

# **NEW ISSUES IN REFUGEE RESEARCH**

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## **Refugee identities and relief in an African borderland: a study of northern Uganda and southern Sudan**

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## Introduction

Borderlands have been the setting for many refugee crises over the last decades. By far the largest part of the world refugee population is hosted just across the border from the country they have fled. Since refugee law stipulates that persons who fear persecution and can no longer be protected by their own state have the right to seek asylum in another state, in order to become a refugee one has to cross a border. However, international borders have often separated people sharing the same ethnic background. The refugee regime is fully dependent on the existence of international borders, since individuals are identified with nation-states (Adelman 1999). Other identities of refugees, formed by a mixture of origin, culture and language, are often neglected. Yet where a border has been drawn arbitrarily through a populated area, this complicates relations between people on either side of it and also between hosts and refugees.

Many African borders are arbitrary, sometimes just drawn as straight lines on the map. Nevertheless, they must be drawn somewhere in order to create a modern state. International borders have been essential for the creation of national identity, or nationhood. Cohen (1997) argues that nation states have coped with ethnic diversity by demanding exclusive citizenship, border control, linguistic conformity and political obedience. Since independence, African states have generally accepted existing borders and aimed to reinforce, or create, national identity. However, in this paper I shall argue that transnational borderlands create a specific identity that should be taken into account by relief efforts in crises of forced migration. The identity of people living in borderlands might be more important than a “refugee” identity, nationality or specific “ethnicity.”

Several questions come to mind in considering the Uganda–Sudan borderland specifically and borderlands in general. What importance do governments and aid agencies attach to the identity of refugees, to which they are contributing by implementing large-scale assistance programmes? Do humanitarian organizations consider the specific characteristics of a borderland, such as isolation, underdevelopment and proneness to conflict? These questions will be addressed in this paper and suggestions for policy will be made.

A further objective of this paper is to study the impact of refugee movements on local host communities sharing the same borderlands. What does a refugee influx mean to the hosts? Do they see the refugees as a burden or as an opportunity? Host communities in Africa have often gone through experiences similar to those of their “guests,” and in many refugee crises share with them a similar cultural and ethnic environment. This impact will be studied in relation to refugee assistance programmes that, while they have good intentions, often fail to address substantial issues. Often relief programmes are “refugee centric” (Chambers 1993), managed from the centre and not sustainable once refugees return home. Relief efforts, although necessary during emergencies, do not ad-

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dress issues underlying the causes of forced displacement and thus have a limited impact. Refugee assistance might create imbalances and tends to bypass the hosts and other war-affected populations. There is also the issue of “relief economics,” a situation whereby the local economy is transformed by the “aid industry,” with its large investments and employment opportunities.

Much has been written about borderlands and “border identity” (Wilson and Donnan 1998, Cohen 1997, Nugent and Asiwaju 1996, and others), and refugee literature is also abundant, but how do they interrelate? Does the frequently used terminology of “refugees,” “returnees,” “durable solutions,” “local settlement,” “voluntary repatriation” and so on make sense when refugee crises are situated in borderlands that can be seen as transnational peripheries?

Although this paper focuses on the Uganda–Sudan borderland, the same might apply to other borderlands in Africa. There is the example of Zambia and Angola, where self-settled Angolan refugees of Lunda origin are fully integrated in north-western Zambia (Bakewell 1999). The borderland of Mozambique and Zimbabwe was the scene of refugee movements in the 1970s–80s across an international border, but refugees and hosts were both Shona and had much in common. The Liberian and Sierra Leone refugees in the Forest Region of Guinea were self-settled and often opted to stay out of the relief system (van Damme 1999). The Kivu provinces in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo have populations closely related to the populations of Rwanda and Burundi. The refugees from Somalia who are assisted in Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya live among Kenyan Somali. There is no doubt that many other examples of refugee movements involving transnational communities in borderlands can be found.

This paper will not propose to redraw the map of Africa, as was suggested by the *International Herald Tribune* on its front page of 13 January 1999:

Wars among nations [in Democratic Republic of Congo], largely absent since Africans became independent starting in the 1960s, may become more common. And, many experts say, the national boundary lines that have defined African countries for a century, and lent some stability, may slowly be erased. “Nobody is happy with the borders they have, but nobody wants to open the Pandora’s box.”

It is unlikely that international borders will be redrawn because both nation-states and the Organization of African Unity (OAU) are extremely defensive concerning each country’s sovereignty.<sup>1</sup> In any case, it can be questioned whether a new map of Africa would resolve its most acute problems. The study of borderlands and how they are related to refugee movements will provide more insight into conflicts and refugee crises and ways of reacting to them. This is not to deny that international borders are important for the

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<sup>1</sup> This was recently confirmed during an OAU summit in Algiers: “Convinced that respect for the principle of the inviolability of the border inherited at independence contributed decisively to the preservation of peace and stability on our continent, we reaffirm its validity and permanence as a fundamental norm applicable in the settlement of border disputes” (Algiers declaration July 1999).

legal international protection of refugees, but relief assistance in borderlands can and should be reconsidered. In this paper, I shall make recommendations for an aid policy focusing on a broader, more integrative approach, giving less importance to international borders.

In the first section of this paper, I will elaborate on the concept of borderlands and the relation of that concept to forced migration. The characteristics of the Uganda–Sudan borderland, showing similarities between southern Sudan and northern Uganda, will be analysed in the following section. The history of refugee movements across the border will be described in the third section. The relief efforts on behalf of Sudanese refugees in Uganda will be reviewed in the fourth section, by looking at the current aid policy. In the fifth section, I will make concluding remarks and policy recommendations for aid efforts in refugee-hosting areas.

### **Border anthropology and refugee studies**

There is abundant literature on international boundaries and their impact on livelihoods. The borderlands on both sides of such a boundary have peculiar features because of the interaction between the people living there. This interaction might give rise to new complex identities and create an ambiguous attitude towards the nation-state. Although borders in the main divide people, borderlands and cross-border movements can lead to new relations and dynamics. Borderlands can also be seen as a vacuum where no central power reaches, but where political dividing lines restrict interaction. Wilson and Donnan (1998) introduce the concept of border anthropology, whereby they wish to focus attention on the identity of persons suffering from restrictions created by international borders. They argue that the border limits movement and thus fruitful communication. They also note that an international border can be used (trade) or “abused” (smuggling). Borders are seen as an economic opportunity, whereby a two-way flow of goods and workers can bring progress, but can also be “abused” for economic gain through illegal import or export or by capitalizing on different prices and markets on both sides.<sup>2</sup>

Borderlands are actually dynamic areas with an interplay between restrictions and opportunities. Frequently, they are the setting of conflicts within a country, whereby a group (or groups) from the periphery considers itself marginalized by the centre and starts a rebel movement. Armed groups often benefit from the power vacuum in borderlands. Border disputes between nation-states, on the other hand, such as that between Eritrea and Ethiopia, are not common in present-day Africa.

African colonial borders were drawn in the latter part of the 19th century, during the so-called “scramble for Africa” (Pakenham 1991), when the whole continent was “sliced up like a cake” and 30 new colonies and protectorates were agreed upon. After gaining inde-

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<sup>2</sup> Akol (1994) refers to the opportunities of cross-border trade exemplified by developments in the Maridi and Yei districts in southern Sudan during the early 1980s. “Those [Sudanese] who had spent time in Uganda and Zaire had often preserved friendships outside Sudan, and would use these networks to trade illicitly across the borders” (1994: 90).

pendence, the former colonies maintained their borders and set out to become modern nation-states. Through nation-building, a new identity had to emerge, one of belonging to a country or nationhood. A national identity, although not always felt so strongly in borderlands, had to define people's territory and "home." People were supposed to be static and to be attached to places (Stepputat 1994). Conflicts arose between nation-states, but more often within them, resulting in population movements from one sovereign state to the other. People lost their "home" and became displaced. The study of forced migration and diasporas finds itself involved in a continuous discussion about what "home" really means and if "home" is always associated with a locality or with a "nation-state." Because of the importance of the "nation-state," refugees have become a political problem and are seen as an embarrassment for the country of origin, since that country cannot protect its citizens. Losing its nationals highlights the shortcomings of a government, as refugees vote with their feet.

For several decades forced migration was explained by Cold War tensions. Conflicts were supposedly based on differences in ideology, and governments or opposition groups could be fitted into this framework. However, in the post-Cold War era conflicts have not subsided; sometimes they have even intensified and they generally affect more people. Recent conflicts in Africa have become more "ethnic" and less predictable. Ethnic groups have become more visible and the feeling of "we" versus "they" has resulted in more armed conflicts.

According to international refugee conventions, a person has to cross an international border in order to acquire refugee status. The 1951 Convention specifically mentions that a refugee has to be "outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country." The "refugee" concept has been much discussed recently, and the usefulness of a special category or label for refugees is increasingly questioned.

