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Post-conflict initiatives and the exclusion of conflict-affected young people in northern Uganda*

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ABSTRACT

Young people are among the most severely impacted by conflict and as such many post-conflict initiatives are aimed at assisting them. Yet the impacts of these initiatives on young people's ability to successfully overcome the adversity they faced during conflict are not fully understood. This paper attempts to examine these impacts by conceptualising post-conflict initiatives as enmeshed within young people's social environments. It argues that post-conflict initiatives are intimately connected to broader processes of exclusion from social systems such as the family. While these systems had previously served to protect young people against adversity, conflict and post-conflict initiatives have disrupted their ability to continue this mission. In particular, the structure and function of the family system are examined to demonstrate the types of disruptions that have taken place that have ultimately negatively impacted the landscape in which young people develop.

Keywords: Youth, post-conflict initiatives, youth exclusion, Northern Uganda.

INTRODUCTION

Children and youth are some of the most severely affected by armed conflict and are increasingly the focus of global initiatives attempting to help rebuild war torn societies. Examples of such initiatives include UNICEF's 'Right to Play' initiative in war-affected regions, WarChild's efforts to restore a child's right to education after conflict and Save the Children's commitment to building post-war child-friendly spaces. In 2012 one video garnered widespread support for post-conflict work in Uganda by highlighting the plight of thousands

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of children who had fallen victim to the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in northern Uganda. This video, heavily dosed with emotional images, heartfelt dialogue, and easy to engage calls to action, succeeded in captivating audiences across the globe and raised millions of dollars for the region. In essence, the Kony 2012 viral video contributed significantly to a global discussion about what happens to the young people that are caught in the depths of war and conflict. This discussion affords an opportune moment to further examine the effectiveness of the humanitarian and development initiatives that flocked to the region in the aftermath of the conflict.

This paper questions the extent to which such initiatives, including but not limited to those motivated or influenced by Kony 2012, have assisted conflict-affected young people (CAYP) to overcome adversity. It acknowledges that much literature focuses primarily on the challenges young people face (see Apio 2008; Onono 2013; Ladisch 2015, for examples) and extends the conversation by investigating the *environments* within which young people exist. Theories of social ecology and resilience are used to stress the importance of an individual's environments to their capacity to overcome challenges or adversity. The role of the family is highlighted to showcase not only the challenges within the family system itself, but how the family system is also embroiled within broader changes to social environments and impacts of post-conflict initiatives. The concept of family used reflects Mergelsberg's (2012) description of Acholi village life and the homestead. In examining IDP camps in Pabbo, northern Uganda, Mergelsberg (2012: 67–8) states that pre-displacement Acholi homesteads are remembered as spaces of order, accountability, respect, and of a shared, common identity with neighbouring families. In this sense the 'family' is a marker of the larger community and extended family that in turn has intimate connections to social life and community. I will highlight how the conflict and post-conflict initiatives have impacted the degree to which this family environment is either conducive to a sense of belonging or facilitates exclusions. As Stewart (2017) argues, a strong sense of belonging is central to the Acholi post-war efforts to reclaim the physical spaces that had been affected by the violence and upheaval of conflict. Belonging is therefore intimately connected to the ability of young people in northern Uganda to overcome the challenges of a post-war context. In focusing on belonging, I first argue that the conflict itself has disrupted the protective capabilities of the family system. Second, without denying the positive impacts that post-conflict initiatives have had, I argue that many such initiatives have been unable to remedy these disruptions. Third, I argue that the impact of the conflict and post-conflict initiatives has created various exclusions of conflict-affected young people and that these exclusions are antithetical to a strong sense of belonging.

CONTEXT

The violence that plagued the northern regions of Uganda for more than two decades came in large part as a response to years of disenfranchisement and marginalisation from the political centre that was exacerbated under British colonial rule (Van Acker 2004; Kasaija 2008: 53). These divides worsened from 1971–1979 under Idi Amin who, wishing to expel any ethnic, political or intellectual dissidents, ravaged much of the country and targeted ethnic groups such as the Acholi of northern Uganda. Following Amin's reign, Yoweri Museveni's capture of power in 1986 was initially a welcome relief, with his inauguration bringing increased international trade, investment, and ultimately some economic stimulation to the country (Bevan 2007). Yet, while the legacy of Amin's terror began to fade from the southern regions, many northern regions failed to benefit from the renewed economic prosperity and their marginalisation continued without respite (Kisekka-Ntale 2007).

