finding durable solutions in Northern Uganda
AVSI has operated in Northern Uganda since 1984, mainly through development projects in-line with the AVSI strategy of celebrating the individual within his or her community. As the security situation in northern Uganda deteriorated in the 1990s, AVSI Uganda’s foundation of education and health projects was broadened to include emergency relief for those suffering from the conflict. To date, AVSI has undertaken operations in the health, education, water and sanitation, mine awareness, food security, and protection sectors with the goal of promoting the dignity of all individuals in the conflict-affected Acholiland.

As the global leader in protection, The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) intervened in northern Uganda in 2006 amid the inception of peace talks in Juba (South Sudan) between the LRA and the Government of Uganda. UNHCR’s Representation in Uganda pursues the attainment of durable solutions for refugees and sustainable returns for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). It involves the communities in income generating activities and livelihood opportunities such as road clearing, construction work, micro-credit schemes, agro-forestry schemes and animal husbandry. UNHCR further advocates for community-based approaches in areas including support to vulnerable persons, road maintenance and construction of community buildings.

Partnering with UNHCR, AVSI has been involved in Camp Coordination and Camp Management (CCCM), Return and Protection Monitoring and Livelihoods activities in the districts of Gulu, Kitgum and Pader. Over the course of the last four years, UNHCR and implementing partners have supported some of the fundamental systems which have facilitated the return of more than 1 million IDPs in the Acholi sub-region. The dynamic return in northern Uganda has shown the importance of integrated humanitarian assistance to the recovery process. At a time when the region has entered its longest phase of development in more than two decades, this book represents an opportunity to reflect on some of the achievements and challenges thus far, as well as on the great hope for the future of this culturally rich region.
The roots of the conflict in northern Uganda fundamentally date back to 1986, when Ugandan President Tito Okello, an Acholi by tribe, was overthrown by the National Resistance Army (NRA) of Yoweri Museveni. Numerous insurgencies resulted in Acholiland, with the most destructive being a rebel movement called the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) led by Joseph Kony. Since 1998 the LRA has become notorious for their abductions, murders, and seemingly inane terrorization of Northern Uganda.

The Government of Uganda’s policy of “protected villages” began in 1996 as a way to provide better security and a tactical advantage by assigning a military detachment to each settlement. With the policy repeated in 2002 and again in 2004, these “protected villages”, formerly larger towns, trading centers or strategically placed villages, were quickly overwhelmed with an estimated 1.8 million Internally Displaced People (IDPs).

Due to the short displacement distance and fluctuating security situation, it was nearly impossible to register the almost two million IDPs, or to provide comprehensive humanitarian assistance.

There have been no LRA attacks in Uganda since 2006, when the government and the LRA signed the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (CHA). The LRA failed to sign the Final Peace Agreement in April of 2008, however, and has since resumed their patterns of killing and abduction in Southern Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Central African Republic. After more than a decade of confinement to the crowded IDP camps, in 2006 the Ugandan Government declared the IDPs free to move from the camps. The war in northern Uganda lasted for more than two decades though, and return has proved to be a slow, and oftentimes complicated process. Though the majority of IDPs have now moved back to, or towards, their villages of origin, the recovery is far from complete.
Following the inception of the peace talks between the LRA and the Government of Uganda in the summer of 2006, and the subsequent declaration by the Government that IDPs were free to move out of the camps, AVSI and UNHCR partnered to implement Camp Management and Return Monitoring Activities in Gulu, Kitgum and Pader districts.

As an active member of the Protection Cluster lead by UNHCR, AVSI promoted and advocated for the concept of “freedom of movement” of the IDP population. Adopted in late 2006, the concept focused on allowing IDPs to choose where to stay “in safety and in dignity.” In 2007 the Protection Cluster adopted three “durable solutions” for IDPs in Uganda: Return to their ancestral land in their place of origin; resettlement to a new location outside of the camp but not on their ancestral land; or local integration - remaining in the place of displacement. In 2008 the protection cluster adopted the framework for the achievement of these durable solutions.

The complex situation in northern Uganda during this period has defied traditional displacement interventions. Camp management activities have taken place at the same time as return; emergency interventions occurred simultaneously with development projects. Supporting the “parish based approach” advocated by the Government, AVSI and UNHCR aimed to integrate interventions within the camps, transit sites and villages of origin; each settlement presents its own specific complexities and needs which are best identified by its residents and leaders. Even upon return, many families remained somewhat transient as they attempted to build again their lives in the village while still being able to access services provided in the camp.