Legally speaking, it means a lot to lose the protection of a state and thus part of one's national identity. But categorizing people as refugees carries the danger of overlooking the context in which refugee movements take place. Other categories such as, for example, "internally displaced persons," "stayees," "war-affected," or "hosts" often receive less attention and lack a clearly defined legal significance. The impression often arises that refugees are an easily identifiable group that receives preferential treatment. One could even say that refugees are provided with an identity to facilitate the provision of relief. In Africa, most refugee crises are situated in border areas that have particular characteristics and in which there is, to say the least, confusion about one's identity. Different identities coexist, while each one of these identities becomes important depending on the circumstances.

Borderlands in this context are seen as areas where people of different nationalities, but not necessarily of different ethnic identities, meet. Borderlands are peripheries, away from the political and administrative centres. Roberts (1998) reasons that many post-colonial states have inherently fragile national identities, frontiers and institutions. In

borderlands, far from the power centres, these identities would even be more fragile. This leads to the assumption that national identity is less relevant in borderlands.

Wilson and Donnan also introduce the concept of “border identity,” referring to the special environment that is created by a borderland. This identity can be a mixture of many different identities and can change rapidly depending on the political and economic situation. A group identity is here seen as socially constructed and subject to constant change and “visibility” (James 1996). The same is true for an ethnic identity, here seen as a combination of a person’s place of origin, language and culture. Ethnicity has a fluid chameleon-like character (Fukui and Markakis 1994) as people and ethnic boundaries move. There is an ongoing discussion about the roots of ethnicity, and Turton (1996) warns against a “sedentary point of view” that explains the origin of ethnic groups on a territorial basis. Many ethnic groups are “deterritorialized” and live in diasporas (Cohen 1997), but still maintain their identity. People in Africa often do not identify themselves with a certain location, but instead with their clan or ethnic group, wherever it is located at any given moment.

Kopytoff in *The African Frontier* (1987) reasons that there are many societies in Africa that do not conform to the ethnic or “tribal” unity that colonial administrators or anthropologists might like to see. Despite the fact that there are common characteristics of ethnic groups, there is also a moving “local frontier” (or “ethnic boundary”) where groups meet and new identities emerge. These border areas, where a wide diversity of people move or “migrate” and ethnicity is being changed, are dynamic. It is often assumed that societies and ethnic groups are static entities and that it is possible to trace their common history and common origin. In this context, the role of nationhood is to control population groups and provide them with a defined territory.

This way of thinking forgets that there is a population flow or exchange and that there are borderlands where identities change. Or as Kopytoff puts it: “Instead of a primordial embryo – a kind of tribal homunculus – maturing through history while preserving its ethnic essence, what we have here is a magnet that grows by attracting to itself ethnic and cultural detritus produced by the routine workings of other societies” (1987: 6–7). It should be noted that in many African borderlands traditional values have changed radically due to conflict and movements. Traditional authorities are no longer recognized by the political movements, community and clan structures have been destroyed, and household composition has changed drastically. Moreover, economic transformation has changed the rural areas in particular, with new production systems and new markets. Market forces have had a large impact on human migration.

Relief programmes, implemented in many African borderlands, can also have great impact on the local economy, on both employment and markets. More study will be needed about what could be called the “relief economics.” Large assistance programmes with vehicles and expatriate staff definitely change the local setting.

The colonial powers indeed had an interest in categorizing people according to ethnic groups, in order to control them and to collect revenues. A borderland was seen as a buffer between different countries. The international border defined national territory and

facilitated control from the centre. Colonialism fixed people as well as their identity (Simons 1999). After independence the nation-states continued on the same basis – post-independence politicians had great interest in controlling the territory of nation-states and therefore their borders (from the centre). Territory and international borders are thus seen as structures and agencies of the state (Wilson and Donnan 1998).

Refugees and hosts, particularly when both are affected by conflict and forced displacement, share experiences and exchange identities. In borderlands, cross-border relations gain importance when problems between periphery and centre persist. Transnational communities emerge, since the system of nation-states cannot fully control human movement. This contrasts with the efforts of many African states to control human migration, characterized by tougher border control or immigration policies. People are supposed to stay within the borders of their nation-states. And if they are in exile, they are supposed to repatriate and go back “home.”

The lessons for refugee studies and assistance to be learned from the study of borderlands can be summarized according to three major considerations. First, refugees cannot and should not be seen as a separate category in a borderland affected by conflict. As Allen (1996) puts it: “Research findings made it clear that in north-east Africa, formal distinctions between refugees, internally displaced, returnees and stayees violate the realities of circumstances on the ground.” (1996: xii). A wider approach, which includes other war-affected populations such as the hosts, needs to be adopted. In the case of Uganda and Sudan the whole border area is affected by years of underdevelopment and conflict, which will be explained in more detail in the following sections.

Second, although international borders are important, since they define “nationality,” this nationality is complemented by other identities. For refugees, loss of national identity is important because they have lost the legal protection of their state and now depend on the host country and on the international community for both protection and assistance. I would argue that within the refugee regime, the national identity has overshadowed other identities. More attention to the special characteristics of borderlands can lead to a better understanding of refugees’ and hosts’ identity, irrespective of their nationality.

Third, “border anthropology” might assist us in reaching a better understanding of relations between hosts and refugees. The two groups often have more in common than is assumed. Cooperation and eventually integration can be achieved when refugees are accepted as “transborder” people (Nugent and Asiwaju 1996). Cross-border migration in this case can be seen as looking for peace and opportunities and has a less static undertone than the flight and repatriation concepts used by humanitarian agencies (Bakewell 1999).

Border anthropology can provide a better understanding of the context in which massive displacement takes place. The borderland has a fluid character as populations move and interact across the border. According to Cohen (1997) groups cannot easily be contained in the nation-state system; he also argues that so called “borderland cultures” represent a threat to the nation-states. A “borderland culture” transcends the international border and

enriches identity on both sides of the border. More study of complex borderlands in which forced migration takes place will also support the planning and implementation of better assistance programmes, which often play an essential role in creating the identity of refugees. Interventions can be put in a context in which hosts and refugees interact and survive during periods of conflicts. Refugees cross borders and lose their livelihood, but what is there on the other side of the border that can assist them in rebuilding a livelihood? Which existing cross-border trade system can still be practised? Can refugee households have access to the land near that of the hosts? A good relationship with the hosts would be the first and perhaps most important asset in rebuilding the refugees' self-esteem after being forced out.

A particular borderland has been affected by the refugee crises in northern Uganda and southern Sudan, where refugees have been "catapulted" (Bascom 1998) to both sides of the border over the last decades. The people on both sides of the border have similar identities that are somehow formed by the specific characteristics of that borderland, as the following section explains.

### **The Uganda–Sudan borderland**

The Uganda–Sudan border extends over a long distance through a sparsely populated area, and like many others in Africa, it is an arbitrary line, not representing a real natural or cultural division. During the early colonial time the border was vaguely agreed upon between Uganda, as a British Protectorate, and the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. Collins (1962) gives a detailed report of the Uganda–Sudan boundary rectification between 1909 and 1914. The Lado enclave west of the Nile was, after the death of King Leopold II of Belgium, transferred from Congo Free State to Sudan in 1910. Sudan in turn handed the southern Lado enclave over to Uganda to facilitate the administration of hut taxes and the control of sleeping sickness. Collins describes in detail how the border between Uganda and Sudan came into being, separating ethnic groups such as the Acholi, the Madi and the Kakwa, and cutting through the Nilotic (Acholi) and Sudanic (Madi/Kakwa) language groups. It was argued as follows:

...although this would mean drawing the boundary through the Madi people, the frontier would at least pass between the northern and the southern Madi who at that time were unfriendly to one another. Captain Kelly, member of a boundary commission in 1913, described in detail the proposed boundary between Uganda and the Sudan leaving to Uganda the Acholi on the south and south western slope of the range (Collins 1962: 141–2).

The colonial border bifurcated a rather homogeneous area whereby individuals found their family members suddenly on the other side of it. The border created new identities. Little attention was paid to "ethnicity" or economic relations between different groups in the area. The rectification of the border, agreed upon between the governments of Sudan and Uganda in the early 20th century, showed how arbitrary the drawing of borders was.



A boundary commission set out from Nimule (now in southern Sudan) to examine the ground in detail and submit its recommendations.

