01).

However, in this case, it is not the differences between those in the conflict mindset and those in the present mindset that offer the most insights: it is the general level of patience across the two groups.

Contrary to what we would expect to find, drawing on established theories in the literature, we observe a high level of patient behaviour in both groups: both groups are quite willing to wait for a payoff. Across all tasks, the option most often selected was the option that required more patience of respondents: people most often chose an option to get more money in the future, meaning they were less concerned about immediate benefits. Thirty-four percent of all decisions chosen had the highest time-to-patience ratio (meaning people chose the longest time available to get a higher benefit later on), while only 16 percent of all decisions showed the lowest time-to-patience ratio. Our findings might have been even stronger if we had given people the option to delay payoff further. When asked about choosing when to get paid, it was clear that some respondents would have adjusted their time preferences further if given the option to do so.

3.2 The role of cash in time and risk preferences

A good example to illustrate time preferences and risk-taking is people's relationship with cash. Dealing with cash is a prime measure for risk appetite in behavioural assessment. If people do not like to accumulate cash, then they would be more likely to choose the 'patient' option in the time-preference game because this option will give cash in the future and not now. This is something of a savings mechanism, but also highlights that cash in the present is not viewed as a valuable proposition. It is striking that we find that people tend to choose to be patient when it comes to the possibility of a future cash payout on more favourable terms – this is striking because it is not a common choice.

Cash comes with its own challenges in northern Uganda. Money in hand is desperately needed to pay for education; yet acquiring cash and holding on to it is challenging. Cash is in many ways considered more risky

than accumulating livestock: 'People here don't want to convert animals quickly to cash. They want to restock. When they want to pay fees, they sell one. But this issue of selling and keeping the cash, they rarely do,' explained one respondent.[15]

One reason why the relationship with cash continues to be treacherous is because taking credit is a precarious business, for both those giving and those receiving. For example, youth livelihood projects often involve receiving a loan, an approach that was described as 'unreasonable' in a focus group discussion since the consequences of taking such a loan could be severe: 'What... if I fail to pay it [back] and be imprisoned?'[16] Common government and NGO programmes tend to require a certain amount of risk-taking on the part of beneficiaries. However, respondents felt that these programmes put the risk squarely on the beneficiaries. A particular youth livelihood programme, for example, provides an opportunity for groups of young people to apply for funds to invest in a business project. This fund then later has to be paid back without interest. Many felt that the risk involved in taking on such a loan was too great: 'Youth projects here are meant for business and buying animals. Yet you have to pay a loan. In case the animal dies, will I have to pay the loan?'[17]

Another respondent explained that 'Youths are not coming out to benefit that programme. Because they have fear. They have heard that they have to refund the fund back, it is like loaning.'[18] One interpretation of this is that it illustrates how risk aversion can limit a community's willingness to take advantage of economic opportunities. Alternatively, however, this risk aversion could be wise and reflect an accurate judgement on the ability to pay back the loan.

Investing in agriculture was described as a solid livelihood strategy: 'You can cultivate crops and if the yield are good you can sell some... and even store some to last until the next harvesting season'.[19] Introducing a cash element, however, was not regarded the same way, as a farmer could not be sure what price the harvest will achieve:

> *Even if you get a good harvest, the price fluctuates and this does not leave you with enough money to support your family and yet it is costly to grow crops starting with land opening up to harvest.*[20]

Cash also prevented more collective action on commodity prices, as the need to raise cash for education fees stood in the way of negotiating prices jointly: 'Due to individual pressing needs like school fees, you find that one [farmer] ends up selling at a given price in order to raise school fees for the children.'[21]

We found that people who spoke most comfortably about their need to manage cash were members of saving societies – what they called self-help groups. These are groups that offer loans to their members or pay out the collective savings pot to members regularly, thus combining the need to manage cash with social networks and relationships, which seemed to be a crucial part of buffering against risks.

