

# **NEW ISSUES IN REFUGEE RESEARCH**

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## **Self-image and the well-being of refugees in Rhino Camp, Uganda**

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## **Introduction**

This research arose from puzzlement. Public, media, and literature describe refugees generally as suffering, traumatised, dependent, helpless victims without power and control, in need of Western guidance and expertise in order to find solutions to their problems. Humanitarian assistance is said to perpetuate their dependency and disempowerment, especially for those living in camps. In comparing this portrayal with my experiences of working and living in a refugee settlement in Zambia for three years, with a different perception of our work and the refugees themselves, I began to ponder several questions: Firstly, was I too ignorant to see the real extent of the refugees' (mental) suffering? Secondly, did we as managers inflict additional harm to the refugees' already adverse situation? Thirdly, and most importantly, would the refugees in this settlement have agreed to the image of them as powerless and helpless, and did they feel that we worsened their situation instead of helping them? It often appears as if authors base their judgements on observations and ad-hoc interviews instead of having profound and in-depth knowledge of the refugees' views on things. Authors frequently claim with great confidence that they know what refugees need, what problems they have, and that refugees have the same priorities. Often the impression is that refugees are not seen as subjects and actors, with their history, aspirations, resources, capacities, and views. Who has asked the refugees?

This leads to the purpose and core questions of this research: What do refugees think about themselves, what is their self-image? How do refugees feel about their lives, and how do they describe their existence in terms of well-being, power, control, and independence? How do they define their priorities, their problems, and their achievements?

This research focuses on refugees from southern Sudan who fled to Uganda and who are now living in Rhino Camp in north western Uganda. It gives them a voice and makes them actors in their own stories. This research informs the reader, apart from shedding light on the above-mentioned questions, about what these southern Sudanese refugees need in order to experience well-being, how they evaluate their lives, what their major concerns are, and how they present their self-image.

The findings suggest that self-image and well-being are interdependent, and that each is shaped and affected by the positive and negative features of refugees' lives. At the same time, self-image and well-being influence and determine how the refugees tackle problems and bring about improvements. In addition, food and education proved to be the major concerns of the respondents. Access to education and food form problems and needs, and at the same time are means to overcome problems and to fulfil needs. The following elaborations are going to substantiate this proposition.

## **Objectives**

The research aspired to fill gaps in the knowledge of refugees' self-image and well-being, to provide a more holistic picture of their existence beyond the label 'refugee', and to contribute to existing research. In using a different focus and approach, I hoped to reinforce refugees' awareness of their position, capacities and strengths. Furthermore, conducting the research aimed at creating and/or increasing field staff's

understanding that they are not dealing with an anonymous group of uprooted people, but with individuals in need.

### **Conceptual background**

The Cambridge International Dictionary of English defines self-image as “the way a person feels about his or her personality, achievements and value to society” (Cambridge International Dictionary of English 2002). The term well-being is frequently used interchangeably with objective well-being, subjective well-being, psychological well-being, psycho-social well-being, happiness, quality of life, and life satisfaction (Lee 2000:351; Lu and Bin Shih 1997:181; Veenhoven 1984). For the purpose of this research, Veenhoven’s definition seems most useful. He defines happiness “as the degree to which an individual’s overall evaluation of his life-as-a-whole concludes positively” (Veenhoven 1984).

The most often stated prerequisites for a person to experience well-being/happiness are autonomy/independence, competence, and relatedness/belongingness (Ryan and Deci 2000:68; Sheldon et al. 2001; Triandis 2000:14f.). Veenhoven summarizes by saying “that people feel at their best when they live in a free, affluent and peaceful society, when they are part of an intimate network and are physically and mentally healthy” (Veenhoven 1991:24). The literature clearly states that Western concepts and understandings of happiness/well-being and self-image are not transferable to non-Western cultures, because these are concepts which people conceptualise, experience and express according to their cultural values, beliefs and traditions (Ahearn 2000:12; Diener, Lucas and Oishi 2002:68; Eastmond 2000:69; Lee et al. 2000:352; Lopez et al. 2002:703; Lu and Bin Shih 1997:182f.; Pedersen 1979:79; Ryan and Deci 2000:75). However, Ryan and Deci argue that the prerequisites in order to experience well-being are universal, but their salience and expression vary across cultures (Ryan and Deci 2000:75).

Research on refugees focuses predominantly on analysing and describing negative and harmful aspects of refugees’ lives and living conditions (Cernea and McDowell 2000:4; Strachan and Peters 1997:vii). In particular, the analysis of refugees’ psycho-social well-being draws heavily from concepts of loss, separation, stress and trauma, emphasising what is lacking for refugees to experience well-being. Ahearn points out that “this approach has limitations for it highlights weakness and pathology rather than strength and health” (Ahearn 2000:5). This goes hand in hand with the overall orientation of psychology towards weaknesses, healing and “repairing damage within a disease model of human functioning” (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000:5; see also Strack, Argyle and Schwarz 1991:1). In contrast, positive psychology concentrates on the study of strengths, resilience and virtue, because it has been shown that knowledge on ‘repairing damages’ alone does not prevent further damage, and that happiness and well-being have positive values, such as that happy people tend to be more productive and creative, socialize and volunteer more, are generally healthier, and engage actively in problem solving (Diener, Lucas and Oishi 2002:69; Kogan 2001; Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000:10; Veenhoven 1991:14).

Various authors, like Eastmond and Harrell-Bond argue that the emphasis in research and in the general perception of refugees as weak and deficient has serious consequences. Firstly, it perpetuates refugees being labelled as helpless and powerless

victims (Eastmond 2000:18; Harrell-Bond 1999:150; see also Pupavac 2002:2; Wessels 1998:142). Secondly, it reinforces and justifies the 'aid regime' in taking the lead in assessing and helping refugees, since 'unfit' people cannot be agents of their own recovery or participate in finding solutions to their problems (De Voe 1981:92; Dick 2002:4; Harrell-Bond 1986; Pugh 1995:22). Further, it disregards the social and political context in which the humanitarian crisis and the refugee experience are embedded and renounces refugees as social and political actors and agents of their own recuperation (Bracken, Giller and Summerfield 1995:1073; Dick 2002:3; Jamal 2003:6; Punamäki 2000:118; Pupavac 2002:10f.; Rieff 2002:87, 143ff.; Summerfield 1995:354; Summerfield 1999a:1460).

However, while the intentions of authors like Harrell-Bond who criticizes the 'aid regime' and the labelling of refugees are commendable, their approach still helps to perpetuate the negative and deficient image of refugees. Instead of using their experiences, knowledge and influence to contribute to a shift in the general perception of refugees by drawing a picture of refugees as actors and subjects, taking refugees' perspectives as a starting point for their reports, and by emphasizing refugees' capacities, strength and resilience, they maintain their focus on the negative and mainly point to the negative consequences for refugees.

Some writers also point out that neo-colonialism, racism and ethnocentrism are major forces determining the perception and treatment of refugees, how the aid 'regime' is organised and how aid is administered (Bracken, Giller and Summerfield 1997:440; Harrell-Bond 1986; Pupavac 2002:11; Rieff 2002:66; Vaux 2001:30f.; Wessels 1998:142). This corresponds with the fact that most tools of assessment, planning and implementation of humanitarian assistance, including psycho-social projects, stem from the West, and are, largely due to lack of understanding, sensitivity and transferability, neither useful nor applicable (Ahearn 2000:12f.; Bracken, Giller and Summerfield 1995:1074; Eastmond 2000:72).

While acknowledging negative and harmful aspects in refugees' lives in general and in camps in particular, it seems obvious that most of the literature generalizes and de-contextualizes. Living conditions of refugees, the levels of freedom, control and independence they experience in and outside camps vary, and there are many differences in the way camps are organised. In addition, looking specifically at refugee camps in Africa, it has to be noted that the refugees in these camps are sometimes better off than their local counterparts, and the reasons that their lives are still marked with deprivation lie partly in lack of funding, and partly in general "under-development" and poverty in these host countries.

### *Literature review*

Existing literature often suggests that refugees in camps are likely to have a low self-image, and are likely not to experience well-being, because circumstances deny them feelings of competence, independence, membership of social networks, and achievements. Some writers indicate however, that despite being refugees and despite living in camps, refugees can feel well, capable and autonomous, and also can have a sense of belonging and achievement.

