

# **The Politics of American Aid and Conflict in Northern Uganda**

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## **Introduction**

The United States' Senate has recently passed legislation calling for President Barack Obama to develop a more comprehensive plan of action that will address the ongoing violence in Northern Uganda. While the authors of the Lord's Resistance Army Disarmament and Northern Uganda Recovery Act 2010 may have good intentions, the push for America to play a more decisive role in the conflict has come two decades too late and at a time when the rebel group, the LRA, has left the country. While the violence has largely subsided in the North, the conflict is not yet over. The rebel group continues to massacre communities in the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Until recently, a vague and noncommittal foreign policy, support for a semi-authoritarian regime, and generous donations of aid have characterized the United States' reactions to the atrocities committed in the Acholi sub-region of Uganda. This violence erupted in the country's Northern districts almost immediately after President Museveni took power in 1986. The LRA leader, Joseph Kony, has since terrorized Acholi communities in the name of liberating them from Museveni's dictatorship. Most famously, he has abducted an estimated 30,000 children to use as sex slaves and soldiers, forcing them to torture and kill their relatives and fellow children (Doom & Vlassenroot, 1999). Kony has also orchestrated several massacres, in which his army hacked and clubbed to death hundreds of victims. This conflict has quickly escalated into a "severe humanitarian crisis, with thousands killed, hundreds of thousands of civilians injured, and between 1 and 2 million

internally displaced, while famine and illness” have ravaged the population (Tripp, 2004, p. 22). Despite the severity of the situation, both the American and Ugandan government have largely failed to bring the conflict to an end. Instead of taking action, the United States has chosen to condone Museveni's undemocratic and corrupt policies by giving his regime a substantial amount of aid and military assistance with no strings attached. While this support has and continues to make a significant difference in many Ugandans' lives, US foreign assistance has also played a complicated role during and after the conflict. At the international, national, and local level, aid and the politics that envelop aid have perpetuated the conflict and have created an environment conducive to violence rather than improve the living standards of Northern Ugandans. Articles from Ugandan newspapers and interviews with participants support this theory—many interviewees discussed the undemocratic nature of Museveni’s government, government corruption, and the extent to which they hold aid agencies accountable rather than the current regime in power.

### **Theoretical Background**

Many scholars, including, most prominently, Jeffery Sachs, champion foreign aid, arguing that it has an enormous potential to end cycles of poverty, catalyze economic development, cultivate civil society, and establish democratic political and social norms. For Sachs and others, foreign aid represents "an international transfer of resources that would not have taken place as the result of market forces," which "includes grants and loans made at subsidized interest rates, provided by governments or by international financial institutions" as well as "technical assistance and debt relief" (Goldsmith, 2001a, p. 412). Seen from this perspective, the underlying logic of aid lies in its capacity to provide a disadvantaged nation with the most basic capital necessary for its development. Sachs points to a small village in Kenya,

Sauri, as a positive example of the effects of foreign investments in agricultural methods, health, education, and infrastructure. He asserts that "with fertilizers, improved fallows, green manures and cover crops, water harvesting and small-scale irrigation, and improved seeds, Sauri's farmers could triple the food yields per hectare and quickly end chronic hunger," and improved "storage facilities would allow the village to sell the grain over the course of months, rather than all at once, thereby getting more favorable prices" (Sachs, 2005, p. 233). Development of stronger educational systems and vocational training programs, he adds, would create a new generation of empowered students with the skills necessary to develop local leadership and solutions to community problems. By strengthening these human resources, "foreign aid could conceivably have additional unintended benefits for democracy," because "better educated and healthier people, in turn, may make better informed and more active citizens, who are the lifeblood for democratic institutions" (Goldsmith, 2001b, 137). Yet the United States' aid to Uganda has not generated such benefits, chiefly because the American government has failed to attach conditions that would both address realities on the ground and encourage economic liberalization and democracy. In Uganda, US aid has ultimately created more problems than it has addressed.

Rather than facilitate development in Uganda, US aid has instead legitimized and propped up a government that relies on undemocratic practices to maintain power. As it has in other nations, America could have used its aid as leverage to compel Museveni to democratize and adopt a multi-party system of government. Such assistance programs could, for instance, ensure that "responsibilities of African governments are carried out competently as well as conducted in a transparent and accountable manner," which would "make it more difficult for state elites to make public policy decisions to the advantage of individuals and groups supporting the government in power" (Tangri & Mwenda, 2005, p. 450).

Employed in this fashion, US aid has the potential to trigger reforms to open Uganda's closed political system. Yet American presidents have instead demonstrated both a willingness to condone Museveni's actions and to reward his resistance to democratization with funding. In 1993, for instance, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) gave Uganda \$25 million to increase and diversify agricultural exports, and in 1994 America gave an additional \$8 million to support the Uganda Primary Education Reform Program (Ofcansky 1996, p. 130). With these aid packages, Museveni has been able to portray himself as an effective leader who has worked to improve the Ugandan economy and its national educational system. Without this assistance to mask his incompetence, Museveni may very well have lost support from his constituents, who may have been more willing to overthrow him and install a more capable leader. In this East African nation, then, US foreign aid has ultimately consolidated Museveni's political dominance, and has done little or nothing to foster democracy and democratic institutions (Tangri & Mwenda, 2005). Indeed, this support has given the Ugandan President a "security complex" by which he feels that he can ignore internal pressures to create a larger space for opposition, and this has created "conditions in which conflicts in the region can only thrive" (Onyango, 2004, p. 46).