In response to this continued marginalisation, the spiritual leader Alice Lakwena began to unite people in northern Uganda in 1986 under the Holy Resistance Movement, promising to help them defeat Museveni's government. A key leader that emerged within this movement was Joseph Kony, who following the Holy Spirit's defeat in battle in 1988, rose to power and eventually formed the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). Initially Kony gained support through his promise of being a viable force to defeat the ruling government, but by the 1990s he had lost much of this support (Bevan 2007). Kony was eventually pushed into neighbouring countries by the late 1990s, where he continued to wage war until relative peace returned to northern Uganda in the years following the peace talks between 2006 and 2008 (Dunn 2010).

The regions of northern Uganda were disproportionately affected by this conflict with nearly 95% of the Acholi people being displaced, over 1.9 million living in Internally Displaced Persons camps, between 60–80,000 children being forcibly abducted, and ~3,000 children born to forced mothers (Human Rights Watch 2005; Apio 2007; Shanahan & Veale 2016). While Kony 2012 helped to stimulate widespread awareness of the conflict in northern Uganda, many organisations had already been present in the region prior to the emergence of the viral video. Among these are Akello's (2010) work with various sectors of northern Uganda's healthcare system (including international NGOs such as World Vision), Vindevogel *et al.*'s (2011) research with local care centres for returned child soldiers, and Annan & Brier's (2010) study with reception centre social workers.

With significant aid and development activity in the LRA-affected regions of northern Uganda, there is an increasing emphasis on the importance of investigating the impacts on the people that such initiatives intend to help. For example, Dolan (2009: 220) argues that 'NGOs and Inter-Governmental Organizations, who in failing to fulfill the humanitarian imperative to protect and assist, played bystander roles which at times merged with those of perpetrators'. As such, in northern Uganda 'war is being used as the guise under which to perpetrate social torture' in which innocent populations become the victims of tactics and symptoms akin to individual torture such as 'widespread violation, dread, disorientation, dependency, debilitation and humiliation' (Dolan 2009: 2). In this sense, Dolan (2009) offers an expanded view of 'perpetrators' in which humanitarian organisations are considerable actors. Branch (2011) presents similar conclusions, arguing that Western interventions in northern Uganda have undermined the efforts of Africans themselves and in some cases have entrenched the very problems they sought to resolve. Similarly, in an investigation of the challenges facing children born in captivity (CBCs), Apio (2008) contends that at the time of writing, post-conflict psycho-social support overwhelmingly targeted mothers returning from conflict at the expense of their children. These studies indicate the potentially negative (albeit often unintended) consequences that can come as a result of aid and development initiatives that follow conflict. This paper contributes to this body of knowledge by specifically examining the effects that such initiatives have on young people.

THEORY

While resilience is broadly understood as the ability of an individual to overcome adversity or significant risk, contemporary understandings stipulate that individual traits and capabilities alone cannot adequately account for a person's ability to overcome hardship. Rather, a person's environments are much more significant in influencing resiliency than has been traditionally understood (Ungar 2012). This approach to resilience encompasses three main principles: that (1) social and physical ecologies rather than inherent capabilities are of primary concern; (2) environments can either inhibit or facilitate resilience; and (3) resilience is a dynamic and interactional process (Ungar 2010, 2011, 2012). Conceptualising resilience in this way moves the conversation away from simply whether resilience is displayed amongst individuals, and towards an analysis of how it occurs in some contexts and not in others.

The concept of resilience used in this paper therefore draws on the social ecological notion that individuals interact with and are influenced by their various surrounding environments. While this notion stipulates that individuals exist within multiple, overlapping systems, the relationship between parents or caregivers and youth in particular has been found to directly impact the individual capabilities of youth (Wyman *et al.* 1992; Lynch & Cicchetti 2002; Kliewer *et al.* 2004). Yet much less is known about the impacts of conflict on this relationship. Of the research that does exist, conflict has been found to be most significant to resilience when it results in a separation of young people from their caregivers (Ressler *et al.* 1998; Levey *et al.* 2016). Given the many challenges of implementing rapid and successful family reunification for displaced families (Hepburn 2006), these relationships may not exist in a post-conflict context. Post-conflict contexts also have the unique attribute of the presence of NGOs and development workers that may alter the way social ecological systems respond to youth (Kostelny 2006).

In light of these dynamics, this paper focuses on how the family unit can foster exclusion amongst young people after conflict and how this exclusion can become a source of adversity. In this sense, belonging and exclusion are understood as central components of the social processes that are a significant aspect of reintegration (Annan *et al.* 2009, 2011). While not contradictory to reintegration, belonging (or conversely exclusion) is a facet of reintegration that is expounded on in this paper and builds on the efforts of Angucia (2010), McIntyre (2005) and Honwana (2006) to elucidate a nexus between rehabilitation, reintegration and reconciliation. This is to say that while belonging and exclusion have important ramifications for the reintegration of CAYP into their families and communities, they can also be understood as significant to the broader processes of post-conflict rehabilitation and reconciliation (as argued by Stewart 2017).