Critics of the humanitarian aid 'regime', who promote refugees' self-settlement and self-governance outside established camps, compare refugee camps with 'total institutions', in which refugees are being deprived of power, control and freedom. Refugees' identities are said to have to undergo transformation in order to assume the role they are supposed to play, and where they are bound to be entirely dependent and in need of help from outsiders (Bowles 1998:14; De Voe 1981:93; Harrell-Bond 1986; Harrell-Bond 1999:150f.; Harrell-Bond 2000:1; Harrell-Bond, Voutira and Leopold 1992:210; Jamal 2003:4; Loughry and Nghia 2000:161; Marx 1990:198; Payne 1998:39; Vaux 2001:v; Walkup 1997:51; Zetter 1991:40, 55). Assessing the system of humanitarian assistance in general, Knudsen concludes that "paradoxically, the camps with the most complex relief systems often leave their residents with least control over their own lives, this being brought about a form of imposed aid which serves the relief workers' needs rather than those of the refugees" (Knudsen 1991:25). Ryan and Deci point out that, generally, coercion and pressure decreases well-being and motivation (Ryan and Deci 2000:70). In contrast, other authors, on the basis of their observations and experiences, describe refugee camps not only as lively places with urban features, such as businesses, markets, education and health facilities, employment and training opportunities for refugees, and close contact to the local population, but also as places where refugees manage to prosper (Bowles 1998:12, 22; Dick 2002:27ff.; Hammond,1999:231; Jamal 2003:4; Kibreab 1993:331; Merckx 2000:21; Perouse De Montclos and Kagwanja 2000:210; Rogge and Akol 1989:195; UNHCR 2000:109). Instead of being dependent, refugees appear to show great initiative, resourcefulness, and skills in maximizing available opportunities (Bakewell 2003:9; Dick 2002:4; Farah 2003:21; Gibbs 1997:228, 235ff.; Kibreab 1993:331f.; Payne 1998:19f., 27ff.; Pottier 1996:417; Summerfield 1999b:126; Voutira and Harrell-Bond 1995:216).

Critics of the aid 'regime' also argue that the way in which humanitarian assistance is implemented does not acknowledge and actually undermines refugees' own capacities, resources, and resilience, causing refugees to undervalue or disregard their own potential (Bracken, Giller and Summerfield 1997:437; Prendergast 1997:174; Pupavac 2002:4; Summerfield 2001; Von Buchwald 1994:231f.; Wessels 1998:142). Often the aid given is not appropriate and focuses on food and water; it usually does not take any other needs of refugees into account, as Vaux observes: "Conventional aid can be an insult to people's feelings" (Vaux 2001:178). Anderson stresses the fact "that suffering is not, in itself, demeaning and demoralising. However, responses to suffering can make it so" (Anderson 2000:499). Some refugees themselves express the view that they would rather have less assistance but more control; facing challenges and seeking solutions to their problems would reinforce their sense of dignity and of being capable (Harrell-Bond 1986). They find their conditions humiliating, degrading and shameful (Harrell-Bond 1999:141ff., 160f.). Other refugees express their appreciation for the advanced services they receive in camps, the knowledge and skills they acquire, and emphasise that the exposure, for instance to management structures, modern technologies, and expatriates, widens their horizon and this causes them to be more self-confident and determined (Aguilar Zinser 1991:109f.; Dona and Berry 1999:187; Hammond 1999:231; Loughry and Nghia 2000:161f.; Sperl 2001; Stepputat 1999:221f.). Such a view receives support from authors who highlight the fact that times of upheaval, disruption and destruction have the potential to be eventually beneficial and liberating experiences which are conducive to personal, social, economic and political growth (Fisher 1999:69;

Hammond 1999:235; Krznaric 1997:69f.; Leffert 2001:137f.; Majodina 1995:211; Nolen-Hoeksema and Davis 2002:602; Pearce 1997:440, 445; Rogge and Akol 1989:194f.; Weiss Fagen and Eldridge 1991:172).

Furthermore, researchers and some refugees complain that being a refugee and living in a camp is mentally and spiritually depriving since there is nothing to do and the responsibility for their lives lies in the hands of the management, which does not seek the participation of the refugees (De Jongh 1994:230; Harrell-Bond 2000:9; Loughry and Nghia 2000:161; Middleton and O'Keefe 1998:161; Von Buchwald 1994:232). Payne and other authors, however, state that some humanitarian agencies actively promote and facilitate refugees' participation in planning and implementation of programmes (Payne 1998:60-69; see also Bowles 1998:13; Demusz 1998:240; Le Borgne and Belchior-Bellino 1999; Rodriguez Pirotte 1999). Stein and Cuny add their observation that "one of the more interesting patterns found in refugee camps is the formation of politically organised, cohesive communities of uprooted peoples. Refugees show an impressive ability to organise and cohere as a new community, with its own customs and values" (Stein and Cuny 1994:179; see also Turner 1999:11f.).

Another negative feature of being a refugee is said to be that refugees not only experience the collapse of their "social worlds", leaving them without a support system, but also that vast numbers of refugees allegedly suffer from trauma due to their experiences of loss, destruction and violence, and that they are unable to recover, except with the help of Western psycho-social/psychological interventions (Bracken, Giller and Summerfield 1997:439; Desjarlais et al. 1995:116; Harrell-Bond 1999:147; Payne 1998:41f.; Prendergast 1997:174; Pupavac 2002:7; Summerfield 1995:354; Summerfield 1999a:1449ff.; Summerfield 2001). Here, refugees are perceived and described as a helpless, powerless and uniform group of victims, without political and social agency, identity, and history, entirely depending on help from others for their physical and mental survival, and subject to others' assessments and definitions of their problems and solutions (De Voe 1981:90f.; De Waal 1997:82f.; Dick 2002:3; Dineen 1998; Eastmond 2000:81; Gibbs 1997:229; Harrell-Bond, Voutira and Leopold 1992:206; Kibreab 1993:336; Kibreab 1995:1; Pottier 1996:405, 411f.; Pugh 1995:22; Punamäki 2000:118; Rieff 2002:25f.; Vaux 2001:30; Wessels 1998:142; Zetter 1991:40). In fact, most refugees preserve what is left of their broken social world and often re-define their concepts of relationship, community, and kinship in relation to new circumstances (Davis 1992:155; Hammond 1999:238f.; Stein and Cuny 1994:179). In addition, most refugees harbour a wealth of individual and collective experiences, and show at times incredible resilience: Summerfield observes that refugees "are victims, but they are also survivors. ... and even the most destitute still exercise active interpretations and choices" (Summerfield 1995:353; see also Kibreab 1995:1; Martone 2002:177; Payne 1998:36; Punamäki 2000:111, 121; Summerfield 1995:353; UNHCR Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme 2001:2).

Moreover, pain and suffering are said to be 'normal' in the sense that they are part of life and Dick comments that "people place catastrophes such as war into their collective social memory and incorporate it within their accumulated culture" (Dick 2002:7; see also Davis 1992:150; Eastmond 2000:71; Nolen-Hoeksema and Davis 2002:599; Punamäki 2000:112; Rieff 2002:28). Also, all human beings seem to have

in common that they actively engage in finding a meaning in what happens to them, and refugees frequently mention that faith, religion, spirituality and political convictions help them to put meaning to and to endure even the worst atrocities (Bracken, Giller and Summerfield 1995:1077; Cornish, Peltzer and MacLachlan 1999:269; Eastmond 2000:75; Gibbs 1997:235; Harrell-Bond 1999:159; Lopez et al. 2002:705f.; Patel, Mutambirwa and Nhiwatiwa 1995:220; Wessels 1998:139).

Generally, researchers report that the level of well-being of people in Africa is lower than in Western countries, indicating that well-being is low when basic needs are not met, and that people who live exposed to threats, such as natural disasters or violence, experience low levels of well-being (Diener and Diener 1995:654; Diener, Diener and Diener 1995:862; Diener, Lucas and Oishi 2002:69; Lopez et al. 2002:706; Triandis 2000:20). On the other hand, Triandis suggests that the level of subjective well-being is also quite high in less developed countries and he explains “that when expectations are low and/or people have relatively low levels of desires for things that require resources, they will have high subjective well-being” (Triandis 2000:19). Veenhoven concludes that like health, happiness/well-being seems to be the rule or normal condition (Veenhoven 1991:14, 24; see also Diener, Lucas and Oishi 2002:68).

