Back To(wards) My Home
Stories of moving on from displacement in Northern Uganda
The Background

The roots of the current 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. These insurgencies resulted in Acholi land, with the final being a rebel movement called the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) led by Joseph Kony. The LRA has since become notorious for their abductions, murders, and seemingly inane terrorization of Northern Uganda.

Rebel tactics, bushy terrain, and the use of child soldiers meant the LRA could elude the Ugandan army’s efforts to capture the top commanders. Rebels slipped easily in and out of the rural villages where they likely had friends or family; it was difficult to distinguish between a rebel and a victim – and sadly between a rebel and a child, because many were well under the age of 18.

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. These “protected villages”, formerly larger towns, trading centers or strategically placed villages, were quickly overwhelmed with Internally Displaced People (IDPs) generally coming from a village of origin between 5-20 km away. Due to the short displacement distance and fluctuating security situation, it was impossible to register the more than 1 million IDPs, or to provide comprehensive humanitarian assistance.

Prior to displacement, families were scattered across great distances, relying almost entirely on farming. The confined existence of camp life has stressed all aspects of traditional Acholi culture, all-but crumbling the social infrastructure of this largely rural area.
Today

After more than a decade of confinement to crowded camps, in 2006 the Ugandan Government declared the majority of the IDPs free to move out from the camps. The war in Northern Uganda has dragged on for more than two decades though, during which more than 1.1 million people were displaced in the Acholi Sub-Region. The combination of the large displacement figures, a strong but inefficient local government, fluctuation of the security situation, and difficulties in coordination among humanitarian actors has contributed to the complexity of the return process.

This document examines the transitional period of early 2008 in the North through three stories of people who have experienced displacement and are now moving on in their own ways, and for their own reasons. Each individual’s story is different, but all share the hope for a better future, and for a return of Acholliland to what it is.
AVSI’s Role in the Return

The concept of “freedom of movement” was adopted in late 2006, allowing IJRPs to choose where to stay “in safety and 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; And local integration - remaining in the place of displacement.

AVSI has operated in Northern Uganda since 1994, mainly through development projects in line with the AVSI strategy of celebrating the individual within his or her community. As the security situation deteriorated in the 1990s, AVSI’s foundation of education and health projects were broadened to include emergency relief for those suffering from the conflict. AVSI has undertaken operations in the health, education, water and sanitation, mine awareness, food security, and protection sectors aimed at promoting dignity within all of those involved.

As the global leader on forced migration issues, The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) arrived in Northern Uganda in the summer of 2006 amid the latest inception of peace talks in Juba, and a signing of a Coexistence of Hostilities agreement between the LRA and the Government of Uganda. Partnering with UNHCR, AVSI has since been involved in Camp Management and Return Monitoring (COCOM) and Protection Monitoring activities in Gulu, Kitgum, and Pader Districts of Acholiland.
The complexity of the situation in Northern Uganda defies traditional displacement interventions. Camp management takes place at the same time as return; emergency interventions occur simultaneously with development projects. Agencies and donors alike must work diligently to improve the efficacy and accountability of the process. The needs for everything from water and sanitation, to health, education, and psychosocial support must be coordinated with great sensitivity to the current situation.

As both a camp management and return monitoring agency during a period of relative peace, AVSI is working to support the “parish-based approach” advocated by the central government and local communities themselves. The goal is to integrate a threefold approach to interventions within specific geographic boundaries (traditionally a parish) – intervening in camps, transit sites, and villages of origin. Each type of settlement has its own specific complexities and needs that can be clearly identified by its residents and leaders.
Displaced Dreams

In 1947 Otim Rostiko was born in Ludum Oyere, a small village in Kitgum District where homes are scattered across a vast grassy landscape overlooking the mountains of South Sudan. Born onto the same land his parents had been born to, Otim grew up surrounded by his Clan, and by the traditions of Acholi culture. In 1974 he married Lakot Sylvia, and by 1983 they had three children - Tito, Emanuel, and Betty. Life was unfolding gracefully in front of he and his family, and Otim envisioned giving his children the same upbringing that he had been afforded.

In 1986 Otim moved to Namokora, a nearby trading center, where he began serving as the Head Catechist at the local church. That year the conflict in the North began.

