


# Mobility and crisis in Gulu

## Drivers, dynamics and challenges of rural to urban mobility

SUBMITTED TO THE RESEARCH AND EVIDENCE FACILITY

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 <b>HMK Transporters</b> <b>DAILY SERVICES</b>		
Departure Kla Arrival Gulu: Departure Gulu Arrival Kitgum	8:00am 1:00pm 1:30pm 2:30pm	<b>KAMPALA TO AGORO</b> Departure Kitgum Arrival Agoro
Departure Kla Arrival Gulu:	12:00pm 6: 00pm	<b>KAMPALA TO KITGUM</b> Departure Gulu Arrival Kitgum
Departure Kla Arrival Gulu:	4:30pm 10:00pm	<b>KAMPALA TO GULU</b>
Departure Kla Arrival Gulu:	6:30pm 12:00am	<b>KAMPALA TO KITGUM</b> Departure Gulu Arrival Kitgum
<b>RETURN</b>		
Departure Kitgum Arrival Gulu	6:00am 8:00am	<b>KITGUM TO KAMPALA</b> Departuregulu Arrival Kampa
Departure Agoro Arrival Kitgum Departure Kitgum Arrival Gulu	8:00am 9:30am 10:00am 12:00pm	<b>AGORO TO KAMPALA</b> Departure Gulu Arrival kampa
Departure kitgum Arrival gulu	7:00pm 9:00pm	<b>KITGUM TO KAMPALA</b> Departure gulu Arrival kampa
Departure gulu Arrival kampa	1:00am 06:30am	<b>GULU TO KAMPALA</b>



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Cover image: Gulu bus stop, Gulu, Uganda © Ronald Kalyango.

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# Map of Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda



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## Summary

Gulu Municipality is among the fastest growing urban centres in Uganda. In 1991, it was the fourth largest with a population of 38,297. In 2002, the population increased to 119,430 and by 2014, the population had risen to 149,802 people. The sudden population increase between 1991 and 2002 can be attributed to the armed conflict in northern Uganda, which forced many displaced people into the town. The further increase in 2014 is largely a consequence of persons who did not return to their pre-conflict homes and persons who faced challenges in their pre-conflict homes, who then returned to Gulu.

Historically, Gulu is a place of mixed opportunities. In the 1980s and 1990s, Gulu hosted many internally displaced persons (IDPs) fleeing the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) conflict in northern Uganda. When the conflict came to an end in 2006, the municipality quickly became a migrant destination because of the security it provided and the economic opportunities available in the post-conflict period. When conflict broke out in South Sudan in 2013, Gulu again became an important destination for refugees fleeing the conflict and entrepreneurs.

The push and pull factors informing migration to Gulu town can be understood in three contexts: Rural to urban migration from the Acholi sub-region; from other regions of the country; and foreign migration from other countries, particularly refugees from South Sudan. Push factors from the rural areas in the Acholi sub-region are mainly a consequence of land conflicts experienced during the period of return to pre-conflict homes, failure to make a living through agriculture, and migration due to marriage and other social linkages.

The study finds that migration is facilitated by social networks, which provide the crucial connections that individuals need to settle in a new place. Networks are an essential source of information on available livelihood opportunities and social security. Three forms of social networks are identified: Networks based on family relations; networks based on tribe, place of origin and language; and networks based on membership in saving groups. An examination of migrant life trajectories reveals that social networks play a critical role in the decision to migrate and in settling into life in a new place. As migrants become involved in new networks, they access new information that may inform decisions for onward migration.

For many, integration into Gulu town is a gradual process partly facilitated by capital endowments in terms of social networks, financial resources and human capital, such as entrepreneurial skills. Forging new social networks in Gulu town and sharing information may lead to further migration. The presence of Ethiopian, Eritrean and Sudanese entrepreneurs in Gulu is also likely to result in the formation of social networks that facilitate further movement out of Gulu. The shift of business enterprises from Juba to

Gulu in 2013 points to the fact that migrants remain agile and willing to move on to new destinations where economic opportunities arise.

