Between a Mask and a Meal:

The nested dilemma of post-conflict communities' response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Northern Uganda

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Abstract

Ever since the guns went silent after a two-decade war, Northern Uganda has seen multiple government programmes focused on reconstruction and compensation. There were, for example, the Northern Uganda Social Action Fund (NUSAF) with its successor programme, the Peace Recovery and Development Programme (PRDP) as well as a number of compensation schemes for lost property. Belatedly, these have been accompanied by accountability efforts at both international and domestic levels, using the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the International Crimes Division (ICD) to bring alleged perpetrators to justice. Despite this, the significant investments already made by the state and the international community in these efforts, myriad post-war conflicts on gender inequalities, land conflicts and constrained livelihoods continue to emerge in the whole Acholi sub-region. These social and gendered inequalities understood by communities as 'the new war fronts' have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated lockdown measure. In this paper, we draw on qualitative and participatory interview conversations and mapping of social and other forms of media to analyse the post-conflict communities' response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings indicate that COVID-19 stripped communities of social capital central to their efforts towards social cohesion.

Key words: COVID-19, Social Death, Gender

Introduction

This paper is framed around insights into the inherent post war gendered effects on the community, exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated lockdown measures relating to the experiences of conflict affected communities in Northern Uganda. The COVID-19 pandemic manifested during the research process as a critical juncture in the broader process of post-war recovery and exacerbated the already existing post-war conflicts. The paper hence highlights dominant forms of post-war conflicts and discusses ways in which these intersect with the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated restrictive measures which exacerbate the already fragile experiences of people in post conflict communities. We discuss themes related to increasing cases of intra-household tensions emerging from competing claims to use land, spiking cases of gender-based violence, constrained household livelihoods, social trauma/mental health, and social insecurity emanating from social displacement. Land and indeed agriculture was one of the only sectors that remained operational in lock down and as a number of people living in urban areas returned home after long periods, to claim and use their portion of land, there was tension in homes, at least in the short term.

In very profound ways, the pandemic exposed inadequacies in post-conflict recovery programmes, bringing to the fore the urgent need to focus on taken-for-granted social connectedness, cultural heritage and a sense of identity as central aspects of a long-term return to relative social cohesion in the Acholi community.

The Conceptual and Methodological Approach

This study worked with multi-disciplinary methodological approaches to investigate people's everyday narratives of return from displacement camps, their relationships to land, livelihood patterns, emerging post-conflict conflicts and how these influence and/or are influenced by gender relations. This paper specifically draws upon field visits conducted in Gulu and Omoro districts in December 2020, exploring in-depth previous research themes which included post-war conflicts, psychosocial trauma – e.g. the increasing reports of male dominated suicides, the COVID-19 pandemic and its disruptive effects on issues of justice, land rights and livelihood patterns. The COVID-19 pandemic was conceptualised as a critical juncture in the broader process of post-war recovery.

Due to restrictions on mobility and social gatherings, the research team[1] adopted an alternative research method - tracing media narratives - to gather information through social and other forms of media to inform the understanding of post-conflict situations during the pandemic. This phase of data collection focused on a total of 16 in-depth interview conversations (5 men and 11 women). These participants came from district local government, the cultural institution *Ker Kwaro Acholi*, non-governmental organisations and individual women community members from two sub-counties - Koro and Pokony. These conversations were complemented with findings from social and other forms of media mapping during the COVID-19 lockdown.

At a theoretical level, this study draws on Claudia Card's (2003) concept of social death. Card (2003) uses the concept of social death – described as the loss of social vitality or the loss of identity and thereby meaning for one's existence – to distinguish the peculiar evil of genocide from the evils of mass murders. She argues that major loss of social vitality is a loss of identity and consequently a serious loss of meaning for one's existence. Accordingly, "[putting] social death at the center takes the focus off the individual choice, individual goals, individual careers, and body counts [how many physical deaths occurred] and puts it on relationships that create community and set the context that gives meaning to choices and goals" (Card 2003, 63). This framing enables us to connect the dynamics of conflict and post-conflict social relations especially when she observes, "when a group with its own cultural identity is destroyed, its survivors lose their cultural heritage and may even lose their intergenerational connections. […] They may become 'socially dead' and their descendants 'nattily alienated', no longer able to pass along and build upon the traditions, cultural developments (including language) and projects of earlier generations"(Card 2003, 73).