METHODS

Fieldwork for this study was conducted in Gulu, Uganda over a three-month period between September and December 2016. Given the diversity of northern Uganda, Gulu was not taken to be representative of the entire region. Rather, it was selected as an appropriate field site to provide insights into some experiences of the LRA-affected regions because of its history as the epicentre of conflict in northern Uganda, and as the heart of NGO activity following its aftermath. In 2009, 170 organisations were identified as operating in Gulu and the immediately adjacent region (Ager *et al.* 2012). As a consequence, there continues to be a high number of humanitarian, aid and development workers in the region with an abundance of knowledge and expertise regarding CAYP, their environments and the relationships between them. Participants for this project were the youth support workers from these initiatives. An important limitation is that no young people themselves were interviewed due to ethical and resource limitations. However, the insights gained from the participants in this project are significant given the focus on the environments that surround young people. Participants were able to speak to their engagement with CAYP, the challenges they face, and the environments that they themselves operate in. They therefore illuminated the more general role they play in fostering a sense of belonging or exclusion amongst CAYP. While the entry point for data collection was initially focused on initiatives that address the plight of children born in captivity specifically, interviews of this nature led to a wider reflection of the role of aid initiatives and the resilience of young people more generally. Participants acknowledged that while children born in captivity are unique in some ways, many of the challenges they face correspond to similar situations of other CAYP. Thus, the argument in this paper is in reference to a broader category of young people that includes children born in captivity, former child soldiers, and children who grew up in displacement camps, amongst others.

Academic and professional advisors in Canada provided initial contacts of people who were primarily experts in the field of youth and post-conflict studies in Canada, but also of others who were NGO workers in Uganda, many of whom had experience working for a variety of organisations and have conducted or participated in research on similar topics. Given that initial contacts were only people connected to advisors for this project in

Canada, these contacts were asked to recommend any relevant personnel in Gulu who may be interested in participating. After each subsequent interview, participants were asked to recommend any further contacts who could be useful contributors. Thus, while participants were of similar networks, this method was used in an attempt to continually widen the nexus of participants. Interviews were ~1 hour in length and were conducted with 30 participants who were both local (24) and expatriate (6) professionals working in a variety of fields to support or care for young people. Such fields included health and wellness, care for street children and orphans, education and teacher training, trauma healing and wellness activities, livelihood support, and religious or cultural support, amongst others. Many of the participants interviewed were currently or had been involved in some combination of the listed fields of service. However, the most common activity was trauma support, with 53% of initiatives explicitly offering some degree of this service. Religious and cultural support programmes and livelihood support programmes were also widely offered, with 33% and 30% of initiatives respectively offering this type of service. Following interview transcription, all interview response data were thematically coded. While initial codes identified large thematic groups, a second round of coding highlighted more specific trends within these themes in order to identify common responses and points of contestation amongst participants. To maintain confidentiality, all identifying information was removed from the transcripts and published work. Any identifying information was kept securely in a code book where it was assigned a numerical reference number (1–30). Participants are quoted using this numerical signifier.

RESULTS

The following section first details how economic and social disruptions that resulted from the conflict have limited the family's ability to absorb new members, and consequently how it has limited the ability for young people to access important resources, such as land. Second, this section argues that the family's ability to operate as a space where children experience positive relationships and learn important values and skills has been disrupted as a result not only of the conflict, but also of the conflicting agendas of post-conflict initiatives. The subsequent sections detail how these changes often originated in the conflict itself and how post-conflict initiatives have thus largely been a reaction to these changes, rather than a direct cause themselves. However, as will be demonstrated, the ability of interventions to remedy the more structural dimensions to these disruptions has been limited.

The family structure – economic and material exclusion

The relationship between family members and young people is correlated with more positive recovery following trauma, yet as will be described, young people in this study were found to be increasingly denied a space within the family structure after conflict and thus denied the potential benefits that such relationships can afford. This exclusion is significant insofar as it creates further challenges for young people to negotiate claims to the means of production in the form of land. Post-conflict initiatives have attempted to fill this void by offering livelihood support and skills training programmes. However, they face challenges in their ability to offer options that are both relevant and accessible.