Aid from the United States and other Western donors has, moreover, perpetuated the LRA conflict by supporting a regime that has greatly limited the extent to which political opposition leaders can peacefully and democratically express their views. Instead, many opposition groups, particularly those in the North, have resorted to violence. The Ugandan political system reflects a long history of patronage politics, whereby officials use state resources to gain more clients, who in turn support and, more specifically, re-elect, their patron. Such practices are rooted in colonial legacies, which also "effectively created a socioeconomic division between the North and South that consequently led to an economic

marginalization of the North and a further development of the South" (Doom & Vlassenroot, 1999, p. 8). Thus, politicians in power distribute rewards based on regional and tribal affiliations, while the political opposition from other districts, namely the North, are left with nothing. Since Museveni took power, "the alienation of political forces in Uganda has become more extreme and accusations that the [National Resistance Movement] NRM government is mainly for the people from President Museveni's region are more common," and this "growing alienation of political forces [has] led to more rebel groups and violence in Uganda" (Hauser, 1999, p. 636).

In the more specific and practical realm of Uganda's political system, Museveni's failure to establish free and fair elections during most of the conflict further marginalized Northern rebel groups. Until recently, the Ugandan President had banned political parties and effectively created a one-party state. The 2002 Freedom in the World report found that Ugandans did not have the ability to elect their own leaders through democratic competition, because the government had rigged past elections. The document also cited a 1999 Human Rights Watch report, which "concluded that 'the NRM has consolidated its monopoly on political power through exclusive access to state funding and machinery, widespread and sometimes compulsory political education programs,'" and by appointing the electoral commission ("Freedom in the World: Uganda," 2002). Given this legacy, those politicians who do represent an opposition and who challenge the status quo have perennially faced arrest and physical harassment. With no forum to voice opposition, many from the North, including voices associated with the LRA, have responded to their marginalization with violence.

US aid may have also undermined any incentives Museveni might have contemplated for bringing an end to the conflict in the North. Instead, Uganda's widespread high-level government corruption suggests that Museveni and his top officials have likely embezzled a portion of the aid packages

given to Uganda with the intention of helping him suppress violence. As such, aid may have actually motivated the President to neglect the conflict-ridden North. The 2000 Transparency International Corruption Percentage Index ranked Uganda in the bottom ten countries (“Corruption Perceptions Index,” 2000). In this East African country, corruption has long characterized the politics in Kampala, and many top officials have used their power and position for personal gain. “By enabling individual power-holders to divert political resources into their own hands,” the top “political leadership has been able to retain their loyalty and keep them within the ruling coalition” and, simultaneously, “individual government ministers as well as senior bureaucrats and military officers have channeled part of their corruptly obtained monies to ensure that the government remains in power” (Tangri & Mwenda, 2006, p. 104). Yet when Museveni came to power, he promised to end corruption, and while he has established “certain legislative measures in place to combat corruption,” the “resources to enforce them are lacking” (“Freedom in the World: Uganda,” 2009). For instance, the 1995 Constitution established the Inspectorate of Government (IG) to prevent and punish corruption, but the IG head has always been a member of the NRM. It has rarely investigated cases that involve high-level party members (Tangri & Mwenda, 2005, p. 461). Foreign aid has ultimately fuelled this cycle of corruption by expanding the capital available to these officials. Some scholars argue that, in the 1990s, during the conflict, aid-related corruption was so widespread that local primary schools received only 20 cents of every US aid dollar (Moyo 2009, p. 53). Yet, America has continued to give assistance “to help Museveni fight the LRA”, and so long as the aid keeps coming, it remains unlikely that top politicians will push to end the violence in the North and stabilize the region.

Additionally, aid has encouraged Museveni to ignore a conflict that has affected only those in his political opposition, and thereby eliminating them as a viable threat. The British

colonizers only crystallized pre-existing divisions between the North and South, and more specifically between the Baganda and Acholi. By giving privileges to the South and by neglecting the North, the British established a political system of inequality. As a result, in its post-independence history, Uganda has experienced persistent and recurring ethnically- and regionally-motivated violence. For instance, Idi Amin's "brutality and buffoonery made world headlines as hundreds of thousands of people were killed," and Milton Obote tortured and murdered 250,000 people at the beginning of his second regime ("Freedom in the World: Uganda," 2002). Museveni's politics have only differed from his predecessors in that he targets the North for political oppression. Many Acholi, for instance, believe that "Museveni created the [IDP or internally displaced person] camps to neutralize them as a source of political opposition" (Green, 2009, p. 118-19). He has prolonged the conflict, they argue, so that he can justify spending on his political base--the army. Northerners have often asked: "How can the President support the SPLA (the Sudanese People's Liberation Army), the RPF (the Rwandan Patriotic Front) and Kabila (Joseph Kabila, President of the Democratic Republic of Congo) and still pretend that he is lacking the means to protect the Acholi from the LRA?" (Doom & Vlassenroot, 1999, p. 32) Without US assistance, the situation would have been different. Foreign aid has funded the IDP camps, food relief, and medical care. With the camps paid for, his political base satisfied, and his opposition successfully quieted and marginalized, what motivation does Museveni have to bring an end to the conflict?