While AVSI and UNHCR promoted the sustainable return of IDPs to their areas of origin, providing protection to IDPs against abuse, exploitation and sexual and gender-based violence was of primary concern in this time when the vast majority of IDPs remained in camps.

Initial Interventions
From 2007 through 2009 large numbers of IDPs in the Acholi region exited the camps. From November 2007 to October 2008 almost 400,000 people returned to their villages of origin, with another 400,000 returning by September 2009. As of June 2010 only about 7 percent (77,000) of the estimated 1.1 million IDPs in Acholiland remained in camps, and 77 percent (93 of 121) of camps have been officially closed.

While the return of the population in the Acholi sub-region is to be celebrated, the situation still presents areas of concern; IDPs who had returned to their villages of origin lack access to basic services including clean water, sanitation, health care and education, and struggle with limited opportunities to rebuild livelihoods. These significant challenges have meant that the sustainability of the large-scale return movements has been by no means guaranteed. If recovery needs are not addressed from the beginning of the process and the transition from the emergency phase does not succeed, sustainability of durable solutions is at risk. The phase out humanitarian activities and impact of recovery initiatives have therefore gone hand in hand.

As movement occurs within a population, the needs also shift. With the monitoring of return movements by field-based staff, invaluable information has been gathered to define the specific needs of the population in return areas. In order to avoid gaps between humanitarian assistance and the impact of development strategies, it has been crucial that recovery has undertaken a fluid nature rather than a phase-by-phase approach. In response to the diverse needs of an ever-shifting population, AVSI and UNHCR have implemented activities ranging from school rehabilitation and provision of housing material to support to district services and camp cleanup committees.

To help the displaced access their social and economic rights, activities have focused on self-reliance programs. Primary healthcare, prevention and treatment of malnutrition, HIV/AIDS and malaria, primary education, water and sanitation and the empowerment of women have all been supported also.
I returned home on April the 11th, 2007. As soon as the rebels gathered for the peace talks in Sudan I decided to come home to my land. With the food shortages it was very difficult to provide for my large family in the camps. I had 4 wives and 33 children; 18 of these children were taken during the conflict and did not return, while 2 died of malaria in the camp. I’m here now with my 13 remaining children and seven grandchildren.

On July 2nd, 1998 I went to the Camp. Before then life was quite easy; we had all we wanted. I had 82 head of cattle and 41 goats; there were so many chickens. These were all taken from me before we left for the camp, but still I remained here as long as possible. It was only after the rebels captured me, beat me, and took the little I had left that I had to escape to the camp.

When I moved I had nothing. I relied on food from relatives and WFP until the food I planted on borrowed land began to come up. After 2 or three months I had potatoes and cabbages, but life was still extremely difficult. You needed money for renting land, and the rebels were still around so you couldn’t go out to dig freely. You had to dig in the mid-day heat because of the curfew. If you were out after curfew you were assumed to be a rebel.

Now that I’m back here life is again becoming easier. I find it difficult to clear the trees from the land again, and there is lack of access to water, but I’ve been able to start again projects of my own. I have goats and chickens again, and have bought two cows; I’m a beekeeper; I’ve planted oranges and groundnuts; surely life is no longer the same! We don’t have as much wealth as we used to have, and now my family lives in a scattered manner, unlike the way we were settled in the village before. Still, this is the way we began here - making our own life – and this is much better than struggling for the little possibilities we’ve had during the conflict.

Fighting only kills eachother. If the war was not here we could not be poor; we have so much that is produced from the land. It is only fighting that has caused these problems. If this happens again, people must sit down to talk and sort their differences!"
One of the greatest humanitarian challenges remaining is the achievement of durable solutions for the extremely vulnerable individuals (EVIs) and Persons with Specific Needs (PSNs) among the displaced in camps. By the end of 2009, 235,000 IDPs remained in camps and a further 200,000 in transit sites. A disproportionate number of these IDPs were elderly, disabled and sick people, including people living with HIV/AIDS. The phasing out of camps without developing potentially durable settlement options for these vulnerable IDPs poses a serious threat to the most vulnerable members of society. Unable to return home because of the inability to build a hut or access health care, and unable to settle permanently within the camp due to disputes with the land owners on which the camps were based, many of these EVIs and PSNs are left with few options; some IDPs have been threatened with eviction from their huts in the camps.