Many participants pointed to economic hardships and the weakening of household economies as the most significant impact of the conflict. Reasons for this shift included the loss of life and physical assets, low productivity resulting from disruptions to education provision, and rising healthcare costs due to the widespread physical impacts of conflict (Ministry of Finance, Planning, and Economic Development 2003). The large-scale displacement that took place during the conflict also resulted in widespread contestation over land as people returned to their communities in the aftermath of the conflict (Rugadya *et al.* 2008; Hopwood 2017). This is not to say that the economic situation for many was adequate prior to conflict, but rather that the conflict placed *additional* economic strains on many households, which resulted in additional challenges for young people to negotiate their claims to the material resources needed to support themselves. Participants noted that this weakening of household economies has resulted in many young people being rejected from family structures altogether. One participant who works with an organisation aimed at empowering young girls through sport highlighted this problem in stating that 'if we strengthen household economies, improve on livelihoods, we could see many more of these children being absorbed' (P4 2016 Int.).

Other participants highlighted that economic conditions alone do not explain the changing structure of families. Rather, it is the conjunction of these conditions and the cultural norm that a child belongs chiefly to the father's family, that better explains this dynamic. For children who were born in captivity, orphaned during the conflict, or whose lineage is otherwise unclear, such ties are difficult to establish. Therefore, their place within family structures may be contested. Denov & Lakor (2017) argue that not only does this result in confusion over identity and belonging, but also in deep, longer term economic insecurity as they have nowhere to settle. Some participants in this study held a different view, arguing that historically, abandoned children would have a place within a family structure. A cultural leader described this trend as follows:

> Number one: tradition and culture say that any child with a questionable identity, for instance a child born out of wedlock which includes even children born in captivity, assumes the identity of their maternal relations unless that child is fully claimed for by the paternal relatives. … So, all these children born in captivity, born out of wedlock, born in conflict crisis, rape are absorbed in their maternal families. … The problem now is that … household economies are no longer [able to] support extra persons. (P12 2016 Int.)

This statement speaks to the exclusion of CAYP from the benefits of the formal family structure. Irrespective of whether this exclusion is a result of disruptions to the practice of culture or as a result of increasing economic strain, the ensuing result is the same as CAYP are denied rudimentary access to resources. Furthermore, as Hopwood (2013, 2015) has demonstrated, current land disputes are increasingly settled through recognition of customary communal land tenure, a type of ownership that is predicated on clan membership. For CAYP who are excluded from the family structure, such membership does not exist.

These conditions mean that the strains on the family structure are particularly detrimental to CAYP insofar as they put them in a challenging position to negotiate claims to limited material resources. Even if they are absorbed into a family, they risk being perceived as an additional demand on already limited resources, given the economic deterioration that came as a result of the conflict. If they are not absorbed into a family structure, they are left without any claim to land that is ultimately needed to secure a viable livelihood. Furthermore, Woldetsadik (2017) argues that access to land and economic resources is a significant component of societal integration. Thus, exclusion from material resources has implications for a young person's ability to integrate both materially and socially. In response to this type of exclusion, most of the initiatives that participated in this project had some component of livelihood support or training. In this sense, post-conflict initiatives represent new actors within the community that have attempted to fill a gap left by the shrinking family structure and deteriorating family resources. This role has also been noted by Omach (2016), who argues that various NGOs and grassroots groups emerged in Uganda in the 1970s and 80s to fill the void left by economic crisis and state failure. However, DENIVA (2006) argues that the legacy of aid and humanitarian activity in the country is defined by non-engagement in political advocacy due to the country's history of authoritarianism and repressive rule. Therefore, initiatives are limited in the degree to which they can advocate for political changes such as land reform and the settling of land disputes. The initiatives in this study were found to be similarly strapped by this legacy insofar as they opted for programmes that did not disrupt the underlying political tensions regarding land and resource distribution.

Instead, many programmes offered boarding school style vocational training, short-term livelihood support programmes, and more general rehabilitation programmes with vocational or skills training components. These types of programmes included hairdressing, tailoring, bead and jewellery making, mechanics and motor repair, and pig and quail egg farming amongst others. Such initiatives are important insofar as they help young people learn skills that may allow them to earn at a minimum a basic income in the absence of a strong household economy to support them financially. However, without tackling systemic issues surrounding land distribution, the viability of these initiatives is limited. For instance, one of the main criticisms that some participants levied against such programmes was that they do not properly equip young people for the types of predominant opportunities that are available in reality, namely, agricultural work. Similarly, others argued that the market for these types of skills is currently oversaturated and thus cannot amount to a viable livelihood. For instance, one participant stated that while their vocational school is widely popular, the students who have been the most successful are not those who have been able to utilise their skills as a vocation, but rather those who have opened their own vocational training programmes. This same participant first boasted that their institute has seen over two million graduates, only to later explain that many students are unable to use their learned skills and most return to 'digging' and agricultural work to provide for themselves. These statements thus speak to limited opportunities for youth more broadly in the sense that vocational and livelihood *training* has come to be an economic opportunity in itself. Moreover, they support the statement by Omach (2016: 92) that 'peacebuilding activities such as those aimed at building local economies and improving livelihoods are merely sedative unless efforts are made to redress the structural roots'.