After two decades of conflict, the situation of underdevelopment in local communities has remained unchanged, chiefly because people do not hold Museveni's government accountable for its failures to end the conflict and to provide services. Aid has undermined this accountability. From the beginning of the conflict in 1986 to 2007, Uganda received a total of roughly \$17.4 billion in aid, which

represented over half of the nation's annual budget (“UN Data: A World of Information, 2009). Dependence on American and other nations’ assistance "structures accountability as something between the executive branch of government and aid donors rather than between state and society," and this accountability between the state and civil society is a fundamental component of a democracy (Brautigam & Knack, 2004, p. 265). The absence of a more democratic relationship occurs because foreign aid is an "unearned" source of income; the revenue does not come from taxes but from donors. "At no time," then, do African states "establish a major tradition of providing goods and services in exchange for taxes and fees," and so "foreign aid stymies the very values of responsive and efficient government it is meant to foster" (Goldsmith, 2001b, p. 127). In the North, Acholi communities—communities affected most by the conflict--have failed to hold the appropriate actor accountable: Museveni's government. Instead, these people have often looked to NGOs and the aid agencies of foreign donors rather than the President to end the conflict. With no one holding him accountable, Museveni risks little political capital in perpetuating the conflict. Yet why has the United States, which claims to expand "democracy and free markets, while improving the lives of citizens in the developing world," continued to fund such an undemocratic regime? (“This is USAID,” 2009)

America's need to justify its economic and political donor stipulations—more so than its desire to maximize the potential benefits of aid--has shaped its aid policy to Uganda. The West has poured billions of dollars into African nations' development since their independence, but after decades of failures, various observers began to question the capacity of foreign aid to address these countries' problems. During these unsuccessful years, many scholars began to criticize the United States for forcing economic reforms on Africa. Their main arguments "were that these programs did not work and that donors imposed dangerous and useless goals on weak

countries" that might, in the long term, undermine their development (Hauser, 1999, p. 633-34). Instead of helping Africa industrialize, the economic reform efforts attached to aid, scholars argued, have centered on "resurrecting the primary-product export economies that existed at the time of independence" (Haberson & Rothchild, 2009, 43). Such reforms have clearly benefited American businesses, which have continued to rely on Africa for cheap prices of raw materials. US corporations can manufacture products and sell the secondary goods back to the developing countries for higher margins of profit. To justify the implementation of these economically-beneficial programs, the United States desperately needed to find a success story. Then, donors could claim that aid failures were a result of uncooperative recipient governments rather than the economic conditions that they attached to aid. Uganda fit this Western definition of success. In just four years, from 1991-1995, the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) had grown at an annual rate of 4-6 percent, and its per capita GDP growth averaged 3 percent per year in real terms. And from 1994 to 1995 alone, Uganda's GDP doubled its expected growth rate of 5 percent (Hauser, 1999, p. 633) Following Uganda's adoption of free-market reforms encompassing economic liberalization, privatization, and the reform of public enterprise, Museveni earned accolades from many in the West (Onyango, 2004). Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright went as far as to hail Uganda as a "beacon of hope" (Mugisha, 2004, p. 140). The United States, then, has little motivation to admit fault and alter aid policies that benefit its economy in a way that would pressure Museveni to end the conflict and establish democratic policies. America will continue giving unstipulated aid to Uganda.

Beyond these economic motivations, the United States has had a vested interest in maintaining Uganda as an ally in the War on Terror against its neighbor and long-time enemy, Sudan. Because the Northern Sudanese government in Khartoum had harbored Osama Bin Laden and other Islamic

terrorist suspects, America "categorized Sudan as a 'state sponsor of terror' and applied multilateral sanctions" in 1993, and President Bill Clinton "authorized providing military assistance to Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Uganda in order to contain" the Sudanese threat (Huliaras, 2006, p. 710). After September 11, 2001, the United States' focus on Sudan and its civil war intensified as President George W. Bush fixated on eradicating terrorism. The Islamic government's ties with radical Arab movements in the Middle East further motivated Bush to take a keen interest in the region (Collins, 2007). Yet due to past experiences in Somalia, the American government has since demonstrated a hesitancy to directly intervene in the internal conflicts of African nations or in highly localized conflicts between African states. The United States, then, had to devise a strategy that allowed it to discretely fund the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA), the rebel group fighting the Northern government. Because its conflict has been closely connected to Sudan's civil war, America looked to Uganda.