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[1] The research team was composed of: Josephine Ahikire, Amon Ashaba Mwiine, Gloria Acayo, Harriet Pamara and Jovah Katushabe

The concept of social death is particularly helpful in guiding complex analysis of the prolonged costs of war beyond the tangible/physical and statistical body counts and financial cost of recovering from wars. The concept of social death offers us an opportunity to look beyond post-conflict recovery programmes that often tend to focus on material and financial costs of recovery. Such approaches tend to assess war "in terms of its ruin of individual careers, body counts, statistics on causalities and material costs of rebuilding" (Card 2003, 64).We note that the notion of social death has the potential to create more space for understanding the overt and covert tensions in current post-conflict Northern Uganda, in particular the fragilities that have been accentuated by the COVID-19 pandemic. These tensions relate to the precarious social identities emerging from war and the impact these identities have on ancestral land as a cultural and economic resource, struggling cultural institutions, crippled livelihood patterns and the floating populations (those without a cultural heritage). Understanding post-conflict everyday life through the conceptual lens of social death and of social vitality re-centres the research focus on the often taken-for-granted contemporary struggles around issues of identity, belonging, social cohesion and one's meaningful existence.

The lid is off: COVID-19 and inherent cracks in conflict affected communities

The COVID-19 pandemic was undoubtedly one of the most disruptive pandemics the world has known in recent history. *As one of humanity's biggest challenges, the pandemic, along with the measures taken to protect the population and keep public health systems afloat, have threatened the health of all, brought grief, financial difficulties, and enormous changes to daily lives* (Ahikire and Mwiine 2020). The effects of the pandemic and the associated lockdown measures disproportionately affected communities already experiencing certain forms of inequalities. For example while discussing a viral video of a grandchild physically assaulting his grandmother in Omoro district during the lockdown, Ahikire and Mwiine (2020) argue that "[r]eading this incident outside the post-war social context in the Acholi sub-region, is to strip the incident of the complex history that possibly informed this and many other social tensions that may not have received media coverage".

Research participants noted that the COVID-19 pandemic and the measures instituted to control its spread greatly exacerbated already existing post-conflict conflicts. These worsening tensions were noted with regard to struggling livelihoods, intra-family conflicts over land and psychosocial needs of the community e.g., trauma and mental health.

> *"I think COVID-19 is adding to these challenges that we already had, blowing them beyond proportions now because I think when COVID-19 came, our true colours came out. Families were forced to live together for the first time – all together at home. Before this pandemic, children would go to school, maybe boarding and they are there, the parents would go for work but now during the lockdown Museveni [the president] said everybody stay home. Then people stayed home and domestic violence became a serious issue. I should say that some people fought and killed themselves during the lockdown. The work that people used to do they could not do it because of the lockdown but the family needed to survive. So, if money is needed in the home for food maybe from the man, then the woman may not understand that it is a lockdown, the man is not working and money is not there. So, they end up fighting. Some people who were not using land started getting back to land because land was one of the key things that never stopped; people were encouraged to continue working on land. Those who had no prior interest in using the land started using the land. Some were using land which their brothers had not been using but because of lockdown they said for me this is the land of our father, we must all use. Then those conflicts set in"*
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> ***Lukwiya Francis, Secretary General, Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative***

The above conversation, from the Religious Leaders Peace Initiative provides a detailed catalogue of social tensions – constrained livelihoods, competing interests in using land, unmet expectations amongst women and men that result in different forms of violence in the home – that are not necessarily new in communities. According to Lukwiya, these tensions were exposed during the lockdown.

