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'We shall secede…' - narratives of marginalisation in post war participatory recovery of Acholi, northern Uganda

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Abstract: Set in a remote part of Acholi, on the northern side of Murchison Falls National Park, northern Uganda, this paper focuses on the efforts of the local community in Pabit Parish as they rebuild their agricultural livelihoods in the aftermath of the 20-year civil war. Their struggle to recover, however, hung in the balance as problem animals started to destroy their crops. Their recovery became even more uncertain when their efforts to dialogue with the government about the unfair wildlife policy remained unheeded. Meanwhile, the Acholi Culture and Tourism Centre project set up by Purongo Sub County Local Government to supplement the people's agricultural livelihoods was marred in conflicts that threatened its very existence. What had started as a post war participatory development thus turned out to be an arena of conflict.Using ethnographic methods of data collection integrated within a case study, this study focuses on the tourism centre project. Premised on principles of participation, the project had been considered instrumental, not only in the protection of wildlife in Murchison Falls Park which would attract more tourists, and thus more revenue to the community from commercial tourism, but also through promoting agricultural livelihoods, the mainstay of the local economy. However, the reluctance of wildlife officials to engage communities in policy discussions, and internal weaknesses in the governance structural systems, combine to frustrate efforts in the local community to recover their livelihoods for a better standard of living.

Keywords: Agricultural livelihoods, post war recovery, marginalisation, participation, wildlife policy.

1. Introduction[1]

At the time the ceasefire agreement between rebels of the Lords' Resistance Army (LRA) and the government of Uganda was signed in 2006, the number of people that had been forced into Internally Displaced People's (IDP) camps across the northern region had risen to more than 1.8 million, about 90% of the country's population (Mabikke 2011: 3; Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre and Norwegian Refugee Council 2009: 4), up from 1.3 million in 2005 (Boas and Hatloy 2005: 1). Although all their homesteads had been reclaimed by bush, their houses destroyed, and the majority of them had lost their livelihood assets, especially livestock (Boas and Hatloy 2005: 1, Weeks 2002: 32-35, Gersony 1997: 81, Gelsdorf, Maxwell and Mazurana 2012: 2), in 2008, all IDP camps were decommissioned by the State and IDPs told to 'return to where the war found you' (Whyte, Babiiha, Mukyala, and Meinert 2012: 3). With the economy of the region in ruins, poverty was widespread, yet houses needed to be repaired or rebuilt, homesteads re-established and fields prepared for cultivation (Obika, Otto-Adel, Babiiha and Whyte, forthcoming) as part of re-establishing household food and livelihood security. By the time I started conducting this study in 2009, WFP and other relief agencies had already stopped distributing relief food and other basic necessities to those who still remained in the numerous IDP camps across the region, citing lack of resources (UN-RSG of IDPs 29 July, 2009); yet even for those that had gone back to the villages the situation was not any better. Basic services such as education, health, and clean water were yet to be restored to these villages, and where they were already being provided they were quite inadequate, resulting in some categories of community members remaining in the camps (Whyte et al 2012: 2-4, IDMC and NRC 2009: 4-7).

Rebel leader Joseph Kony's reluctance to sign the comprehensive peace agreement scared local communities into thinking that the relative peace experienced in the region during the peace

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talks in Juba, South Sudan, in 2006, was temporary. Nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) were also reluctant to embark on serious reconstruction projects. It was not surprising, therefore, that post-war development agencies that had been expected to take over from - and to plug the vacuum left by - departing humanitarian NGOs took time to come to the rescue of IDPs trying to go back home. In its August 2009 Report on northern Uganda, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) highlights the poor international response to the Consolidated Appeal for Uganda when it showed that, by July 2009 only 45% of the requested funding had been secured, with three sectors: education, mine action, and shelter having received nothing at all. Health had gotten only 11% (IDMC and NRC 2009: 7). Yet, in spite of the situation outlined above, and in complete disregard of the ‘durable solutions’ (IDP Policy 2004), government officials almost forced IDPs to leave the camps (Interview with a UN OCHA official in Gulu town 25 September 2009). Durable solutions emphasise that displaced persons have the right to make a free and informed choice between returning to their original homes, integrating themselves in areas of displacement, or resettling elsewhere in the country.

However, as peace continued to be consolidated, post-war development assistance and foreign direct investment into the area increased. In addition to government programmes, the area also benefitted from donor funding through the state or NGO projects, as well as private sector investments. Key among the government initiatives was the Peace, Recovery, and Development Plan (PRDP) which was launched in October 2007. As the post conflict development framework for the region, the PRDP incorporated programmes and projects such as the Northern Uganda Social Action Fund (NUSAF) and the Northern Uganda Agricultural Livelihoods Recovery Programme, which were aimed at reintegrating the region into the national economy after twenty years of war. Nevertheless, in spite of the recovery framework and the numerous projects - and in spite of the steady progress towards recovery (UNDP 2015: 3) - the Acholi, as a community which had been at the epicentre of the LRA war, continued to wallow in poverty and to cry out against what they described as marginalisation. The Uganda National Bureau of Statistics (2010) and the IMF (2010: 15-16 and 87-90) also show that the northern region still possesses the highest indicators of poverty in the country. For example, the Human Development Index for northern Uganda improved from 0.402 in 2005/06 to 0.431 in 2012/13, but it remains the lowest against the nation’s 0.463 (UNDP 2015: 5). It took Norbert Mao, a leading national politician from the region, to formally amplify their outcry when he warned the government to stop treating the northern region like second class citizens, or else the region would secede from Uganda. ‘We are either full citizens, equal to all others, or non-citizens’, he warned in a press conference as he talked of forming the Nile State (Charles Odongtho, URN 25 August 2006; Sunday Monitor, 21 February 2010; New Vision, 3 May 2009).