### **Rhino Camp and the Sudanese refugees**

The borderland between Sudan and Uganda has a long history of migration movements, both work/trading migration and forced migration (Merkx 2000:13). Large numbers of refugees from southern Sudan, around 100,000, began to arrive in northern Uganda in 1993-94 due to intensified conflict between the Sudanese government forces and the Sudanese People’s Liberation Army (SPLA), and to factional fights within the SPLA which led to atrocities being committed against civilians (Merkx 2000:17). After housing them initially in transit camps close to the border, the Ugandan government, in cooperation with local councils and elders, provided land on the West Bank of the Nile, on which three refugee settlements were established, namely Ikafe, Imvepi and Rhino Camp (Merkx 2000:17f.).

Direct attacks on camps by the West Nile Bank Front made them highly insecure; looting and killings took place and caused further displacement. When in March 1997 the town and county of Yei in southern Sudan fell to the SPLA, half of the refugees in Arua district decided spontaneously to repatriate. Since 1997 the security situation in the camps in Arua district has stabilized; though sporadic conflicts between rival rebel factions still occur (German Development Service (DED) 2002:2).

Rhino Camp is located in Arua district and covers an area of approximately 225 square kilometres; it is divided into 10 zones and has 42 villages (or clusters). By July 21, 2003 the refugee population figure stood at 25,812 (52 per cent men and 48 per cent women); about 20,000 Ugandans live within the settlement area (Interview with Lawrence Mugisa, Camp Commandant, Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), 21.07.2003). There are four health centres, and Arua district hospital and Koluba Mission hospital serve as referral hospitals. Medical treatment is free of charge. Thirteen primary schools and one secondary school within the settlement provide educational services. In addition, one vocational training centre offers skills training in carpentry, tinsmithing, and domestic science/home management. All zones have markets; small shops, and stands can be found in every village. Churches – mainly

thatched – and sports fields are numerous. Refugees and nationals live together without visible differences. People live in grass-thatched huts (tukuls) built with mud bricks. Several huts form a compound of which all are very well kept. Structures with plastic sheeting (“tents”), provided by UNHCR, are extremely rare.

The Sudanese refugees are predominantly from rural areas and major towns in southern Sudan, mainly from Equatorial Province. The majority of the refugees belong in terms of ethnicity to the Baris, in which the Kakwa form the biggest ethnic group; others include Mundari, Kuku, Kaliku, and Pojulu. Minority groups are Madi, Waka, Sande and Lulubo. Nilotic cattle keepers from Upper Nile and Bahr el Ghazal (Dinka) and from Eastern Equatoria (Acholi) are also minor groups. The local population mainly belongs to the Madi ethnic group (German Development Service (DED) 2002:2; interview with Felix Poru, General Chairman, Refugee Welfare Council (RWC), 18.07.2003). Kuester points out that the refugee and local population in northern Uganda have great similarities in customs, languages, and religion (Kuester 2000:25).

The refugees are mostly from an agricultural background with some skilled artisans in mechanics, masonry, carpentry and tailoring. Others worked in Sudan as civil servants, teachers and health workers. In Rhino Camp the majority live as cultivators; others are engaged in trading, run small shops selling daily staples, bicycle repair shops, tailoring shops and carpentry workshops. Others work as teachers or in the medical field. Some have found employment with NGOs. Many refugees are active members of youth groups, church groups, women groups, sports and cultural groups.

The Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), which is in charge of refugee affairs, is represented by the Camp Commandant in Rhino Camp. UNHCR has its sub-office in Arua and staff members visit Rhino Camp regularly. The German Development Service (DED) is the main implementing partner of UNHCR, and manages the camp. Other agencies working in Rhino Camp are the Red Cross, the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS), and the Transcultural Psychosocial Organisation (TPO).

In 1998 UNHCR, together with the Ugandan Government/OPM, launched a self-reliance strategy programme, which started officially in 1999. The objectives are twofold: to empower refugees and nationals to become self-reliant, and to integrate services in camps into the government/district structures, to be accessible to both, refugees and nationals (Merkx 2000:22). In Rhino Camp, for instance, the government now has full responsibility for the sectors of education, health, community services, and agriculture, although the other agencies also continue to supplement and support these activities.

The implementation of the self-reliance strategy, which leads to increased agricultural production, results in a reduction in food rations. However, before food rations are being reduced, nutritional surveys, food security assessments, and socio-economic surveys are conducted in order to ensure refugees’ food security. Merkx points out that the refugees in settlements in north Uganda do not oppose the self-reliance strategy as such, “but they complain about the lack of land, the poor quality of land, and the limited markets in which to sell their produce” (Merkx 2000:24). This view corresponds with the experiences and opinions of the refugees in Rhino Camp, as we shall see.

Part of the self-reliance strategy is the formation of a refugee representation body in each settlement, which “is organised along similar lines to the Ugandan local council system” (Merkx 2000:25f.), but does not have any political function or influence; it serves as a civic administration for the refugees. This Refugee Welfare Council (RWC) is organised on three levels; level I is village level, level II is at zone level, and level III is the settlement level and therefore the highest one. At each level is a committee comprising of 10 members: chairperson, vice chairperson, secretary general, along with secretaries for the areas of finance, disabled persons, education and mobilisation, environment and construction, security, women, and youth. According to the statute of the RWC, at least four positions in a committee must be held by women.

At each level and between the three levels, regular meetings take place. In addition, and most importantly, the RWC, in particular the representatives from level III, represent the refugee population at district level and management level within the settlement. In Rhino Camp, regular meetings with all stakeholders (Camp Commandant, UNHCR, DED, RWC, and other agencies) are called for. The RWC is actively involved in planning and implementation of the programme.

Contrary to the positive experiences of cooperation between RWC and management in Rhino Camp, which will be highlighted later on, Merkx observes that in north 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” (Merkx 2000:22). Payne, in her description of the Oxfam programme in Ikafe, another settlement within Arua district, points out that the whole operation might have been more successful if the refugee representatives had received more respect from the management in form of official attention (e.g. official inauguration of elected leaders) and special treatment and incentives (e.g. bicycles for the highest refugee representatives) (Payne 1998:64f.). In Rhino Camp, refugee leaders are given both official attention and incentives.

### **The research process**

Upon arrival in Rhino Camp I met the DED Programme Coordinator, Adi Gerstl, other DED staff members, and was introduced to the Camp Commandant, Lawrence Mugisa, government representative of the OPM. After that, I met with the General Chairman of the Refugee Welfare Council, Felix Poru.<sup>1</sup> As I was in need of an interpreter, Mr. Poru linked me up with Stephen Asega, a refugee who speaks English, Sudanese Arabic and several local languages, and seemed to have a very good understanding of the dynamics in Rhino Camp and Sudanese culture and traditions. Then I went round the settlement with Mr. Poru and Stephen in order to meet the chairpersons of the different zones, and to explain to them the purpose of my visit and the nature of my research.

Before starting with the interviews Stephen and I discussed at great length the best way of inquiring about issues like ‘well-being’, ‘self-image’, ‘being in control’, and how to translate them. In addition, with the support of Mr. Poru I organised a group

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<sup>1</sup> On July 29, 2003, new elections for all levels of the RWC were held. Mr. Poru was not re-elected as General Chairman.

discussion before conducting one-to-one, in-depth interviews, in order to clarify and define meanings, to gain an understanding about prevailing perceptions, and about what refugees define to be their priorities.