By 2003 Otim’s entire family had been abducted. His wife and eldest son were killed, and his youngest son was either killed by, or still with the LRA. Dozens of friends and relatives were dead or missing as a result of the conflict.

While Otim was not physically displaced, his dreams, family, and future have all been displaced. Otim’s story illustrates both the immense struggles of the people in AcholiLand during this conflict, and the strength of character within these people. This is his story, in his own words.
Life Taken

“It was February 17th, 1998 when the rebels had come. We heard gunshots coming from near the homestead at about 4 in the morning. Pu/Pu” we were in the church preparing for morning mass when we heard more gunshots, coming from all directions.

We realised that the rebels were within the area and were exchanging fire with the government soldiers. As the NRA was overpowered, so they retreated giving way to the LRA to loot the center. Some of them came to the mission: They shot the gate with an RPG and looted the place. I was in the church with another catechist. We waited until it was quiet again before stepping out to check on the other people in the compound. As I was travelling towards my home I suddenly stood in front of ten rebels, and soon we were moving towards the Pager River.

After half-hour’s walk, when we crossed the river, we met another LRA group waiting there with many kidnapped people - including all my three children - Titus, 17, Emmanuel, 15, and Betty, then 21 years old. From there we continued our uncertain journey towards Sudan in fear and pain.

Looking at me one of the LRA commandants addressed me: “Mzee, what’s wrong?” “I am not happy,” I answered. He then asked me: “What kind of work do you do?” “I am a catechist.” “Good”, another rebel said sarcastically. “You’ll help spread the word of God in the bush”. “What’s the problem?” the commander wanted to know. I then heard myself answer: “If this is the way you people operate, you are up to no good!” I thought the end would come for me and my children because of that provocation. The commandant remained calm, though, and asked me: “Why are you saying that?” I replied: “You go around and addict everyone from my family!” Then the commandant said “I promise to you that I will personally make sure all your children remain safe. Mzee, you can go back home.”

There was nothing I could have said anymore knowing that further begging for them would possibly result in the rebels killing them in front of my eyes. I watched my children leave with those dangerous strangers and I wondered if I would ever see any one of them again. With a broken heart I walked back home to find my wife and tell her what tragedy had befallen us. Our home changed, there was no more laughter, no will to work, or even to live.”
Fire Side Traditions

"In Lodom Gyere, where all my children were born, we would sit by the fire in the evenings and tell the children educative Acholi stories; Stories about Mr. Hare (Rabbit) that would relate to life's choices and challenges. I enjoyed the concentration on the faces of my children, especially Tito, who was very interested in the meaning of the stories. I would have the boys all sitting very close to me, and Betty would lean against her mother.

In those days I would go with my boys to do chores like cutting firewood. This was the time to teach them the names of the plants and trees. If they were medicinal, I would tell them what the Acholi use it to treat. Betty would remain around the home helping her mother.

The most enjoyable time would be the evenings in the dry season, after the harvest, with the full moon. My family and I would sit out enjoying the evening breeze. I would tell them about the Acholi superstitions, like when the oriel bird sings, it is signalling danger, or when you are going somewhere to meet a woman, turn around and go back home because what ever you are going for will never be achieved.

When we moved to Namokora my children had grown up and started school, but the fireplace tradition continued. I looked forward to such time when I could sit down with my children. It was so rewarding to see the trust in their eyes, as if I knew everything.

Parenting demands that you have answers to everything, because children will not take “I don’t know” as an answer. My wife and I decided to always tell them the truth, and taught them to be assertive. I would tell them, one day I will not be there to tell you what is right or wrong, so you have to pay attention to all that I tell you now because when you become parents you will have to do the same for your children. They would laugh and tell me that I would live to be old like Abraham in the Bible, and have as many grandchildren!

I miss them a lot.”
I hope to find closure when I move back to Ludum Cayre. My nephew is helping me to construct my hut in the village, where I hope to relax and finally find peace. I will be an elder again - someone the community will treat with respect.

I am looking forward to sitting again in my large compound, around the fire with my grandchildren, educating them with stories as I did my children. But this time the task is heavier. They were born in the camp and do not know what village life is like. In the camp the huts are close to each other, in the village they are all spread out, and they will only move and play with their cousins.