Similar views about the impact of COVID-19 were noted by a programme staff member (*Alonyo Immaculate*) from a women's rights group – the Gulu Women Economic Development and Globalisation (GWED-G). In an interview, Alonyo characterised the lockdown as a shock that pushed communities to the edge. It led to the closure of formal businesses, public services, and informal businesses such as saloons, boda-bodas (motor-bike transport), public transport, market vending, the hotel and restaurant industry among others. These closures led to unprecedented human movement from urban and peri-urban trading centres to rural homes to work on the land for survival. As earlier indicated, land (agriculture) was one of the key essential resources/activity that was never locked down. Agriculture production activities continued during the lockdown (Guloba, Kakuru, and Ssewanyana 2021). The short-term pressure on land triggered conflicts amongst family members especially those who had no prior interest in land use. Ensuing conflicts were further complicated by lack of mediation and conflict resolution due to limits on social gatherings.

Further, the COVID-19 lockdown eroded collective spaces for engagement. Notably, social gatherings such as village savings and loan schemes, community sensitisation meetings, civil society community-based activities, collective gardening, parties and funerals were all cancelled. Alonyo noted "*when social gatherings were restricted, we started receiving massive calls from communities with traumatising stories of what was going on there. It was only then that we realised how therapeutic social gatherings were to the post-conflict communities*". Lacking opportunities for building social cohesion led to isolation and re-igniting memories of loneliness. According to Abber Rhoda, another GWED-G staff, pre-COVID-19 training of women in tailoring enabled women previously involved in armed conflict to heal. For them, tailoring was not only a way to make a living, but it was also therapeutic, as it helped them to focus, interact with others, calculate and innovate designs. Closure of such programmes reduced women's social interactions and constrained their ability to provide for their families.

The challenge of livelihood: between a mask and a meal

Furthermore, people's inability to meet their everyday livelihood demands was exacerbated by new requirements to observe health standard operating procedures to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Research participants shared how, when confronted with the pandemic, families experienced constrained choices on whether to buy a mask at 2000 shillings (equivalent to $0.56) or whether to spend such an amount on a family meal.

Image: an improvised hand washing water tap in Olanya's compound.

These competing health and livelihood demands - between a mask and a meal - represent the dilemma that poverty-stricken post-conflict communities are faced with, especially as infections skyrocketed in Uganda at the time. According to global statistics, Uganda had registered 42,600 COVID-19 cases by December 2020, with the period between December 2020 to

May 2021 being the peak of the first wave of the infections in the country[2]. In an interview, Amos Olanya, who returned to his village after being abducted during the war, shared with us how the pandemic led to the dissolution of village saving groups as families struggled to provide food, service loans and meet other essential necessities. He noted, "*Life was hard during the lockdown. At times, I had to forego food for masks in fear of being exposed to the virus; business was brought to stand still. Market places were closed, obtaining loans and paying back became very difficult in our local village saving groups*". No wonder Olanya wanted to learn from the research team about the possibility of an end to the COVID-19 pandemic or chances of receiving a vaccine.

Of the floating population in the post-conflict social imaginaries

One other dominant discourse in post-war Acholi is on the emerging categories of people that some of the participants refer to as "floating populations". The concept of floating population was raised by Ben Otto, founder and Director of Advocacy for Research in Development – ARiD, a local CSO in Pader District.

> *"As I said earlier, there is some sort of a 'floating population' [emphasis added] without strong belonging or attachment to any bigger social group like clan setting or cultural system. Take for example, a young woman who gets to Pader town, she is from Opit or maybe from Gulu and does market vending. Those days when there was no lockdown at night, she gets a friend, in the end she produces a child. Eight or 10 years later this boy is grown up and yet the woman can't take him to Gulu because she didn't get the child from Gulu, neither to the 'would be' husband from Pader because they just got him in a reckless way. The girl, now a mother of this young man cannot go back home to her family so she continues to hustle around Pader. To me that is how partly that population is beginning to spring up in our society. And this boy grows up and doesn't belong anywhere".* ***Interview with Ben Otto***