While the group discussion went on in a very lively manner and helped me to gain an understanding of the refugees' priorities, I initially thought that the outcome was not as fruitful and clarifying as I had wished it to be, and I refrained from having a second group discussion as I had originally planned. Only after analysing the answers later on and comparing them with answers given by the respondents of the in-depth interviews did I realize that they, basically, define the same issues to be of importance and priority, namely food and education, which will be the subject of further examination in the section 'What the Refugees had to say ...'. Moreover, it became obvious that, for a number of reasons, the participating refugees showed reluctance to talk about their well-being, or in general about positive features of their lives. Almost all questions were answered by giving a narrative about their problems and constraints. This attitude appeared to confirm the 'warnings' I had received even before I started the research. "Asking refugees about their well-being, you will only get answers like 'We are suffering, food is not enough.'" This also corresponded with my previous experiences in Zambia. Since this tendency is not only a potential source for bias in refugees' answers, but also says a lot about the self-image and survival strategies of refugees, I take this up in the next section.

After the group discussion, I conducted twelve semi-structured interviews (with 13 participants) with refugees and four semi-structured interviews with holders of official positions, of which two are refugees as well. With the former group, the refugees, the preference was rather to have a smaller sample size with fruitful discussions than to get incorrect or superficial answers due to lack of time, trust, and familiarity.

Variables for the interviews with the refugees were sex, age (from 18 years), ethnic group, length of stay in the settlement, occupation in Rhino Camp, occupation in Sudan, and place of residence in Rhino Camp. Reasons for the choice of these variables were that they might have an impact on respondents' self-image, level of well-being, level of integration, level of prosperity, and that they might result in respondents having different problems, problem solving strategies, priorities, and aspirations. I excluded persons below the age of 18 years mainly for the reason that issues of power and control affect them differently than adults and they are not as involved in decision-making processes, e.g. elections of leaders. What is more, the issue of children in refugee camps is beyond the scope of this research.

### *Potential bias of answers*

There is always the possibility that respondents give answers they think the interviewer wants to hear. Reasons for this might be that they wish to please the interviewer and do not want to raise controversial issues. In addition and as already mentioned, when being interviewed (and in the presence of white foreigners/visitors) refugees tend to show an attitude which can be described as stressing the problems and negative features of their lives, and being reluctant to mention anything positive. Discussing this phenomenon with refugees and staff members in Rhino Camp several explanations were offered. Refugees are, naturally, interested in maintaining and maximising assistance. A statement like "yes, we are okay" bears the danger of

assistance being cut. A person saying such a thing in front of others might even be held responsible and blamed if aid indeed were reduced (most likely not because of this statement). Stephen<sup>2</sup> pointed out that refugees have many needs and aspirations; whatever they can get will bring them closer to meeting their needs and achieving their goals. (White) visitors/journalists/researchers are usually perceived as potential donors or people in a position to help refugees. Although the respondents acknowledged that I am “powerless” right now, because I am “only a student”, they posed requests to me as a person capable of looking for potential sponsors, organising books for them etc. Most visitors are indeed potential donors, assessing the situation and inquiring about problems. Adi Gerstl, DED Programme Coordinator in Rhino Camp, remarked:

Very often these people come and then they are seen as a kind of somebody who wants to make a decision of which something can come out. Every community, not only in Africa, everywhere around the world, even if you are well off, if somebody gives you something free on top of it, you will not refuse. And it is the same with the refugee community.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, it seems that visitors usually do not ask refugees about positive things in their lives; their focus is on problems and what needs or can be improved, thus reinforcing refugees’ attitude to expect further help. Adi Gerstl again:

It always depends what you come to do. When you come and say ‘now my refugees, I have come, I know that you are suffering...’ surely they will tell you problems. But if you come and ask them ‘how are things, how is your harvest, what have you done this year?’ you get a different answer. ... Very often people come to find out what problems are here, what can still be done, and that is maybe sometimes the reason that only negative answers are given. Not in a bad way, because sometimes even the refugees come to us later and tell us ‘look, we don’t mean it that way, but you know surely I have a hundred boreholes but I can get two hundred, then I say yes, it makes my life still easier’.

Also, it is perhaps not only a matter of what kind of questions visitors ask refugees, but it is also possible, that not only refugees, but human beings in general, tend to make an issue of negative things in their lives, that they verbalise problems, worries and complaints instead of pointing out what is positive about their existence. Perhaps most people are not even consciously aware of positive and supporting aspects in their lives; as Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi suggest: “People take for granted a certain amount of hope, love, enjoyment, and trust because these are the very conditions that allow them to go on living” (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000:13).

Mr. Poru explained that some “refugees have that cry, ‘as we are here under UNHCR, we are refugees, UNHCR should continue to give us’”. This way of thinking might be profound due to the fact that many Sudanese refugees have a “prolonged relationship with relief agencies ... and have been refugees in Uganda on and off for over 30

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<sup>2</sup> All holders of official positions and Stephen as my interpreter agreed to their real names being mentioned. For all other informants pseudonyms were used.

<sup>3</sup> Some of the following statements have mistakes in grammar and/or wording, but for the purpose of authenticity, I will quote them in their original form.

years; others have had access to relief aid through camps for displaced people within Sudan”, and have experienced higher levels of assistance (Payne 1998:40f.). Jebeda complained:

But UNHCR of nowadays really differs. During that time when we were taken back to our country, we were really happy. No one went unhappy. People were fat. We had a lot of things which we had bought for ourselves to go back to our land. But this time, with this UN of nowadays, we shall just go back poor and empty-handed. When we go back to Sudan, it will be only with one piece of clothes.

Refugees’ attitudes towards assistance and levels of dependence or independence they perceive, whether they show initiative or expect to be helped, will receive more attention later on.

### **What the refugees had to say ...**

In order to inquire about refugees’ self-image and well-being it is essential first to find out whether thoughts of evaluation and judgement are issues close to refugees’ minds. All my informants confirmed that they think a lot about their lives and, in addition, they share their views, problems and problem-solving strategies with others.

#### *...about their self-image*

The self-image of these refugees is in general a positive one. It reflects how the refugees perceive themselves now, and how they chose to present themselves to me, as a white researcher. Their self-image of course might have been a different one in Sudan, and it might change when they will return to Sudan. In addition, they might portray themselves in a different way when speaking to another person.

The respondents frequently emphasised that the positive way in which they behave, relate to each other, and perceive themselves, is rooted in their traditions. In view of the more than 30 years ongoing civil war in Sudan, I was sceptical. A visitor from Sudan explained the contradictions of his country to me: “Sudan is hot yet cold, wet but dry, green and desert, rich but poor, free and enslaved, peaceful but warring ...”, and he emphasised that “the conflict is political, but we people are social”. As we have noted, self-image is “the way a person feels about his or her personality, achievements, and value to society”. For the purpose of outlining the refugees’ self-image it appears useful to follow this definition.

#### *... about their personality*

When I asked the respondents how they would describe the refugee population in terms of characteristics some pointed out that they are not a homogeneous group. Calvin, for example, explained:

You know, people are just different. To me, I may think I must struggle for myself so that tomorrow I am a good person, a good citizen, but for others, they might just think ‘I am a refugee and tomorrow in case my

country will be in peace I am going, I don't need to dig. I can wait for DED'. So, these are the different categories of people I can show to you.

Mr. Poru pointed out that in the beginning when the refugees came, they were

... very arrogant and harsh, but bit by bit through education, through exposure to the laws of this country, continuous interaction, workshops, the community managed to understand. They managed ... to have that spirit of understanding, tolerance, and unity.

This statement implies that refugees were different before, that they have achieved an improvement, that they appreciate the provision of workshops and exposure, and it refers to the prevailing spirit of solidarity. Jebeda commented on the most prominent aspects of the refugees' self-image: strength, the determination to work hard, independence. These seem to be values shared by many respondents:

Madam, we Sudanese people are really strong, we are not weak. (*Saying it with great emphasis.*) Look at my hands. (*Shows me her hands.*) We really struggle to dig for ourselves to at least get something we can depend on, but the problem is that we were brought to very bad climatic conditions. ... If we would be weak people, we won't have lasted.

Showing initiative is also part of the survival strategy. Emma asserts:

Actually, we are mostly not depending on DED or UNHCR, that when they bring food then we can stay idle, because if you stay idle you let your life down. So, since we have nationals around we just go and ask for casual work, so that we can get something to eat. After that, DED can help by bringing additional food.

Emma's statement discloses the range of attitudes refugees show towards the delivery of assistance. Some complain that they do not receive enough assistance, and expect that everything should be provided by aid agencies; others like Emma, perceive assistance as a supplement to their own efforts. Mawien expressed a similar view:

We are the ones who help ourselves by digging. The agencies are just helping us with drugs for example, with half ration, full ration is not there. They can also give us advice. ... There are things we need somebody to help us, but we feel proud that we Sudanese, we are not weak people.