Since there was no absolute geographic feature, like the Congo–Nile watershed for instance, upon which the whole of the boundary could be fixed, tribal boundaries appeared to be the only principle upon which a more permanent frontier could have been established, but tribal boundaries, as the commissioners had discovered in the Farajok District, were frequently confusing and unreliable. To construct an international frontier from the claims of rival tribes was at best a difficult and trying undertaking when the commissioners were present to examine the area in person. To attempt to fix such a boundary without thoroughly investigating the frontier was simply to invite unwelcome disputes in the future. The interests of both the Sudan and Uganda would undoubtedly have been better served if the Commission had traversed the whole of the proposed frontier and had devoted more care to delimiting, particularly in the east and west, a more rational boundary. (Collins 1962: 141–2)

In 1914, the border was recognized and, although it was supposed to be of a temporary nature, it remained the international border. Having been drawn so hastily and cutting through different identities left many unresolved problems. Even in 1947, during the Juba conference on the political development of southern Sudan, doubts were expressed about the political and economic orientation of the south:

Since 1945, there have been developments both economically and educationally in the south, and it has begun to be clear, I think, that the southern Sudan, by its history and by the accidents of geography, river transport and so on, must turn more to the north rather than to Uganda or the Congo.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout the post-independence years the border remained permeable, and cross-border movements continued to be part of daily life. The border was maintained, however, and the sovereignty of the states it divided was never questioned.

The drawing of the Uganda–Sudan border has had a significant impact on the “border identity” of people living on both sides. Since independence both states have sought to control their citizens, both in the centre and at the periphery. The objective was to form a new national identity, and nation building became a high priority. However, the same politicians frequently used ethnicity and “ethnic identities” to maintain their power bases. In the case of Uganda, the army was always ethnically biased, and Milton Obote and Idi Amin both used the army to control the nation-state.<sup>4</sup> In Sudan, the tensions between the Islamic north and Christian south were not only based on religion, but had a strong ethnic

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted from a letter of B. V. Marwood, Governor of Equatoria, relating to proceedings of the Juba conference on the political development of the southern Sudan, June 1947.

<sup>4</sup> Obote was twice president of Uganda; his first term of office, from 1965 to 1971, is referred to as Obote I, and his second term, from 1980 to 1985, is referred to as Obote II.

undertone as well. Khartoum was never willing to share real power with the “backward” southerners. Within the south, more ethnic rivalries emerged when the political struggle for greater autonomy gained importance. Despite these internal conflicts and related movements across the border, both Uganda and Sudan have tried to avoid open inter-state conflict, although lately, frequent border incidents have occurred.

The international border between Uganda and Sudan hardly restricted human migration. In the 1950s, the southern Sudanese moved freely to Uganda to work in the cotton industry (Bascom 1998). Migration helped in reinforcing links between the Madi and Kakwa living on both sides of the border. The relations established during this migration later enabled the Sudanese to settle in northern Uganda among their kin when they had to flee from the civil war in southern Sudan. Self-settlement and the sharing of resources were common in those days.

Bascom (1998) argues, however, that the reciprocity that so often characterizes rural African communities came under strain as the available resources became scarce and production systems changed. The whole border area, similar to other rural areas, slowly transformed from a subsistence economy into a market economy with more competition and less reciprocity between refugees and hosts. Traditional production and exchange systems lost their importance. It has been argued that giving the often-used saying “African hospitality” as an explanation for the good relations between refugees and hosts has a limited validity (Chambers 1993). Hosts and refugees who have much in common may still be strained by underdevelopment and have to compete for access to the available means of production. Resources such as land and firewood have also led to friction between the two groups.

Despite the tougher economic environment that has developed since the 1960s, interaction between people in northern Uganda and southern Sudan continued. Languages in the borderland of Uganda and Sudan are similar, although with many dialects, and facilitate communication in vast areas of northern Uganda and southern Sudan. People move freely to their kinfolk on the other side of the border, seeing it as an “invention” from outside. Many residents of borderlands are involved in cross-border trade because the border made trade worthwhile. Coffee and tobacco smuggling from Uganda to Sudan was common because of lack of border control. And up to now, the hosts and refugees have been involved in a profitable cross-border trade. Vegetable oil provided by the World Food Programme (WFP) for southern Sudan has frequently appeared in the Arua and Koboko markets in Uganda, and commodities made or easy to obtain in Uganda are taken to markets in southern Sudan. The people who manage to retain links across the border tend to be better off (Payne 1998). Nowadays the Uganda shilling is widely accepted in southern Sudan and relief aid flows frequently from one country to the other.

The borderland of Uganda and Sudan has a history of economic underdevelopment. There is hardly any socio-economic infrastructure, markets are isolated and large investments are scarce. The local economy has been hampered by lack of relations with the centre, which in turn made cross-border trade more important. Markets are mostly internal or limited to the borderland. Transport is unreliable and often interrupted by

insecurity and bad roads. The people of the border areas are generally marginalized and do not share real political or economic power, which is concentrated in the centre. This tradition of underdevelopment has led to conflicts within the border areas and between the central government and rebel groups in the periphery. In Sudan, the access to resources such as oil, gold and teak have further complicated the relationship between the south and the north. Political unrest and conflict between the centre and periphery in both Uganda and Sudan have a long history. Conflicts on both sides of the border have also spilled over (Woodward 1991), creating “international” unrest between the two nation-states. The governments of Uganda and Sudan have had sour relations for several decades now, but this has not led to full-scale war. Instead, the conflict has conveniently been confined to the borderlands.

Conflict in the Uganda–Sudan borderland has also an ethnic dimension. The civil war in Sudan has an obvious ethnic and religious character, whereby different groups see warfare as a means of maintaining their identity or of keeping the idea of an independent political unit alive (Turton 1996). The Sudanese People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) has been plagued by inter-ethnic power struggles almost since its foundation in 1983, and factionalism continues to weaken its effectiveness in fighting the Sudanese government forces. Sudanese refugees in Adjumani district (north Uganda) often refer to conflict within the SPLA, sometimes even giving this as the main reason for fleeing to and remaining in Uganda. Many recall how they have suffered at the hands of SPLA forces.

In Uganda, conflict has devastated the north since the fall of Idi Amin in 1979, when conflict between different ethnic groups came to the forefront. The Ugandan army historically recruited its soldiers from the north. The “Amin” soldiers were said to have been mostly Alur, Lugbara, Kakwa and Madi. After the overthrow of Amin in 1979, these ethnic groups (not only the soldiers) were harassed and had to flee to southern Sudan. In 1980–83, the inter-ethnic conflict worsened. The government forces, known as the Uganda National Liberation Army (UNLA), during Obote II (1980–85) became Acholi- and Langi-based. The Madi and Acholi started fighting each other despite the fact that they are, in effect, the same people (Allen in Allen and Morsink 1994). Allen argues that “tribal” identities are the product of historical processes and that the ethnic identity of Madi and Acholi were unimportant until soldiers started killing civilians (Allen in Allen and Morsink 1994). Ethnic conflicts within the borderlands created movements of refugees with specific ethnic identities. Refugee integration in exile depended on this identity and how it related to the host identity.

During 1980–85, the UNLA was held responsible for the horrific killings in the Luwero triangle. After the National Resistance Movement led by Yoweri Museveni came to power, the conflict between centre and periphery continued. During the late 1980s, the Holy Spirit Movement of Alice Lakwena became active, followed by other rebel groups, such as the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), which has continue to fight up to the present, mostly operating in Acholi-land (the Kitgum and Gulu districts of northern Uganda). The LRA is fighting a war against both the government and anyone who is suspected of supporting the authorities. Both hosts and refugees have suffered from the indiscriminate killings and abductions by the LRA.

Although the wars are fought in the periphery, the central governments have played their part in supporting rebel groups across the border. It is widely known that the Ugandan government is supporting the SPLA and that the Sudanese government is supporting the LRA. War in the Uganda–Sudan borderland has therefore become a proxy war, fought in the periphery and supported from the centre and internationally. Through this involvement of central government, the conflict has acquired an international, inter-state dimension and has led to strong international protests. Sudanese military Antonov aircraft flying over Uganda territory have dropped bombs on border towns (including Adjumani in October 1998). Ugandan army tanks on the other hand have frequently been spotted supporting SPLA operations in southern Sudan (such as the SPLA offensive in early 1997). Consequently, the borderland is frequently referred to as a no-man’s land or as a no-go area.

Refugees, internally displaced people and hosts do not only share the experience of conflicts which is so characteristic of this border area, but they are also often related through kinship, speak the same language, and have the same cultural background. Their communities are mostly involved in similar productive activities with small cross-border trade opportunities. They do not necessarily have the feeling of “we” versus “they” (Fukui and Markakis 1994). Turton (1996) argues that an ethnic group is not a group because of ethnicity, but because its members engage in common action and share common interests. Refugees, internally displaced people and hosts have many interests in common, one of which is to rebuild their communities. Another is to stay away from conflict, which leads to frequent migration, internally or across international borders. It can be seen, therefore, that a “border identity” may become more important than other identities. This common border identity also provides opportunities for refugees to settle and integrate within local communities. A common background and recent history of forced displacement has created less difference between Sudanese and Ugandan nationals living in the border area.