Ben is not alone in describing the precarious identities, or the lack of social belonging experienced in most of the post conflict communities in the sub-region and the implications therefrom. The narrative of a floating population in the post-conflict communities resonates with the recent popular story about the Ugandan floating island. As recently as April 2020, Ugandans were thrown into panic as the nation experienced a national power cut. It was later reported locally and internationally, that the nation-wide power outage was caused by a floating island on Lake Victoria (BBC Africa 2020).The floating island of at least two acres, almost two football size pitches, choked the turbines of Nalubaale Hydro Power Station, causing widespread interruption. The disruption not only caused a delay in the broadcast of President Yoweri Museveni communication on the COVID-19 crisis for almost an hour, but it also attracted a presidential site visit. The president later commissioned a committee of scientists commanded by the Uganda Peoples Defense Forces (UPDF), to remove the land mass. The floating island and the national havoc it created could be symbolically drawn upon to understand the implications of Otto's and other participants' concerns about an emerging population without a clear and strong cultural foundation and what this means for the post-conflict communities' return to social cohesion.

Most participants talked about a challenging population detached from Acholi history and culture e.g., those born in camps (*lutino camp*) or returned from the bush, or people with no known parents, no clan identity and no ancestral land (Identity). Threats to social identity and communities' return to pre-war social cohesion are deeply embedded in people's everyday lives. For instance, one local council chairperson we talked to recollected the life in the camp and the impact it has had on youth work ethic and everyday lifestyles.

> *"The other thing I have seen is the issue of livelihood, the way people used to work back then with plans of unity for prosperity has even ended. Even the children, because they grow at the time of the war, which means that they have not **learnt** how to work. The children do*

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[2] See https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/uganda/ (accessed on 23rd November 2021)

not even know that it is the war that has made them fail to work, they think that is how life is. This has led to too much laziness and increase in poverty levels. The other thing I have seen which is as a result of the war is drunkenness. During war, people would not plan to do anything. All they would think is that your life is about to end so people resorted to the lifestyle of drinking alcohol. As long as there was alcohol, people would drink. These all continued even when the war ended."

Interview with Ociti John, LC1 Kal sub-ward, Peace division Gulu city.

Ociti's recollections reveal the behavioural continuities from life during war and how they are shaping the behaviour of the population after war. Ahikire and Mwiine (2020) also note the use of potentially denigrating labels for people especially those born in camps as "Lutino Camp". These labels, used in evaluative descriptions, include looking at youth as "children with no values, humans who are empty shells, lazy and not interested in work at all, alcoholics, [disrespecting] elders and [those who] do not want to return to the villages". According to some participants, these emerging populations are highly visible in trading centres (formerly internally displaced people's camps) and have no cultural structures that can hold them accountable.

Participants also talked about the youth (whom they characterise as "errant"), who have no interest in ancestral land except for selling, the 'new breed' of traditional chiefs who are not schooled into the Acholi culture and more recently the rising tide of *Aguu* – loosely translated as children on the street. Aguu. as the local people call them, are children who reside on the urban streets, collecting used plastics and metal scraps. Unlike the general street children, some of these have outgrown childhood and operate in seemingly coordinated gangs that terrorise the communities in and around the trading centres/towns.

A noticeable aspect of concern in Otto's characterisation of the floating population is the idea that this is a generation without a cultural foundation that would regulate their behaviour in society. What is further of concern is that this might signal a long-term scenario of a population without a sense of identity and a socially dead generation. These fluid identities have been worsened by COVID-19 which led to closure of schools and massive numbers of children getting stranded in poverty-stricken communities. Indeed, there have been many reports of young girls being sexually abused, increasing case of teenage pregnancies and fears that a significant number of children may never return to school. Accordingly, school closures deprived adolescent girls of the social protection that school offers and exposed them to risks of sexual violence, exploitation and abuse, child marriages, and teenage pregnancies (UNFPA- Uganda (2021). These constraints, coupled with a post-conflict context of deprivation has the potential to increase the post-conflict and post-pandemic floating populations.