In Ludum Cayre I will talk to other elderly people, my friends, about teaching the youth who have not had the chance we did to be educated about the values of the Acolot culture. We will organize meetings with the youth who will carry on the wealth of our culture to ensure it does not perish with the war and displacement.

Currently, Apart from that, I have to move out of my house at the mission because a new building is being constructed. There are only armed guards on duty where I live. It is a great sacrifice for them to guard me.

Back home, we will teach our grandchildren in a proper and culturally correct fashion to pass on the values passed on to us by our parents. And when the time is right and they are settled down, wealth or doctor together with children come back, for the same purpose we also have strict rules and will have my sons anywhere to be my heir.
On April 10, 2008 Joseph Kony failed to appear for the signing of the Final Peace Agreement between the LRA and the Government of Uganda. The need for further clarification of the judicial process to be imposed on him and the LRA members. The Ceasefire and Relocation Agreement expired on April 15, with no sign of being renewed.

Now, what has been considered the last opportunity for peace in more than two decades seems to have past, and uncertainty prevails. The LRA have reportedly doubled their troop size within the last few months with further abductions from neighboring South Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and the Central African Republic (CAR). Both the Ugandan Government and the UN have said they are prepared for renewed conflict if a final agreement isn’t reached in the near future.

According to UNHCR in August of 2007, the tenuous peace, combined with a nearly complete lack of social infrastructure in the return areas makes it incumbent upon the humanitarian community to acknowledge the profound problems that continue to affect Northern Uganda, to be wary of overemphasizing the progress and impact of the peace process, and to recognize that a strategy based on the assumption of a full and speedy return to home sites will neither be appropriate or effective.
The Numbers

Of the approximately 1,100,000 people living in camps in AcholiLand at the end of 2005, about 650,000 are still remaining. Of the returnees, only 9 percent are estimated to be living in their village of origin. The security as it relates to the peace process, and the availability of basic services such as education, health, and water facilities are all major factors in the decision to move from a camp. An August 2007 OCHA study went so far as to suggest that “return” may not even require any significant movement of the population. Many of the displaced are living in camps close enough (within 5 km) from their farmland to consider it beneficial to commute to their land to maintain access to services in the camps, essentially reintegrating into the area they were displaced to. Factors such as these make quantifying return all-the-more difficult.
Not Quite Home

Families such as this one in Kitgum Matidi have remained in the camp temporarily while their home in the village is being constructed. Motivated by factors such as the camp’s existing schools, health centers, water sources, and various food and material distributions, it is common for families to maintain a home in both the village and in the camp.

Referred to as having “one foot in the camp, and one in the village” many families maintain the links to their home in a camp as a way to ensure safety in case of renewed hostilities. Others are motivated to remain partially in the camp so as to not be excluded from future distributions.
Para schools have arguably sustained the most damage of any of the major social infrastructures during the conflict. With the displacement came an influx of children into, what were, school systems that were haphazardly put together in the past few years. Now with the outpouring of children back to the return sites and villages, communities are struggling to find a way to repurpose and reshape for the future generation.

The median age of the population in Acholiland is only 14 years. The culture depends heavily on the education of its youth. With a lack of teachers, classrooms, desks and books, many returnees are making do with whatever they have. Using the shade of a tree as a classroom, sitting on the floor or on empty rooms, is common. With classes resuming at the sites, students still lack material supplies.
In partnership with UNHCR in 2007, AVSI supported communities to construct 80 huts for Extremely Vulnerable Individuals (EVI) in return areas throughout Pader District.

In 2008 AVSI will again support the construction of about 200 huts in Gulu, Kitgum and Pader Districts. By helping communities to support their persons with specific needs, the aim is to find durable, lasting solutions.
The Necessity of Motion

In 2002 Okelb was displaced from his land in Kitgum District, to this home in the Kitgum Matidi IDP Camp. This is the story of his transition “out of the camp life, and back to the good life,” as he refers to it.
Riding Home

“When we were here we had everything we needed,” explained Okello, last November, as he surveyed the crumbled remains of his hut in Mulago Village, Kitgum District. “Now, in Kitgum Matidi we have nothing. We have to rely on food from WFP and blankets from NGOs. There are no jobs in the camp.”