However, the nationality of the refugees remains important. Refugees presently in Uganda have Sudanese nationality and are expected to repatriate “one day.” They mostly refer to themselves as “Sudanese.” Their national identity places them in a separate category. The objective of central government, as much in Uganda as in Sudan, is to maintain national identity. Nationality in Sudan is perhaps less significant, since there is a strong separation between the Islamic north and Christian south. Despite this, Nugent and Asi-waju (1996) reason that even in southern Sudan, where the case for secession might appear overwhelming, there has been a surprising willingness to countenance the survival of Sudan as a single entity. During recent years the SPLA has made it clear that it is in favour of a federal state with increased self-determination for the south instead of full autonomy or independence.

In Uganda, the National Resistance Movement government has adopted a policy of neutralizing ethnicity (Muherera and Otim 1998) and promoting “nationality.” It remains to be seen how successful this policy will be, as the central government remains very concerned to maintain equal representation from the different ethnic groups and regions. The importance of nationality is obvious for refugee issues: international boundaries are cru-

cial for people in flight and international agencies that provide assistance will have to respect these. These agencies, however, will have to deal with an interplay between nationality and ethnicity. In the case of Sudanese refugees in Uganda, both these identities and the identity created by the refugee regime are relevant. The borderland has created a transnational community in which hosts and refugees change roles.

During periods of internal conflict the border remains permeable and people flee to safer and more convenient areas. As a first phase they might flee to family and friends within their country, trying to remain close to their homesteads and fields. When things become worse they might decide to cross the border and become refugees. Both Sudanese and Ugandan nationals have a choice, which they make in a rational way depending on the level of conflict and economic opportunities which are forcing them to either side of the border. There is a combination of compulsion and choice. Refugee populations can become transnational communities, exploring possibilities in the borderland. Refugees have normally settled not too far from the international border in order to remain in touch with home. The borderland has become a place to change identities depending on the circumstances. Clifford (1992) refers to the emergence of a borderland culture, as part of his “travelling cultures,” whereby the border area is populated by ethnic groups unevenly assimilated to dominant nation-states. He suggests that for people in transit, such as refugees, the question is not so much “where are you from?” as “where are you between?” Clifford calls this the intercultural identity question.

### **Refugee movements in the borderland: 1960 – 1998**

The Uganda–Sudan borderland has seen dramatic human displacement over the last four decades. First, there was a tradition of migration, principally of Sudanese travelling to Uganda for work. Migrant workers for the cotton and coffee plantations were accepted in Uganda as long as the economic conditions there provided employment. Later, conflict led to forced migration across the border, with movements in both directions. Other population movements have taken place on either side of national boundaries but within the same borderland, leading to large numbers of internally displaced persons. Again and again people were forced to move due to internal conflicts that also spilled over to the other side of the border. The Uganda–Sudan borderland became a battleground where people had to adopt changing identities.

#### *Refugee movements since the 1960s*

The north–south conflict in Sudan created the first massive population movements from southern Sudan to Uganda. Forced displacement during the first Sudanese civil war (from the end of the 1950s up to 1972) was significant, but refugees settling with their family and kin could still cope without much outside assistance. Refugees crossed the border and settled spontaneously on land made available to them by their hosts. Dependence on international aid was limited. Their similar ethnic background (mostly Kakwa) further facilitated good relations between refugees and hosts. According to Akol (1994), 86,000

Sudanese refugees settled in Uganda during the 1960s.<sup>5</sup> Local integration in northern Uganda progressed well. Moreover, when Uganda became independent in 1962, it already had a large refugee and migrant population within its borders, probably more than 100,000 people (Pirouet 1988). The authorities were accustomed to assisting refugees from Congo, Rwanda and Sudan. Uganda also had a large immigrant population (Banyarwanda, Nubians, Kenyan Luo and a significant Asian community). Some Sudanese found their way into higher education and obtained positions as civil servants and even integrated into the ranks of the military. When Amin came to power, it was widely known that he had strong backing from the Sudanese refugees.

During the sixties, Uganda maintained a neutral stance regarding the civil war in southern Sudan. Only in 1971, when Amin was president, did more support go to the Anyanya groups fighting for self-determination in southern Sudan. In 1972, the Addis Ababa peace agreement was signed, giving autonomy to southern Sudan, and a regional government was established in Juba. The repatriation of Sudanese refugees from Uganda and other countries began, although many refugees decided to wait and see how things developed before going home. The reception of the returnees was relief-oriented, with the handing out of repatriation “packages.” No rehabilitation of the home areas was undertaken. The rebuilding of livelihoods was left to the returnees themselves. Expectations after return were high, but mostly not met (Akol 1994).

During the Amin regime, many Ugandans left the country for political reasons. After the murder of Archbishop Janani Luwum in 1977 and the claim that he had been linked to an Acholi plot to overthrow Amin, many Acholi in Kampala and the surrounding area felt insecure and left, principally for Kenya and from there on to Europe or Canada. Amin replaced the Acholi in the army with people from the West Nile province, mostly Kakwa and Aringa from northern Arua district, his home area.<sup>6</sup> These northerners were also referred to as “Sudanese,” that is, descendants of the Sudanese migrant workers who came to Uganda in the 1950s (Gersony 1997).

The exodus from West Nile after Amin’s downfall was the most dramatic forced migration in the recent history of Uganda. When the Tanzanian soldiers had “liberated” Uganda and left the country, the Ugandan National Liberation Army (UNLA) started its campaign to control the north and in particular West Nile. Nubians and Kakwas were the first to cross into Sudan, as they were seen as the remnants of Amin’s army. The conflict quickly became ethnic since the Acholi and Langi dominated the new army. The UNLA specifically targeted the Alur, Lugbara, Kakwa and Madi population of West Nile. The area as a whole was a stronghold of the Democratic Party (mostly Roman Catholic) and was seen as being opposed to Obote’s Uganda People’s Congress (mostly Protestant). Remnants of Amin’s army formed a rebel movement, the Uganda National Rescue Front (UNRF), and tried to organize themselves to oppose the UNLA. At certain points in time, they controlled part of the border area, but they could not prevent large numbers of Ugandans leaving, first for what was then Zaïre and later for southern Sudan. Refugees at

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<sup>5</sup> Other countries that received Sudanese refugees were: Ethiopia (35,000), Kenya (500), Zaïre (67,000) and Central African Republic (30,900). See Akol (1994).

<sup>6</sup> West Nile province in north-west Uganda comprises the districts of Nebbi, Arua, Moyo and Adjumani.

first tried to remain near their places of origin, but slowly realized that the rebels fighting the UNLA could not sustain their hold on any territory in northern Uganda.

When the UNLA had achieved control over most of the north, the government of Uganda and UNHCR started a repatriation scheme in mid-1983; having refugees in Zaïre and southern Sudan was an embarrassment to the government. But on 18 June 1984, UNLA soldiers murdered a prominent returnee, Al Hajji Jabiri, and UNHCR suspended the scheme. The methods of persuasion used to encourage refugees to return have been the subject of much debate and criticism (Crisp and Ayling 1984). The objective of Obote's army in West Nile was to clear the region completely of its population, thereby eliminating once and for all support for Amin (Pirouet 1998). In the Luwero triangle, where Museveni had intensified and concentrated his rebellion against Obote, the people went through the same experience as those in West Nile, but there was no international border nearby and the UNLA army surrounded them. The inhabitants of the Luwero triangle were trapped and atrocities committed by the army were numerous. Gersony (1996) describes Luwero as "the ghost that haunts the Acholi," referring to the role of the Acholi in the UNLA.

By 1985, 28,000 refugees had fled to Zaïre and 250,000 were in southern Sudan. Ugandan refugees in southern Sudan settled in the border area, but many moved on to settlements where security was better. Harrell-Bond (1986) has given a detailed account of the refugee assistance programme and its shortcomings in southern Sudan, where most people from West Nile settled. She argues that the "integration" of refugees in southern Sudan was attributed to the belief that as colonial boundaries intersected established communities, people who have fled across a border are welcomed by their kith and kin with whom they share common origins, language and culture. But she goes on to say that integration is not only about this, it is also about resources. The relief effort was "refugee-centric," and relations between hosts and refugees became strained, thus affecting integration.

Allen (1996) makes a distinction between the West and East Bank settlements inside southern Sudan. Regarding the East Bank settlement, he argues that because UNHCR sub-contracted only one implementing partner (Norwegian Church Aid), the aid activities were not much affected by antagonisms between expatriate-run development agencies trying to manage projects in the same place. In contrast to the West Bank settlers the Ugandan refugees of Madi origin, who mostly settled on the East Bank (among their kin), had limited access to land and ran into conflicts with the Acholi population in southern Sudan. When, in 1986, security deteriorated sharply and the East Bank refugees ran into confrontations with the Dinka-dominated SPLA, they repatriated en masse (Allen 1996).