3.3 What do we learn from the finding that northern Ugandans are willing to wait for payoff?

Our findings point towards the phenomenon that, in general, northern Ugandans feel that taking a risk is not a smart choice, that the present underdelivers and that waiting is worthwhile. Why would northern Ugandans be so risk-averse? Psychology offers clues on how risk preferences might be affected by shocks. Lerner and Keltner (2001) suggest that, when trauma has induced feelings of anger, respondents are more likely to make optimistic risk evaluations and are more prone to choosing risky options. In contrast, when the trauma induced feelings of fear, respondents are more likely to avoid risky options.

Exploring Kenya's post-election violence, Jakiela and Ozier (2015) found that exposure to post-election violence – which presumably created fear – increased risk aversion. Similarly, Callen *et al.* (2014) found that individuals exposed to violence, when primed to recall fear, exhibited an increased preference for certainty (or aversion to risk) in Afghanistan. However, a study in Burundi found that exposure to violent conflict made people more risk-seeking (Voors *et al.*, 2012). It is therefore an open question which effect dominates, and how context changes the effect and the emotions elicited.

15   Male respondent 1.
16   Focus group 1 (conducted in Acholi): Oriang village.
17   Focus group 1 (conducted in Acholi): Oriang village.
18   Male respondent 2.
19   Female respondent 2.
20   Male respondent 3.
21   Focus group 2 (conducted in Acholi): Ayuu Alali.

In our case, fear and anger do not seem to differ too much between the conflict-mindset and the present-mindset groups. This suggests that recalling conflict may not be the driver of difference in risk responses. Again, maybe the similarities between groups are more important than the differences.

We find it more likely that we are seeing a general willingness to wait – mostly uninfluenced by recalling a conflict experience – because the experience and the expectation of waiting carries a particular meaning in northern Uganda, which shapes a particular and underappreciated quality of post-conflict life.

We posit that the experience of life in camps and the post-conflict landscape has pushed northern Ugandans towards seeing waiting as an attractive (and less risky) option. In the camps, waiting was indeed often the only option available. During the recovery period, an overwhelming experience has been that recovery did not deliver quickly on its promise of improvement. The experience of having to wait to benefit from NGO programmes is especially common in northern Uganda.

This, we think, might have contributed to a conception of time that suggests that the best use of time is to wait, as own initiative and investment of anything else but time are unlikely to bring results. Having gone through a profound experience of delayed gratification (sometimes so delayed that gratification is yet to be experienced), with little means to speed things up, it is a reasonable approach to preserve strength and optimism by not taking action – which manifests as idleness. Yet, even as a political choice, waiting is a sensible and observable strategy, as Alava and Ssentongo (2016) argue with regard to the 2016 elections.

If we relate this notion to what we see in the experimental games, we learn to see that idleness incorporates both risk and time preferences. Choosing to be idle might actually be the opposite of an idle choice. Instead, choosing to wait expresses preferences on time as a form of waiting, and risk as some unwillingness or inability to take action to bring about change. This, however, poses another puzzle: If most people choose to wait (which might look as if they are idle), why do people judge idleness as a poor choice?

4 Reinterpreting idleness as a post-conflict dilemma

Understanding that individuals tend to be more comfortable waiting, we now look at idleness in a different way. Commonly, the phenomenon of youth idleness tends to be explained as either a generational/character problem or as structural. It might still primarily be a structural problem that youth do not know how to pursue livelihoods – but our findings suggest that it is more than that. Our findings also resonate with insights from Alava (2018), who argues that Acholi youth decidedly do not view themselves as idle or 'lost' but instead use their opposition to the label of 'lost youth' to develop agency towards political participation and social change.

Idleness is a reflection of structural challenges of post-conflict reconstruction. These challenges are readily identifiable. Pursuing livelihoods is a frustrating endeavour and people repeatedly experience that their own actions have very little to do with whether or not they receive a good outcome. Further, choices are indeed limited, as one interviewee described:

> *Youth have no work. How can you [represent] something when you have no work. After school, what they know best is alcohol. If you're not doing anything, they will take alcohol and just rest. The main thing is lack of jobs.*[22]

However, this report suggests that idleness is also emblematic of post-conflict life and behaviour. It is helpful to reinterpret idleness as an outcome of time and risk preferences, rather than seeing idleness as a character flaw. Being idle might in fact be a sensible choice, given the options, experiences and perceptions of people.