Increasing population movement to Gulu Municipality, however, poses several challenges to urban planning. Inadequate social services to meet the demands of the growing population, environmental degradation, poor refuse management, the HIV/AIDS epidemic, high levels of illiteracy and crime are some of the challenges Gulu Municipality currently faces. Moreover, the growing population is not matched by a growing municipal budget. Although the growth of business has boosted local revenues, the impact has been limited due to the fact that the majority of migrants work in the informal sector, which is difficult to regulate and tax. Thus, while municipality officials are enthusiastic about growth, several issues need to be addressed to make Gulu a viable secondary city in Uganda.

# 1. Introduction

## Project context and aims of the research

This project aims to better understand the dynamics of rural to urban migration and the ways in which this phenomenon impacts the social and infrastructural fabric of secondary cities. It is conducted within the framework of the Research and Evidence Facility (REF) on migration in the Horn of Africa, supported by the EU Trust Fund. It is carried out in three secondary cities in East Africa: Gulu, Uganda; Eldoret, Kenya; and Dire Dawa, Ethiopia. The purpose of the project is to better understand the dynamics associated with rural to urban migration, their impact on people's movement to secondary cities and the extent to which migration to secondary cities leads to subsequent migration.

The three research questions are explored:

- i. To what extent and how does rural–urban migration enhance people's livelihoods and resilience? How much do such movements lead to improved access to services, higher incomes, better employment and improved security? How effective are urban linkages in introducing a safety net for those who live in rural areas?
- ii. What is the impact of people's movement into secondary cities on infrastructure and services, social cohesion, and security? What impact does a growing population have on strengthening the urban economy or on putting pressure on services, exacerbating tensions and contributing to insecurity?
- iii. How does migration to secondary cities affect subsequent migration? Does the first experience of migration prepare people for further migration?

## Significance of the site of investigation

Gulu Municipality is among the fastest growing urban centres in Uganda. In 1991, Gulu Municipality was the fourth largest, with a population of 38,297. In 2002, the population of Gulu suddenly increased to 119,430, making it the second largest municipality after Kampala. This increase can be attributed to the armed conflict in northern Uganda, which forced many displaced people into Gulu town. Following the end of the conflict in 2005, the majority of displaced people returned to their pre-conflict homes. Despite these returns, the population of Gulu continues to rise. By 2014, for example, Gulu Municipality was home to 149,802 people, making it the seventh largest in the country (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Population of the 10 largest urban centres in Uganda, 1991–2014**

	District	Urban centre	1991	2002	2014
1	Kampala	Kampala	774,241	1,189,142	1,507,114
2	Wakiso	Nansana Municipality	na	na	365,857
3	Wakiso	Kira Municipality	na	na	317,428
4	Wakiso	Makindye Ssabagabo	na	na	282,664
5	Mbarara	Mbarara Municipality	41,031	69,363	195,160
6	Mukono	Mukono Municipality	7,406	46,506	162,744
7	Gulu	Gulu Municipality	38,297	119,430	149,802
8	Buikwe	Lugazi Municipality	18,828	27,979	114,163
9	Masaka	Masaka Municipality	49,585	67,768	103,293
10	Kasese	Kasese Municipality	18,750	53,907	101,557

Source: UBOS, The National Population and Housing Census, 2014\*

\* Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS), 'The National Population and Housing Census 2014–Main Report', Kampala: Uganda, 2016. Unless otherwise stated, reference to national census data is derived from this source.

Gulu stands at the junction of the major roads to northern Uganda, South Sudan and the Central African Republic.<sup>1</sup> The 192 km road from the Ugandan border to Juba is a vital link between South Sudan and Kenya's Indian Ocean ports and the wider world, which travels through Uganda. The road has made Gulu an important transit town to Juba, as well as to other destinations, such as Atiak, Kitgum, Adjumani and Arua. When conflict broke out in South Sudan in December 2013, Gulu became an alternative destination for those fleeing the conflict, including for South Sudanese, and Eritrean and Ethiopian entrepreneurs. Because of its location, Gulu attracts rural migrants from both the Acholi sub-region and other parts of the country.

<sup>1</sup> Gulu District is located in northern Uganda, approximately 350 km north of the country's capital, Kampala. It is bordered by Amuru District in the west, Lamwo District in the north-east, Pader District in the east and Omoro District in south. The total land area of Gulu District is 1,870 km<sup>2</sup>.

