

Publications

Publication Option 1: Positionality in Foreign Aid

As one of his first major policies, US President Donald Trump enacted massive freezes in US foreign aid. In the aftermath, the global humanitarian landscape has undergone significant disruption. As one of the largest providers of aid, American withdrawal from aid provision has left many partners, including Uganda, seeking alternative routes. However, aid dependency, when coupled with ineffective or uninformed foreign interventions, has left many communities frustrated and disillusioned. Our recent fieldwork in Northern Uganda, conducted as part of our capstone project at the University of British Columbia's School of Public Policy and Global Affairs, revealed widespread concerns about how foreign aid is allocated and implemented. Our main research focus is on the impact of armed conflict on family structures, specifically with regards to social cohesion.

Uganda is a colorful and multicultural country, consisting of a variety of peoples and languages and customs. As foreign researchers, we strongly believe that one must be aware of their own positionality and status as an outsider when making observations on another culture. One must not make unfounded assumptions about the topic based on uninformed or mis-contextualized conceptions. This aspect is further emphasized when one takes into consideration the global North-South divide. Despite the team's varied backgrounds, as students at a Canadian university, we are by default Global North researchers. While two out of four members are from the Global South, neither of them is from Uganda. As such, we are essentially a team of foreign researchers. Throughout our research and fieldwork, we have done our best to act accordingly to this foreign identity by keeping our positionality in mind and not superimposing our own ideals over local norms and lived experiences. However, we have found that this mindset sometimes did not translate into an angle of approach for past aid efforts.

In recent years, Uganda has sometimes been the target of international humanitarian aid efforts, though not all of them have been fully effective. An article on The Observer (<https://observer.ug/news/world-bank-fallout-can-uganda-survive-without-foreign-assistance/>), an Ugandan newspaper, makes the bold claim that "it is common knowledge that aid, and loans never get to reach the grassroots, let alone leave donor countries." Regardless of whether this claim is truthful, the strength of the statement reflects that there is at least a degree of frustration with receiving aid. The same sentiment can be seen as early as 2005, with this talk by an Action Aid coordinator at Makerere University (<https://www.newvision.co.ug/news/1115663/-eur-donor-aid-poorly-handled-eur>). He said donors should be "giving Ugandans themselves policy space to determine how to use aid money".

In our fieldwork, we have noticed a widespread disappointment with aid received. Many have said that aid and loans often look good on paper, but failed to meet expectations in terms of implementation. Some interviewees pointed to the fact that some donors are donating in a simple fashion, without gaining an understanding of the circumstances and realities of the recipient of aid.

Some interviewees have complained that foreign aid has also brought foreign culture, which has partially eroded traditional norms and values. One interviewee even went as far as to say that sometimes policies by the government fail because the government is rushing to conform to international moral pressure rather than actually trying to help the population. These all reflect a sense of frustration with foreign interventions that fail to take into account the lived realities of the people living there. Even worse, some NGO workers that we spoke to outlined actual cases where uninformed aid initiatives had unintentionally worsened conditions for its recipients. All the interviewees that we spoke to indicated that they wished for more of an Ugandan voice to be heard in current and future efforts.

When researchers approach any given topic, they should be trying to gain as close of an understanding as possible. This article by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (<https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/12/global-north-majority-world-misinformation?lang=en>) discusses this in depth, concluding that Global North researchers should take into account local community norms and dynamics, as well as pay attention to local information sources. A similar sentiment is mirrored in this article on the Stanford Social Innovation Review (https://ssir.org/articles/entry/impact_without_imposition_what_role_for_northern_academics_in_the_global_south). However, it would appear that this approach has not often been translated into policy outcomes, as it can be seen that inefficient aid is still a prominent issue. This article is a call for not only researchers, but also donors, diplomats, and any other foreign actors that intend to engage with Uganda, to pay attention to communal norms, cultural values and beliefs, and local sources of information. Attempts at aid without gaining a holistic and comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences in Ugandan realities are simply irresponsible, and there is a significant amount of both empirical and theoretical evidence to support this approach.

As the aftershocks of US President Donald Trump's foreign aid freezes continue to affect large parts of the world, it is evident that there is a rapidly widening vacuum in the humanitarian aid space that requires other actors to step in before the situation deteriorates further. By keeping a locally and culturally informed approach in the policymaking cycle, it is likely that inefficiencies in planning can be prevented and sufficient aid is provided to those that need it.

Publication Option 2

Introduction

The sun ascends over Gulu, casting a golden glow upon the bustling markets where seasoned vendors deftly arrange fresh produce. The rhythmic pulse of Acholi music spills from nearby stalls, intertwining with the morning chatter of early shoppers. Children weave through narrow alleys, their laughter reverberating like a hymn of perseverance.