Some of our respondents regarded the idleness they observed as an effect of war. In this reasoning, the war had changed people's mindsets and the older generation's frustration with the youth was not just a generational conflict but a reflection of an attitude problem among youth. Having been successful in life was automatically attributed to having been proactive, with little consideration of other factors being taken into account.

Some interviewees related this perspective on idleness to time preferences. Idleness was seen as reflecting an unwillingness to work hard today to reap future rewards. In this perspective, behavioural change away from idleness is linked with perceptions of the future and

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22 Male respondent 4.

hope: 'Most of our youth break out from school, when the parents have nothing to pay, they just go and sit. Why don't you try harder? So that your future is different from my father's?'[23]

In northern Uganda, people have experienced time and again that taking big risks does not automatically bring improvement and that waiting is part of life. Thus, avoiding such ruptures may be a sensible choice, rather than an expression of lack of engagement. Hewson (2010) argues that, in understanding agency, it is necessary to take into account how people judge the possible consequences of their actions: Not doing something might thus be just as strong an expression of agency as taking action.

4.1 Waiting as a characteristic of post-conflict life

Life in post-conflict northern Uganda is experienced as full of waiting. As one interviewee put it: 'Here we are always put on hold.'[24] A key question is whether the strategy to succumb to waiting is an expression of lessons learned, whether it reflects a high degree of patience (as suggested by the experimental games) or whether it is due to a lack of viable alternatives.

Some people wait for changes; others are still waiting for a final conclusion to the war itself. Qualitative data supports the idea that a particular aspect of the conflict experience – that of living in internal displacement camps – can alter people's time preferences. One respondent explained that:

people can only feel that this war is really over when the LRA surrenders or maybe when the peace talks resume and they put some kind of condition and they are welcomed back. But as long as they hear they are still there in another country, they still think they can commit atrocities. So people will only believe that this war is really over when they come back and they seek amnesty. It will never happen. So people are waiting, they do their work, they know there is relative peace and they feel like they are on a long vacation from the LRA but they still think anything can happen and spoil that.[25]

The same interviewee described how this indefiniteness also influences behaviour, perhaps towards a form of risk aversion:

It leaves that question hanging at the back of my mind. What if? Will I go back to life as IDP? That question also affects the way people behave and carry out their activities and plan their lives. And it has led many to also buy land in other places, you will find across from Karumba, it is only Acholi people who farm. And others have chosen to stay there because of that thinking of 'what if'? What happens if something happens again? So that kind of thinking will also have contributed to that behaviour. In case anything happens, I can go with my family there.[26]

For some, idle attitudes are related to the dependencies that living in camp creates, which is seen to have created a permanent mindset shift: 'Because when we are taking in the camp, we stayed, there and the children born there they were just being fed like chicken, so now they cannot do any work. They drink, they are redundant.'[27] In general, when interviewees talked about the past conflict and its legacy, day-to-day life in camps was a prominent theme. The experience of camp life may provide a most enduring mental legacy of conflict, perhaps more than exposure to violence.

Long memories were common, not just of promises made, but also recalling fonder times. As one elderly interviewee put it: 'In the 1960s things were ok.'[28] One individual was still waiting for his land to be ploughed, as promised by the local authorities in 2007.[29] In fact, waiting for action from the local authorities was a major part of everyday experience. Another was waiting for the fulfilment of a promise that cattle stolen in 1986 would be restocked.[30] One respondent highlighted that many people carried dates in their minds when they were expecting a promise to be fulfilled, for example by an NGO: 'Every day they would wait and [the promiser] would not come. And people remember broken promises for a long time.' Often, the date for the promise was not fixed, making waiting indefinite: 'When follow-up is made, you are told to hold on and wait until I don't know when.'[31] Eventually, this leads to disengagement because, at some point, waiting no longer seems

23 Acholi leader 1.
24 Focus group 3 (conducted in Acholi): Dog Tangi.
25 Religious leader 1.
26 Religious leader 1.
27 Female respondent 3.