The changing terrain of the cultural institution

The slow return to social cohesion was further animated by weakening cultural institutions, in the context of a state promoted neoliberal agenda. For instance, in our conversation with an official from the cultural institution, Ker Kwaro Acholi (KKA), the paramount chief presides over 57 chiefdoms, each with a semi-autonomous traditional chief. The chiefs constitute a governing council. Each of the chiefdoms is constituted of several clans with male clan leaders. In each of the clans are the agricultural community mobilisers *Rwot Okoro* (female) and *Rwot Kweri* (males). The role of community mobilisers was to promote agricultural productivity based on a clear gendered division of labour. In the previous phase of data collection, we indicated ways in which the role of *Rwot Kweri* and *Rwot Okoro* grounded women and men in the knowledge of land use, land boundaries, and how these were key in conflict resolution around land.

However, the roles of *Rwot Okoro* and *Rwot Kweri* have expanded in the post-war era taking on general community mobilisation including for central government programmes. The widening of the roles of community mobilisers, in the context of market economy, reduced community mobilisers' commitment towards the social good. Similar shifts were noted among the traditional chiefs. In an interview with a clan leader in Koro division, it was noted that cultural institutions have lost their autonomy, commitment, and legitimacy to promote social cohesion.

> *"Cultural leaders in communities are not empowered. They no longer move in the community. We only see them on burials and parties. They no longer have the urge to move amongst the people and assist them"*

Male Clan leader, Paromo Clan, Koro sub-county.

The social distance between the chiefs and local communities was attributed to a set of factors – poverty, government support to the cultural institution and an increasing sense of individualism amongst the post-conflict communities. The clan leader pointed out that there are chiefs involved in land wrangles and alcohol drinking in their communities. He noted that out of 10 chiefs he knows, 8 of them have been involved in land wrangles, fighting over land with their family members, while others are poor. It was further noted that traditional institutions and their relationship with the central government has been compromised. "How do you expect a chief who is paid, stays in a house built by the government and is receiving scholarship from the government to be autonomous?" These patron-client relations between the state and the cultural institutions compromise the latter's autonomy to promote cultural values e.g., customary land ownership that are not in the interest of a neoliberal state bent towards largescale investments on land for economic productivity of the post-conflict communities. The weakening of such institutions also makes communities more fragile and a pandemic such as COVID-19 only works to worsen the already bad situation. Hence, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, cultural institutions were confronted not only with doubtable autonomy and inability to respond to the real needs of communities but also the lockdown of avenues for social gatherings. Cultural gatherings in clans and chiefdoms are often avenues to galvanise the sense of community, cultural identity and belonging, and moments to implement activities such as dispensing traditional justice as a means of conflict resolution. COVID-19 lockdown messages such as "stay home, stay safe, save lives" limited cultural institutions' capacity to stand with and unite individuals, households and communities experiencing gender-based tensions, loss of lives and livelihoods.

In a publication, *principles and practices of customary tenure in Acholiland*, (Ker Kwaro Acholi 2008), the Acholi Cultural institution notes "many years of conflict and displacement have led to the weakening of traditional systems and practices and have left many people with vulnerable rights to land". This acknowledgement is reiterated in this study's findings (from different phases), on the changes and consequent weakening of the cultural institution in the post-conflict setting. See for instance research report "*on nested post-war conflict on land, livelihoods and social belonging in northern Uganda" (April 2020)*. In an earlier phase of data collection in Gulu and Pader (November-December 2019), participants cited similar concerns of state/cultural institutions' relations that played out as patron-client relations with the potential to compromise the autonomy and functionality of the cultural institution. The report also noted an increasing trend of politically motivated and commercially oriented cultural institutions. In Gulu town for instance, we were told that some clan leaders charge their subjects who file a case with the cultural leader 80,000 Uganda shillings (approximately $23) for opening up a 'legal file'. In a group conversation with staff of ARiD, the director shared with us the changes in the clan system. He noted: "The clan system is changing. Unless you are rich, educated, you won't be elected a clan head. The more financial muscle you wield, the higher the likelihood of being chosen as the clan leader". Indeed, one of the traditional chiefs we interviewed in Pader district a year ago, requested a refund that was 3 times higher than the actual price for transport, "because that is what other researchers are doing".