To pursue its geopolitical interests in the region, the United States has relied on Uganda's past relationships with and policy toward Sudan. Uganda has backed SPLA leader, John Garang, for decades and, in response, Khartoum has funded the LRA. Specifically, Uganda has given the SPLA shelter in the North, and the Islamic Sudanese government has provided the LRA with land mines, anti-personal mines, and training facilities (Doom & Vlassenroot, 1999). Funding for the SPLA, however, increased under Museveni's regime, "a fact that coincided with a more active Western interest in fighting what is considered to be the scourge of Islamic fundamentalism" (Onyango, 2004, p. 41). Thus, the United States gives a significant amount of military aid to Museveni, which he will then ship north to the SPLA under the guise of sending vehicles and equipment to fight the LRA (Clark, 1998). The Ugandan conflict has provided a sufficient justification for shipping military assistance to the North. To maintain this relationship, America must also placate Museveni

by funding his regime. This "lack of donor political conditionality on Uganda," has largely been "due in part to the fact that donors, particularly the US and Great Britain, [have] relied on President Museveni's leadership in the region for their foreign policy goals" (Hauser, 1999, p. 634). US foreign aid, donated to maintain Uganda's loyalty and support of the SPLA, has ultimately propped up a corrupt government that perpetuates the LRA conflict by forcing marginalized political opposition to resort to violence. This aid has further prolonged the war by undermining the level to which Acholi communities hold Museveni accountable for failing to bring an end to the conflict.

## **Methods**

Because most Northern Ugandans have benefited from foreign aid, I could not simply ask them if that assistance had, in their view, perpetuated the conflict and created an environment conducive to violence. Instead, I examined their perceptions and the views conveyed in Ugandan newspapers of seven factors that have contributed to such a volatile atmosphere and have motivated opposition to respond with violence. These components or indicators include: the extent to which aid has legitimized Museveni's regime, the existence of a space for political opposition, marginalization based on ethnicity and region, corruption, NGOs and aid agencies, accountability, and the role of the US assistance in Uganda's political development and its Northern communities.

### ***Participants***

A total of eleven individuals, consisting of four residents of Gulu, a town in northern Uganda; four local leaders; two national government leaders; and one United States Agency for International Development (USAID) representative, agreed to participate in the study. Here, a leader can be defined as any individual that holds a prominent and

influential position within the community, which includes but is not limited to political, social, religious, and intellectual figures. Only two of these six local and national leaders are women, and two of the four Gulu residents are women. In total, then, four women and seven men participated in the study. With the exception of the USAID representative, all subjects are Ugandan citizens, and all live in the North. The participants' ages ranged from 22 to 57. Their socioeconomic backgrounds also varied, but I interviewed neither impoverished nor extremely wealthy Ugandans. All participants spoke fairly good English, which generally indicates a high level of education relative to the rest of their community.

The focus on Gulu residents and local leaders is appropriate, chiefly because Northern Ugandan communities have previously responded to political exclusion with violence. These leaders presumably speak for and represent their communities, and would, thus, articulate opinions that have circulated among their constituents. Indeed, local perceptions of these seven indicators have and will continue to significantly affect the relationship that exists between foreign aid, the LRA conflict, and Museveni's government. For example, if foreign aid has provided Museveni with the resources to maintain power and the Acholi believe that his government excludes them, then members of these communities may return to the bush to fight. Likewise, if communities persist in holding NGOs and aid agencies accountable for building roads and schools, they will never pressure Museveni to change, and he will continue to pursue undemocratic and corrupt policies. The actors at this most basic level ultimately represent a political force for change, and their perceptions can help explain why so much has remained unchanged in the Acholi sub-regions of Uganda.

I also interviewed government officials working for Museveni and an international aid representative to determine if their opinions regarding the indicators differed from local

perceptions. These national-level actors generally develop and implement government policies, while foreign donors devise aid strategies that either condone or support recipient countries' laws. In Uganda, the existence of a "disconnect" between these national-level actors' and local communities' views may have helped prolong the conflict and contributed to an environment conducive to violence. For instance, if the United States prioritizes its strategic interests and condones Museveni's corruption, American donor policy will remain unchanged and continue to feed the violence. If government ministers believe that Museveni has not established a climate not favorable to political opposition, it is unlikely that they would push for free and fair elections. And, if Gulu residents still feel excluded from the political process, they may resort to violence. Thus, to fully understand the complex relationship between foreign aid, Museveni's government, and conflict, I had to examine the dynamics between international, national, and local actors.

### ***Interview Procedures***

To collect qualitative data, I read Ugandan newspapers and conducted semi-structured interviews in a location of the subjects' choosing for approximately one hour. The objective of this particular method centers on understanding an individual's opinions and feelings about a specific topic. Because I wanted to study the complex relationship between public opinion, foreign aid, conflict, and politics, I expected that participants' views would be equally complicated and would often need clarification. Thus, I decided to rely on a somewhat flexible data-collecting method. To conduct semi-structured interviews, I prepared a general outline of questions, but I rarely phrased questions the same way for each individual. Nevertheless, all questions measured participants' perceptions of the benefits and drawbacks of foreign aid, the role of the United States in Uganda, the level of corruption in Museveni's government, political marginalization, and accountability. I also frequently stopped to ask follow-up

questions, clarify a participant's comment or to fully discuss a topic raised by an individual's answer.