28 Female respondent 3.
29 Religious leader 2.
30 Male local authority 1.
31 Female respondent 4.

like a fair choice: 'that is why the people give up'.[32] Dissatisfaction culminates in disengagement:

> *I do not normally attend to the village meetings because it is a waste of time on my part since nothing productive comes out of it. Normally they are told to wait, hold on and for how long?'*[33]

It was also often noted how this state of permanent waiting is encouraged by authorities:

> *when follow-up is made, we are always told to be patient and wait because government programmes take time to materialise. What if it comes when some of the people who designed it are dead? What benefit shall it bring?*[34]

Another interviewee summed up this common experience: 'The only result given by the chairman was to be patient and wait.'[35]

We find from our research that waiting is considered fair, and also that linking an experience to the memory of conflict creates higher standards of what is considered fair (Amanela *et al.*, 2020c). When these two insights are combined, it follows that it might be a huge challenge to engage people in a programme, after waiting for a long time, on the basis that they think the programme is fair.

4.2   Waiting for a better future

How people spoke about the future, and their expectations for it, can provide insights into behavioural results on time preferences and a more general theme of waiting. Expectations for the future were broadly pessimistic. Most frequently, expectations, be they positive or negative, revolved around access to education. One interviewee reflected a common view, describing how she was 'not hopeful at all for the future because children are not going to school'.[36] Future expectations also commonly depended on health issues,[37] security fears,[38] smaller crop yields[39] and political changes.[40]

Multiple interviewees described the future in the language of a necessary personal struggle. Many, however, described their future as being in the hands of someone else – individuals who had helped in the past, the

government or their broader community. These perceptions of a future determined by the action of others may reinforce the experience of permanent waiting.

While waiting more often was seen as the only resort, occasionally there was understanding that it was necessary and an active choice: 'If it has not reached the Acholi, it means it will in the future. Even she has not received, but sometime in the future she will get or the child will get.'[41] Sometimes waiting was explicitly strategic, for example when a farmer waited to sell their produce at a better price.[42]

Most often, waiting appears less as a strategic choice to see issues addressed by others, but the default option when it is not plausible to take other action to address an issue. When communities expressed choosing waiting as a strategy, it often reflected a lack of belief in their ability to bring about change – as well as a safety precaution. Both concerns are probably well-founded:

> *They would not protest, because the sub-county are refusing them. They just stay relaxed. Staying relaxed doesn't mean they are protesting. They can't go and shout at the office at the sub-county level, it is better they stay on their hands.*[43]

4.3   When do people choose not to be idle?

Idle youth was regularly cited as a problem – with youth being considered as idle, too, if they had been working in the field all day but had not activity to return to. Expectations for youth activities – such as a meeting place for playing football or music – were often phrased as a government responsibility.[44] Others, however, have taken what they call a 'self-help' approach, with groups coming together every week:

> *and then we sit together and during that sitting we always make some small contribution. To qualify as a member you have to contribute a membership fee, and also we are doing the routine saving of money, it is like a village saving and loan association. We are about 40 in numbers, majority are women. We have formed the group with the aim of empowering them and to business because from your saving you also borrow with interest. And the way they started the*

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32   Male lab participant 3.
33   Female respondent 5.
34   Female respondent 4.
35   Male respondent 5.

36   Male respondent 6.
37   Female respondent 6.
38   Female respondent 7.
39   Female respondent 4.

40   Male lab participant 3.
41   Male respondent 6.
42   Male respondent 7.
43   Male respondent 8.

44   Male respondent 1.

composition was to give treatment to the post-war, because we found out there are a lot of psychological problems, like post-traumatic, and we have seen that if people are in the group, you can share ideas and if something is not going well, the group members can come and support. If you lost your dear ones, there is emergency contribution here and from that pool we will help that person.[45]

However, other respondents also argued that the youth are the ones who pull together in times of community needs:

When a calamity like death befall the community, it is the youth who give a helping hand like organising the burial and all its arrangement... The youths also engage in football that they play here, sub-county, even if they have been elected to play at district level.[46]