The massive population displacements that took place in the 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s mainly affected people living in border areas. Conflict based on ethnicity frequently spilled over from Sudan into Uganda or vice versa and escalated within southern Sudan and northern Uganda because of central government policies towards their peripheries. The following tables summarize the major refugee and return movements over the last decades:

Table 1. Refugee Movements between Uganda and Sudan (UNHCR figures)

<i>Period</i>	<i>Country of origin</i>	<i>Estimated number</i>
1955–1972	Sudan	86,000
1979–1983	Uganda	200,000–250,000
1986–1994	Sudan	170,000–210,000

Table 2. Return Movements between Uganda and Sudan (UNHCR figures)

<i>Period</i>	<i>Movement back to</i>	<i>Estimated number</i>
1972–1974	Sudan	75,000 <sup>7</sup>
1986–1989	Uganda	200,000–250,000
1997	Sudan	40,000–50,000

### *Background of the current refugee population in northern Uganda*

At present, Uganda hosts some 170,000 Sudanese refugees. Most of them are settled in the northern districts of Adjumani, Arua, Moyo, Kitgum and Masindi. All these districts, except for Masindi, border Sudan and have suffered from long periods of unrest.

In 1983, when sharia (Islamic) law was introduced in northern Sudan and the decentralization policy was halted, the autonomy of the south came to an end. After the SPLA was founded in 1983, fighting erupted in various areas in southern Sudan, including the provinces of West and East Equatoria, which bordered Uganda. When, in 1986 and the following years, the Ugandan refugees were pushed back by the SPLA (with the knowledge and support of the Ugandan government), a reintegration programme was implemented in north-west Uganda. By the end of 1986, some 40,000 returnees had arrived in Moyo district alone (Allen 1996). The repatriation was mainly triggered by SPLA attacks on refugee settlements on the East Bank of the Nile inside Sudan. The repatriation from the West Bank was similar, although the Ugandan West Nilers had more time to plan their return. By 1989, repatriation had brought back most Ugandans from southern Sudan.

The estimated number differs widely; UNHCR claims that a total of 350,000 persons returned, whereas Allen (1996) argues that around 200,000 might have returned.<sup>8</sup> While the Ugandan refugees were returning, Sudanese refugees started arriving in northern Uganda. Most Sudanese refugees were fleeing the civil war between the Sudanese government

<sup>7</sup> Akol (1994) argues: “It is estimated that over 11,000 refugees remained in Uganda and did not return to Sudan until the fall of President Idi Amin” (1994: 84).

<sup>8</sup> Allen states: “UNHCR estimated that by June 1988 a cumulative total of almost 350,000 Ugandans had returned to Arua and Moyo districts mainly from the West Bank (some also returned from Zaire)” (1996: 233). Again this is surely an overestimate. Based on house-to-house surveys I supervised in 1988 and the 1991 Uganda census figures, it seems reasonable to guess that the total number of returnees between 1987 and 1989 was around 200,000. See also Crisp (1999).



forces and the SPLA, although many were specifically affected by the SPLA incursions in the Equatoria province. In addition, forced recruitment into the ranks of the SPLA was common, and flight to Uganda was a way of avoiding this. At first, the Sudanese refugees fled in relatively small numbers. Refugees were transferred to what are now called the “older” settlements in Adjumani and Masindi (Kiryandongo settlement) districts. Other refugees settled on their own, specifically in West Moyo. Thus, during this time the north of Uganda had to cope with a large group of Ugandan refugees returning to their places of origin and a new influx of Sudanese entering the same area. The returnees had difficulties enough with their own reintegration, which did not facilitate the reception of a new group of Sudanese refugees. The local economy in northern Uganda, devastated by years of war, was not able to sustain the Sudanese refugees.

Large influxes of Sudanese refugees did not occur until 1993–94, when in a short time more than 100,000 Sudanese fled to Uganda. Sudanese government forces controlled parts of the Equatoria provinces bordering Uganda, and fighting with the SPLA had intensified. A large group of refugees testify that their area was occupied by Dinka-led SPLA troops who committed atrocities in their local communities. They fled reprisals by the SPLA’s predominantly Dinka faction after the defection from the SPLA of minority groups. The SPLA was split in several factions, some of which established links with the government forces. The refugees on the East Bank of the Nile who fled from Sudan to Uganda say that they will not return to the liberated areas (under SPLA control) in southern Sudan until the SPLA sorts out its internal conflicts and its conflicts with other southern Sudanese rebel movements. It has been widely acknowledged that the SPLA failed to create civil structures within the areas under its control. The functioning of the Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Association (SRRA), which is in charge of SPLA’s humanitarian affairs and is intended to represent civil society, has always been questioned.

The refugees who arrived in Uganda in 1993–94 were brought to transit centres in Arua and Adjumani districts, Koboko and Ogujebe being the largest. Since the early 1990s the government of Uganda and UNHCR had embarked on a local settlement scheme. Refugees were transferred from the transit centres to agricultural settlements with the aim of becoming self-sufficient, concentrating on food production. After the large influxes of 1993–94, the settlement scheme had to be expanded and new areas were made available.

The Ikafe, Imvepi and Rhino Camp settlements were opened on the West Bank of the Nile, and refugees were transferred there to reduce the congestion in the overcrowded transit centres in Koboko. In Moyo and Adjumani districts settlement areas were opened in various parts of the districts to accommodate some 100,000 refugees. The settlement scheme was implemented under pressure, which caused mistakes and confusion. There were many misunderstandings between refugees, implementing non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the Ugandan government and UNHCR. All of them had different ideas as to how best to assist the refugees to achieve self-sufficiency.<sup>9</sup> One of the issues frequently mentioned as problematic was the relationship between hosts and refugees. The settlement programme did not manage to involve the hosts from the start, and refugee settlements became “islands,” where parallel services were provided to the refugees.

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<sup>9</sup> See the evaluation of Ikafe settlement in Payne (1998).

It is remarkable that the government of Uganda was willing to allow refugees to occupy large areas in the north. The land itself was made available to the refugees by local communities, represented by elders and local councils. Land available for settlement was still abundant; the local population was not interested in settling in many areas because of their isolation and because of security problems. It should also be noted that settlement land is of rather poor quality with a lot of sandy soil. After a difficult beginning, however, some good results were reported and refugee communities produced some promising harvests soon after they had settled down. Other refugees who were not interested in agriculture focused on small-scale trading.

### *Insecurity in refugee-hosting areas*

Complications in the settlement of refugees started when the security situation deteriorated in northern Uganda, and after 1996 insecurity became part of daily life in the north, for the hosts as well as for the refugees. The West Nile Bank Front (WNBF), led by Colonel Juma Oris (who had been a general under Idi Amin), undertook regular rebel incursions into West Nile, operating mostly from Zaïre. Host communities as well as refugee settlements were attacked. During 1996 the atrocities committed by the WNBF increased, and several refugees were killed in the Ikafe and Palorinya settlements. Refugees moved away from their agricultural plots and demanded a greater military presence. The number of Uganda People's Democratic Forces (UPDF) detachments deployed was not enough and could hardly prevent rebel attacks.

East of the Nile the refugee-hosting areas were affected by incursions from the LRA. The LRA, with bases in southern Sudan, undertook frequent attacks on local communities in Gulu and Kitgum district, resulting in the creation of large centres for the internally displaced.<sup>10</sup> In July 1996, the Acholi-Pii massacre took place, in which 106 Sudanese refugees were brutally killed by LRA rebels in Kitgum district. One of the supposed reasons for the attack was that LRA fighters had found UNHCR food ration cards on captured SPLA fighters. LRA rebels coming from Gulu district also attacked the newly-created settlements in Adjumani district. Rebel movements inside northern Uganda made it clear that Sudanese refugees were not welcome and should return to southern Sudan. They also accused the refugees of being SPLA sympathizers. Atrocities continued and refugees were killed. Both the LRA & WNBF rebel groups also attacked the refugee settlements for their stocks of food (especially immediately after food distribution) and medicines, choosing when possible to attack during harvest time or when the grass was high. When the lack of security became unbearable, refugees in Ikafe and Palorinya fled from the refugee settlements and regrouped in safer places or moved to nearby towns. Refugees became "displaced" within the country of asylum.

When, in March 1997, the SPLA "liberated" several areas in southern Sudan, among them the Yei river district, many refugees returned to Sudan. They suddenly walked home, and settlements in the Arua district of Uganda were abandoned. It was believed

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<sup>10</sup> By mid-1999, the IDP centres in Gulu and Kitgum still hosted more than 300,000 people.

that the SPLA and their sympathizers influenced this return movement, as they were interested in populating the liberated areas. Several visits and meetings took place in the settlements just before the exodus, which many saw as forced repatriation (Payne 1998). The walk back to Sudan was a long one and some 15,000 to 20,000 of the refugees settled in Koboko town before crossing the border. Many Sudanese refugees were sceptical about the situation in the Yei river district and decided to stay in northern Arua close to the border with Sudan. Refugees wanted their children to finish the education they had started there, while others preferred to move back to the settlements they had come from. In May and June 1997, UNHCR transported some 15,000 refugees back to the settlements in Rhino camp. By that time, Arua district was left with two settlements, Mvepi and Rhino camps, with a total population of some 41,000 refugees. Other refugees remained self-settled in the border area of Arua district.