## Methodology

Field research took place in Gulu Municipality in August 2017. The research team consisted of the lead researcher, Ronald Kalyango Sebba and two research associates, Isabela Amony and Kindi Fred Immanuel. Data collection was carried out using focus group discussions (FGDs), key informant interviews (KIIs) and in-depth interviews. Respondents include migrants from the four divisions of Gulu Municipality, key actors in the Gulu District administration, NGO representatives, religious institutions and people working in the informal economy. Two rural sites were also included: Lacor, a suburb of Gulu town, and Bungatira, a sub-county in Gulu District. Primary data was collected from the Gulu District local government's second five-year district development plan (2015–2020), to which key informants continue to refer.

A total of 12 FGDs—consisting of between 6 and 10 people each—were held with women and men in the four divisions of Gulu Municipality and two FGDs in the rural areas. The purpose of the FGDs is to capture opinions and ideas associated with mobility patterns, challenges and benefits, as well as the importance of social networks to inward migrants. In addition, two participatory exercises were carried out to construct a community timeline designed to capture major events and their effects on patterns of migration.

The FGDs were followed by in-depth interviews, which focus on the life histories of migrants, particularly with regard to their mobility. A total of 47 in-depth interviews were held: 17 in rural areas (8 females and 9 males) and 30 in Gulu Municipality (14 females and 16 males).

A total of 16 KIIs were conducted (3 females and 13 males) in Gulu Municipality and the two selected rural areas. The main aim of the KIIs is to gain an understanding of important trends in mobility, and the drivers of migration to and through Gulu. Interviews were held with district representatives, NGOs, community leaders and religious leaders, as well as with leaders at different levels and in different capacities in the transport and trade sectors.

## Constraints and limitations

There were no significant constraints or limitations in the implementation of this study in Gulu District.



## 2. Research context and setting

### Socio-cultural context

Gulu District and town date back to 1912, when the colonial administration was established in Acholi land. Since then, it has remained an important regional and administrative centre for northern Uganda. Throughout the colonial period, Gulu District was an important site for the production of cash crops, including cotton and tobacco. The original Gulu District is now subdivided into eight districts: Gulu, Omoro, Amuru, Nwoya, Kitgum, Lamwo, Pader and Agago. Gulu town is also home to the Acholi paramount chief, Rwot David Onen Achana II.

Gulu Municipality represents 55 per cent of the total population of Gulu District; 34 per cent of the district population are young people below eighteen years old.

**Table 2: Population of Gulu Municipality by sex, 2014**

Sub-county	Male	Female	Total
Bar-dege	19,871	20,451	40,322
Laroo	13,317	13,996	27,313
Layibi	18,482	18,723	37,205
Pece	21,535	23,931	45,466
Sub-total	73,205	77,101	150,306

Source: UBOS, The National Population and Housing Census, 2014

Population density increased from 23 persons per km<sup>2</sup> in 1980 to 103 persons per km<sup>2</sup> in 2008 and 129 persons per km<sup>2</sup> in 2014. The increase in population has influenced land conflicts within the district, which have risen in recent years. These conflicts have arguably been exacerbated by the increase in population displacement, which has led to a complete transformation of the land regimes.

While Gulu town serves as the traditional headquarters of the Acholi people, over the years it has gradually become more cosmopolitan. The changing ethnic composition of Gulu town is attributed to rural to urban migration from different parts of the country and to foreign nationals who work in Gulu or make it their home. In addition to economic opportunities, migrants are attracted to Gulu because of the hospitality of the local population. There is widespread consensus, including from district officials at all levels, that Gulu town is welcoming to migrants. According to the chief administrative officer

for Laroo division, a migrant can come and stay in Gulu comfortably, without anyone ever raising questions about why they are living in the town.

**Table 3: Population of Gulu by age group and sex, 2014**

	Male (#)	Male (%)	Female (#)	Female (%)	Total (%)
<b>0-9</b>	45,319	34	42,530	30	87,849
<b>10-19</b>	37,010	27	37,588	27	74,598
<b>20-39</b>	35,709	26	40,046	28	75,755
<b>40-59</b>	12,472	9	14,340	10	26,812
<b>60+</b>	4,287	3	6,312	4	10,599
<b>District</b>	<b>134,797</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>140,816</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>275,613</b>

Source: UBOS, The National Population and Housing Census, 2014

Despite this widely held view of hospitality, some segments of the population regard migrants as a problem. These sentiments arise out of a competition for scarce resources and limited economic opportunities. For instance, migrants are often blamed for criminal activity, the increasing prevalence of prostitution and environmental degradation as a result of urban agriculture.