The refugees' commitment to hard work and self-reliance is an outcome of experience, the compulsion to be as independent as possible, and the refugees' conviction that independence is an advantage. Mr. Poru disclosed:

In fact, we Africans, we know very well that our survival comes from our hands. That's why whether there are bad conditions or what, the refugees could not surrender. ... They know if they remain sitting and say 'oh, we are in problems', that that problem will not remove itself alone.

According to Lawrence Mugisa, the Camp Commandant, the refugees "are strong. Even if they complain, they know that man was born a worker. They know that even

in their country they will be living on their own.” Calvin emphasised “You know, if you don’t work, the only solution is to suffer.” Ihsa related their attitude to their experiences:

So, we don’t say, okay since UNHCR and DED are here, we shall just give control and strength to them, to be controlled by these agencies. No. We have to stand by ourselves because we know already that through depending on somebody or by giving the control over your life to somebody, is really a risk.

Nora added her view:

We realized it later but during that time people had the attitude of saying ‘at least DED and UNHCR should give us something’, but after we had struggled in vain ... we realized that the control should depend on us refugees. ... If we would have depended on DED and UNHCR I don’t know up to this time in what kind of state we would have been.

Anna added that Sudanese people generally have a positive attitude towards life and its problems. Anna explained:

We are really proud of staying here, though there are a lot of problems which are affecting us. Normally it is our tradition as Sudanese whether we are facing a lot of problems or else, we are in a good mood, we just feel normal, because anyway, no matter how much you think, there is no solution. So, in the end, you just tend to be a happy person.

Josephine took the same stance:

We, we are just proud. Any place that you are in, you just ask people from Sudan. Just because the place is poor, it’s still your place. Even if you are not eating and doing well, but you have that feeling that you are still okay, appearing strong.

My own observations confirm this positive attitude. For example, after a group discussion during which people had told me for two hours about their problems in a very serious manner, the refugees joked and hugged, and lined up with broad smiles to have a photo taken. Whenever I met and talked to people in Rhino Camp, they were always very friendly, open, self-confident and humorous. There was nothing like the attitude of refugees I have sometimes encountered: “Madam, we are suffering too much”. I believe that their behaviour and the attitude shown was genuine, and not because they wanted to present themselves to me in this way. My impression received support from other people I discussed this phenomenon with.

*... about their achievements*

Refugees named a number of achievements which not only make them feel proud and happy, but also give them the strength and courage to carry on. In addition, it gives them a feeling of power and the sense that they are in control of their lives. Dennis claimed that the refugees “could achieve anything we wanted if the climatic conditions would be okay” and continued “the little that we have, we have achieved

by ourselves. That makes me proud, because nobody from outside has come to say 'here are some fruits for you and your children'." Jebeda felt in a similar way:

Yes, we are really proud, because we do things by ourselves, and we really sweat for it. ... We are the ones who did it by our own hands, and not by somebody else's hands.

Achol described her achievement as "I am happy that I can at least pay the school fees for the young ones to go to school, and that we stay peacefully in the settlement where there is no insecurity." Ochan added: "The achievement I can see is that we are basically healthy, and safe." Anna explained that she is "happy that I can send the children to school and that they are eating well", but she added her worries: "Sometimes when the food is finished and the children are crying then I feel troubled." Jonathan also showed concern regarding poverty and the ability to feel proud:

Refugees are not all that proud, maybe some who are working, maybe with agencies like DED or UNHCR because they are getting some money. But if you are poor you are not someone who is proud. Because whatever your fellow refugee is doing or is getting money, you are not getting that thing. You have to struggle through thick and thin and you will not sustain your life as your friends are doing.

Jebeda and Calvin emphasised that they have become literate people. He said:

I am proud because as my country is at war I have been catered for by UNHCR, and today I can read and write. By the time I was brought, I could not even fully read and write, I was illiterate. So at least I have achieved something under UNHCR. That's why I am proud, and I am able to communicate to you now and talk to you.

Also Mr. Poru named education as their biggest achievement:

The achievement here that we have seen is on the education side. We have some of our children who have finished O-level, who have finished A-level, and some are in the higher institutions, some are even in university. We really appreciate. The standard is according to the Ugandan standard. It has improved compared to the standard back in Sudan. ... And we hope that if we still remain here for one to two years we shall have enough achievements in education.

Asked what he defined as the biggest achievement of DED as an organisation Adi Gerstl answered:

The peaceful co-existence of nationals and refugees in this area. That is something which we can all be proud of. It's jointly we have done it, you know. ... All this has led to the co-existence of this people and the refugees as the same. They can stay here and have a life in dignity, and where they do something. They are not beggars. They don't depend on somebody, or not a hundred per cent. I think that is a big achievement.

Asked for the biggest achievement of the refugee community from his point of view he replied:

I think what their biggest achievement is that they have their own leadership. They have a certain kind of self-governance, they elect their leaders, they solve their problems, they are not disorganised, they are a very organised group of people who can look after themselves, and can speak with one voice to be given or to be player in the whole game. ... They are united, and I think that is a very big achievement they have.

*... about their community life*

The refugees attach specific attributes to themselves as members of the community. They place great emphasis on solidarity, on the ability to help, to support and advise each other. Emma explained:

Normally we Africans when it is time for cultivation ... we just come together and say 'today we are going to dig for so and so, then tomorrow we shall dig for so and so'. ... We would come and help this person till the work is done.

Referring to her source of strength Achol said:

The love in the camp where people really love each other and help each other, not leaving others aside by saying 'you are suffering, just suffer'. We at least try to encourage each other.

Dennis's sense of support included regarding each other as equals:

We refugees, we are not selfish people, we normally help each other in case of sickness, or in any other case. We really support each other because we want actually to put all of us on the same level. We don't want somebody to be behind, we don't want somebody to be ahead. We have to be one.

Anna and Josephine emphasised that despite being from different ethnic groups they stay peacefully together in the settlement. Josephine explained:

In our settlement we are all friends, even if you are Kuku or Kakwa or whatever, we are just friends. We know that we are all friends, but we have different languages we talk. But we settle in one place. We discuss. When you are together in one place, you can forget some of your problems.

Being together with family, relatives, friends, and community members is a source of strength; the refugees receive advice, support, and encouragement. Jedeba appreciated being with her friends because:

Normally you get a lot of ideas from friends, because when you just stay idle, always in the house, thinking of what to do, you will not reach a

solution. When I am with neighbours and in the community, they will give me courage for doing something.

Mabior added: “I can say it is important, because discussing can also drive you to some point you don’t know, but some of your friends can know.” Mawien pointed out that solidarity and advising each other increases autonomy:

When we come together, we sit and discuss problems we cannot solve ourselves. We have to discuss such problems with the community. Then sometimes we can bring the solution by ourselves, not waiting for a solution from others.

In addition, the refugees reported that helping each other with food, and contributing food when there are ceremonies and social gatherings, are vital parts of community life. “We normally contribute food, at least, because when we come together if there is happiness there should be food, if there is no food that means there is no happiness”, Achol explained. In addition, helping and supporting each other with food is a social responsibility. Mr. Poru observed:

If somebody is not having food, and they (*the other refugees*) know that that person is having food insecurity they can just contribute small, small food and give to that person. Because we the leaders plus the church leaders all the time, we have one language of educating the community ‘if you see one of your community members in problem, if you see one of your neighbours has a critical condition of food, you should assist with something small, that person should be assisted’.

These statements illustrate that a strong, skilful and dynamic person, a person who has a caring, selfless, and egalitarian attitude, is of great value to the community. Concerning food, the ability to share, contribute and help others is crucial to the ability to be a social actor within the community; not having enough food to act socially means a person cannot live up to traditional values and responsibilities. In addition, an educated person benefits community members because he or she is in the position to give advice, and to enlighten other people with new ideas. People rely on information and advice in order to progress. In return, he or she will gain status and will feel respected through showing his or her competence. All the refugees interviewed tried to actively engage in community life in a supporting manner. However, their competence as social actors depends not only on their motivation and intention, but is determined by external factors.