Sometimes, dissatisfaction with waiting for external support leads to a call to action. A midwife described that when it comes to medical supplies: 'We are always waiting for what we have requested. We can't just sit and relax and wait for our voice to make change, we have to request people buy the products themselves.'[47]

We also see that the experience of action-taking is different across genders. It might be that women are more natural decision-makers, but their ability to make decisions is constrained by cultural norms. Women often described men as being particularly prone to not taking action and saw it as a result of not being able to deal with the impact of the war and with rapidly changing livelihood needs and expectations.[48] Women highlighted

that finding ways to make ends meet, to develop a sense of self-worth, to provide and to not be violent towards their partners seemed to be particular challenges for men. When asking why women felt more anxious about the future, one respondent explained that men were the decision-makers and thus felt they had more agency over what was to come, which made them more optimistic.[49] Another interviewee illustrated how important agency and a sense of self-control are for hope:

The men who say their future is better than the women because they are the decision-makers. The women will follow their decision. Once they say we erect our huts here, the women should not dispute. That is why men say their future is better.[50]

In some cases, community action is taken as far as possible, until a point is reached where people feel they can do no more without external support. At this point, waiting is all that remains.

The government come up with a programme that they want to give back the animals collected by those [cattle raiders]. Up to this present we have collected the names, the numbers of the cattle, taken by each person. Up to this day, the government did not report any, or they did not bring back those cattle, but up to this these people have failed with the money also. When we want your cattle to be given, you give the form for photocopying. Up to this time, these people are waiting... Up to this time, the cattle is not there, But the list is there.[51]

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45 Focus group 4: Palabek.
46 Male respondent 9.
47 Male respondent 4.
48 Female respondent 3.
49 Male respondent 8.
50 Male respondent 8.
51 Male local authority 1.

5   How do group identity and notions of good behaviour relate to how people evaluate risks?

We see in our behavioural experiment that there is a tendency to wait, rather than taking the risk of action now. This would suggest that waiting is considered an acceptable response to a challenging situation. Yet when self-signifying their own experiences during the storytelling part of our research, far more people signalled that, in their experiences, other people had been too 'timid' and did not take enough risk (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Self-signification of people being timid or taking risks

In your example, people are …
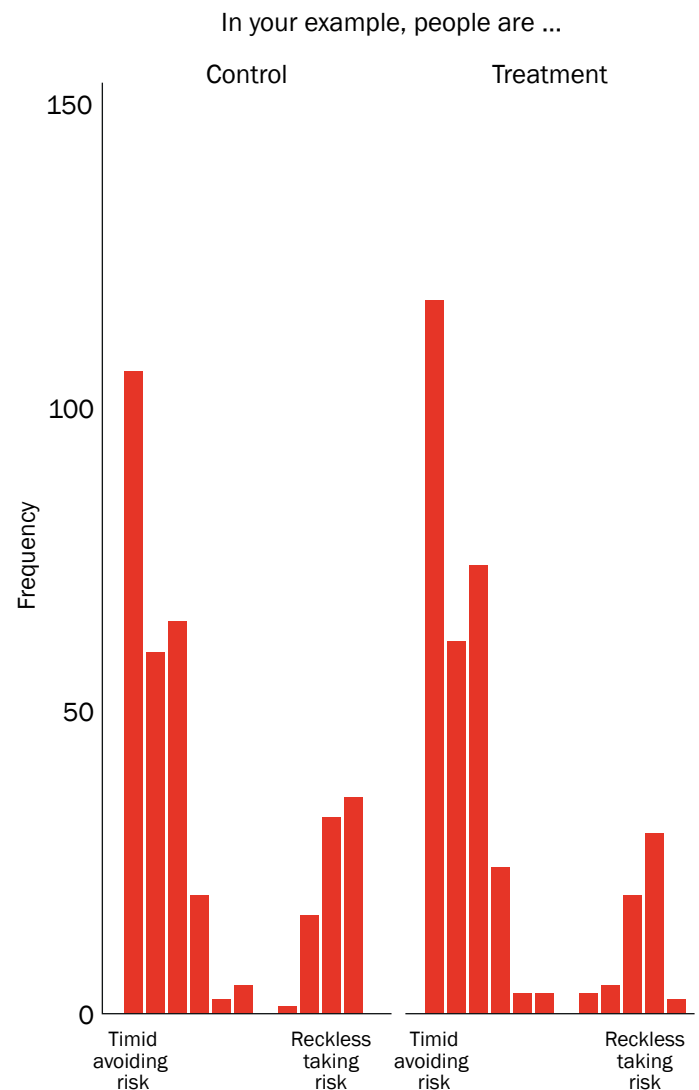
Yet, we do not necessarily find this to be the case. In the self-signification exercise, being timid was associated with negative emotions (distressed, upset), as frequently as these emotions were associated with risk-taking (Table 1). In open-ended interviews, we often heard that turning to certainty and avoiding what were felt to be good risks was generally considered a poor character