On the psychosocial trauma/mental health and the failing male provider role

The critical area of concern relates to psychosocial trauma faced by men specifically. In their study on major depressive disorder seven years after the conflict in northern Uganda, Mugisha and others (2015, 3) acknowledge the existence of depressive disorders despite the end of war. Major Depressive Disorders amongst women and men were attributed to social factors such as food insecurity, negative life events, war trauma, and stress, among others. In an interview, Alonyo, a women's rights activist in the region noted how the immediate end of war was characterised by hopelessness, mental trauma, missing persons or stories of never returned individuals. These and other experiences of war continued within the population, albeit unattended to. Conversations with another female women's rights activist from GWED-G indicated that many people live with either visible or invisible scars of war. She noted, "in daily conversation, or on a normal working day, you will hear of who has run mad or of people bursting out in tears. There are many people who 'act normal', they will talk, laugh but in other moments, memories of war losses come back." In the section that follows, we share detailed case studies about men's experiences of psychosocial trauma and how these have been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown measures.

Please note that some of the participants' narrated psychosocial needs in the case studies below might contain detailed stories of suicide.

On men and mental health concerns

While both men and women experience social trauma, participants noted a trend in which most of the mental health and suicide cases registered especially in Koro sub-county occurred amongst men. Dolan (2002) noted the trend of men dying by suicide as early as 2002 in Northern Uganda. At the time, cases of men taking their own lives were related to their failure to live up to the hegemonic model of men as providers of food and other necessities for their families. Most of the suicide cases narrated to the research team involve youth and middle-aged men between 18-40. In Koro alone, 64 young men reportedly took their lives in a span of eight years (2010-2018). While there is no known universal cause of these deaths, most participants traced cases of suicide to financial disagreements, whether these are among men or between women and men in families. Below, we share three of the many cases described by Mzee Watmon, a clan leader and resident in Koro sub-county.

Case 1: Disagreement over selling a puppy

In our neighbourhood, a boy was staying with his grandmother. They had a dog with puppies. The boy sold one of the puppies without the consent of his grandmother, took the money and drank alcohol. Then he came back for the second puppy but the grandmother told him not to dare touch it. He told his grandmother, "If you don't want me to sell it I will leave you alone". The next thing we heard, he hung himself.

Case 2: Brothers' disagreement over the sale of their father's land

I know of a 26-year-old man who sold his father's land. The buyers paid him money in instalments. When his brothers heard about it, they came to enquire about how the land was sold and for how much. They advised him to return the money to the seller. After the meeting he went and hung himself.

Case 3: disagreement on the sale of land

There is an old man who recently died by suicide. He was living on a government grant. His son sold family land and gave his wife 2,000 shillings to bring to her father in-law. When she brought the money to Mzee, Mzee asked, what is this money for? Her daughter-in-law said, "it is part of what we sold from the land". The old man threw the money at his son's wife. According to our culture, that's *Kii* (an abomination). So, the clan meeting sat to cleanse and reconcile the family. When the meeting was going on, the old man moved behind the hut, as if he was going to the latrine. He hung himself.

It is notable how men have resorted to selling land, including pieces of land where the families derive social and economic sustenance, as a means of earning an income to provide for their households. There are indeed many stories one encounters when the conversation on psychosocial trauma comes up in these communities, especially stories associated with men's overwhelming sense of failure to live up to their cultural expectations of being a man. For instance, in a recent study, Mental Insurgency in Post-Conflict Northern Uganda, Amani Institute Uganda (2020) noted rampant cases of mental trauma in the region. Most of these were attributed, in part, to high cases of domestic violence, land disputes as well as shame attribute to men's failure to meet their marital obligations e.g., "inability of some men to meet dowry requirement contributed to some of the incidents".