... *about their needs*

As it was explained earlier on, the three main prerequisites for well-being identified by researchers are competence, autonomy, and a feeling of belonging, which are said to apply across cultures. However, Ryan and Deci explain:

To suggest that the three needs are universal and developmentally persistent does not imply that their relative salience and their avenues for satisfaction are unchanging across a life span or that their modes of expression are the same in all cultures (Ryan and Deci 2000:75).

What do refugees define as their needs? Are their expressed needs identical or related to competence, autonomy, and relatedness? If such a correlation exists, what is the essence of it and how do refugees present it?

Some refugees stated that in order to feel well they would need health and health facilities, and non-food items like pots, blankets and jelly cans. The needs of the majority, however, concentrated on the issue of food.<sup>4</sup> Achol explained:

Staying in the settlement has a lot of problems, for example there is no change of diet, so we are depending always on the same type of food. ... Beside all other problems, food itself is not enough, since it is reduced now, and which makes people to become weak and thin, and that is the most difficult thing people face here.

Mawien stated:

Madam, we need good yields. I am happy when I cultivate simsim (*meaning sesame*) and I have a good yield. That is when I get money to assist myself and my family.

Two informants also identified education, by which refugees mean school education but also the exposure they gain through workshops, seminars, and skills training, as a need. Jonathan pointed out:

Normally when we are brought here, we are uneducated. So our parents actually have that demand of saying that at least we should go to school, so when our country becomes in peace we go back as literate people. Then we can do things in order to develop our country.

Calvin suggested:

You know, as a refugee to feel happy people have to form groups to advise themselves and look for possible ways of how to survive. These are the things like they have formed what is called peace education. Every month we have our peace discussions in the community. That is to educate people as a refugee how to settle.

Mr. Poru and Moses Manyuon, a TPO counsellor, argued that the most essential need is the need for security and peace. For Mr. Manyuon peace in Sudan was needed because:

Whatsoever, you build a very big house here or have enough food, you may have many, many things, but you are in exile, and you are even sure that you can lose all these things one day, because you are not in your homeland. But if ... you have peace in your country, then though you sit under a tree now, most of your problems, the psychological problems

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<sup>4</sup> In the following elaborations the term 'food' – if not otherwise indicated – will be used to cover issues of food security, lack of food, climatic conditions, and poor soil, because climatic conditions and the level of soil fertility determine whether there is food or not, and whether enough food can be produced in order to sell surplus and to generate money.

will drop a bit, you will overcome other social or socio-economic problems. So, the major need for refugees is security.

Needs can also be examined by inquiring what is lacking for refugees to feel well. What are their biggest problems? All interviewees, except two identified the food situation as their biggest problem. Calvin told me:

We people here are really aiming at digging, but we have problems with climatic conditions ... So that is why we are unable to be strong. ... We are digging but we are not achieving what we aimed for. That is why we are unable to develop.

Nyawela had the same concern:

Every now and then there is starvation. The commonest enemy here is the drought, where one tries to do something, and at the end, you find that you cannot achieve anything out of it. If you look at the food around here how it looks, we refugees are unable to support ourselves.

Two refugees declared issues of education to be their main problem. Since primary education is free, the problem lies mainly in the field of secondary education, insufficient number of scholarships, and in the difficulty to gain access to further education. Josephine stated: "My biggest problem? My biggest problem is just school. ... There is not really money, but I have that aim of going back to school." Dennis indicated in his statement that education is linked to money. In order to get money the refugees depend on agricultural activities; they cannot wait for UNHCR or DED to assist them:

The only problems I have seen here are, one: food, second: money. ... We really struggle by all means. If I have children at home and want to send them to school, I have to use the hoe in order to get the money. If I just stay at home idle and say 'let's wait for UNHCR to come in and give us money so that we can pay for our children', then I would find that my life is difficult all together.

The statements illustrate, firstly, that the priorities and major concerns of the interviewed refugees are in the fields of food and education. Secondly, while they show that the refugees did not define their needs explicitly in terms of competence, autonomy and relatedness, but in terms of food and education, they imply that refugees have these same needs. The interviewees expressed their visions for their future, to strive in order to achieve their goals, to strive to be as independent as possible, and placed emphasis on a good communal life.

Though the refugees did not present belonging specifically as a need – perhaps due to the afore-mentioned tendency of human beings to take a certain amount of love, trust and being related for granted – they frequently mentioned in their statements the importance of solidarity, unity, and peaceful coexistence within their communities. This suggests that being a member of the community, and being related is vital to their sense of well-being, and constitutes a need.

*... about their well-being*

When I asked informants how they felt about their life in Rhino Camp overall, only Josephine and Achol said wholeheartedly that they “feel okay and happy” in the settlement, despite facing problems. The most common answer given was “I am a bit okay, but ...”, followed by narratives of the problems they are facing, in particular drought and an insufficient number of scholarships/access to education. It seems appropriate, therefore, to have a closer look at the overall meaning and relevance refugees attached to food and education, and particularly to examine how the food and education situation affects the refugees’ well-being, how it determines levels of competence, independence, and relatedness.

*.... about food<sup>5</sup>*

Poor yields due to unfavourable climatic conditions cause “poverty, and they are not able to raise money to support education and to cover other needs” Mr. Poru pointed out. They also mean that refugees’ efforts are often frustrated. Jonathan commented:

Farmers here are trying very hard, but this place is not good at all for farming. No matter how much you try, nothing will come out. And then, at the end of the month what are you going to get?

Lawrence Mugisa, sympathising with the refugees, declared:

So the weather and the soil frustrate the farmers. As I said the ultimate aim is to create a conducive environment for refugees to become self-sufficient in terms of food production, but here it is not easy to attain self-sufficiency because the refugees work very much but will harvest little.

In addition, the weather conditions decreased refugees’ autonomy and their sense of competence and power, as Achol suggested:

People become weak and thin because of the food situation. Our problem is the drought, where we try to do our level best in cultivating, but the result becomes negative, for example last year. We, the refugees, here tried hard to do at least something, not to wait for things from other people, but the drought has made us to become disabled.

Respondents frequently emphasised that in terms of climatic conditions they were much better off in Sudan. Mawien pointed out:

In Sudan we were able to get things in a short time, but here in Uganda when you think of something it is not easy to get at the same time. It

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<sup>5</sup> DED provides food rations on behalf of World Food Programme (WFP). Every refugee in Rhino Camp is on ration. A full ration (100 per cent) comprises 13.5 kilograms cereals, 1.8 kilograms of pulses, 0.6 kilograms of cooking oil, and 0.15 kilograms of salt per person per month. All extremely vulnerable persons (EVIs) receive full rations (1,421 persons). All refugees who arrived after 2000 (1,506 persons) also receive full rations. Refugees who came in 2000 (1,960 persons) are on 50 per cent food rations. All refugees who arrived before December 1999 (20,925 persons) are given 40 per cent food rations. – Interview with Adi Gerstl, Programme Coordinator, DED, 24.07.2003.

really takes time to achieve things. But I am a bit okay, because we are not facing the same problems like in Sudan when we were still at war.

Nora's statement implies that being in Ugandan exile with unfavourable climatic conditions means mainly a loss of status, competence and independence, compared to what they experienced in Sudan:

In Sudan, we were still able to do things by ourselves. We had cattle, we had good yields. We had any kind of food. There was nothing like UNHCR, we were just doing things by ourselves. Now at this time things have gone astray. Now we have become powerless.

Mr. Poru stressed the same point and added, "instead of wearing proper shoes, we only move with flip flops", implying that this is a shameful and degrading experience and an insult to their sense of dignity.

It does not come as a surprise that some refugees felt homesick. Jebeda said that she does not "feel okay, because I want to go home. I miss home". Josephine added "they can be sometimes miserable because they have that feeling of going back to Sudan. ... that is when they can feel miserable, but they are also okay". Mr. Poru explained the special attachment one has to his or her home country:

There is that element of a country. Somebody's country is really very important, because you have the right to own land. Though in exile, being here in the settlement is very comfortable, but still there is a love, that love for your own country is there, and there are other things that you could never get it. ... Though we are well treated here, we still don't feel at home.