Yet even as a livelihood, vocational and training-based initiatives face considerable challenges owing to limited funding opportunities. Many participants expressed a need for greater support and financial investment from the government, yet few were hopeful that this would occur, with one participant stating that 'it feels like the government has kind of left out some sectors for NGOs' (P27 2016 Int.). Another participant engaged in an economic recovery project expanded on this sentiment stating that 'the government should be the one actually doing all these activities that NGOs are doing and given its limitations if all the NGOs fold their arms then all these communities will be in shit because it's very hard for the government to implement all these activities that NGOs are doing' (P10 2016 Int.). Out of fear that their absence would lead to further hardship for those they intend to help, many participants stated that they look to external funding to maintain their initiatives. Yet, there was strong competition amongst organisations to secure finite funding and resources. Consequently, large variation existed in *how* initiatives were able to offer their services, contingent upon the level of funding they were able to secure.

One participant noted that as a result of competition for funding they were required to charge an admission fee for their services. However, this limited their ability to offer their service to people who may be in the most need given that those who require livelihood support or training are precisely those who do not have a viable source of income. Conversely, a different livelihood support programme offered its services for free in recognition that the most marginalised are not in a position to pay an admission fee. However, in order to do so they relied heavily on inconsistent and unstable volunteer support, most crucially for their psycho-social component. For those that were able to secure external funding, a common grievance was that they felt unduly tied to the priorities and objectives of the donor, irrespective of whether these were congruent with their own assessment of the types of support that were needed. Thus, young people who are excluded from the family system face a patchwork of diverse approaches, each with different tactics and degrees of accessibility. Such variability is significant given that when asked what happens to young people who are not looked after, many participants responded that they 'are just there', indicating that they may exist without a real or meaningful place in society. The lack of consistency in approach and accessibility means that some young people may be denied even the potentially inadequate support offered by NGO programmes. This denial may in turn further hinder their ability to experience even a limited sense of belonging.

In summary, livelihood support programmes are best understood within the context of limited political manoeuvrability. In order to attend to the void left by the increasing exclusion of CAYP from the family structure, initiatives have had to offer relatively inoffensive and uncontroversial programming. However, this approach creates a compound problem insofar as it curtails broader concerns over the ability to access land and contributes to a lack of consensus as to *what* should be offered and high variability in *how* programmes are offered. This is not to condemn these initiatives, but rather to highlight the significance of the context in which they are immersed and the degree to which they are able to address the underlying structural issues of exclusion. When addressed in this way the exclusion of CAYP, and the difficulty in remedying the root causes of this exclusion, become more apparent.

The family function – social and cultural exclusion

A primary function of the family is to pass on important values and skills that are necessary for members' positive and healthy functioning both as individuals and as members of a community. This section examines how this function was disrupted by the conflict vis-à-vis broader disruptions to the practice and teaching of cultural values. It demonstrates how post-conflict initiatives responded to this shift in a variety of ways, creating a multitude of different approaches being offered to CAYP. This section argues that these changes risk contributing to a lack of social embeddedness amongst young people, which in turn threatens to deepen their marginalisation and impede their ability to reintegrate into their community.

The physical dislocation as a result of internal displacement of civilians and the physical removal of those who were abducted or recruited into an armed group have impeded the ability for families to be present together as a unit and learn about important cultural values. Many participants noted this trend and argued that the conflict more generally eroded the time and space necessary to practice and learn about the Acholi culture. As one participant stated, the conflict and its effects ultimately resulted in 'a category of people who do not even know what the Acholi culture is anymore because they lived their entire life in captivity or in the camp, the traditional values and norms of the Acholi were lost, long gone' (P10 2016 Int.). This statement illustrates a broader trend within some African nations in which 'even before independence, much of the traditional social fabric and cultural meaning had been lost, and the socialisation of the young and the transmission of social capital or indigenous skills and knowledge were interrupted' (Abbink 2005: 7). While the Acholi culture (here understood in terms of the transmission of social values and norms) is significant in its role of teaching young people how to function in their own lives and in the community, the conflict in northern Uganda caused a rupture in the teaching and practicing of this culture. For instance, displacement has been found to have eroded traditional mentoring systems and cultural norms that provided cultural cohesion and guidance (Patel *et al.* 2012). However, this is not to perpetuate the notion of 'cultural violence' described by Narayan (1997) in which a lack of culture leads to negative or violent outcomes. Rather, it is to highlight that the teaching and practice of Acholi culture is significant for its influence in fostering a sense of belonging and social embeddedness amongst young people. Thus, it is not 'culture' or the lack thereof that reproduces violence, rather, a loss of culture is intertwined with broader processes of social dislocation.