While the migrant population can experience negative sentiments from the host population, this has not diminished the overall good will towards migrants in Gulu. The harmonious relations between the indigenous Acholi population and migrants has encouraged further migration and permanent settlement. Among those migrants who are interviewed for this study, it is common to find people who had stayed in Gulu for more than ten years, with no thought of returning to their villages of origin any time soon.

## **Economic context**

Economic activity in Gulu is mainly characterized by formal employment, agro-processing enterprises and a growing informal sector. Approximately 17.4 per cent of the population in Gulu Municipality derive their primary source of living from employment income.<sup>2</sup> Persons employed in the formal sector work in micro and small-scale enterprises that are primarily government run or attached to the handful of parastatal bodies

<sup>2</sup> Gulu District Local Government, 'Second Five-Year District Development Plan (2015/2016–2019/2020)', Gulu: Gulu District Local Government, March 2016. Hereafter this document is referred to as the 'Gulu District Development Plan, 2016'.

and private sector companies in Gulu. These include the post office, telecommunications, microfinance enterprises, hotels, the National Water and Sewerage Corporation, Umeme (power supply), commercial banks, educational institutions and NGOs. The remainder of the population find their niche in the informal sector, where activities include street vending, metal fabrication and welding, construction, restaurants and eating places, shop owners, agro-processing and agricultural produce vending. The main source of household livelihood is subsistence farming (57.8 per cent), followed by formal employment income (17.4 per cent).

Gulu also serves as a regional trade hub for surrounding districts. One of its main attractions is the rebuilt Gulu Main Market. Founded in 1937, the Gulu Main Market was reconstructed from 2010 to 2015. In 2017, it was home to more than 4,000 vendors and has attracted vendors from within Gulu District, as well as from Adjumani, Moyo, Kitgum, eastern Uganda and South Sudan. The agricultural products sold in the market represent the diverse geography of the vendors: Cereals mainly come from Kitgum District in northern Uganda; *matooke* (starchy variety of banana) from south-western Uganda; onions from Masaka District in central Uganda; beans from Hoima District in western Uganda; and green vegetables from eastern Uganda. The diversity of trade opportunities has attracted migrants to Gulu to explore available options for work.

Some of the main economic activities in Gulu and those who engage in them include the following:

### ***Hotels***

The hotel business is primarily dominated by migrants from Ethiopia and Eritrea, who have come from Juba to open businesses following the outbreak of conflict in South Sudan in 2013. They found Gulu a useful alternative location for business investment and, having arrived with capital, purchased many of their businesses from natives of Gulu. Some estimates suggest that around 80 per cent of the hotels in Gulu are owned by Ethiopians and Eritreans.

### ***Restaurants***

While restaurants are often owned by Acholis from Gulu, they tend to employ chefs and waitresses from central Uganda. Many of the restaurant workers who participated in the study come from Mukono District and Jinja District, and are sought after because of their skill in cooking the local foods from central Uganda, such as *matooke*, which are in high demand. Many transit migrants, along with people living in Gulu who come from the central and western regions, regularly frequent these restaurants.

### ***Street food***

Street food business—often know as rolex,<sup>3</sup> which is a local snack—is mainly conducted on the street at night. It only requires a frying pan, charcoal stove, table and an umbrella. The trade has become widespread among male youth in Gulu and has spread to surrounding areas as a source of livelihood for young people. This form of business is said to have been introduced to Gulu by the Bagisu migrants, who have also trained Acholi youth in the trade.

### ***Boda bodas***

The *boda boda* (motorcycle taxis) business, a popular form of transport in Gulu Municipality, is primarily dominated by the Acholi from the surrounding districts, including Kitgum, Nwoya, Amuru and Omoro. According to the chairperson of the *boda boda* association, there are more than 800 *boda bodas* estimated to be operating in Gulu Municipality, with fares beginning at UGX 2,000 (USD 0.5).<sup>4</sup> Most *boda bodas* are driven by daily migrants who come to Gulu town from the surrounding districts during the day for business and return home at night.