In addition to having to struggle with often unfavourable and unpredictable climatic conditions and poor quality of soil, refugees are heavily dependant on agriculture to make a living due to lack of other income-generating opportunities, like trading and running businesses. Another problem arises when refugees have good yields and want to put their surplus on the market. Since they do not usually have access to bigger markets they are forced to sell their produce for little money in local markets. As Ihisa pointed out, "our work has gone for nothing".

In summary, refugees depend on agricultural activities, firstly to feel physically healthy, secondly to raise money to cover their needs (e.g. non-food items, education), and thirdly to help and support others. Food is therefore a need, but at the same time a means to meet needs and aspirations, especially those which enable refugees to feel competent, independent, and related. It therefore has a bearing on self-image and the level of well-being. At the same time, refugees' self-image and well-being determine how they perceive and deal with the food situation. On the one hand, the interviewed refugees do have to struggle with an adverse food situation; on the other hand, it cannot be concluded that this is entirely negative, considering what the informants said about their self-image, their strength, their struggle to act independently, and their achievements, of which many were accomplished with the money raised through agricultural activities. An indication that the interviewed refugees, and the refugee population of Rhino Camp in general, did not face an acute or severe level of food insecurity, might be the fact that the word 'hunger' or the phrase 'I am hungry, we are

hungry' was not even mentioned once, neither by the respondents, nor by any other person I talked to. In addition, there were no feeding programmes run by the health centres. It has to be taken into consideration that all refugees are on food rations, and in the case of failed harvests, rations were usually increased and seeds were given out again to compensate for the shortfall of agricultural produce.

... *about education*<sup>6</sup>

Education appeared to be of paramount importance to the refugees, and is the subject of their aspirations and hopes for a better life and a better future.<sup>7</sup> Calvin said:

To me, my hope for the future is, as I am still young, I must be educated so that tomorrow as I go back to my motherland I am able to live a good life. So that I will be able to tell my children in future my history that 'once I was a refugee in such and such a place, but as a result you can see me now, I am not somebody who is incapable, I can cater. So, that is my hope as a refugee.

Ihisa explained:

The importance of education is that since some of us have never been to school, now we want to send our children to school because soon these children will be the one to support the family in any problem the family will have. Because without education nowadays it is really very difficult, for one has to stay poor.

James, a community development worker, suggested that most refugees stay in Rhino Camp because of the education services available; if it were not for that reason most refugees would return to Sudan to stay in relatively safe SPLA-controlled areas. One visitor in Rhino Camp cited a Sudanese proverb: "The seeds of education are bitter, but the fruits will be sweet."

Mr. Poru explained that education changes individuals, and the community as a whole, for the better. Jebeda felt the same:

They brought the seminars for peace in order to teach us the way we have to stay with our neighbours, so that it creates love between us, so that no bad thing can arise.

Paula observed: "Education is the key to development. Without education, things are slowed down and life becomes difficult. We need education to develop our country

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<sup>6</sup> Primary education is free. School fees for secondary schools are minimum 100,000 Ugandan Shillings per term (≈ £31). At present 422 pupils (192 girls and 230 boys) receive scholarships from UNHCR for secondary schools outside the settlement. Ten scholarships for diploma courses on the level between secondary schools and universities are given by the Church of Uganda. Five scholarships for university courses are granted by the Hugh Pilkington Charitable Trust. Noteworthy is also that a school feeding programme provides lunch to all pupils in the primary schools and the secondary school within Rhino Camp. – Interview with Adi Gerstl, Programme Coordinator, DED, 24.07.2003.

<sup>7</sup> When I asked the refugees at the end of each interview whether they had a message for me or if they wanted to tell me anything, all messages given concerned education, finding scholarships, and sending books to them.

*(meaning Sudan).*” One Sudanese refugee I met in Arua pointed out: “Madam, education is the thing. We will go back educated, we have been exposed. The Arabs *(meaning the Northern Sudanese and the government in Khartoum)* are not going to trick us again.”

In addition to achievements and problems in the field of education, and the meaning refugees attached to education, refugees also showed much appreciation for the education services rendered to them by the Ugandan government, UNHCR and DED. Mawien said:

It is just better, because here we are having free primary education, and secondary education costs less money. ... Here you can say that DED is helping some of our students by sponsoring the schools. Now, let me say, here it is a bit better than in Sudan.

Mr. Poru expressed his appreciation of education services in relation to women and their empowerment through education:

Currently there is a bit of improvement especially with women because DED has introduced adult literacy, especially for women. ... Women who before could not even write can now start writing a-b-c-d. ... We are wishing that that programme could continue to uplift the education standard of women. ... So, by compiling them in one place it just gives them access to learn more and different ideas. It is really great progress. ... There is change from worst to better, and I am sure after two years to come we shall see that women will powerfully compete with men, because they don't have that spirit of fear again.

These statements clearly indicate that the interviewed refugees perceived education as a means to increase their knowledge and abilities, and to raise their status and prestige in society. Access to education and exposure gives them the feeling that they are progressing, despite being in exile. In addition, education is understood as contributing significantly to the improvement of community life, social relationships, and society as a whole. Finally, education serves as an instrument to gain political influence, power, and autonomy. What was pointed out regarding the correlation between food on the one hand, and self-image and well-being on the other hand, applies also to education. Problems and achievements in the field of education either reinforce or weaken self-image and well-being. On the other hand, self-image and well-being determine the ability and the efforts refugees invest in order to pursue education.

*... about their psychological well-being*

Refugees also pointed to psychological aspects of their lives in the camp. Nyawela, for example, stated that “even if there is no sickness the whole day my mind cannot rest”. Emma said that due to the food situation she sometimes feels “depressed”. Mawien described how the fact that he cannot find a way to continue his education makes him “feel miserable” and he went on by saying:

Actually, I don't feel well because right now I am not in school, I am just at home. And when I look at brothers and sisters who are still continuing studies I am unhappy. I have lost interest.

TPO counsellor Moses Manyon asked about the mental state of the refugees in Rhino Camp estimated that “many people, almost 75 per cent of them, have been traumatised. ... You get many of them who have anxieties and worries of how to live and cope with their problems.” Depending on their history, their personality, and their living conditions, they cope differently, he explained, and carried on by expressing his main concern: “What makes matters worse is that people think ‘if I drink alcohol I will forget all those problems’.”

He outlined how TPO as an organisation is trying to address these problems, namely by strengthening and empowering the community through awareness and education campaigns, by offering community-based counselling, and by promoting social, cultural and sports groups and gatherings. These gatherings are meant to help people “to forget their problems, to occupy their time in a meaningful way, ... and which restore and reassure them that they have a future, that they have a plan”.

This was confirmed by the refugees' statements; being together with others and the spirit of solidarity shown proved to be the single most important source for strength, and also for happiness. Apart from helping each other with advice, practical and emotional support, Calvin pointed out that being with others, chatting, discussing, and celebrating together helps to “forget about our own problems”. Jonathan had a different view; he did not consider meetings to be helpful. On the contrary, due to lack of financial power he even felt excluded:

I would say when you are joking or laughing, or dancing and being together with others, the person who is having all his needs satisfied, he might be happy. And if you are not happy and if you are poor, you better stay home. Whatever the people are doing somewhere, you will just remain the same in your place.

Emma added another positive effect of these social and cultural gatherings; they make refugees “really feel normal and that people feel at home, they don't feel that they are not at home”, and she continued by stressing “we look at each as human beings”. In summary, it can be stated that solidarity is a major source for practical, emotional and mental well-being. That the refugees show solidarity is very much based on their self-image.

*... about power, control and independence*

When I asked the refugees whether they perceived power and control to be in their hands or in the hands of the settlement management, and whether they felt dependent on the agencies, the vast majority replied that they felt in control of their lives, that they felt powerful, and that they were as independent as possible. All these answers related to refugees' strength, determination, attitude, and sense of achievement. Calvin, however, pointed out:

We, the refugees, we don't have power, because we stay in somebody's land, and there are guidelines that as a refugee we have to follow. We are just obeying to the rules and regulations, things set by the nationals.

In addition, he felt restricted in terms of movement:

Let me say, within the district we can travel, but before one is allowed to go somewhere else you have to get permit from the commandant. ... So that the commandant is able to know so and so was out. So that your case is able to be followed.