In the case of Pabit, one of the parishes in Purongo Sub County that lies along the northern boundary of Murchison Falls National Park (MFNP) in Nwoya district, the majority of people did not go back to their villages until it had become certain that LRA rebels had relocated to Central Africa Republic and were not likely to come back in the short run (Cf. Obika, Otto, Babiiha and Whyte, forthcoming). For such communities, it was not only LRA rebels that they had to worry about. Wild animals were equally as big a threat, both to their lives and their agricultural livelihoods. Elephants had killed two people and injured eleven when they invaded gardens in the areas neighbouring the park in Nwoya district in September and October that year (IRIN News, 7 December 2010). After a lot of community mobilisation and advocacy by local political leaders and civil society, the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) with support from CARE International finally managed to dig a 36 km trench to stop the elephants from crossing into the villages (URN 5 September 2014).

Fig. 1: Trench to separate wild animals from the community.

(Source: Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, 2012 Annual Performance Report.)

Park authorities also continued to fund local projects using the Tourism Revenue Sharing Fund (TRSF) disbursed annually to local governments for the benefit of local communities neighbouring national parks, as a means of involving them in wildlife protection (GOU 2014: 15).

In addition to the TRSF (made up of 20% of the gate collections), local communities living adjacent to national parks also benefitted from other government and NGO projects worth billions of dollars, as well as direct private sector investments in highly mechanised commercial agriculture, commercial tourism, and sport hunting. But the outcry of poverty and marginalisation had not subsided.

2. Purpose of the study

In this study, I discuss and try to understand the basis of the outcry of marginalisation in Pabit, given that the over-arching post war recovery programme set by the government is, in principle, participatory and was intended to reduce the socio-economic gap existing between the war-affected northern region and the rest of the country (GoU 2007: iii). Although Arnstein (1969), Chambers (1994) or Hilhorst et al. (2010) do not explicitly use the term *marginalisation*, their explanation of *participation* - whose main principle is to involve the target community in matters that affect their wellbeing - implies that people should be empowered to participate fully in all decisions and planned activities so that they can no longer feel like outsiders. In this regard, the persisting outcry of marginalisation was a reflection of the failure of the recovery framework to fulfil the fundamental principle of participation.

3. Setting the Culture and Tourism Centre Project

When Purongo started receiving the TRSF money directly for the first time in 2012 following the commissioning of Nwoya district, the sub county council decided to use it on a goats multiplication

project instead of social infrastructure, as had been the practice under the Amuru district administration. However, the goats that could be procured with the funds allocated to the sub county were so few that only a very small number of people could be served. The individualisation of communal grazing lands after the war meant that breeding the goats could not be done as a communal project. Hence, the goats had to be given out to individual households. But bureaucratic bottlenecks in the procurement processes also delayed the delivery of the goats to the beneficiary households. By the time they were finally delivered, it was the Christmas season. So, many families slaughtered them for Christmas festivities. In the end, the anticipated multiplication never happened.

Later, when the sub county council evaluated the project, they found that the key objective of restocking livestock at household level could not be achieved under the goats project. They thus decided to set up a committee to explore other options. The outcome was the Acholi Culture and Tourism Project.

At the time I went to Purongo in 2013, the committee’s recommendation to set up a culture and tourism centre project had already been adopted by the sub county council. Working very closely with the Community Warden of the park, members of the council had already completed a study tour of the Queen Elizabeth National Park in western Uganda. The councillors wanted to learn first-hand how local communities around the Queen Elizabeth National Park utilised their share of the TRSF. On their return, they resolved to establish a culture and tourism centre project similar to what they had seen during their tour. An interim project committee was set up, five acres of land were bought in Lagaji village, Pabit Parish, for the proposed project, and two grass-thatched huts were quickly constructed on the project site so that the project could start as soon as possible. It was projected that it would showcase the Acholi culture to the outside world, to promote wildlife protection and commercial tourism, while at the same time diversifying local livelihoods and improving household incomes.

On the advice of the Community Warden, the council agreed to set up an advisory team composed of experts from Gulu University, the MFNP, and the Purongo Sub County Local Government (SCLG). It was thus that I entered the field as a member of this team: as one of two academics from Gulu University. Together with two other members from MFNP and three from Purongo SCLG, we constituted the advisory board that worked very closely with the new project committee.