Because I wanted to employ a flexible methodology that still minimized researcher bias, I decided to employ neither structured interviews nor unstructured (focus) interviews. Instead, I wanted to achieve a balance between the two research approaches. Structured interviews and surveys emphasize standardization and consistency as a means to eliminate researcher bias. Such methods ensure that I could attribute the variability in my results to my independent variable rather than to confounding variables. Had I adopted them for this project, their structures would have precluded a subject's stray comment or chance observation and my own ability to discuss and explore such answers further. This method also would have limited the scope in which my participants could have discussed the topic, and it would have prevented me from gaining a complete understanding of the individuals' views on the subject. While I did want the ability to deviate from a pre-determined set of questions, I did not want to conduct a wholly unstructured or focus interview. Researchers generally employ these more "spontaneous" methods to discuss a series of events or experiences rather than a single topic and, so, they do not prepare a set of questions to ask the participant. The interview flows more like a conversation. Yet this method often produces unfocused data and researcher bias. I, however, sought to examine individuals' opinions on the specific but complex topic of foreign aid rather than a participants' narrative, and so I chose not to use such methodologies

I also decided to conduct individual interviews rather than focus groups. I anticipated that private conversations rather than more public discussions would allow participants to discuss somewhat taboo subjects. Many of my target participants are members of either the local government or national government and, thus, some individuals may have found it difficult or awkward to answer questions regarding

corruption, free and fair elections, and marginalization. Also, several leaders may have wished to remain anonymous. Sharing their opinions before a focus group would have jeopardized their confidentiality and, probably, for some, their jobs. Moreover, a focus group would have greatly hindered my ability to ask participants to clarify their answers, and explore a single persons' perception of the subject matter.

## **Findings**

### ***Perceptions of Aid and Aid-Related Factors of Conflict in Northern Uganda***

Although various scholars have argued that the difficulties US assistance has created will ultimately outweigh the benefits that it has generated, participants generally spoke of the real advantages foreign aid had conferred on their communities. Specifically, when asked if aid had created any problems, all Gulu residents said that the assistance had, instead, brought their communities only benefits. Robert Omony, for instance, emphasized numerous positive effects of aid. He told me that he and his community had “survived the war because of NGOs,” because “they provided food and money for peace talks, and [because] they helped a lot with the region’s HIV/AIDS problem” (Robert Omony, interview, April 2010). While they did demonstrate a more vigorous inclination to criticize foreign aid, leaders at all levels also acknowledged both its positive effects and the gratitude that their communities had for donors. Samuel Otim (interview, April 2010), a Gulu District Officer, said that “aid has helped alleviate our poverty and [has improved] our education system,” because “NGOs have helped build schools and classrooms, provided teacher accommodation, and provided desks and chairs.” Both international aid workers and national government officials echoed such sentiments. USAID Deputy Country Representative John Gattorn (interview, 2010) said that the Acholi “feel overwhelmingly grateful and positive” for

the aid. Psychologist Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs explains the tendency of the participants, specifically community members and leaders, to focus on foreign aid's benefits rather than its shortcomings. In his 1943 paper titled *A Theory of Human Motivation*, Maslow argues that people will try to satisfy basic physiological needs before turning to safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization needs (Maslow 2000). To apply Maslow's insights to Uganda, then, people will first focus on obtaining food and water before they secure political freedoms. Such motivations may have prevented Gulu residents from acknowledging aid's negative effects. In the eyes of community members, what does it matter if aid facilitates corruption when they lack access to clean drinking water?

While it was difficult to measure perceptions of the extent to which foreign aid has legitimized Museveni's regime in a region of the country that has never supported his government, recent Ugandan newspapers articles reflect how aid has provided Museveni with the resources to maintain power. For instance, an article that appeared in an April 2010 issue of *The East African*, "U.S. Comes to the Rescue of a Country's Troubled Health Sector," discusses the United States' decision to fund the IntraHealth project, which seeks to provide access to healthcare among the country's rural poor. In total, America gave the Ministry of Health \$11 million to help "advance recruitment and retention rates for health staff by setting up better payroll systems and [to] promote a healthy work environment" (Nakkazi, 2010). The United States also recently gave the Gulu district \$1.3 million to improve its education system by building 68 teacher's houses, 40 classrooms, and 20 primary schools (Ocowun, 2010). In both instances, aid has enabled Museveni's government to provide services that it should have provided on its own and, thus, this aid has legitimized his regime. Aid donors have "weakened the resolve of African states to act on behalf of their citizens," and development assistance "has had the perverse and unintended

political effect of reinforcing despotic rule” (Goldsmith, 2001a, p. 421). As long as America continues to give the economic assistance that Museveni needs to provide basic services, it remains unlikely that the President will change corrupt and undemocratic policies that have motivated political opposition to resort to violence.

The perceptions of Gulu residents and three local leaders reinforced the study’s proposed theory that Museveni had marginalized and largely excluded their communities, which represent Museveni’s oppositional base, from the political process. When asked if politicians could speak openly and compete in free and fair elections, Evelyn Piranok (interview, 2010), a dressmaker, responded that “politicians can talk but they are not safe,” and that “elections are not good, because even if we elect someone, Museveni will steal it,” which is “why people are going back to the bush to fight.” A community leader, Rosalba Oywa (interview, 2010), echoed these complaints. She said that elections had never been free and fair due to vote buying and other irregularities. She added that “Ugandans live in great fear. They should not be saying anything negative about the government, because they will be wrongly framed if they do” (Rosalba Oywa, interview, 2010). The former Chief Mediator between the Ugandan Government and the LRA, Betty Bigombe (interview, 2010), said that “people have felt marginalized for years,” and that “was the reason for the war.” Newspaper stories confirm these attitudes about marginalization and the suppression of political opposition. Just recently, the police arrested the leader of the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC) opposition party, Dr. Kizza Besigye. During a presidential campaign rally, Besigye allegedly told his followers to break the thumbs of NRM party members. Such comments, the police have argued, could incite violence and are, thus, illegal (Felix & Bareebe, 2010). In response to his investigation regarding such accusations and other comments, according to another story in *The Monitor*, “Besigye said ‘the collapsing NRM regime’ will always

intimidate and arrest people like him who have devoted their lives to educating Ugandans about the wrongs of the system” (Wandera & Bareebe, 2010). How can communities in the North and other regions of the country feel included in the political system after a history of one-party rule and when many of their leaders have been wrongly arrested?