Participatory assessments in refugee and IDP settlements, conducted by UNHCR and its partners identified vulnerable individuals who struggled to find durable solutions. The assessments identified the primary needs in the settlements, which were for water, sanitation, education, public health, livelihood activities, protection assistance and the prevention of sexual and gender-based violence.

Since 2008, 1,245 homes and as many latrines have been constructed by AVSI’s UNHCR team to facilitate the return of EVIs and PSNs from the camps to the villages of origin. Two schools in Pader district have been built and two schools in Gulu district rehabilitated, providing facilities for the education of more than 1,200 students.

Because the most vulnerable individuals are often left without the ability to participate in traditional Income Generating Activities (IGAs), AVSI and UNHCR have offered livelihoods support to 670 PSNs as part of a resettlement package. Following the completion of a business skills training and approval of a business plan, almost 200 beneficiaries received business startup grants and are currently operating successful businesses, allowing them to face daily expenses, pay for health and school fees and plan the development of their household.

Needs Remain
A Vulnerable Population
“Before the war started, I was at home without any problems with my children and with my husband. When the rebels came, life changed. They first killed my husband, and then his brother, who was caring for us. After this we ran to the camp.

Those days in the camp I was not happy. Staying in the camp is not easy like staying at home; we were just sitting waiting for World Food. We couldn’t dig for ourselves like here, and would go to sleep hungry. When the government said the rebels are gone, so we should leave the camp, I was thinking, “what am I going to do now? I have no way to go home… I’m weak, and there is nobody to help me move.”

I was remaining in the camp while others had already gone back home. AVSI (UNHCR) was the one who came to pick me from the camp and helped me to build a house. They have done a very wonderful work! They have brought me home!

This is the very land from where the rebels chased me. This is where they killed my husband, and my husband’s brother… but at least this is my home. I can do anything I want from here, and am staying here for good now - for the rest of my life!

If you have a scar on your body you will never forget about that pain. This is the way it is with the rebels. The way they mistreated us and killed our people; we still have this pain. Let nobody forget that we had this problem… Now that we’re home though, the thoughts don’t disturb me as bad as while I was in the camp.

There is a story that I tell my grandchildren now: There was once a time that the Obibi (monster) would come to disturb us. We would say ‘take the children to the safe place! Take the children to the safe place! The Obibi! Run and hide!’ Now though, there is no more Obibi disturbing us. I sing, I’m staying at home well, well, well with all my children!”

Aryemo Julia
Ready to Go Home

To view a Julia’s film go to:
Physical return is not equivalent to the end of displacement. Only once sustainability has been reached and the needs of the returnees are no longer displacement-specific, i.e. linked to their having been displaced, have durable solutions been achieved. Uganda’s National IDP Policy provides for three ways to achieve durable solutions: return, settlement elsewhere, and local integration. The availability of these three solutions is an inherent component of freedom of movement and the right to choose one’s residence; all IDPs retain their right to genuinely opt for one of the three solutions without pressure extended on them.

In the context of Uganda, return to former homes or places of habitual residence is the preferred solution for the majority of IDPs. However, some of the displaced, in particular those who have established economic activities in camp areas, prefer local integration in the area of their former camps. Some IDPs remain in transit sites, which can potentially become permanent solutions as they transform into viable communities.

In order for a return process to be sustainable, several general criteria relating to the process of finding conditions to achieve durable solutions must be present:

1. The availability of information on the return process, consultation and participation of the affected communities is necessary to enable IDPs to make a free and informed decision. Allowing for informed decisions helps avoid forced return, which tends to be unsustainable.
2. Return and transit sites must provide a safe and secure environment for the returnees.
3. Physical and social needs must be addressed, including the provision of food, water, sanitation, proper housing and services such as health care and education.
4. As access to land is often also linked to livelihoods of returnees, settlement mechanisms should be well equipped to deal with the dispute case load.
5. Continued access to livelihoods is critical. Where access to historical livelihood opportunities is no longer possible the creation of new livelihood opportunities is important.

Durable Solutions

Real Solutions for Specific Needs
“When we began staying here it was not easy for us. We thought we were only going to stay for one or two days. The toilet was not there, the bathroom was not there. We came and left our food at home. We were here and suffering without anything. There were not even houses. It was not easy staying like this. I was not used to being with so many people in a crowded place like this.

As we stayed in the camp we began to see that the war was increasing. When we realized that we were going to stay long we saw that something needed to be done beyond only our survival. People started planning what they should do. That is when the idea of starting a business came up. I started by growing tomatoes, and then my wife would sell them in the market. Once we began making some money we then added the small fish, and then, once we had saved up enough from that we were able to open up the shop.