In 2002, Okello, his wife, and child were displaced from the land his family had lived on since 1952. After moving to the Kitgum Matidi IDP camp life began to slowly deteriorate for he and his family, as their base of farming was taken away from them.

Okello was forced to stop his senior level schooling for lack of funds. The family’s only income was that from firewood Okello would collect and sell for about 3,000 shillings ($1.75) per day. The 10,000 shilling school fee of his son became harder-and-harder to come by, and in the meantime he and his wife gave birth to a daughter. He had no way to provide for his family.

After the cessation of hostilities agreement was signed in 2008 the government declared that he and the other IDPs were free to move home. Okello immediately began working towards the day that this could be realized, knowing it would be a difficult process with no capital, and him not having finished his schooling.

Riding his bike 34km, he would prepare his village in Mulago each day, and return to the camp to sleep. The first step was to clear land that had been vacant for five years. Next, he began to plant crops which could be sold in the camp to raise funds for his children’s school fees. He was finally able to begin rebuilding his hut in December 2007.

“I want to move home,” he dyly explained when asked what keeps him motivated. “I want to get back to what is theirs. I don’t want my family to stay in the camp.”

For Okello, the decision to move home has not been emotionally driven, but rather a simple matter of what is best for the family. Determination had come out of his desperation.
Agriculture has traditionally been the main source of sustenance for the Acholi people. It is now proving to be one of the fundamental motivators in the return process. While the camps offer services such as health care, schools and water sources, land for farming is and around the camps must be rented each season from the landowner, if available at all.

When security improved in 2006, Okiello began planting crops in Mlego for eventual sale in the camp. This supplementary income has enabled Okiello to return to school for the completion of his secondary degree, a prerequisite for most non-agricultural labor.

Without the profits from a harvest, he explained that his family would likely have remained in the camp for another year as they would have had to rely on further distributions to get by.
Finding Peace, and Quiet

Access to his land began providing tangible results within a few months. A good harvest from his fields in late 2007 allowed Okello to save enough money to ensure his son, and himself, would be able to attend school for the coming year. More importantly, it ensured his family would have food on the table.

With the help of his family and friends from the area, his hut was soon rebuilt. In March of 2008 Okello and his family moved out of the camp, and permanently back to their village.

After almost six years of displacement, he remains confident that life will now return to what it was for his family. “Everything won’t automatically go back to normal. But slowly, it will all come back,” he explains from the shade of a mango tree next to his hut.

The fields surrounding the compound are being prepared for this season’s crops. Lettuce, sim sim, sorghum, cabbage, tomatoes, and eggplants are being planted, along with beehives filled with honey bees. More time can be spent tending to the garden, and with the family. The time that Okello spent working on mining is now spent largely at school, where he is scheduled to finish his senior level this year.

Threats of future violence and instability don’t seem to bother he and his family. They believe the camp was more dangerous to their family’s way of life than rebels are.

“My kids aren’t spoiled yet. The camp has made many kids very spoiled and trouble-prone. It is not a good place to raise kids, and I wanted to remove them from that as soon as I could,” he said. “My boy has spent almost his whole life in the camp, and needs to live here now.”

“It’s lonely now,” Okello admits. “It’s isolated, but it’s nice to have this quiet place”
42% (34 of 81) of primary schools in Kitgum District are not yet operational in their original sites. Of the functioning schools, 85% (40 of 47) require some sort of rehabilitation. In Gulu district more than 90% (60 of 66) of primary schools are opened, but many still need infrastructural support.

AVS is taking part in school rehabilitations, along with support to nursery centers and vocational training centers areas across the region.
One good harvest is all that’s needed for many of the families remaining in the camps to finally move out. This food security, often referred to as a “bumper crop,” gives families a small safety net in which at least one of their basic needs is ensured before any leap is made away from the relative security of the camp. Crops like groundnuts, sorghum, and cowpeas are often grown due in large part to their long-term storage potential.

AVSI food security projects such as seed and tool distributions, and farmer trainings are aimed at providing livelihoods and knowledge that will last well beyond the project duration.
Obul and his family of twelve moved from their village in Lacedtar to the PaquinUP camp in 2002. As a provider for ten children he was forced to make life in the camp work. He has gone from being a farmer to being a tailor, and then a shopkeeper. Through it all, he’s consistently remained a part of his community. In this transitional time, it’s people like him that are enabling others to return to areas that still lack much of the basic services needed for settlement.
A Close Community

With ten children and two wives, Obul is used to managing crowds. As acting camp leader of Laciektar, a return site in Pajule Sub-County, he is helping his family and a community of more than 60 households to move out of the camp, and closer to home.