The findings of scholars and Transparency International are reflected in participants’ perceptions of corruption in the Ugandan government. Specifically, community members and their leaders perceived high levels of aid-related corruption within Museveni’s government. When asked if the President was pocketing the aid and enriching himself, Evelyn (interview, 2010) responded, “Of course Museveni is benefiting more than the people who are poor because he is a corrupt man.” Similarly, Rosabla, a community leader, discussed the extent to which government officials have embezzled funds intended for her community. To these communities, corruption and government policy have become synonymous terms. National government officials also acknowledged the pervasiveness of corruption within their government, and John (interview, 2010), the USAID representative, said that “corruption is basically the system here.” Participants may hold these opinions because, after years of promises, Museveni’s regime has done little to combat corruption, and the government has yet to prosecute a single top-ranking official (Tangri & Mwenda, 2006). Instead, the Acholi people have seen aid donations increase from \$1.9 million in 1986 to \$1.7 billion in 2007, but they have enjoyed little improvement in their communities (“UN Data: A World of Information,” 2009). They have watched their politicians in Kampala grow wealthier while their incomes have remained stagnant. Such experiences have led members of these communities to believe that Museveni has personally benefited from military assistance and foreign aid. If this is indeed the case, the President would have little motivation to end a conflict that has brought and continues to bring significant

donations of aid to Uganda.

Because it was difficult to ask participants if Museveni had intentionally prolonged the conflict as a means to eliminate the North as a viable political threat, the study, instead, explored participants' perceptions of the politics of regionalism as a foundation for the larger argument that Museveni had intentionally perpetuated the conflict. All participants at the local level believed that the President supported other regions of the country, specifically the West, far more than the North. For instance, Charles Okello (interview, 2010) said that "Museveni favors other regions before the North, which is the least favored." Dorothy Akot added that while Museveni does give to the North, he does not give very much. She said that other parts of Uganda had much better jobs, roads, and hospitals (Dorothy Akot, interview, 2010). Local leaders reiterated these sentiments. They said that their communities largely believed that Museveni had neglected the North. Ugandan newspaper articles expanded upon these feelings of exclusion and addressed the broader argument that Museveni deliberately prolonged the conflict as a means to further marginalize his political opposition. A recent news story reported that Uganda People's Congress (UPC) leader, Olara Otunnu (interview, 2010), said that "Museveni used the war to justify why he could not allow Ugandans to have a genuine multiparty democracy or federal system," and that "Museveni would say that could wait because the government was preoccupied with finishing the rebellion." Such opinions stem from the colonial practice of divisionism. The British exacerbated pre-existing regional tensions by favoring the South over the North with regard to economic development and political rights (Doom and Vlassenroot, 1999). This division became ingrained in Uganda's post-colonial political culture and remains a fundamental issue in contemporary Ugandan politics. Specifically, "regionalism and ethnicity continue to be the usual means of determining who gets what in the political and economic regions" (Hauser, 1999, 635).

Hence, the Acholi recognize that they represent Museveni's political opposition, and they may feel that, in so far as Museveni is a member of a tribe that has long opposed the North, he has largely ignored the region's troubles.

Upon examining the extent to which Northern communities hold NGOs and foreign aid agencies accountable for government services, the study found a complex trend. To some degree, participants do hold Museveni accountable for his failure to provide resources and services. When asked who to blame for the under-development in the North, most participants blamed the government. However, if asked who they turn to first if they have a problem, all participants said NGOs and aid agencies. Robert's comment characterized the responses of the majority of his fellow community members. He said, "When people go to the government, it is not very fast and it takes a lot of time, but the NGOs are fast," and, so, he added, "Why waste time going to the government?" (Robert Omony, interview, 2010). Rosalba also noted that NGOs and aid agencies have completely replaced the government in the realm of effective services and resources. The government, she indicated, is no longer responsible to the people (Rosalba Owya, interview, 2010). Thus, a dissonance exists in the participants' opinions: while people blame Museveni and his government for his failures, they fail to hold his government accountable. Instead, they tend to hold NGOs and aid agencies accountable, by first asking these organizations, not their government, to build schools, hospitals, and roads for their communities. Participants' previous experience with these organizations may have caused this pattern of responses. The flow of capital into the North has been "little affected by government efficiency," and so "there is little incentive to improve state capacity" (Brautigam & Knack, 2004, p. 265). Because participants have relied on NGOs and aid agencies for economic support, they will likely pressure these organizations to improve their capacity before they pressure Museveni's government.