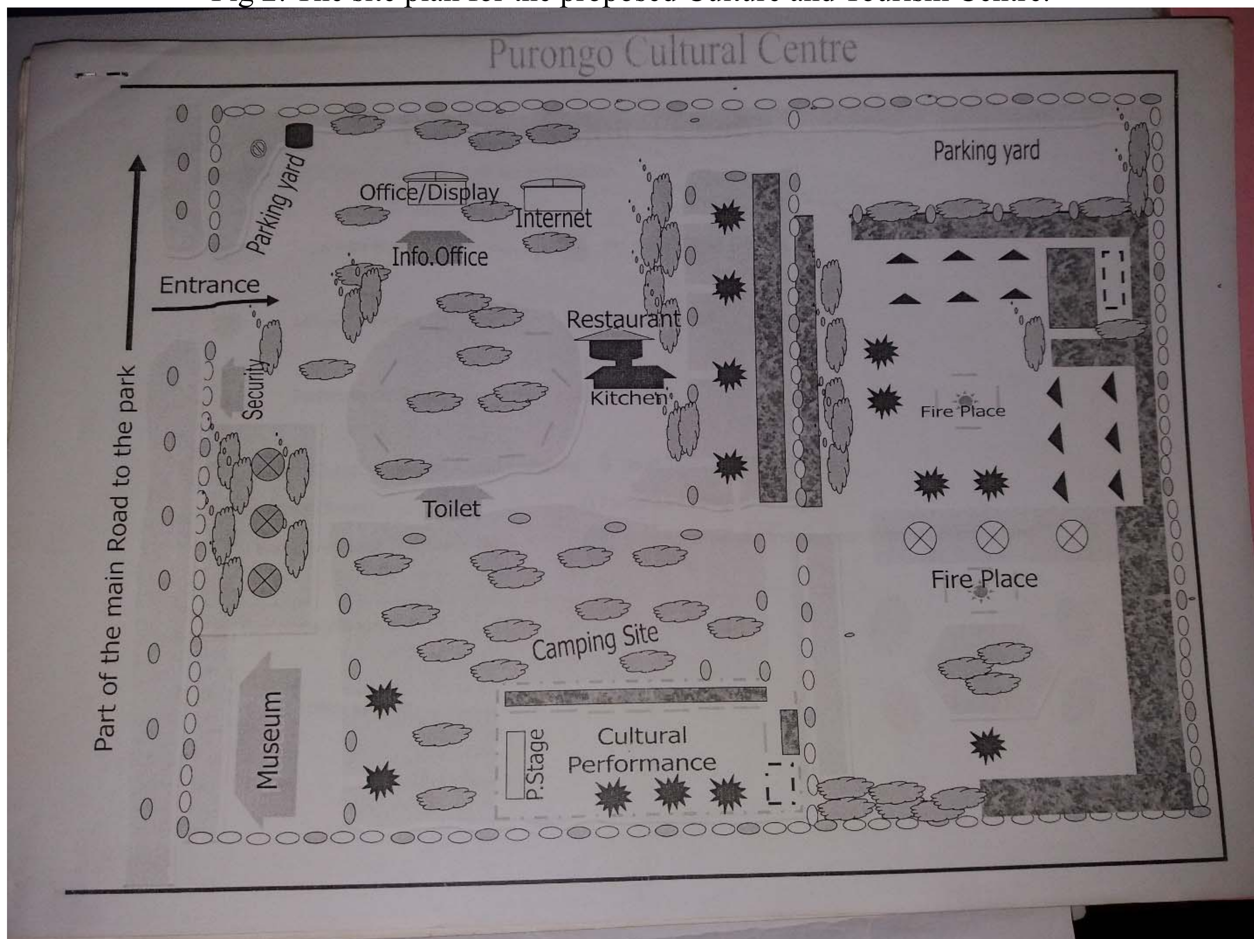
Our first task was to visit the site to evaluate its suitability for and readiness to start operations before the end of the year, which was only three months away. The second was to meet local communities living adjacent to the park to share with them the need for and relevance of the proposed culture and tourism centre project. The logic behind the meetings with the communities was to involve them in wildlife protection through the tourism centre project, so they would stop perceiving themselves merely as passive recipients of TRSF money. As members of the advisory team, we had to think of the best way the project could achieve this objective.

First and foremost, the profitability and self-sustainability of the project needed to be ensured. However, at the same time, the cultural and economic interests of the local communities had to be kept in mind (Hill 2000: 113-115). In view of the above considerations, after analysing a number of options, we decided that a Community Based Organisation (CBO) would be the best alternative. So, when we finally went out for community meetings, our focus was to share these views and recommendations with them in a participatory manner. Thus, what came out of the community meetings were common resolutions (on the project) (Cf. Chambers 1993; Freire 1972). Whenever anyone in the community meeting made a proposal, its validity was analysed independently of his/her social status with the view of reaching a consensus, without regard to positions of power and authority (Sullivan 2012). By the end of the community meetings, we had

managed to reach a consensus on the validity and viability of the culture and tourism centre project in each of the five parishes.