This is why I have remained here in the center. The business is now going on well, and my home is near, so I can go there for digging. The hope lies in the fact that I have a business here. There is no reason for me to leave now. Those remaining in the camp are those having work. Government, policemen, business people - those who remain do so not because they have nowhere to go, but because they have their business. In rare cases there are the ones who have nothing they are doing and don’t know what they want but they are just around. These are few though.

The conflict has been terrible… but in a small way it has brought some good. People have learned the importance of investing in things like business and education; in the past people may have had many cattle, but had roofs full of holes; the cattle were only a sign of prestige. After the cattle were taken away during the conflict, people now understand that it’s not necessary to just stop there. The knowledge of increased.

I’m very optimistic about the future since the war is over. I will to remain here in the camp now, by choice. I have a business here now, and much hope for the future.”
In 2010 several camp transformation activities have been implemented in order to return land to how it was before the destruction of war. AVSI/UNHCR supported the communities and local leaders to identify and demolished (with the agreement of the hut owner and landlords) almost 40,000 huts and latrines that were abandoned and constituted a potential criminal hazard for other people. Using a UNHCR tractor, AVSI ploughed more than 700 acres (350 soccer fields) of land scattered among 15 former camps, turning unproductive land into precious asset for the food security and development of the surrounding community. More than 11,000 pines and fruits seedling have been planted to return the original flourishing vegetation and to create assets for the community members. Six natural spring water sources have been protected and twenty-three boreholes were rehabilitated in Gulu district.

While the Parish Approach of coordinating interventions based on the needs of the communities has produced tangible results in many respects, the need remains in many affected areas for a continued effort to ensure equitable access to food, water, health and education. So long as fundamental risks to the stability and durability of the peace continue to be present, the progress made thus far continue to threaten to undo much of the progress made in areas of return. If not addressed holistically, transition gaps can jeopardize the recovery process. Large numbers of school drop outs, difficulty in obtaining anti-retroviral drugs for the treatment of HIV/AIDS, and a lack of access to medical care and the justice system for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence all represent examples of problems faced thus far. The drought and subsequent poor harvest of 2009 put returnees in jeopardy of reverse movement back to the camps. The fact that the LRA remain active in the region is still perceived by many as a risk to their future safety and a factor in the decision making process as to the manner in which they settle. These issues highlight not only a further need for contingency planning, but also the need for continued attention to making durable solutions sustainable by strengthening the resilience and lowering vulnerability to such risks amongst the Acholi population.
After four years of operations in favor of the northern Uganda IDPs population, it is with pride that AVSI looks back upon what has been done with UNHCR to facilitate the durable return of the Acholi to their land. At present, more than 85% of the formerly displaced population have achieved durable solutions. Since the physical return of formerly displaced populations does not in itself equate to an end of displacement, recovery and re-integration efforts continue in an effort to eradicate challenges associated with displacement and thereby bridge the gap between northern Uganda and the rest of the country. Livelihood opportunities remain critical to enabling effective reintegration. Commitment from the Government of Uganda via the framework of the Peace Recovery and Development Plan for Northern Uganda (PRDP), to stabilize and rebuild Northern Uganda with a 2008 - 2010 timeline, remains crucial.

During the past year the nature of activities has constantly developed; each year, in fact, the activities have evolved with the needs of the IDPs. After favoring the return of the core population, UNHCR with its IPs shifted focus to those who had been left behind. The PSNs were the ones most in need of support; most of them elderly, they were often considered a burden rather than an asset to bring back home. Even in this case, the tailored solution studied for each of them, allowed them to go back with their families. The chosen livelihood assistance projects have been able to favor the reintegration among their communities and to empower these vulnerable people to cater for the educational and health needs of their dependants.

The coming year will be a delicate one for the IDP operation in northern Uganda. Uncontrollable variables such as the referendum in Sudan and the election in Uganda add uncertainty to the scenario, but barring any unforeseen circumstances UNHCR plans for 2011 to be its disengagement year. The future activities will focus on the support to remaining PSNs and the improvement of the return sites in terms of services and infrastructures. The communities will be strongly involved in such intervention, to give them the final blessing to shape the development of their land and to further bridge those in need with recovery and development agencies and government programs. It is time to give the responsibility to the communities, and for them to take the lead in their path to develop this beautiful land.