Participants further noted that other negative stereotypes came to be ascribed to displaced youth. For instance, many cited a sense of 'laziness' that had been developed in the camps as people were uprooted from their lands and livelihoods to camps offering them few productive opportunities. Participants noted that people were thereby conditioned into a state of dependency on external and foreign actors where 'you wake up and you sit, you're not supposed to be outside of the protected area. So, you don't really have much to do, you're squatting in a small hut' (P20 2016 Int.) and that ultimately 'the body adapted to doing nothing and basically waiting for a handout, food or support' (P1 2016 Int.). Furthermore, the lack of economic opportunities coupled with the emotional and psychological trauma of the conflict was said to have also fuelled rising substance abuse issues within the camp. Participants noted the intergenerational effects of the conflict and their significance on the ability for families to function as a space where positive values are passed on. A religious leader and community elder stated that: 'the environment is not good for this child, the parents have a lot of problems … the environment is not healthy' (P18 2016 Int.). Moreover, for those children who were directly exposed to the conflict in their infancy, their sense of normalcy was impacted by the violence they had been exposed to. As one participant working to advance a rights-based approach to peacebuilding noted, some young people 'do not know what peace is' and 'these are the people who lived in the times of violence, they do not know that there is an opportunity where people live in peace … if they fight it is normal, if they hear people are killed it is normal because they have never lived in a situation where there is no abduction as in our time' (P3 2016 Int.). Thus, young people who grew up in a time of conflict face the additional challenge of adapting to a social environment that is far removed from what they may have experienced growing up in conflict. These challenges also risk further marginalising them from their communities if they fail to adapt to new expectations and norms.

Where a gap existed in the socialisation of young people, many service providers expressed an integral component of their role was that of teaching young people how to live in their communities. In this sense, initiatives fulfilled an objective of post-conflict education insofar as they provided 'skills and knowledge to members of a community so that they are able to understand each other and their connections with wider communities' (Dei *et al.* 2006: 14). However, the approaches to accomplishing this, and the types of cultural values being taught were varied. For some this involved an explicit focus on the Acholi culture. For example, a popular radio host held a call-in show aimed at fostering intergenerational dialogue in recognition that structured dialogue within families had been disrupted. Similarly, formal cultural institutions comprising key elders in the community, chiefs and volunteers were working to reinvigorate communities with traditions including justice mechanisms and values such as kinship and communal living.

Participants from these cultural institutions often expressed frustration in their attempts to enhance cultural knowledge as they were now in competition with new actors possessing different sets of values. As one participant working for an NGO supporting women and girls stated, 'they [NGOs] are delinking these children from the relationships that would in the long run remain supporting them, they become children of World Vision, children of Save the Children, children of UNICEF' (P20 2016 Int.). This statement highlights a negative consequence of NGOs assuming the roles of families insofar as it may further alienate young people from the family system and the broader community. In contrast, a Christian-run initiative stated that they help children 'grow spiritually' and become 'morally upright' (P11 2016 Int.), thus indicating the perspective that they are best suited to equip youth with the proper values. A second participant also providing religious support made a similar statement in asserting that 'knowing God' would help young people to become 'reformed' and be 'good children' (P17 2016 Int.). Yet, some have argued that the insertion of Christian values into northern Uganda has a history of negatively impacting reintegration efforts insofar as they can be at odds with pre-existing cultural values regarding justice and reconciliation (Akello *et al.* 2006). Conversely, a small number of participating initiatives attempted to disengage from such debates while still attempting to impart the types of lessons that cultural teachings would proscribe. Examples of this include a rope course designed to promote confidence, self-esteem and teamwork, as well as groups working with artistic means such as painting, music and dance to facilitate creativity and innovation. These approaches focused primarily on the capabilities of the individual rather than explicitly engaging with a particular cultural approach.

While these are only a handful of examples, they illustrate the highly varied arena that post-conflict initiatives operate in and contribute to. The range of available approaches is further demonstrated by conflicting opinions regarding whether specific groups of conflict-affected youth (such as those born within captivity, those born of rape, etc.) should be offered targeted programming or if they are better served by a more generalised approach. For instance, some participants argued that children such as those born in captivity face a unique stigma for their perceived association with the LRA and therefore needed focused programming specifically for them. However, others argued that many CAYP (as well as young people more broadly) face common challenges such as unemployment and poverty, and therefore generalised programming should be offered to avoid further stigmatisation and exclusion. These examples demonstrate how some functions of the family have been increasingly filled by a multitude of different actors, each with their own approach and set of values. They are also demonstrative of the arguments by Dolan (2009) and Branch (2011) that while intending to help, NGOs may inadvertently cause harm. In particular, the statements in this section have described how rather than enhancing a strong sense of belonging, the assumption of familial roles by post-conflict initiatives has resulted in the further exclusion of young people from their communities.