In practical terms, community approval of the project meant that each parish had decided to forfeit its share of the money from the TRSF so it could be spent by the project committee at sub county level. Each parish was to nominate two people that were to constitute the pioneer project committee. Once in place, the project committee was expected to write the constitution, register the project as a CBO, and then set up a number of sub committees to help it in the operations and management of the project. Among other things, the sub committees were to engage local communities in contributing artefacts for sale to tourists, trophies for the museum, cultural performances for foreign tourists, and food supplies for the restaurant. A sketch of the site plan for the project had already been drawn by a volunteer as indicated in Figure 2 below.

Fig 2: The site plan for the proposed Culture and Tourism Centre.



The motivation for the project was to provide a multiplier effect both in the short and long term, not only in the promotion of cultural tourism, but also in wildlife protection, commercial tourism, as well as agricultural livelihoods. The importance of tourism is underlined by the fact that, in addition to the above benefits, it contributes more than US $75 million in direct jobs worldwide (UNWTO 2012: 2).

In Uganda, the great potential of tourism to grow the economy is witnessed in the sector's position among the nation's top investment priorities since the 2014/15 financial year (Uganda National Budget Brief 2014). This implies that the tourism project in Purongo Sub County would not only benefit the local community, but also the tourism sector and the national economy as a

whole. However, in spite of the impressive contribution of tourism to the gross national income, local communities in Pabit Parish - where the project is located - continued to wallow in poverty as a result of the heavy losses they suffered from animal raids on their agricultural livelihoods.

4. Methodology and data collection

Between 2013 and 2016, I continued to visit Pabit Parish and Purongo Sub County in general. Each time I visited the area, I would stay for at least one week - during which I would interact with members of the community and also participate in different activities related to the project, while at the same time collecting data in the process. The primary data I collected was in the form of minutes of meetings, interviews of key informants, and focus group discussions. I also made personal observation of various activities and events (Mugenda and Mugenda 2005; Mikkelsen 2005). In total, I interviewed five key informants who included the Sub County Chief, the Community Development Officer (CDO), the Community Warden, the *Rwot* of Pabit Parish, and the Production Committee Chairperson of Purongo SCLG. I also conducted two focus group discussions with two farmer groups in the sub county, and participated in five community meetings in the five parishes of the sub county when we went out to sensitise the communities about the project. Later, I also took part in twelve meetings of the Project Committee, while the project launch in April, 2015 also provided an opportunity to gather more data. Government and NGO Reports, and other forms of documentation also provided some additional or complementary data. The main ones included the NUSAF Reports (2002, 2009), the PRDP Report (2007), and the National Development Plan Report (2010).

As a participant in meetings, I was able to take part in the discussions, while at the same time I observed the nature and conduct of members during such sessions, including the general atmosphere in which such meetings were conducted. The main advantage of being a participant observer in this study was that it gave me access to the internal *goings on* which I would not otherwise have been able to know if I had remained on the outside. Although as a technical advisor I was not fully involved in the community, it nevertheless gave me the feel of what community members went through in certain circumstances as they expressed their hopes and fears, their aspirations and the challenges they faced. In the workings of the project committee, I felt first-hand the frustrations of the core members as they tried their best to carry out their mandate when they had been denied resources by the SCLG officials. Often times I used the interviews and focus group discussions for triangulation purposes to corroborate data I had received, read, or observed earlier and vice versa. I recorded my field notes in notebooks while still in the field, and typed them out on my computer immediately afterwards while the memory was still fresh (Sanjek 1990). Where it was difficult to write my field notes while still in the field, I used a digital sound recorder to record the voices of respondents, and transcribed the information afterword. But I always made it a point to ask for permission before clicking the record button, whenever I found recording of a respondent’s voice necessary.

5. Theoretical underpinnings

In this section, attention is focused on the reforms that swept across Africa in the 1980s and 1990s (Bollig 2016: 172) in the field of wildlife conservation. The reforms that introduced the TRSFs were not only aimed at addressing the threat posed by increasing competition between humans and wildlife for space and resources (Lamarque F., J. Anderson, R. Fergusson, M. Lagrange, Y. Osei-Owusu, and L. Bakker (2009)), but they also aimed to address concerns about extreme poverty in local communities living adjacent to such resources (Bollig 2016: 773-775); thence, the call for attention for the mitigation of the costs and losses suffered by local communities. The call for reforms was strengthened by the new theoretical perception in the development discourse, which

sought to put target communities at the centre of the development agenda rather than leave them as passive recipients of its outcomes (Chambers and Conway 1991; Burkey 1993; Chambers 1994: 1445-1446). The participatory approach (to rural development), as it was popularly known at the time, called for target communities to be genuinely involved in decision making as a key prerequisite to meaningful social transformation, rather than the term being used merely as a buzz word for populist propaganda (Olivier de Sardan 2005; Cornwall and Karen 2005).