How does a land once scarred by conflict continue to pulse with such vibrancy? This question echoed in my mind as I bore witness to the indomitable spirit of Northern Uganda. Though its past is marred by hardship, its present brims with vitality—a testament to the fortitude of its people. This is the Northern Uganda that demands recognition, celebration, and reverence.

The Indelible Shadows of Conflict

Northern Uganda's history is deeply etched with the scars of war, particularly the decades-long insurgency waged by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). Families were fractured, entire communities displaced, and generations forced to endure unspeakable trauma. At the height of the conflict, the United Nations estimated that over 1.8 million people were uprooted from their homes, their lives suspended in uncertainty.

Yet, within the ruins of devastation, resilience thrives. I met a woman who had spent years in an Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camp—her voice measured, her gaze steady. “We do not have the luxury of forgetting, but we also do not have the time to stop moving forward,” she told me. In her words lay the ethos of an entire region—one that acknowledges its wounds yet refuses to be defined by them. Northern Uganda's strength is not in erasing the past but in transcending it.

A Cultural Tapestry Woven in Strength

Despite its troubled history, Northern Uganda remains a beacon of cultural richness. The Acholi people, renowned for their oral traditions, carry their heritage through music, dance, and folklore. I had the privilege of witnessing a traditional dance gathering—an intergenerational symphony of movement and song. A young girl, no more than eight, struck a drum with a passion that defied her years, her rhythm echoing the heartbeat of her ancestors.

These traditions are more than relics of the past; they are threads of identity, binding generations in shared history and collective pride. Language, too, serves as a vessel of cultural preservation—the lyrical cadence of Luo not merely a means of communication, but a bridge to the past. In a world increasingly veering towards individualism, the communal spirit of Northern Uganda offers a poignant reminder of the power of togetherness.

The Land's Unspoken Promise

Beyond its people, the very land of Northern Uganda tells a story of untapped potential. Verdant hills unfurl towards the horizon, punctuated by farmlands where cassava, millet, and maize flourish under the equatorial sun. Unlike the frenzied cadence of Western cities, life here ebbs and flows in harmony with nature's rhythms.

A cultural leader spoke with reverence about the region's agricultural wealth. "If we had better access to markets, we could feed more than just our people; we could feed the world," he mused. Indeed, the promise of this land extends beyond survival—it offers a vision of self-sufficiency, economic empowerment, and sustainable growth. To perceive Northern Uganda solely through the lens of past struggle is to overlook the boundless promise embedded in its soil.

The Quiet Revolution of Resilience

Amidst the echoes of history, what struck me most was the profound optimism that permeates daily life. Conversations rarely dwelled on what had been lost but instead focused on what could still be achieved. Micro-entrepreneurs rebuild businesses with quiet determination. Students, undeterred by adversity, pursue education with unyielding resolve. Mothers cradle their children, their lullabies imbued with hope rather than lament.

Success, so often measured in material wealth, assumes a different form here. In Northern Uganda, prosperity is found in the strength of relationships, in shared burdens, in the unwavering belief in a better tomorrow. "We do not need pity, we need opportunity," a local community leader asserted. His words encapsulated the very essence of the Ugandan spirit—an unbreakable will to forge ahead, not as victims of circumstance but as architects of their own destiny.

A Call to Witness and Appreciate

It is all too easy to fixate on Uganda's potential—on what it might become, what it still lacks—without pausing to acknowledge the beauty of what already exists. My time in Gulu altered my perspective, challenging my notions of progress and worth. To those who view Uganda solely through a prism of struggle, I urge a broader lens—one that recognizes both its trials and its triumphs.

See Uganda not as a country in need but as a land of resilience, culture, and resourcefulness. Development is not confined to GDP growth or foreign aid but is also found in the quiet defiance of a people who refuse to be overshadowed by their past. To truly understand Northern Uganda is to recognize that progress is not only about economic indicators but about the richness of life as it is lived today.

Conclusion

Northern Uganda's story is not merely one of survival but of triumph. Its people embody a spirit that refuses to be extinguished—a spirit that should not be obscured by outdated narratives of suffering. To genuinely engage with Uganda and regions like it, we must shift our perspective—from one of deficit to one of appreciation.

Let us honor the beauty of the present, acknowledging that progress is not always measured in grand economic strides but in the dignity, culture, and determination of those who call this land home. As I departed Gulu, I did not leave with mere memories; I carried with me a profound reverence for the resilience of its people. Northern Uganda stands as a testament to the power of endurance and hope. And in recognizing this, we uncover a deeper, more authentic understanding of what it truly means to flourish.