Upon his initial displacement in 2002, Obul and his neighbors assumed their move to the IDP camp would be a short stay, after which they would move back to their land. Now, after five years of displacement it’s clear that their community has been forever changed. Vast spreads of land will lay empty each night, as the village has been consolidated into a central return site from which the families will make the short commute each day to their gardens.

This phenomenon of return sites is a clear reminder that there will be effects of displacement lasting well beyond any potential peace agreement. Families have learned to live in a setting different from that prior to displacement. For many, a return site such as Laciektar provides security in its’ numbers. Both in terms of physical security, and in being better able to organize for social infrastructure.

By 2006 Laciektar, like most villages, had lost much of what was left in 2002. Water sources had been neglected and laid unusable. The school had been lost, with many of the teachers gone; the ground was overgrown, with little signs of previous inhabitation, but for the crumbling walls of huts peeking through the grass.

To return, the community felt it beneficial to use their numbers, explained Obul. Using the power of numbers they could quickly clear land and build huts. Furthermore, they felt that their numbers would make them more likely to attract the NGOs to help them solve their water and school problems.

Whether it be the first step towards an eventual return to their ancestral land, or a long-term destination, as in Laciektar, more than 2/3 of those who’ve left a camp have elected to move to a return site.
Restructuring Tradition

Once the community had decided to make the move, Obul was named as the camp leader. He and the elders of the community decided where the community was to be located, and the steps in which they would follow for their relocation.

In September 2007 residents of Lacetak began to mobilize twice-a-week to clear land. With between 15 and 75 people making the 45-minute walk with materials and tools each Tuesday and Friday, the land was cleared and ready for building by December.

Obul worked like anyone else, but would frequently walk through the site to discuss with anyone questions they may have. He detailed the placement of huts and latrines, and advised anyone in need. He was the de-facto head of the school committee, hygiene committee, and construction committee.

In a culture centered around a clan system, this organization has worked well for Lacetak. This new, informal position of “site leader” is arising in return areas throughout the districts.

By December more than 30 stick frames of huts had been erected. After the harvesting grasses were available, and the occasional rainfall necessary to make bricks, huts began to be completed. The community still lacked a water source though, as the nearest water came from a stream 2km away and was stagnant in the dry season. No school structure had been formed, and some families complained of a lack of food as they awaited the rainy season.

By March of 2008 nearly all of the families in Lacetak had completed their move. A borehole was drilled by an NGO, and there are plans to begin school under a nearby mango tee while they organize for a building to be constructed. Seeds have been planted for the season, and the community has expressed optimism towards their future here.

While Lacetak looks similar to a camp, the daily life is much closer to that of their village life before displacement. Only time will tell, but it looks as if communities such as this will change the social structure of Abyolkpam for many years to come.
Prolonged displacement has inevitably affected the Acholi culture; we continually discover new ways in which the social fabric has shifted. Many youth, for example, may choose not to return to the rural, agricultural way of life and instead seek more familiar opportunities in tracing centers or towns. A majority of returnees have elected to move to return sites in which they live in a community near their land, as opposed to the solidarity of their village. Infrastructure that has been lost over the years will take decades to fully recover. Regardless of the direction the return takes, the emphasis should be to engage all communities in a constant dialogue to assess the effects of displacement, the imprints of the war, and peoples ideas on how to best move forward.
Communities both in camps and return areas, as well as District officials, have endorsed the "Parish-Based Approach" as the way to integrate these seemingly disparate interventions. Using the traditionally Acholi Local Councilor (LC) leadership structure organization can be incorporated from the village (LC 1), the parish (LC 2), the sub-county (LC 3), and finally the District (LC 5) level. Each level has a development plan that should be facilitated by the international community, not substituted or imposed. Emergency interventions can provide invaluable data and advice to development actors and vice versa; both must be present in the coming months, working together as the IDPs await peace.
TWERO: to have the capacity or ability.