In the context of wildlife conservation and its policy, the affected local communities should have been involved at every stage of the policy formulation for them not to feel marginalised, as is the case here. But, as it stands, although the revenue shared out to the local communities living adjacent to national parks has been fronted globally as a key instrument for managing protected areas (Tumusiime and Vedeld 2012: 18-19; Hill 2000: 311-313), *Rwot* Otto - the traditional clan chief in Pabit - says "it is nowhere comparable to the losses caused by problem animals in the livelihoods and wellbeing of the affected individuals". From this testimony, it is clear that the argument advanced by proponents of revenue sharing strategy, i.e. that the "sharing of tourism revenues with local people … secures [their] allegiance", does not hold. As Hill (2004: 281-283) argues, the absence of local participation (in policy formulation) has not only led to a lack of locally acceptable ways of effectively reducing the human-wildlife conflict (and its consequent poverty), but it has also contributed to feelings of being marginalised among local peasants. Hill (2000: 311-313) thus posits that local people must be involved so their needs and views are taken into account when discussing conservation incentives, damage compensation, hunting alternatives, and co-management. None of this can be effectively accomplished without genuine participation in policy discussions.

With an acceptance of participation in the mainstream as the development paradigm in the 1980s (Cornwall 2000: 5), one expected a change in the management of natural resources, including national game parks and wildlife. It should be noted that since the expansion of MFNP into Acholi, on the northern side of River Nile in 1926, it had become illegal for local communities to hunt on the demarcated land. And, as was the case elsewhere in British colonial history, from the 1920s onward, "game management was usurped completely by the state, rendering any use of the resource by local peoples illegal" (Bollig and Olwage 2016 quoted in Bollig 2016: 773). Even traditional authorities who otherwise enjoyed special privileges under colonial rule were no longer allowed to hunt (Cf. Bollig 2016: 773-774). In Uganda, the situation was not any different. For example, even when the 2002 Wildlife Policy claims to involve local communities in the management of wildlife, the practice of exclusion adopted from colonial masters has been maintained.

6. Data presentation and analysis

6.1 Power and conflicts within the project

With the challenging task of operationalising the culture and tourism centre project hanging over their heads, the project committee members wasted no time. They held their first meeting within two weeks of their appointment, in which they made a work plan that was to guide their activities. However, their enthusiasm was soon curtailed when they realised they could not implement the work plan. The sub county authorities who controlled the TRSF money which was supposed to facilitate their activities claimed there was no money for the committee. To their dismay, the committee members soon realised that a power struggle had erupted between them and the SCLG officials. Sub county councillors looked at the project as their brainchild and wanted to have the upper hand, while the project committee considered itself the legitimate organ mandated to plan for and implement the project. In the end, when the two failed to reach a compromise, the project could not take off. It simply became a white elephant.

It all started when the newly appointed committee rejected the proposal of the sub county executive to include retired civil servants and selected elders on the project committee. The sub county chair had invited five elders to attend the first committee session at which the executive council of the project committee was to be elected and the work plan drafted. But by a vote of eight to two, the elected committee members rejected the idea. They saw this as political interference into the affairs of the committee. During the meeting, a member emphasised that “UWA guidelines do not mention elders as a special category to be represented on Parish Development Committees (PDC) or Parish Procurement Committees (PPC) at the grassroots” (Meeting, September 2013). (The PDC and PPC were grassroots committees mandated by the UWA to implement community projects involving revenue sharing funds donated by the UWA to the communities. But in Purongo Sub County, the community had accepted the transfer of that mandate to the culture and tourism project committee until the project took off). Thus, the project committee had the mandate of the grassroots communities on the matter. Hence, when the matter was put to vote, members overwhelmingly rejected the representation of elders on the project committee. It was quite embarrassing to the sub county executives who had invited the elders. So, in retaliation, they decided not to sponsor any project committee activity financially, thereby sabotaging implementation of the work plan. Subsequently, because of lack of facilitation, lack of quorum, tardiness for project committee meetings became quite persistent. In the end, half of the committee members stopped coming for meetings altogether because, even when they sacrificed their personal resources to meet their transport costs, their lunch expenses were not refunded. I remember that, whenever meetings were scheduled, we would sometimes start in the afternoon instead of the morning. At other times, meetings were simply rescheduled to take place the following day because quorum had not been realised. By the time one of the members on the advisory team sacrificed her own resources to register the project at the district headquarters two years later (Meeting, April 2015), only five out of the ten members were still active. But, all along, the sub county executive committee had continued to make decisions and to spend money meant for the project.

Even as the project was being One of such decisions was to construct two semi-permanent structures on the project site without involving members of the project committee. When a member on the advisory team asked why this had been done, Council representatives on the advisory board told him that the law did not allow non-councillors to attend meetings of the organs of local governments. So, decisions about the project continued to be made without involving project committee members. Yet, according to its mandate, it was the project committee that ought to have made all such decisions. Another major resolution made in the absence of the relevant committee was about commissioning the project.