Numerous scholars have examined the motivations behind America's generous aid donations, and many have pointed to the United States' economic and geopolitical interests in Uganda. However, such arguments carry little weight on the ground in Gulu. Only two local leaders and the USAID representative addressed America's strategic use of foreign aid. When asked why the United States gave such significant amounts of aid to her country, Rosalba responded, "Because of Uganda's position. It is situated next to Sudan, which the US blacklisted because of its Islamist government," and, as she pointed out, "support to the SPLA from Uganda is actually from the US" (Rosalba Owya, interview, 2010). She added that America is not ignorant of the problems aid has created in Uganda, but that the United States turns a blind eye because of its own interests. John (interview, 2010) stated that, "As much as [USAID workers] want to stay out of politics, the truth is that we are at the center of it." The remaining participants all gave various explanations that touched on Ugandans' cooperation, Americans' humanitarian nature, the conflict, and Museveni's policies. Evelyn (interview, 2010), for instance, said that Americans gave generous aid donations to Uganda, "because they are good, and they think of us as their people too. They care about us." Maslow's theory of human motivation may again explain why Ugandans may not recognize this strategic function of assistance. Only when their most immediate needs are satisfied can these communities really explore the larger, more abstract issues tied to aid. Until then, they may only understand aid's benefits rather than its larger, geopolitical and economic nature. Such motivations remain largely irrelevant to the majority of these participants.

### ***Disconnects Between Local, National, and International Perceptions***

Because "disconnects" in perceptions may heighten the Acholis' feelings of marginalization and exclusion, the study examined the extent to which local, national, and international

actors' views differed. The study found that, despite expectations of identifying disparities between the goals of USAID endeavors and local perceptions of these efforts, these two participant groups' held similar views. This lack of discrepancy may be attributed to the USAID representative's distance from official policy and policy makers in Washington, D.C. The data, however, did indicate significant differences between national government officials' perceptions and local communities' opinions regarding political exclusionary practices and corruption. Discrepancies of opinions in these subjects, combined with the already existing problems that aid has created, have arguably exacerbated the situation in the North. If national leaders fail to listen to local communities, these communities may feel that violence is the only means to having their "voice" heard in Kampala.

The majority of community members and leaders expressed frustration with the government's policies of marginalization and conditions for political opposition, but national-level officials stated nearly the opposite. All Gulu residents emphasized both that elections were not free and fair and that political opponents cannot speak openly. Robert (interview, 2010), specifically said that "a leader has never been thrown out of power by a vote." Local leaders' statements largely reflect these views. Samuel, the Gulu District official, said that a true democracy does not exist in Uganda. Instead, he argued that people have feared and will continue to fear the government. Only David Labeja (interview, 2010), a news editor for a government-funded radio station, believed that members of the political opposition could speak their mind as long as they did so within the boundaries of the law. The Regional District Commissioner, Walter Ochora, disagreed with the majority of these local sentiments. He argued that Museveni did allow the political opposition to express their views. However, he said that "the opposition takes advantage of these freedoms," and that "they abuse the freedom of speech" (Walter Ochora, interview, 2010). By altogether

denying practices of political exclusion, this government official's statement only exemplifies Museveni's policies of marginalization.

While national-level government officials did acknowledge corruption, they all denied that Museveni was corrupt. Betty, for instance, stated that corruption is deeply ingrained within Uganda's political system. But when asked if Museveni was personally embezzling a portion of the aid donations, she responded, "Museveni is not benefiting. I have met him many times, and he is discouraged with the situation" (Betty Bigombe, interview, 2010). Walter held a similar opinion. He said that corruption was pervasive, but that it was limited to the accounting officers and did not extend to Museveni (Walter Ochora, interview, 2010). Because Museveni appointed these participants, they may benefit from corruption and, thus, may have been unwilling to accuse the President. Local leaders, however, perceived corruption to be rampant. Martin Mapenduzi (interview, 2010), Gulu's District Council Speaker, said that it is not just Museveni's government that is corrupt—the President, himself, he asserted, is corrupt. When I asked a community member, Charles (interview, 2010), if he thought that Museveni was corrupt, he replied, "I do not just think it. It is true." These communities may become increasingly frustrated with their national government officials' refusal to acknowledge corruption within high-ranking politicians, and such high levels of aggravation produce an environment that is conducive to violence.

## **Conclusion**

After two decades of devastating violence and billions of dollars in foreign assistance, much in Northern Uganda has remained largely unchanged. The region continues to face many significant challenges including poverty, corruption, patronage politics, a lost generation of youth, an absence of basic infrastructure, and an under-developed education system.

Why, then, have these generous donations failed to improve the standards of living in Acholi communities when similar amounts of assistance have achieved successful results in other East African nations? In Uganda, academic literature suggests that America's strategic use of foreign aid implementation policies has ultimately subverted aid's capacity to benefit the country's northern regions. US assistance has prolonged the conflict and fostered an environment conducive to violence by legitimizing Museveni's government. His regime has established policies of corruption and marginalization that have left political opposition with few alternatives to violence. Moreover, by undermining government accountability, NGOs and aid agencies have restructured the relationship between the state, civil society and donors. Rather than push the state for change, Acholi community members first approach NGOs with their needs. Thus, these communities have directed their efforts towards the wrong actor, and they have yet to pressure Museveni to fully address the conflict and its effects. Interviews with Gulu district members and leaders give some support this theoretical claim. Their statements illustrate perceptions of the prevalence of Museveni's corrupt policies of exclusion and of a lack of accountability. To fully address this situation, change must occur from both the bottom and top. Community members must begin to hold Museveni accountable for his failures. Yet for this mobilization to occur, the United States must reconstruct its foreign aid strategies to include stricter political conditions. Despite this recent bill, the Lord's Resistance Army Disarmament and Northern Uganda Recovery Act 2010, and Hillary Clinton's promise to oversee the upcoming elections, it remains unlikely that America will change its aid policies and risk losing a regional ally, especially with the current situation in Somalia.