Adjumani and Moyo districts were also affected by poor security. Frequent rebel attacks on refugee-hosting areas were reported in 1997 and throughout 1998. The LRA rebels mostly attacked at night and abducted refugees or nationals to carry loot to their camps in Gulu district. In March 1997, when the refugees in Arua district returned to Sudan en masse, the Moyo and Adjumani refugees did not do so. One reason frequently given was that the Madi are not willing to return to the SPLA (i.e. Dinka) “liberated” areas because of previous experiences inside southern Sudan.

After March 1997, the transfer of refugees in Uganda to settlement areas in Adjumani and Moyo district continued, although at a slower pace. During the second half of 1997 and at the beginning of 1998 transfers to settlement areas increased again, and by February 1998 the Ogujebe transit centre, that had once hosted close to 100,000 persons, was closed. The majority of the Sudanese refugees had now settled and had made promising progress with agricultural production. Although insecurity remains a concern, the settlement of Sudanese refugees can be seen as a success: it is becoming more and more difficult to distinguish between refugees and hosts.

As the Sudanese refugees have now spent some time in Uganda (between five and 10 years) and the situation in southern Sudan has not changed for the better, the need to look into longer-term solutions for refugee-hosting areas has increased. A self-reliance strategy was launched in 1998 to encourage a more integrative approach to the Uganda–Sudan border area to be adopted.

### **Refugee relief in borderlands**

It is important to note that local settlement of refugees is not the same as local integration into the host community. Often the two terms are used in confusing ways. In northern Uganda the local settlement programme for Sudanese refugees started in 1992, when land was made available to refugees for agricultural production. By settling the refugees it was automatically assumed that the refugees would “integrate.” This assumption is wrong: local integration is a more complex process than local settlement, and refugees can be settled without ever becoming integrated. An important factor is how refugees themselves

perceive local integration, since some refugee populations would not accept integration in the first place (e.g. Palestinians).

Harrell-Bond (1986) has been critical of the relations between refugees and hosts when describing the Ugandan refugee settlements in southern Sudan. In her studies she focused on the refugee aid agencies with their extreme refugee-centric approach, and she argues that refugees have a great impact on the poorer members of the host population. The competition between them and the refugees is increasing, while refugee programmes and aid agencies destroy the old modes of adaptation that exist in local communities. Consequently integration of refugees in host communities was never achieved in southern Sudan.

It is useful to distinguish between local settlement, local integration and assimilation. Local settlement could be seen as the mere transfer of refugees from camps to agricultural settlements. This can easily lead to “refugee islands,” whereby services are provided in a parallel scheme without considering the hosts. Local integration would be a situation whereby refugees and hosts are sharing available resources and services; no major economic or social differences would be observed between the two communities. Kuhlman provides a detailed review of the dimensions of “integration,” and questions “how refugees are able to make a living in the country of settlement and how the standard of living of the host population is affected by them” (1994: 4). He also argues that the circumstances of individual refugees and hosts have a great effect on the extent of integration.

The same is true for the attitude of refugees towards the country of exile. Kuhlman uses the classification of “integration seeking realists” for those refugees who are willing to make their own living in the host community.<sup>11</sup> I think this classification is relevant for the situation of refugees in northern Uganda. Refugees establish relations with the hosts and at the same time maintain their own cultural identity. Assimilation would go one step further, whereby refugees would eventually lose their separate cultural identity and become full participants in the host society, with citizenship and political rights. I am of the opinion that a refugee settlement programme should aim at integration (if wanted by the refugees themselves) but not necessarily assimilation.

The settlement programme in northern Uganda is slowly progressing and refugees are managing to increase food production, sometimes even achieving surplus production. WFP food rations are consequently reduced, and some 80 per cent of all assisted Sudanese refugees in Uganda now receive reduced rations. Food reductions depend mainly on the time of settlement, but nutritional surveys, crop assessments and food economy studies are undertaken to complement information on household economies. The general impression in northern Uganda is that refugees contribute significantly to the local economy. They not only provide the cheap labour that is in high demand but also contribute significantly to agricultural production. The Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) in Moyo district once told UNHCR in a meeting that food crops in the local market are mostly produced by refugees, and argued that the locals would suffer without the refu-

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<sup>11</sup> Kuhlman makes use of Kunz’s classifications (1994:117), and also uses Berry’s acculturation model (1994:55).

gees. Other refugees bring that part of the WFP food ration to the market that they prefer to exchange for other basic commodities. Since the vegetable oil of the WFP ration has a high economic value it often appears in the markets.

Local markets have grown considerably since refugees have started producing in the settlements. Refugees in one of the Adjumani settlements stated that the trucks of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) aid agency bringing out WFP food return loaded with sorghum and charcoal produced by the refugees. The truck drivers will most probably make an interesting profit by selling this produce in the district market. Ugandans regularly admit that refugees, once they are given access to the land, work harder and produce more than the local inhabitants.

The isolation of the north and the lack of external markets are, however, hampering the development of the regional economy. Lack of security has made the roads to the north unreliable: there have been frequent ambushes along both the Gulu–Adjumani–Moyo road and the road via Arua, and for a long time transporters had to wait for military convoys to bring up their goods (WFP had the same problem with relief food). The markets in Moyo and Adjumani are limited. The Arua market on the other hand is more dynamic, probably due to the existing links with traders in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Sudan. Both hosts and refugees have been complaining about the difficulties in marketing any surplus production. If traders do come at all they have hardly any competition and crops such as sesame and sorghum are sold at very low prices. Here it is also important to note that the refugee settlements do not only depend on agriculture. Many refugees, normally the better off, are involved in small-scale trade and move frequently between the settlements and nearby towns or across the border into southern Sudan.

Refugee settlements, as long as they are not “islands,” could somehow rebuild the sense of community for the displaced Sudanese. Community life is interrupted by the mere fact of forced migration, and family and clan structures have changed. But after some years in exile new relations emerge both within the refugee community and with the hosts. Refugees and hosts are both living in a borderland with transnational communities. In northern Uganda it is becoming harder to note differences between the host and refugee households.

Refugee settlements are still very dependent on outside assistance and are kept away from mainstream society. Most of the activities in the settlement are managed by aid agencies that provide separate services for the refugees. In many cases nationals living in the same area benefit from the services, but this disappears once the refugees return. Up to now the district has played virtually no role in the provision of services in the refugee-hosting areas, while districts such as Adjumani and Moyo are very aid-oriented, and all major investments come from the refugee programme. Their local economies are influenced and sometimes overshadowed by the “relief economy.” Going through the districts one can observe the numerous UNHCR-funded vehicles, and the refugee programme is probably the largest employer in the region. The “aid industry” is distorting the real economy in the borderland. If a contribution is to be made to “real” local development it is high time

that the profile of the aid agencies changed and district structures started to take over affairs in refugee-hosting areas.

Although Harrell-Bond argues that settlements for refugees exist so that the aid agencies can “manage” the refugees (1986: 9), I would contend that settlements have provided the refugees with an opportunity to be more self-reliant and to have a better life than in closed centres or camps. In the settlements refugees are organized and participate, although not yet sufficiently, in the daily activities which concern them. Self-settlement, in contrast to refugee settlement, is taking place, but the host community would not have the capacity to receive all the refugees and share the available resources without outside assistance (from the government or the international community). Refugee settlements have brought some relief to both hosts and refugees, although the objective of self-sufficiency is not yet achieved and the results of settlement schemes are generally unsatisfactory as far as local development is concerned. The recurrent insecurity can be blamed for this, as aid agencies often had to limit their activities to the bare minimum.

Harrell-Bond (1986) also claims that refugee assistance programmes in southern Sudan were paternalistic. Probably the same could be said of the current refugee programme in northern Uganda. Aid agencies still see the refugee community as a mere recipient of assistance and not as a partner in rebuilding communities and improving relations with the host population. By adopting a wider approach, looking at the refugee-hosting area, there could be a more equal distribution of aid. “Imposing aid” could be converted into a “local development in partnership.”

### *Self-reliance in refugee-hosting areas of Uganda*

Understanding the refugee-hosting areas in northern Uganda as being underdeveloped and isolated, the question now arises as to how refugee assistance programmes should be planned. Hosts and refugees have not only suffered from similar hardship and conflicts, but also have a common ethnic and cultural background. Although of different nationality, they share the same borderland. The underlying assumption of refugee self-reliance is that refugees do not constitute a burden but rather an opportunity for local development. With this in mind the idea of the self-reliance strategy (SRS) came about.