A grand ceremony was organised in April 2015, at which the Acholi Paramount Chief, *Rwot* Acana II, was the chief guest. As a member of the advisory board, I was one of those invited. At the ceremony, the five members of the project committee who attended had been relegated to the minor roles of constructing the shelter, organising seats for the invited guests, organising traditional dance groups, etc. But the programme for the ceremony and the budget remained firmly in the hands of the political councillors (Meeting, April 2015). In a brief meeting we held after the ceremony with the five committee members present, it became clear that, although the project committee members had been involved in the ceremony, they were not in control. commissioned, none of the planned activities such as setting up sub committees, or collecting artefacts and trophies were being considered. We learnt later that the councillors had a parallel view on how the project should be managed. Instead of the participatory approach which the project committee had planned for, the sub county councils wanted to issue a management contract to a foreign investor. But with very little formal communication between the sub county council and the project

committee, all this was heard in the context of 'rumours'.

On their part, park officials had looked at the project as a good mechanism through which to engage with the local community in wildlife conservation (Interview, April 2016). The different sections of the project would need a regular and constant flow of tourists, just like the park. Hence, the community would have to work closely with park officials to ensure effective measures of protecting wildlife from poachers and other dangers.

For park officials, the survival of more wildlife would mean more tourists, more revenue to the park, and consequently, more revenue sharing funds to the communities. For the community tourism project, on the other hand, more tourists would mean more customers to the project, and consequently, more demand for items from the community, hence more income directly into the project and into the community. At the same time, the community would acquire better skills to supply quality food items, cultural performances, crafts, and artefacts, thereby diversifying their livelihoods (FGD September 2013). In a nutshell, therefore, the power struggle between Purongo Sub County Local Government and the project committee was a serious impediment to the recovery of livelihoods in the community and a powerful tool in the promotion of marginalisation.

6.2 The people's narratives

Both the key informants' interviews and focus group discussions I held in Pabit Parish highlighted the marginalisation of the Acholi as a real concern. However, whereas the peasant farmers explained it basically in terms of their crop losses which had been ignored by the government, the key informants had a broader perspective which included other factors outside the problem animals and the tourism sector. *Rwot* Otto, the area clan chief, quickly brought out four key complaints that he said made the Acholi feel more marginalised than any other community in Uganda. These included: the government's refusal to compensate for the damages caused by wildlife; memories of Acholi cattle stolen by 'men in uniform' during the LRA war (cf. Weeks 2002; Gelsdorf et al. 2012; Gersony 1997), the corruption and mismanagement of donor funds for post conflict recovery of northern Uganda in the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), and land grabbing in Acholi land, part of which was linked to the state (cf. Atkinson and Owor 2013; Mabikke 2011). However, in this paper, I limit myself to the first issue – problem animals and the government's refusal to compensate individuals who lose their agricultural livelihoods to animal raids.

The *Rwot* of Pabit says he is convinced that a comprehensive dialogue with the government on these matters is the only way to make his people feel they belong. But he observes that, in his parish and the entire sub county, as it were, the participation arena between the UWA and managers of the tourism sector generally on the one hand, and the local community living adjacent to the park on the other, remains quite narrow (Interview, September 2013, April 2015). My observation was that, whatever channels of communication existed, they were top-down. I witnessed this in the attitude of some park officers and National Forest Authority officials in April 2016, at a workshop on the rights of indigenous people living in or close to protected areas. It took time for the officers to reconcile what, to them, was a contradiction. According to one of the District Forest Officers from Eastern Uganda (Interview, April 2016), their training in wildlife conservation had only prepared them to defend the rights of flora and fauna in protected areas. Local communities had none. Based on the way the park and forestry officers articulated their position at the conference as custodians of the law on wildlife in Uganda, it was quite clear that *community participation*, as existed in the 2002 Wildlife Policy, was only a buzzword.

The view of the sub county Production Committee chair on the situation was that the recovery of agricultural livelihoods of entire communities living adjacent to the national park was at stake, with negative implications for poverty eradication, and something needed to be done - urgently (Interview, April 2015). The Acholi Culture and Tourism Centre project initiated in 2013

by the SCLG, which the councillors had envisaged as a forum for dialogue on issues of mutual interest between the community and the park, had not taken off as expected, due to internal conflicts. In the meantime, post war vulnerability and poverty linked to the problem animals of the MFNP remained unresolved.

Although there were obviously a number of other challenges that affected the agricultural livelihoods of peasants in Pabit Parish, ‘the elephant’ was considered to be the major one. When at some point I asked members in the two focus groups that I conducted to rank the major impediments to agriculture, problem animals were ranked higher than erratic rains and drought conditions (FGD, June 2014). Yet, these two were also a big threat to agro-production in the area according to the Sub County CDO (Interview, June 2014). Others were lack of input, lack of modern farming skills, an unpredictable market, and the fluctuating prices of agricultural produce, among others (FGD, June 2014). An elder in Pabit agreed with the group’s ranking on the issue of the elephant when I presented it to him a few days later (Interview, June 2014). He narrated to me how, in the long rains of 2015, he had cultivated 5 acres of rice from which he had expected a substantial amount of income; only to be frustrated by elephants which ate it all up. In the end, he was barely able to cover his production costs. With a lot of bitterness, he explained:

> When elephants come at night, we phone them [meaning, park warders] to come to our rescue but they don’t respond. When you are lucky and they answer the phone, they tell you they don’t have transport. … But even when they say they are coming, they take so long that by the time they arrive, the animals will have done so much damage and probably moved on. You know how an elephant does not move alone and you know how big they can be. When they descend on your gardens, my dear, you don’t want to witness it! So, I am just there. I don’t even know what to do next.