trait in people and judged accordingly. Waiting and lack of taking action and risks was often described using negative attributes such as timidity, laziness and passiveness, expressed in people's 'waiting for opportunities to appear'. Participants in the conflict mindset pointed significantly more towards other people's timidity as a challenging characteristic ($p<0.05$). Thus, even though the default option seems to be to choose to wait, it is not an option that people experience as positive. This creates a difficult cycle where the only viable option available is one that is not considered good, thus highlighting the absence of positive options.

This tells us that there is a group notion that people ought to take more risks and yet, individually, they tend not to. There is a gap between the injunctive norm – what people feel is the right thing to do, in this case

Table 1: Emotions associated with risk-taking

Number of participants self-signifying story by emotion, risk

Emotion	Self-signification: Timid	Self-signification: Reckless
Interested	35	6
Distressed	134	39
Excited	83	19
Upset	228	56
Strong	51	20
Guilty	11	3
Enthusiastic	63	13
Scared	79	37
Proud	13	15
Hostile	32	18
Alert	37	5
Irritable	67	12
Inspired	40	8
Ashamed	13	11
Determined	55	7
Nervous	23	4
Attentive	11	5
Jittery	22	4
Active	7	2
Afraid	17	8

taking risks – and the most common actual behaviour – lack of risk-taking. An obvious explanation is that there are structural constraints on an individual's ability to take action. From our research, we suggest this also stems from a particular quality of post-conflict life in northern Uganda, characterised by a tendency to wait and to avoid individual risk-taking. Although people might collectively agree that *someone* should take risks, they may not be the one willing to actually take these risks, and break away from the group's descriptive norm.

Individual risk-taking, however, is particularly difficult in an environment where war has changed existing support mechanisms. We find that stories of the conflict are often linked to feelings of being unable to do anything about one's situation and experiencing others as unable to do anything either. The most striking manifestation of this is that people talking about the conflict were less likely to identify those closest to them (such as grandparents, parents, self, peers and friends) as having any power to make things better or worse.

Such failures are then added to a long list of disappointments: land wrangles between families, broken promises to pay for education, administrative let-downs in schools and after exams taken that create a waiting period of a few years for something as simple as exam results.

Some of these disappointments show up the link between, on the one hand, initiative and ability to take action, and, on the other hand, tradition. For example, many respondents talked about their troubles over land ownership, often within the same family. These troubles challenge traditional ways of passing on land within families and curtail the opportunities to use land for livelihoods for those at the receiving end of such wrangles. The realisation is often that taking initiative to maintain family land has not paid off. One respondent said that, after the death of his father:

> the issue of land is now becoming very hard for me. [My relatives] want to remove my father's land. And they are forcing me to move away from where my father is staying... I do not know why this kind of thing is happening. Sometimes I feel like I used to think during the night 'Why did I come back home? I should have stayed in Kampala up to now.'[52]

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52 Male respondent 10.

5.1   Individual struggles for a better future

While much improvement is expected to come from better group representation, the everyday experience of taking risks to improve the future is a very personal one. It is in these personal experiences that the tension between perceptions of what is considered the norm of good behaviour, and the individual response to this, is lived.