As noted by Ensor & Reinke (2014: 86) a vast array of approaches is significant given that:

> There are no internationally accepted criteria for the qualifications of aid workers or for the supervision of interventions, and few cases in which projects targeting children are subjected to comprehensive inspection. Most professionals who work with children (i.e. social workers, educators, lawyers, health care providers) are 'accustomed to making assumptions about the needs of children and what is best for them' (Smith 2007). Finding that the programmes established for their benefit do not always satisfy their needs, children often 'shop around' among projects in search of the best offering of the services they seek.

I have thus far attempted to extend this argument by demonstrating the potentially negative effects of a context that lends itself to 'shopping around' for services. I have highlighted how the environments within which young people exist are significant insofar as they structure the possibility of experiencing a sense of belonging. The following section details how a focus on belonging helps to highlight how changes at the structural and functional levels of the family are enmeshed within a broader dialogue concerning the role of young people after conflict.

UNBELONGING AND YOUTH AFTER CONFLICT

The argument presented thus far is that changes in the family's structure and function can contribute to a broader sense of exclusion amongst young people. The internalisation of this lack of belonging creates challenges in the ability to negotiate a strong sense of place in families and wider communities (Stewart 2017). Social exclusion is also commonly cited as a driver of insecurity and vulnerability for youth more broadly (van Kessel & Abbink 2005; Agbiboa 2015; Martuscelli & Villa 2018). In this sense, the changes that this paper has highlighted are significant to a larger discussion of the role that young people play in post-conflict contexts. In particular, exploring the types of environments in which young people exist can help to better understand the roles they take on after conflict.

There is a growing effort to highlight the positive contributions made by young people after conflict (such as Borer *et al.* 2006; Denov & Buccitelli 2013; Baines 2015). I argue that in order to develop and utilise this strength, young people must be exposed to environments that foster, or at least allow for these roles to be explored. As Berents (2015: 92) argues, dichotomous understandings of young people (as victims vs. perpetrators, or troublemakers vs. peacebuilders) run the risk of only offering reductive notions of childhood and youthhood, consequently limiting the ability to understand how young people are 'competent actors and influencers of their everyday lives'. In this sense, it is important to understand the environments that shape youth behaviour to offer a more nuanced understanding of what it means to be a young person in a post-conflict context, and how to better support their positive contributions to reconstruction efforts. To underscore the importance of a young person's environments, I turn to an individual story in which the participant was a young person who had been impacted by the conflict and experienced many of the changes that have been detailed thus far. However, in the face of such changes, the person was able to find ways to positively contribute to the community.

The story is of a young man whom I will refer to as Laurence; it is a stark example of the protective capacity of the family unit. Laurence was chosen to participate in this study given his work teaching martial arts to young people as a way to heal from the trauma of conflict. He was himself an adolescent during the conflict and as such had seen many of his close friends and relatives abducted or killed, narrowly escaping abduction himself several times. He detailed the many atrocities he had witnessed and the ways that they had profoundly (and negatively) impacted the people around him. Yet Laurence described his ability to overcome hardship as being directly correlated to support from his family. At the centre of his story were family members such as his father, uncle and grandfather who had taught him discipline, compassion and generosity. For instance, when asked how he had been able to make positive contributions to his community after the conflict, he stated that it was a result of his parents and his attempts to emulate them and their behaviour. He also described the many times he moved between towns during the conflict as his family sought to shield him from its worst effects. Laurence described moving between various places and living with different family members as his own parents fell ill and were unable to care for him and his siblings. In this sense, regardless of whether the primary caregiver was his own parents, uncle or his grandfather, Laurence explained that there was always a place for him in a family unit.