An unofficial source told me that the refugees are supposed to get a travel permit, but that most refugees move without, even as far as Sudan. Adi Gerstl commented on the question of power relations:

I do not think that they (*the refugees*) are powerless. They have power, and they know it. ... They know as well that they have boundaries because the law of the land has to prevail. ... But as a group they know that they are powerful. They are organised, as I said before. They know that they can speak with one voice, and they are heard because they are united.

This leads to the issue of the relevance of the RWC, the leadership body of the refugees. Mr. Poru explained its objective:

The main purpose is that the refugees manage themselves, and they feel honoured. It is empowering the refugees to have that capacity of managing themselves. So that in future, tomorrow when peace is availed in their country of origin they will move with certain knowledge and reasoning.

Overall, the interviewed refugees felt that their leaders do represent their interests, and make their voices heard. Emma displayed an example where the intervention of the leaders proved to be successful:

There was a time last year where there was no food and it was really difficult for those women who had just delivered. ... When they informed the leaders to go and to request for food from the office. ... And we got that emergency food.

Achol explained that through the initiative of the refugee leaders "UNHCR thought of bringing food to our pupils in schools and even to the secondary school". Ochan, however, pointed out that the refugee representatives were not always influential:

We really feel represented by the leaders, and we also forward a lot of problems to them to communicate to the office, 'tell the office that these are the problems we are facing on the ground'. And though they can go and forward the issues, often nothing comes out. ... The leaders that we have elected maybe don't have a say.

Another problem seemed to be in some cases the lack of feedback from the leaders, as Nyawela and Jonathan complained. Jonathan said:

The leaders can go to represent us in meetings. But whatever they have said in the meetings will just remain in the place of the meeting and will not be communicated to the ground.

Anna appreciated the care and advice they received from leaders:

Especially here in this settlement (*meaning in her village or cluster*) we have leaders who wake up very early in the morning and just move in the settlement to see whether people are all okay. ... Maybe if somebody is sick, they have to find then how the sick person can be taken to the health centre.

Jebeda added in relation to the co-existence of refugees and nationals: “The leaders also advise us to integrate ourselves with the nationals, so that we are one.”

Asked about the relationship between refugees and management most refugees replied that they feel respected by management. Josephine stated: “We have respect for them and they also respect us”. Emma said that management “respects us that we are human beings”. Calvin defined this respect by saying:

... We feel respected because they provided us with some things, where people can learn. And there are a lot of primary schools in the settlement, so our young ones are all educated. There is really a high respect from UNHCR and DED.

According to Lawrence Mugisa, Adi Gerstl and Mr. Poru, the Refugee Welfare Council and management meet on a regular basis. In addition, members of the RWC are represented in all committees, and work together with the management in all areas. Lawrence Mugisa pointed out that they have a participatory approach:

They give us advice for the due approach. They have been helping us. ... We have a participatory approach in the running of the settlement. Because when we make decisions ourselves, we still doubt it. Suppose the beneficiaries are not in favour of that decision, then we have gone wrong.

Adi Gerstl explained the guiding principle of their approach:

The refugees have their own programmes, and we are trying to assist these programmes. ... They are a community and have their ideas. They do their own things, and we have to strengthen them, we have to assist them in pursuing their goals. ... The programme should just come in where they have deficits. Instead of creating an atmosphere where everybody waits for hands-out, we create an atmosphere where everybody looks after himself and still there is a security net or network, which we provide.

Calvin confirmed that the agencies support the ideas and projects of the refugees and assist to put them into practice:

So, DED really assists us a lot like when we form a group and you present a-b-c-d, that we are lacking a-b-c-d, then you take the letter to the

office, they are able to assist, and they are able to give advice on how to run activities.

These statements suggest that the overall power relationship between the refugees and the management of Rhino Camp is relatively balanced. Refugees do not feel disempowered, but strengthened through their leadership and the support they receive from the agencies. It is safe to assume that the fact that they feel heard, acknowledged and respected is a major contributing factor to their positive self-image and the level of well-being they experience. On the other hand, part of their self-image is the belief in independence and it therefore shapes how they perceive their own authority and that of the management, and how they pursue power and control.

The following statements of Adi Gerstl and Mr. Poru serve best to summarize the findings.

Adi Gerstl:

I do think from experience, I do think these refugees live as a community in an area, which we call settlement or a camp, but it is an open area. I do think it is a community, which can have a quality life, which can experience well-being, which does experience well-being. I do think it is there, not for each and every one a hundred percent, but as a community they have it. ... They see themselves as a community living here, and I think there is something like the feeling 'we are okay, we are doing well'. And I think that feeling is what makes a community to be called to do well or to be okay.

Mr. Poru:

The refugees are very happy, as you have seen. They have freedom of movement, they can move to towns to buy some items. ... They can move to take small, small things for sale. So, they feel happy. Also, they feel happy because they are secure. This is the most important element that makes refugees feel happy here ... And also they see that their children go to school early in the morning. Children bath, then they go to school. And in the school now the children are fed, there is supper, there is porridge. So, they feel happy.

## **Conclusion**

Comparing these findings with the portrayal of helpless and powerless refugees underscores the extent to which conventional images used to describe refugees are inadequate. They are strong individuals within a strong community. Their ability and the way in which they define and pursue their priorities prove that they are full-fledged social and political actors. They are far from being powerless, helpless, and dependent. They have not only redefined their identity and their concepts of relationships, kinship and community, but it seems that being in exile, in Rhino Camp, has even served to reinforce their sense of unity and solidarity. The management of Rhino Camp not only leaves them space to feel in control of their lives and to exercise power, but it seems that empowerment and participation are actively promoted.

It can be concluded that despite facing problems and experiencing frustrations the refugees have a positive self-image and do experience well-being, because they are guided and supported by their own beliefs, values, capacities, and social network, and instead of relying solely on aid they utilize the advantages and opportunities humanitarian assistance offers.

Veenhoven comments on the correlation between well-being and complaining:

Even the happy are not without complaints. ... One first thing to note is that happiness and complaining do not exclude each other logically. One can be fairly satisfied with life as a whole, but still be aware of serious deficits. In fact, both stem from a reflection of life. Secondly, bad feelings and perception of problems may to some extent contribute to overall happiness. Only through realistic acknowledgment of pains can people cope effectively with the problems of life and thereby maintain a positive overall balance (Veenhoven 1991:14).

My intention is not to imply that the refugees do not need further assistance or that assistance should be reduced. Rather I wish to contribute to a greater understanding and acknowledgment of refugees, to prompt interest in the “inner life” of refugees as personalities, and to further concern with refugees’ priorities, needs and interests in relation to those of the aid agencies and aid management. In particular, food and education should receive more attention beyond the provision of kilocalories and basic education services. Aid providers should be aware of the meaning and relevance refugees attach to these issues in order to adjust planning and implementation.

In addition, it is hoped that the emphasis on the deficient and negative aspects of refugees’ lives (in camps) will shift to one which acknowledges the negative but concentrates on reinforcing the positive, and utilizes the skills and knowledge which are available in refugee communities.

Rhino Camp is a good example of a participatory refugee project where refugees feel powerful and empowered, and have opportunities to feel competent. There is too much uncritical generalization by the media and in academic and applied research; all refugee groups are unique, and each camp/settlement has its own dynamics.

Research should be conducted in order to compare these findings with other refugee groups and other settlements/camps. This could contribute to a shift away from the humanitarian assistance-centric to a refugee-centric approach. Too often humanitarian assistance is provided in a way that tries to satisfy political, financial, logistic and structural requirements, and does not orient the delivery of services towards the needs and interests of refugees. If empowerment and participation of refugees are meant to be more than visionary objectives it is crucial to gain knowledge and understanding of the refugees themselves, and to incorporate this into planning and implementation of humanitarian projects.

These refugee voices have demonstrated that self-image and well-being on the one hand, and living conditions on the other hand, are interdependent. Future research should tackle the question: Which side is more dominant? For example, do the refugees have a positive self-image because they manage well, or do they manage well because they have a positive self-image? Are they pursuing independence

because it is part of their self-image, or do they have a positive self-image because they experience autonomy?

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