We see that the group norm is that people ought to take risk and seek to improve their lives, and yet individually they often do not – thus, once again, individual and group actions, perspectives and behaviours diverge. One reason might be that living a precarious economic existence – expecting things to get worse at any moment – means that there is no way to take advantage of an opportunity unless one can be absolutely certain that there would not be a drawback. Some respondents, for example, described current livelihoods and entrepreneurial programmes as paralysing, rather than empowering. If they had taken a loan to start a business, they were often not able to track if they were handling this risk correctly: They had no way of reliably examining whether they were on track to fulfil their loan obligations through a successful business undertaking.[53]

Relying on government help is equally precarious, or, as experience has shown, a futile strategy. While the experience that government cannot be relied upon fuels disappointment and discontent, it does have implications for people resorting to idleness. Post-conflict recovery is a hugely contradictory experience in the particular relationship between a post-conflict environment that still sees itself as marginalised, a government whose efforts at addressing that marginalisation have not been effective, and a general experience that things improve very slowly overall and often very little for individuals.

Some respondents described how what looks like idleness is in fact a conscious choice to express agency through withdrawal. This seems to be particularly the case when it comes to political expression, following what Alava and Ssentongo (2016) have also argued.

> *Protesting is not an option in this country because even if you are protesting right now, the government can spend 800 million on one person, they will bring a truck full of teargas. The community knows it's not an option. Maybe another way of protesting is to not participate. Because what is happening now is me and my family, can I afford my daily bread, are they going to school? Anything outside that is luck. In the next few years, protest is not an option, but it is the thing that bad leaders are elected by good people who do not vote. People stop participating in elections. Because it is like you are giving an opportunity to somebody to scale a new height of which that persons will not look back. This is the ladder which took me there. So low responses to government programmes [will be normal] in the next few years if the status quo remains.[54]*

Disconnecting from initiatives that might promise change is a reasonable option on the basis of this experience. One respondent described his unwillingness to pursue development:

> *For the future I think that for the government programme, we just leave. So we resolve to our normal work [of farming]... you can make your own decision. You can be happy because when you make your own decision so you can after achieving the goal, you will be happy.[55]*

However, this respondent immediately qualified this insight by noting that withdrawal from processes also cut off benefits of being a member of a group: 'Because being independent at time is also not good.'[56]

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53 Male lab participant 4.   54 Male respondent 11.   55 Male local authority 1.   56 Male local authority 1.

6 Conclusion: idleness as a behavioural strategy and programmatic challenge

Idleness is often mentioned as one of northern Uganda's great challenges. We found through a combination of behavioural games, self-signifying of stories and qualitative research that idleness might in reality be a sensible behavioural choice to deal with the structural and political post-conflict situation in northern Uganda – and yet people's lack of risk-taking and initiative contributes to making it more difficult to improve the situation. We thus encounter a situation in which people are both producers as well as a product of their social system (Bandura, 2001).

We know that an understanding of how people make choices in the present to influence their futures is a crucial aspect of post-conflict recovery. It may be in the nature of post-conflict life that escaping the behaviours that served people best during the conflict – such as waiting in the displacement camps – is challenging, thus making recovery much more difficult.

If we thus consider idleness as a sensible behavioural choice, post-conflict recovery faces an added challenge. Hope that things will improve is a crucial part of post-conflict life and waiting is a good expression of hope in this context. Yet the actual experience of waiting is expressed as a lack of action and, seemingly, agency. To break that cycle, taking action needs to be made worthwhile, while also bringing in actual benefits or changes to the situation that would establish an experience of recovery, inclusion and change.

Much of post-conflict development policy focuses on the need to revive the economy and increase livelihoods opportunities for people in communities affected by the conflict, as well as shifting harmful social norms. However, in many cases, programmes revolve around the need for individuals to take on monetary risk (such as accessing credit, spending time / money working on a new business venture) or social risk (showing agency by going against established expectations of behaviour). As we find that those individuals in the conflict treatment group are more likely to exhibit risk-averse preferences, does this mean that such programmes are bound to fail? Perhaps.