Amid these spiralling post-trauma experiences, most of which have been exacerbated by the lockdown (fear, anxiety, loss of jobs, social isolation, among others), is the general feeling that mental health issues have not been a priority in post-conflict recovery programmes. In an interview, Lukwiya Francis, Secretary General, Acholi Religious Leaders Peace initiative noted that while some of the psychosocial programmes ended pre-maturely, most of them were provided by NGOs which did not have a broader legitimacy and financial capacity to facilitate the programmes. As such, people who witnessed war atrocities have not been able to heal and re-imagine life in meaningful ways.

Experiences of people taking their own lives, particularly in the gendered manner as narrated above, could point to realities in which men struggle with an overwhelming sense of loss of cultural and economic resources that buttressed ways of identifying as an 'Acholi man'. While writing about the overwhelming sense of loss amongst men during the war, Dolan argued that "[in] the northern Uganda context of ongoing war, heavy militarisation and internal displacement, it is very difficult if not impossible, for the vast majority of men to fulfil the expectations of a husband and father, provider and protector which are contained in the normative model of masculinity" (2002, 64). The inability to conform to gendered expectations at the time was attributed to the raging war that restricted men to protected villages, little access to substance farming, education and employment. The war had eroded cultural and economic resources that were the foundation upon which masculinities were constructed. The erosion of sociocultural ways of identity notably worsened in post-conflict settings as ancestral land became commercialised, consequently increasing competing interests amongst men in households. In an earlier phase of this study[3], Auma, a female respondent from Bungatira, Awak Village, talked about old men using the threat of nudity to scare their youthful sons from unscrupulously selling ancestral land. Accordingly, one elderly man threatened his son that he would strip naked if the later dared to sell the family land. And in the cultural context, this act, is only next to a permanent curse (Ahikire et al 2016).

Men's increasing inability to provide for their families, their increasing loss of the cultural connection with the 'new generation' of men born in the market economy of the camp life, and the loss of cultural grip over land has impacted their sense of "identity and thereby of meaning for one's existence" (Card 2003, 63). It is such sense of loss of identity, more often rendered invisible, that constitute masculinity as inherently about power and privilege, that potentially explains increasing cases of psychosocial trauma and suicide cases amongst men.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, we reflect on the centrality of social vitality or the loss of it and its implication for social cohesion in post conflict communities. When we first arrived for fieldwork in Gulu town, our research team's attention was drawn to a multi-coloured sticker in the office of the Resident District Officer. We had visited the office to seek clearance as we headed into communities for interviews ad dialogues. The creative sticker (indicated below) read in part; *Peace is a group effort*.

PEACE
is a
group
effort

As we interacted with communities, participants highlighted the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated lockdown had interrupted the subtle everyday collective social interactions that foster unity and togetherness. One after another, participants pointed out how COVID-19 was stripping communities of social avenues, e.g., informal meetings, village savings and loan schemes meetings, community gardening, among others. This form of social capital was previously taken-for-granted. The COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictive measures introduced to reduce the spread of the virus were overwhelmingly disruptive. The pandemic negatively affected almost every aspect of people's lives, in particular their livelihoods. Yet, it was also revealing. The pandemic lifted the lid on the post-conflict communities, revealing the glaring gaps in post conflict programming – what the participants termed ‘our true colors’. The pandemic exposed inadequacies in social recovery, bringing to the fore often taken-for-granted social aspects of the post-conflict situation (increasing intra-family land conflicts; poverty, SGBV, trauma).

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[3] Fieldwork Conducted in Gulu and Pader, December 2019

Importantly, the COVID-19 pandemic, as a critical juncture within the trajectory of post-conflict programming points to the need to prioritise social vitality, - that which exists through relationships, contemporary and intergenerational, that create an identity that gives meaning to life (Card 2003, 63). Rediscovering social connectedness, cultural heritage and a sense of identity in the Acholi community, might be one of the core aspects needed to enable the post COVID-19 recovery as well as the long-term return to relative social cohesion.

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