As a member of a task force made up of two government and two UNHCR officials, I was directly involved in the development of the self-reliance strategy. Within our UNHCR office in Kampala there was sometimes heated debate about the objectives of the self-reliance strategy, since it directly affected UNHCR’s way of working. We also had a two-day retreat and long discussions with government officials of the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), when we agreed on a common approach. The biggest challenge was to present the strategy in northern Uganda and consult the different stakeholders on the ground.

In discussions we defined the different phases of a refugee influx and what should be done in these phases:

UNHCR usually starts in an emergency by focusing on what it should urgently do for refugees. Then in a next phase it looks at what can be done for the refugees in a way that also benefits the affected nationals – this is currently the practice in Uganda. The next phase could be what UNHCR and its partners can do for and with the host communities in a way that benefits the refugees.<sup>12</sup>

If the above is implemented it will mean a move from the “refugee-centric” approach, so often criticized, to a more “integrative” or “district” approach. The host population was normally not taken into serious consideration and often had to watch aid agencies targeting their relief to the “poor” refugees. This was also one of the main conclusions when Oxfam was reviewing their experience in Ikafe settlement (Payne 1998). Large parallel systems of service delivery had been created which led to unequal development in refugee-hosting areas. Refugees received what could be described as preferential treatment. They are continuously categorized as needy, helpless recipients of aid (Harrell-Bond 1986) who need to be taken by the hand and cared for, while the hosts do not share in the relief efforts.

The self-reliance strategy’s objectives were defined as being:

- To empower refugees and nationals in the area to the extent that they will be able to support themselves.
- To establish mechanisms which will ensure integration of services for the refugees with those for the nationals.<sup>13</sup>

Although the strategy is not aiming at the integration of refugees as persons (citizenship, assimilation), it intends to integrate services. In Adjumani district, where 41 per cent of the population is of Sudanese origin, this was an important point, as local authorities feared a too dominant refugee community, although at the same time they highlighted the economic opportunities:

Communities at sub-county level seem to welcome the concept of self-reliance, but they are worried about some issues. The most important one is that they do not wish to become a minority in their own land. They see the refugee population with greater developmental capacities thanks to over 10 years of assistance by UNHCR and other agencies. Nevertheless, people by and large look at integration with sympathy; they understand what displacement actually means (as they have experienced it themselves), they see the social parallels and closeness between them and the refugee communities, and they foresee a number of opportunities as a result of the process (i.e. market and revenue).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> See UNHCR/OPM Uganda (1999), Forward.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>14</sup> As stated in the Adjumani District Development Plan, District Local Government (1999), p.18.

The reasoning of the self-reliance strategy is that by targeting assistance programmes to refugee-hosting areas the impact could be more sustainable. Investments (in schools, boreholes, roads, dispensaries etc.) should be an integral part of district development plans and contribute to local development. Once the refugees leave, the infrastructure and services will remain for the hosts.

The self-reliance strategy was also developed to reverse the downward financial trend for what is becoming a protracted refugee relief programme. Over the years, UNHCR and other aid agencies have found it harder to get funding for the refugee programme in northern Uganda, and donor interest has diminished rapidly. By launching the strategy we were hoping to receive funding for a transition period and make existing development projects refugee-inclusive.

After initial scepticism from most stakeholders (refugees included), who alleged that the process was “top-down,” the long-term strategy was “endorsed” as the Ugandan refugee policy for the Sudanese refugees in the north. Consultations and discussions in the field had removed some of people’s fears. Since then consultations with all stakeholders have intensified. The scepticism about the self-reliance strategy came mostly from two sides: the refugees and some local authorities. The local authorities hesitate to “integrate” the Sudanese refugees further, since they fear the continued sharing of scarce resources, of which land is one and environment is another.

With the Land Act of 1998, the district and local communities received full control over land distribution. The land belongs to the people and the district land board regulates distribution. Over the past years refugees have received temporary access (not ownership) to land from host communities, represented by the elders and local councils. This process was voluntary and indeed many communities have been ready to allow refugees to make use of their land. By providing land for refugee settlements the host communities expect the aid agencies to reciprocate with local development. Despite the development opportunities, however, the local authorities fear that refugees might one day demand ownership of the land and political integration.

The refugees were also sceptical when they first heard about the self-reliance strategy. They criticized the aid agencies for introducing a system to reduce assistance. A frequently heard complaint was that “UNHCR is leaving us alone”. They well understood that self-reliance means further reduction of food rations, a halt to non-food assistance and an end to the free delivery of services. Since the local settlement scheme had been embarked upon, food self-sufficiency was always one of the main objectives. Increased food production and consequent ration reduction would be implemented irrespective of the self-reliance strategy. Continued free food distribution would strain the relations between refugees and hosts, who in times of drought suffer as much as the refugees.

In conversations with refugees it is becoming clear that they do not strongly oppose the food reduction policy, but they complain about the lack of land, the poor quality of the land and the limited markets in which to sell their produce. They require the means to reach full self-sufficiency. They have also made it clear that they are more concerned



about the integration of services and markets. Historically, the Sudanese refugees in Uganda have given high priority to education; many indicate that the lack of decent education in southern Sudan is one of the main reasons for remaining in Uganda. They claim to fear that the integration of services such as education will see the deterioration of the services currently provided. The idea of cost recovery for the provision of social services through fees is worrying them. They also fear that the self-reliance strategy might cause problems for the more vulnerable groups within the refugee community. Community care, they argue, is not feasible while the refugees are struggling to become self-sufficient, since this does not give them time to undertake community work. Community structures are being rebuilt slowly and so are not yet capable of integrating the more vulnerable.

Hopefully, the self-reliance strategy will also end the extreme influence of aid agencies on the local economy. Many officials (UNHCR, government, NGOs) have become dependent on the “aid industry” in northern Uganda. UNHCR has become the single largest employer in the areas with a high concentration of refugees. Some aid agency staff will fear the integration of refugee services because it means the loss of well-paid jobs. It is also known that the distribution of relief assistance has a damaging effect on local markets. Local prices have been distorted by the availability of cheap relief products. More integration into existing district structures might provide a more realistic picture of the local economy.

The self-reliance strategy needs a strong drive towards refugee self-management. The taking over of many services and activities, such as water pump repairs, road rehabilitation, grinding mill operations, store management etc., presently provided by international NGOs, will boost the responsibility and self-esteem of the refugees. Refugee organization and participation will need to be reinforced. Here the role of aid agencies needs revision, since many organizations working on behalf of refugees tend to do things for them instead of enabling them to do things for themselves. Refugees, like hosts, will have to organize their own lives and parallel service delivery systems will have to be phased out.

Although the self-reliance strategy looks promising for both refugees and hosts, some issues need further clarification. Taxation is one. A large percentage of the refugee community presently pays tax. The refugees who are employed, mostly by the international NGOs, pay income tax. Refugees involved in local trade and marketing pay graduated (or poll) tax. Opinion in the Refugee Directorate of the OPM is that refugees should not pay graduated tax, since this might entitle them to political rights and to be involved in local politics, the right to vote for local councils being linked to proof of payment of graduated tax. Refugees who participate in local markets pay their fees and contribute significantly to the sub-county revenues, making them interesting partners for the sub-county authorities.

More generally, there is the question as to how refugee organizations can coordinate with the political authorities at sub-county and district level. How do we ensure that the refugees have a vote? Refugee representation is organized along similar lines to the Ugandan

local council system, but coordination between local councils and refugee councils is still weak and sometimes viewed with suspicion.<sup>15</sup>

Another issue is freedom of movement. For refugees to become self-reliant, freedom to move around in pursuit of economic opportunities will become increasingly important, since possibilities for employment and trading are limited within the settlement areas. On the other hand the settlement areas will have to open up to hosts (in some settlement areas this is already the case) and allow nationals to start businesses and trade with the refugees. This “spatial” integration will benefit both communities.

A new Ugandan refugee bill has been drafted and will shortly be presented to parliament. It will address legal issues such as taxation, employment and freedom of movement, and is formulated in line with the self-reliance strategy for refugee-hosting areas.

Finally, a self-reliance strategy for refugees and hosts will never succeed if the local economy remains isolated. Security and a well-functioning road network are prerequisites for trade, the marketing of surpluses and economic growth. Activities of the government and the international community should target this aspect of development. Self-reliance for refugee-hosting areas should become part of larger development projects in the Uganda–Sudan borderland.

#### *The refugee-hosting district: Adjumani*

I have already mentioned the case of Adjumani district, with its high concentration of Sudanese refugees. It is worth having a closer look at how the self-reliance strategy is being adopted in this district.