Risk aversion is a complex and contradictory experience in post-conflict northern Uganda. Generally speaking, respondents experience 'risky' behaviour as negative, which is a stance likely rooted in the experience that payoffs are rare and losing out after a risk taken can have catastrophic livelihood consequences. Yet, there is a general consensus that, for development to happen (or, in the case of northern Uganda, for post-conflict improvements to become noticeable), some risk-taking is

necessary. When people are too risk-averse (which is also the case for people living in extreme poverty), they are less likely to invest in the future if the outcomes are uncertain.

Being risk-seeking is linked to entrepreneurship, migration and other decisions that may not bring benefits immediately or with full certainty, but might be more beneficial in the long run and are thus important to improve the lives of individuals or communities. Indeed, the notion of development is built on the need for risk taking; yet this sits at odds with the post-conflict need for stability and the cultural understanding that 'waiting' is part of life and is good, patient behaviour. In northern Uganda, there is also a tension between being risk-seeking and the need for stability and collaborative behaviour. Are collaboration and more individualistic risk-taking possible at the same time?

However, perhaps the findings on waiting and risk-taking help shine light on what acceptable levels of risk may be in post-conflict societies. What we may label as risk aversion may actually be a means of social insurance and pragmatic political and economic calculus. To encourage taking sensible developmental and political risks, policy-makers ought to look at the reasons for risk aversion. Is it due to the fact that there is no experience or reality of manageable risk? Many programmes in post-conflict settings are imagined to offer acceptable levels of risk, with the idea that people will take on the risk in order to gain the award. Yet it is not clear from our findings whether, in the case of northern Uganda, there is a shared sense that taking certain risks is a worthwhile investment – and some political risks might simply be too risky in the current situation. In fact, what we see points towards a lack of belief that taking a risk is worthwhile, or – further – that there is a deeper cultural and moral belief that risks are to be avoided.

Much behavioural research points towards the need to 'nudge' people towards behaviour that is considered

> **Being risk-seeking can be more beneficial in the long run and is therefore important in improving the lives of individuals and communities**

more beneficial for long-term development. This notion of 'nudging' is not in itself a benign one: President Museveni's speeches, for example, in which he perpetuates negative stereotypes and discourse on the Acholi might contribute to a negative self-image of the Acholi, but certainly positions an entire part of the country as inferior to the rest (Alava, 2019). However, when it comes to nudging attitudes towards more risk-taking, such an approach might be misplaced since it is not clear what behaviour should be nudged towards – what is the culturally and contextually appropriate attitude to risk that supports reconstruction? What are manageable and acceptable risks for people? Are they risks over which they feel they have some agency? Agency needs to be considered differently in the northern Ugandan context. With a population infused by the memory of the complete lack of agency in camp life,[57] often able to express agency only by joining the rebels, the expectation of agency as a driver of development is controversial and contradictory.

People designing programmes need to consider that waiting might be a strategic choice, but that it does have possible negative implications they might be able to counter. If beneficiaries' default behaviour is that they are waiting for one issue to be resolved for them before they engage in another activity that could improve their lives, this lack of engagement might be a sensible way to preserve time and energy. However, it might also mean that they are inadvertently contributing to their own experience of slow recovery, as they miss out on contributing to a design that might better develop a feeling of inclusion and fairness for them. Without this early-design-state say in how a programme might be delivered, they might feel excluded. The programme then fails to help overcome the strategic choice of waiting, recreating a cycle of disillusionment, waiting and the perception and experience of exclusion.

This points towards a minimum need for programme design: it makes promising benefits that are not guaranteed, or might be very delayed, a red flag, since such promises act as unhelpful behavioural nudges. Benefits that are expected and not received seem to create extra barriers for people to develop initiative in other parts of their lives, as they may have counted on a particular benefit as an impetus to their own initiative or to help them overcome feelings of being owed. Good programme design requires factoring in small wins at the start. This allows a positive experience, which enables trust to grow and agency to be experienced as active.

57 Female respondent 1.

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