He said he could not understand why the government refused to listen to its own citizens’ outcry, but instead showed more concern for the welfare of wild animals. An adult elephant can consume as much as 500 kg of foliage in a day (IRIN News, 7 October 2010).

A deeper analysis of the contradiction between theory and practice of the participatory paradigm shows that affected communities are often left on the fringes when major decisions are taken, yet such decisions have profound effects on their lives. In Uganda, for example, the decision to offer 20% of park gate collections to local communities in form of TRSFs was delivered from the top. So were the guidelines on how the funds were to be managed (TRSF Guidelines 2010). The elder concurred with *Rwot* Otto that the costs and losses incurred by individual members of local communities far outweighed the value of the TRSF. Like the local peasants affected by the problem, the *Rwot* could not understand government’s refusal to have a dialogue on its Wildlife Policy, which made it criminal for people to access the park, yet refused to compensate the losses they incur when problem animals from the park invaded their space. The solution to the crisis, he advised, was to review the whole wildlife policy with wider participation, including the local communities neighbouring the parks whose livelihoods were directly affected by problem animals (cf. Hill 2000; Chambers 1994). Such a gesture would not only enhance their belonging as citizens, but also strengthen their capabilities to handle similar challenges in the future.

Another elder from a neighbouring village had similar testimony. His concern, which has been echoed everywhere in the Acholi sub region, was on education. “With these types of losses, it is now very difficult to keep our children in school. And I am afraid, unless something is done, very soon it will also be difficult to feed them”, he lamented. The high number of school-age children loitering at the Purongo Trading Centre proved his point. The Local Council chairperson confirmed (Interview, April 2015) that the crime rate at the centre had gone up due to youth

unemployment, as many of them have dropped out of school.

7. Discussion of findings

Just like the outcry about marginalisation did not go away in spite of the heavy sums invested in post war participatory projects, so the culture and tourism project failed to take off, in spite of the guaranteed finances from the TRSF. My interpretation was that, in both cases, the issue was an inappropriate mode, or lack of genuine participation (Cf. Olivier de Sardan 2005; Arntein 1969). Therefore, although the 1995 National Constitution of Uganda states under National Objectives and Directive Principles of State Policy X (n.p.) that "the state shall take all the necessary steps to involve the people in the formulation and implementation of development plans and programmes that affect them" (GOU 1995, n.p.), reality demonstrates otherwise. I argue in this paper that an absence of participation in the wildlife policy has not only prolonged the returning IDPs' attempts to re-establish their livelihoods as they grapple with problem animals, it has also left local communities feeling marginalised (Hill 2004).

Anthropologists (Olivier de Sardan 2005; Long 1993; Pottier 1999) argue that rural communities are an aggregation of differences in many things, including gender, age, and ethnicity, as well as education, poverty, and wealth, among other things; hence, they cannot be assumed to participate on the same terms. But development projects continue to treat them as if they were a community of equals. In his critique of the PRA method of participation, for example, Mosse (2001) argues that agencies implementing rural projects for the poor often conceal the priorities of the power elites or those of 'outsiders' but presenting them as the 'local knowledge' whereas they are not. This implies that the disaggregated views of the local communities are disregarded and instead, only those of the power elites are presented as the common position of the local community. In the final analysis, local priorities end up not being addressed.

Thus, in the end, it is the power elites (both within and without) that often benefit rather than the target community itself. However, whereas Chambers (1993, 1994) is aware of these differences and acknowledges the possibility of elite capture, he nevertheless strongly advocates for participation. Like Freire (1972), he stresses that, with a little effort, members of the local community can be empowered to become conscious of their potential (*conscientised*) so that they can gain confidence and be able to articulate their concerns and to dialogue with those responsible for the management of society. Having worked practically with rural communities, both Chambers and Freire hold strongly that facilitators and development professionals only need to change their attitudes towards peasant communities to witness how much both can learn from each other (Chambers 1994; Freire 1972).