### ***Commercial sex***

Commercial sex is another common activity in Gulu. The trade has attracted migrants from central Uganda—including Congolese women who followed their Uganda People’s Defence Force husbands from the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 2009—and women and girls from the surrounding districts and rural areas of Gulu. The trade is mainly carried out in areas of Gulu town where large discotheques and clubs are located, as well as in local hotels. Although many work openly in these clubs and hotels, others carry out their trade discreetly, making contact with potential clients through mobile phones. For some, commercial sex is an entry point into the economic life of Gulu.

### ***Street vending***

Street vending is a new phenomenon in Gulu, largely attributed to migration. Most of the vendors came from Kampala after they were chased away by Kampala Capital City Authority. Gulu has become an alternative market for their goods because of the large population and the opportunities for work this offers. The majority of these vendors are young people. While women are involved in selling agricultural produce, men are primarily involved in the sale of assorted merchandise. District officials consider street

<sup>3</sup> Rolex is a popular street food in Uganda that consists of an egg omelette and vegetables wrapped in a chapatti. The name ‘rolex’ derives from the method of preparation, with the omelette and chapatti rolled together.

<sup>4</sup> Currency rates are approximate and reflect oanda rates as of October 2017, when this study was completed. In direct quotes from respondents, reference to shillings is retained to better reflect speech patterns. Otherwise, the international currency code, UGX, is used. See: <https://www.oanda.com/currency/converter/>.

vending a challenge because it is difficult to regulate. Vendors pay no taxes to the district councils and their time of operation (6 p.m. to 10 p.m.) is outside normal working hours.

### *Charcoal*

Gulu District has attracted charcoal traders from central Uganda, who are now seen as a new source of charcoal to meet demand in Uganda's towns, particularly Kampala and Wakiso District. Traders lodge in Gulu Municipality before moving on to the suburbs and other areas of the district to either burn or collect charcoal. Although district authorities are largely against the trade for environmental reasons, it has continued unabated. Control measures put in place by district officials in Gulu remain relatively weak against this growing trend.

### **Rural to urban mobility in historical perspective**

Migration to Gulu occurs amid diverse political, social and economic contexts. While there are no available statistics for the overall movement of migrants to Gulu, the available literature on northern Uganda and the re-creation of migrant movement that emerges from the interviews bring to the fore a picture of Gulu as a town of mixed opportunities.

By the time of independence in 1962, the majority of the Ugandan population lived in rural areas, with only a limited number living in urban centres. One important characteristic of this urban population is that while the majority were born in rural areas, they often visited their places of origin and regularly sent money to rural areas.<sup>5</sup> Until the 1970s, the typical pattern of migration was to spend only a short period of time in Gulu town and then return home. This was because urban wages were relatively low and only a small number of households could feasibly bring their entire families with them.<sup>6</sup>

In the 1970s, Gulu suffered serious setbacks. The presidency of Idi Amin (1971–1979) greatly undermined personal security and hampered agricultural production in the region. Social services declined and no significant improvements were made to the physical infrastructure of the area, a trend that continued through the 1980s.

### *Forced urbanization in Gulu*

Prior to 1986, much of the population in Gulu lived in rural areas and survived on agriculture. This dramatically changed in the twenty-year period from 1986 to 2006. The war that brought the National Resistance Army to power in 1986 was extended to Acholi land in northern Uganda, in pursuit of the remnants of the Uganda National Liberation Army, which had transformed into the Uganda People Democratic Army. With each

<sup>5</sup> R.M.A. Van Zwanenberg and Anne King, *An Economic History of Kenya and Uganda, 1800–1970*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1975.

<sup>6</sup> Van Zwanenberg and King, *An Economic History*, 1975.



defeat, the group transformed, first into the Holy Spirit Movement of Alice Lakwena and later the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) of Joseph Kony.

These forces destabilized rural areas, endangering the physical security of local populations and disrupting agricultural production, a crucial means of livelihood in northern Uganda. Through practices such as mass abductions and indiscriminate killing and maiming, many people were forced to move out of their villages to find safety in towns, including Gulu. Although the population periodically returned to their villages when it was considered safe to do so, this ceased in 1996 when the government enforced internment in protected villages as a counterinsurgency strategy against the LRA. Given only 48 hours to move out of their homes, villages were depleted of people because they moved to IDP camps.