This example demonstrates the strong capacity that young people have for contributing to positive reconstruction when exposed to the environments that help to facilitate this behaviour. However, the ability to do so is centred on a strong sense of place and belonging, an aspect that has been impeded by the conflict and the ensuing responses. This is not to say that post-conflict initiatives have created this condition. Rather, it is to say that these initiatives were tasked with remedying issues far outside their abilities. To rectify a lack of belonging would be to engage with the political and economic marginalisation of the northern region, as well as the cultural institutions of the Acholi. For instance, this paper has argued that access to land and economic resources has significant impacts on belonging and exclusion. However, to address this challenge necessitates engaging with the complex historical and political roots of land distribution in northern Uganda (as described by Hopwood 2013, 2015, 2017). Similarly, as Mergelsberg (2012) highlights, local efforts of culturally significant social control may be irreconcilable with the human rights-based approaches of NGOs. He notes that discussions of displacement often reference a loss of culture, yet there is a lack of consensus on how to re-establish Acholi culture in practice. As such, while 'NGOs have enthusiastically embraced a discourse on the need of restoring Acholi traditions, assuming somewhat naively that this corresponds with their ideas of positive values … People's concerns often referred to the need to control their families and the ways through which they attempted to regain this control could be quite violent' (Mergelsberg 2012: 78). Thus, addressing the structural foundations of meaningful change may fall outside of the objective and apolitical nature that is characteristic of post-conflict initiatives. It is therefore less helpful to view these initiatives as either a success or failure, and more productive to illuminate the more general role they play in combating or fostering the sense of belonging that I have identified as critical to both young people and the region more broadly in recovering from conflict.

While only one example, this story is consistent with similar findings elsewhere. For example, Levey *et al.* (2018) provide an in-depth analysis of stories from two girls in post-conflict Liberia. In examining the factors that enable youth to reclaim a sense of agency and return to relative normality, the authors pay particular attention to the ways that the family relationships mediated their behaviours. While in some instances these relationships gave rise to negative outcomes, there are numerous positive outcomes that these relationships facilitated. For example, one participant started an organisation to look after other girls just as her mother had cared for her; she drew on the emotional support of her 'play mother' to help heal from the trauma of conflict, and stressed how support from her uncle helped her foster a sense of independence. Similarly, the authors note how the second participant highlighted her relationship with her mother as an important site of safety and protection that helped her understand and express her own vulnerability. In a study of how youth agency is institutionalised in Ghana, Coe (2012) highlights how a sense of place and belonging helps young people claim a positive national role for themselves. By drawing on the public roles afforded to them by Charismatic Christianity, and through the medium of school cultural competitions, young people were able to vocalise their concerns and the challenges they faced in a positive and constructive manner. Lastly, Bau (2014: 122) has found that particular research methods such as participatory photography and videography are useful tools for positive social change after conflict given their ability to 'contribute to re-establishing relationships and creating a shared understanding of the conflict, while building the view of an interconnected future among opposing groups'. Together, these examples reinforce the importance of an individual's environments and moreover, the sense of social cohesion and belonging that these environments can foster in how they respond to adverse conditions such as conflict.

CONCLUSION

This paper has demonstrated the disruptions that have occurred at the level of the family as a result of the conflict in northern Uganda, and some of the responses by post-conflict initiatives. It has shown the changes in terms of both the structure and the function of the family and how both have contributed to a lack of belonging amongst young people. This is significant for the ramifications it has on young people's ability to positively contribute to peacebuilding and reconstruction efforts. Rather than evaluating post-conflict initiatives, this paper has paid particular attention to disruptions to the traditions of social support more broadly that post-conflict initiatives were tasked with remedying.

Ultimately, this paper has sought to draw on a social ecological approach to youth resilience and the role of youth in a post-conflict context to present the case for placing a young person's environments at the centre of understanding their ability to not only overcome the adversity of conflict but also to affect positive social change. In her study of orphaned children, Cheney (2012: 106) suggests that 'aid should therefore be targeted not at the orphan – who is a symptom and a symbol of a larger phenomenon of poverty – but at changing the structures that have impoverished and destabilised entire communities'. This same focus on structural change can be applied to CAYP in northern Uganda insofar as initiatives targeting the individual without enhancing structures of social support and belonging are limited in their ability to foster positive contributions from youth themselves. As one participant stated, 'the guns have fallen silent but the war that is within the community is still unresolved, the community needs healing' (P30 2016 Int.), and it is this social healing that will play a significant role in determining the outcome of young people in the region.

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Interviews

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Participant 3, Rights-based NGO staff member, Gulu, Uganda, 3.10.2016.
Participant 4, Sports-based NGO staff member, Gulu, Uganda, 7.10.2016.
Participant 10, Reconciliation focused CBO staff member, Gulu, Uganda, 15.10.2016.
Participant 11, Vocational training institute staff member, Gulu, Uganda, 17.10.2016.
Participant 12, Cultural institution staff member, Gulu, Uganda, 18.10.2016.
Participant 17, Founder of vocational training CBO, Gulu, Uganda, 24.10.2016.
Participant 18, Cultural leader, Gulu, Uganda, 27.10.2016.
Participant 20, Childcare institution staff member, Gulu, Uganda, 2.11.2016.
Participant 27, Teacher training CBO staff member, Gulu, Uganda, 16.11.2016.
Participant 30, Arts-based NGO staff member, Gulu, Uganda, 21.11.2016.