Another seeming contradiction is the logic of the TRSF. Introduced in Uganda in 1996, the fund was aimed at involving local communities living adjacent to game parks in the management of wildlife conservation (Tumusiime and Vedeld 2012). But, the guidelines issued by the UWA in 2010 only mention participation in relation to the use of the fund. It says that local communities are expected to participate fully in decisions on how the funds released to them are to be utilised. There is no mention of any upward link between the communities and the UWA, which in effect means there was no meaningful participation insofar as the management of wildlife is concerned. Both the interviews and group discussions brought this out quite clearly. Local communities in Pabit Parish said they were yet to see local engagement in the management of wildlife (Community meeting, September 2013). They only testified on the damage being inflicted by wildlife on their efforts to recover their livelihoods after the long war, and the mitigation measures recommended by park authorities, which they said had so far proved ineffective. Be that as it may, the contradiction between the theory behind revenue sharing and the painful reality when problem animals raid peasants' gardens in Pabit is irreconcilable under the current policy. *Rwot* Otto says

he has tried

> … as much as possible to call for a participatory approach on the issue of compensation but park officials only point at the wildlife policy, which they insist does not allow them to pay compensation. This is obviously an unfair policy and it should be changed. I have even gone to the politicians to seek audience with the president on the matter, but so far, I have not succeeded … (Interview, April 2016).

In discussions held with park officials on the sidelines of a seminar on the rights of local communities in protected areas held in Purongo in April 2016, the officials concurred with the local community view that the TRSF was inadequate. One of them put it this way:

> We are aware that the 20% income from the gate collections which is shared out to the communities by the park is not enough to compensate for the losses incurred by individuals whose crops are destroyed by problem animals or those who are killed or injured by wildlife (Interview, 2016).

But they quickly absolved themselves, saying there was nothing they could do about it since the law does not allow victims of animal raids to be compensated.

Linked to the problem of animal raids is the issue of mitigation measures. Peasant farmers in Pabit pointed out that all measures suggested or actually carried out by park authorities, such as digging the trench, growing chilli peppers, burning elephant dung at night, beating pans and plastic jerry cans to make frightening noises when they hear the animals approaching, and forming scouting groups that would warn park warders when elephants came, had all been tried, but so far no sustainable positive results had been registered. Crop raids by problem animals have continued. At some point, a farmers group in Lagaji showed me elephant tracks quite close to their young chilli garden. Yet red chilli pepper was supposed to ensure that elephants do not come near the gardens. However, the consolation is that, since elephants do not eat chilli pepper, farmers can at least hope to harvest the whole crop and thereby be assured of some income for the family, while at the same time it protects the other crops from the elephant (Interview, August 2016). The magnitude of the problem of elephants is best highlighted by the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations. It puts the annual cost of elephant raids on crops per individual farmer in Africa at between US $60 in Uganda and $510 in Cameroon (IRIN News, 7 October 2010). The report indicates that an adult elephant can consume as much as 500 kg of foliage in a day, which shows the extent to which peasant farmers in Pabit are affected as they try to re-establish their livelihoods.

Although I did not ask specifically about it, the poor status of the chilli gardens that I visited appeared to portray the peasants' poor attitude to the new crop. In three out of the four group gardens that I visited the germination rate was rather poor, but the farmers had not covered the gaps with more seedlings at the appropriate time. So, as the chilli plants started maturing, the numerous gaping spaces on the half acre gardens gave the impression of an activity that was not taken seriously. The challenge is that, except for cotton, most peasants seem to want to stick to the food crops which they are used to, that serve them both as food and cash crop (Interview, August 2016). These include rice, sesame, ground nuts, maize, and sorghum, which have all become important market crops. Indeed, some of the groups I visited appeared not to give much attention to chilli red pepper. For example, some of them had not even started harvesting the chilli, yet it was already ripening in the gardens. Being their first time to grow the crop, however, the officers from the Gulu Agricultural Development Company that was promoting the new crop continued to

encourage and guide farmers on how to maximise their gains from the crop. There is hope that - with other players such as advocacy organisations that promote dialogue to cater for the interests of local communities, and commercial private companies promoting non-traditional cash crops such as chilli red pepper - in the long run, local communities will gain agency and cease to feel marginalised.

8. Conclusions

As a narrative of the poor local community in Pabit Parish, this paper aimed at presenting their anger and frustrations as they try to reconstruct their livelihoods after the long LRA war. And as already pointed out above, it is also a narrative of the revenue sharing fund as is manifest in the culture and tourism centre project against the backdrop of the 'unfair' wildlife policy brought to life through the perennial crop losses and human injuries (Hill 2004) of the local Pabit community.

In theory, the project was a good opportunity to involve the local community in the promotion and management of wildlife conservation. The fact that the project would need a continuous flow of tourists, most of whom would be primarily visiting the park, meant that the community would actively participate in efforts to ensure the safety of wildlife and to attract more tourists. Thus, the conflict that erupted between the sub county LG and project committee which delayed the project's ability to take off not only affected the recovery of the community's agricultural livelihoods, but also prolonged their sense of being marginalised. Hopes for community empowerment through livelihood skills and capabilities, and the cultural awakening that were to be gained through the project have also been frustrated. Instead, there is continued wastage, as the buildings on which so many resources were spent remain in disuse, and the project which held so much promise for the recovery of people's livelihoods degenerated into an arena for conflicts rather than community transformation. However, with other players such as advocacy organisations joining the field, and the promotion of non-traditional cash crops by the Acholi Agriculture Company and other investors, there is hope that, in the long run, local communities will gain agency and thus be able to influence matters in their favour and thereby feel part of the mainstream.

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