Adjumani district is a young district on the east bank of the Nile, bordering Sudan. It was separated from Moyo district in July 1997. In the past the Moyo and Adjumani districts had been known as Madi county. Madi ethnicity became important when conflict erupted after the overthrow of Amin (Allen 1996). The return of the Madi population since 1986 and their reintegration has been a long and difficult process that coincided with a new influx of Sudanese refugees. While struggling with the rehabilitation of their own war-affected area the Madi received the first Sudanese refugees. At present Adjumani district hosts some 70,000 Sudanese refugees and a domestic population of over 100,000. Refugees represent some 41 per cent of the total district population, while of the refugee population in Adjumani 50 per cent is of Madi origin, the same ethnic group as the host population. Other ethnic groups are Kuku (25 per cent) and Acholi (12 per cent).<sup>16</sup> Both hosts and refugees have experienced displacement and conflict and could be said to have a shared border identity.

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<sup>15</sup> The Ugandan local councils are elected; the system comprises five levels, parish (LCI – lowest level), village (LCII), sub-county (LCIII), county (LCIV) and district (LCV – highest).

<sup>16</sup> The information relating to the ethnic breakdown of the refugee population was collected during ongoing registration exercises implemented by the LWF in coordination with UNHCR.

Adjumani is a rural area with hardly any infrastructure other than some buildings constructed with UNHCR funding and the recently constructed district hospital, funded by the African Development Bank. The isolation of the area has put a strain on any possible economic development. Despite its poverty, however, Adjumani district has been open to refugee settlement from the beginning; local communities have come forward to offer land for refugee settlement in the hope that the refugees might bring some local development.

The district local government (DLG) of Adjumani has been very active in the discussions about self-reliance and has stressed the importance of decentralized implementation. The refugee programme of northern Uganda will have to fall in line with this decentralization policy, which is supported by the central government. It can be argued that refugee affairs are a central government issue, which is true regarding legal aspects and the determination of refugee status. But the district will have to be at the centre as far as implementation of services in refugee-hosting areas is concerned; the district technical departments will have to become the main actors.

After many consultations and discussions the authorities agreed to include the refugee population in the new district development plan. They also acknowledged that the refugee population had brought a lot of benefits to the local economy. The district development plan (DDP) of Adjumani (completed in July 1999) clearly shows that refugee programmes can be run in an integrated, non-parallel, way.

In addition, increasing stability as well as the recently announced UNHCR's refugee self-reliance strategy, have opened up new opportunities for development through the inclusiveness of the refugee population into the DDP, with the possible support of a number of donor countries and international agencies (District Planning Unit 1999: 2).

At the same time the local population sees as an opportunity the presence of the refugees as additional consumers and producers. The district is also concerned about the longer-term effects of refugee settlement and refers in the DDP to sustainability and development opportunities.

Previous experience has shown that refugee communities may decide to return to their own country one day, leaving in place some expensive services which will be no longer in use; in other words sustainability will become an issue. Therefore, the solution would be to go for "physical integration" of refugee communities within the host community centres. This would also help to remove the environmental threat that is imposed by some of the current refugee camps on the district's natural resources. However, any process of "resettlement or relocation" will have to be considered and planned for with great care. Finally, the SRS offers a range of development opportunities that can go hand in hand with the district's vision, including the opportunity of strengthening the capacity of the district local government to deliver and manage better services (District Planning Unit 1999: 18).

The district plan shows that the actual distribution of services in the district is uneven. In the water sector this can be easily demonstrated: the refugee settlements (some 70,000 persons) have 174 boreholes, while the nationals (some 100,000 persons) have only 157 boreholes. By integrating the “refugee” services into the district plans and departments, this uneven distribution of resources will have to be changed. UNHCR and other agencies working in the refugee-hosting areas will have to ensure that development is evenly distributed over the district. Coordination with other development programmes is essential in this respect.

The district approach shown by the Adjumani example makes the labelling of refugees less important, since the population is seen as a single unit or “refugee-inclusive.” This should reduce the tendency for a “refugee-centric” approach. Adjumani as a borderland district is in the process of adopting the refugee population, knowing what it is to be displaced and understanding the conflict that devastates southern Sudan.

### **Towards integrative development and refugee self-management**

The approach of refugee relief programmes has been questioned by many. A first criticism is that they are “refugee-centric,” focusing only on one category of a war-affected society. Other displaced populations are often not included in the assistance programmes, or are treated differently. The hosts are left out because they are believed to be free of the suffering that affects the refugee population. Refugee programmes often neglect the context in which they take place. The borderland in which most refugee crises are situated is a particular setting, a periphery, often characterized by economic and political underdevelopment, making the integration of an additional refugee population a further constraint. Borderland cultures make the nationality of a population less relevant.

Integration and interaction with the hosts becomes difficult if refugees are kept in isolated, well-run settlements (“islands”) that maintain parallel systems for service delivery. UNHCR is still maintaining the terminology of “local settlement” as one of the “durable solutions” and prefers not to talk about integration, since this might have connotations of assimilation and permanency. The point I want to make here is that assistance programmes aiming at integration, not necessarily assimilation and not excluding return, should widen their approach and target refugee-hosting areas as a whole.

The study of borderlands can assist here. In the case of northern Uganda I would strongly recommend a district approach which ensures that refugees are included in district development. The decentralization policy of the government of Uganda makes this approach all the more feasible since development priorities are decided upon at the district (or even sub-county) level. UNHCR’s fear of going beyond its own mandate is understandable, but refugee assistance has to become more sustainable and should, where possible, contribute to local development. In this context UNHCR has a role in making development programmes in refugee-hosting districts “refugee-inclusive.” The distinction between humanitarian assistance and development should not be rigid, and the concept of “refugees” should not automatically be related to emergencies or to humanitarian assistance.

To achieve self-reliance and to end parallel service delivery, attention should be given to the concept of refugee self-management. Settlements run by refugees provide more self-esteem and support the rebuilding of communities. Too often, after many years of assistance, aid agencies feel that refugees cannot run their own grinding mill or other basic services. Refugees continue to be patronized, and services that in a local community are run (properly or badly) by local people are here run by humanitarian agencies. Refugee self-management has a lot to do with respect for the skills and knowledge that are available in the refugee community. It also allows for further relations and interaction between the refugees and the hosts. Refugees ought not to be mere recipients of aid, but should be enabled to undertake initiatives to improve their own livelihoods; when they are in partnership with the host population local development can be accelerated.

Refugees exist as a category because of the creation of nation-states and international borders. In this paper I have tried to show that international borders, although important for refugee status determination, do not necessarily divide people who need to be put in a special and exclusive category.<sup>17</sup> The refugee identity and related relief should be reconsidered in specific borderlands. Refugee-centric approaches in African borderlands often do not have any validity and lack sustainability. They might well create new problems within the country of asylum and show a lack of respect for the host communities. An approach taking into consideration a wider “refugee-hosting area” (not “refugee-affected area”) will in these cases be better for both refugees and hosts and lead to a better local interaction between the two groups.

The problems in the Uganda–Sudan borderland remain unresolved in political terms, with the continued possibility of more refugees, new guerrilla movements and conflicts fuelled from across the border (Woodward 1991). Without improved relations between the governments of Sudan and Uganda and the resolution of internal conflicts, the border area will continue to suffer, and will remain vulnerable to conflict and forced migration. Development efforts will continue to be hampered. It has been suggested that international humanitarian efforts can prolong armed conflicts as long as no decisive political decisions are taken, by feeding the oppressors via the victims; food has often ended up in the hands of the main protagonists of the conflicts. Although relief does not resolve the root causes of conflict and war, it can mitigate the suffering of many people. It would, however, be better to convert refugee relief into local development for refugee-hosting areas and thus try to reverse the course of a conflict.

Refugee and other population movements have to be seen in the wider context of borderlands. A better understanding of the specific characteristics of border areas and the implications of ethnic groups that cross international borders (border anthropology) is needed when implementing refugee assistance programmes. A borderland can be seen as an area with transnational links with constantly changing identities and economic opportunities.

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<sup>17</sup> Jeff Crisp argues that it is difficult to distinguish between different categories such as “refugees,” “returnees,” “internally displaced” and “local residents:” “And even if such distinctions can be made in strictly legal terms, they are irrelevant in terms of human needs and humanitarian assistance”, Crisp (1999), p. 9.

Refugee identities are many. A refugee in northern Uganda is “Sudanese” and at the same time “Madi.” The host is “Madi” as well, but “Ugandan.” The Uganda–Sudan borderland has, like many other borderlands, a large diversity of identities. These change and overlap, while at the same time they separate people. Displaced populations have mixed identities because they have been uprooted. Once in “exile” they rely on assistance and the relationship with their hosts. More integrative assistance programmes will help to erase the false division of identities and acknowledge the importance of a “border identity” for a more peaceful development in the Uganda–Sudan borderland.

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