The forced encampment policy was not followed up with a plan to meet the needs of IDPs, who lived in squalid conditions with no water, social services or food. Prior to 2005, humanitarian assistance remained largely ad hoc and only targeted those in gazetted camps. This left scores of IDPs in what were termed as 'unrecognized camps' with no form of assistance. IDP camps had nothing to offer in terms of livelihood activities. According to a male migrant respondent from Bar-dege division of Gulu Municipality, while women continued their domestic responsibilities, men were largely left redundant, 'waking up with nothing to do'. Human capital was diminished in the lives lost during the conflict and as a consequence of the psychological trauma associated with abuse during this period. With nothing to do and having no access to land for crop production, rural livelihoods completely eroded.

### *Night commuters*

The term 'night commuters' was coined by humanitarian agencies to refer to the periodic temporal movement of individuals out of their homes to towns for safety at night and returning home during the day. This phenomenon largely involved children, young people and a few adults who came from areas surrounding Gulu town, such as Bungatira and Paicho. Night commuters presented immense need for protection, food and social services. Initially, they spent the night on the verandas of Gulu town, market places, and near hospitals and churches. According to the community development officer of Gulu Municipality, night commuters left the streets dirty and there was a risk of disease as a result of poor sanitation—with no facilities, commuters used the street for their hygiene needs, which posed an inconvenience and health hazard for the business community. To address this problem, Gulu Municipality designated 13 shelters where night commuters could sleep and banned them from the streets.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the presence of IDPs in Gulu town, they often did not receive humanitarian assistance, in part because they had become intermixed with the residents of the town.

<sup>7</sup> These shelters were mainly run by NGOs such as Samaritan's Purse and *Médicins Sans Frontières* (Doctors Without Borders), which provided food and entertainment to the nightly residents.

IDPs mainly survived on the growing business opportunities brought about by the plethora of humanitarian agencies that made Gulu their base of operations. By 2003, more than 100 relief organizations were working in northern Uganda and by 2007 USD 200 million was being spent annually on IDP camps.<sup>8</sup> This evolved into a humanitarian economy, whereby aid agencies directly employed people as administrators, guards, office assistants, cleaners or drivers. Others were employed in the service sector that grew up around the humanitarian industry and in the petty vending sector. The growing economic opportunities in Gulu, in contrast to the precarious living conditions in the IDP camps, made Gulu an attractive location for many IDPs.

### *Gulu as a migrant transit hub*

Following the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in January 2005 between the government of Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army, there was a large influx of people into Sudan, including an estimated 1.5–3 million Ugandans.<sup>9</sup> In the period between 2005 and 2010, Uganda experienced a trade boom with South Sudan. This mainly involved Ugandan traders from Kampala who sold manufactured merchandise, and agricultural produce and products. Goods were loaded at Arua Park in Kampala and transported through Gulu town to South Sudan via Nimule.<sup>10</sup> The trade boom began to decline between 2011 and 2013 because of increased market competition from other countries. Trade came to a halt on 15 December 2013, following the outbreak of conflict in South Sudan. The conflict resulted in the flight of Ugandan traders from South Sudan, many of whom have found an alternative trade destination in Gulu. Shortly after, this was followed by the flight of South Sudanese into Uganda as refugees, including to Gulu District.

During the years of displacement, not all people who made it to Gulu could survive there. According to the Peace division chairperson of Gulu Municipality, there was no permanent employment for most people but rather a constant shift from employment to underemployment to no work at all. Those who failed to find employment were forced to go back to the IDP camps. This state of affairs resulted in a pattern of circular migration between the camps and Gulu, while others moved onward to neighbouring towns, such as Bweyale and Kiryandongo. In the aftermath of the conflict in Uganda and the population returning home, this status quo did not much change. Persons who were

<sup>8</sup> UNOCHA (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs), 'Uganda 2005: Consolidated Appeal Process', Geneva: United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2005.

<sup>9</sup> International Alert, 'Trading with neighbours: Understanding Uganda–South Sudan business community relations', London: International Alert, October 2014.

<sup>10</sup> During this period, informal exports to South Sudan grew from USD 9.1 million in 2005 to USD 929.9 million in 2008. Formal exports, in contrast, increased less dramatically—from USD 50.5 million in 2005 to USD 245.9 million in 2008. Source: International Alert, 'Trading with neighbours', 2014.

unable to settle in their home areas moved back to Gulu but they face competition from Ugandans returning from South Sudan.