## **Recommendations**

In response to the conflict in Northern Uganda, the United States has given both military assistance and generous aid donations, but this aid has, in theory, only prolonged the violence. Local perceptions of regionalism, corruption, government accountability, and US aid suggest that a change in aid implementation strategies must occur. To realize the full potential of aid, the American government must first listen to what these communities have to say—what they need, what needs to be fixed, and who should get the aid. As Americans, we have the tendency to believe that we have all of the answers to the problems of the developing world, but we have yet to fully capitalize on the experience and local knowledge of northern Ugandans, themselves. The United States must also alter its foreign policy from one that responds to conflict and underdevelopment to one that prevents such problems from arising. Americans must realize that while such strategies may require significant start-up costs, they will be more cost-efficient in the long-term. For instance, if America focused on establishing real democracy in Sudan rather than its own interests, the United States may not have had to give such large amounts of military assistance to Uganda and the SPLA to fight the government in Khartoum. Hence, had the United States tied aid directly to promoting stability and democracy in Uganda and Sudan, the US would not now, amidst its “War on Terror,” be in a position of appeasing Museveni. The development of such a free and open political system, then, may have prevented the LRA from organizing recruits by appealing to their sense of exclusion. Moreover, donors should attach conditions to foreign aid that both address the recipient country’s needs while calling for the government to implement more democratic traditions. America, then, should not simply give millions of dollars free of restrictions to Museveni. Instead, USAID and other US aid agencies should develop implementation strategies that require Museveni to adopt anti-

corruption laws, make a space for political opposition, establish a tradition of peaceful political turnover, create a merit-based rather than patronage-based recruitment system, and promote free and fair elections. Such measures would successfully address and combat feelings of political exclusion that ultimately motivate communities to respond with violence.

Because NGOs and aid agencies have undermined the extent to which communities hold the government accountable, donor aid policies must also restructure the relationship between donors, the state, and civil society. In a functioning democracy, the government answers to its citizens but, in Uganda, the state answers to donors rather than to its civil society. These communities, in turn, largely look to NGOs and aid agencies to provide services. Thus, the Acholi have long held the wrong actor accountable—donors. As a result, they have done little to pressure the government to end the conflict and its practices of marginalization. To establish a healthy civil society and end this cycle—a key component to democracy—America must create smarter aid policies. The USAID Deputy Country Representative in Gulu suggested that his institution and other donor organizations should work with the Ugandan government to establish a more transparent system. In place, but ignored, he argued, is a potentially functional approach: villages and parishes create development strategies that they submit to higher levels of government until the plans reach the national level (John Gattorn, interview, 2010). Rather than subvert this strategy and undermine government capacity, NGOs and aid agencies should adhere to this policy. Local communities, then, would have a forum in which to express their concerns and contribute to the national plan. When problems arise, these citizens can then blame the government rather than aid agencies and NGOs.

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## **Interviews**

### **Gulu Residents:**

1. Dorothy Akot  
Occupation: Student  
Gender: Female  
Age: 24  
Consent Given: April 20, 2010
2. Charles Okello  
Occupation: Senior Driver  
Gender: Male  
Age: 45  
Consent Given: April 19, 2010
3. Evelyn Piranok  
Occupation: Dressmaker  
Gender: Female  
Age: 22  
Consent Given: April 20, 2010
4. Robert Omony  
Occupation: Student  
Gender: Male  
Age: 23  
Consent Given: April 19, 2010

### **Local Leaders:**

1. Name: Rosalba Oywa  
Occupation: Retired Teacher and People's Voice for  
Peace Administrative Staff  
Gender: Female  
Age: 57  
Consent Given: April 21, 2010
2. Name: David Labeja  
Occupation: Newspaper Editor for Radio Rupiny  
Gender: Male  
Age: 31  
Consent Given: April 19, 2010
3. Martin Mapenduzi  
Occupation: District Council Speaker  
Gender: Male  
Age: 31  
Consent Given: April 19, 2010
4. Samuel Otim

Occupation: District Officer  
Gender: Male  
Age: 42  
Consent Given: April 21, 2010

National Leaders:

1. Name: Walter Ochora  
Occupation: Resident District Commissioner  
Gender: Male  
Age: 50  
Consent Given: April 26, 2010
2. Betty Bigombe:  
Occupation: Consultant to the World Bank and  
Former Chief Mediator between the Ugandan  
Government and LRA  
Gender: Female  
Age: 56  
Oral Consent Given: April 28, 2010

USAID Representative:

1. Name: John Gattorn  
Occupation: USAID Deputy Country  
Representative  
Gender: Male  
Age: 40  
Consent Given: April 26, 2010