## Impact on urban development

Gulu town is in the process of transforming into Gulu city. While the population at large is pleased with this development, the municipality must grapple with several development issues as a result of rapid population growth. At the top of the urban development agenda, as the district planner for Gulu Municipality indicates, are issues relating to rural to urban migration followed by a high level of poverty characterized by low household incomes, inadequate access to social services, accelerating environmental degradation, refuse management, poor governance, the prevalence of HIV/AIDS, high levels of illiteracy and criminal activity. The same district planner says that rural to urban migration in Gulu Municipality has had both positive and negative consequences for urban planning. On the one hand, for example, the increased number of business enterprises in the municipality has resulted in increased revenue through business licences and widened the tax base for the district. Population increases also mean Gulu receives more money for infrastructure development. On the other, Gulu Municipality must contend with a growing informal sector, increased refuse collection, a rise in criminal activity and a housing shortage, among others.

### *The informal economy*

The growth of the informal sector poses a challenge about how to assess tax contributions and regulate informal business activities in the town. Informal sector activities such as street vending, prostitution, gambling and the *boda boda* transport business have proved the most difficult to regulate. Commenting on street vending, an urban planner for Gulu Municipality notes, 'These people operate in the evening hours after we have closed offices. They pay no licence fees and thus make no contribution to the cleaning of the town, which they often leave extremely dirty after their evening activities.'

District officials are not alone in complaining about the problems associated with street vending. The chairperson of the Gulu market traders' association, for example, points to the ongoing conflict between street vendors and market vendors:

Street vendors sell similar products like those in the market. Unlike the market vendors, they pay no licence fees to the local government, no rental charges and make no contribution to garbage collection. Having someone doing a similar business on the street and paying nothing is not really fair trade. The municipal authorities should come out and address this problem.

At night, a large number of vendors from Gulu Main Market now shift their merchandise to the street so as to attract more customers, as this female vendor explains:

I move my merchandise outside to the street. By so doing, I am able to sell more than when I sit at my stall inside the market. Customers do not come inside the market as long as they can find what they need outside on the street.

While the various trading groups in Gulu are expected to work in harmony with the municipal council to create a conducive environment for smooth commerce,<sup>11</sup> this is not the case. Moreover, it seems that the district has done little to resolve this problem.

### *Access to clean water*

Access to clean water for the growing population in Gulu Municipality remains a challenge. Existing service is unreliable due to water shortages, especially during the dry season. This means that more than half of the Gulu population has to rely on unsafe water sources. According to the district planner for Gulu, the district is in the process of expanding the water reservoir and drawing water from Karuma Falls on the Victoria Nile, which is about 70 km from the town. The population heavily depends on open water sources and swamps, some of which are being destroyed because of urban agriculture.

### *Development of slums*

Migration to Gulu has also put pressure on the housing sector, leading to the growth of urban slums. Most of the slums that developed during the years of insurgency are now being phased out but with limited financial means, many migrants struggle to find a decent place to live. The result is that many are forced to settle in slums or stay with their friends or relatives. Slums, however, offer very little security. Many residents face eviction in these and other condemned neighbourhoods. Despite pressure from the government to relocate, most do not have the means to do so.

### *Health services*

The influx of migrants has placed a burden on municipal health services. Whereas Gulu town has some of the best health services in the Northern Region, the increase in demand largely can be attributed to inadequate health services in rural areas. In particular health centres in rural Gulu face significant human resource challenges (for example, a lack of midwives, doctors, anaesthesiologists, clinical officers and dispensers), limited supplies of medicines and drugs, and inadequate emergency services.<sup>12</sup> As a result, patients, such as those suffering from chronic diseases, are often referred to health centres in Gulu town for treatment.

In addition, improved transportation systems and readily available accommodation in Gulu has attracted patients from surrounding areas, including refugees. This can pose a challenge, however, to the municipal government in terms of adequately planning for the population's healthcare needs, especially given that healthcare in government hospi-

<sup>11</sup> 'Gulu District Development Plan, 2016', 129.

<sup>12</sup> 'Gulu District Development Plan, 2016', 36.

tals remains relatively free. As one district official notes, planning for immunization, for example, can be challenging: Gulu District may plan for a specific number of patients, only to find that services must be stretched beyond those that have been budgeted.



## 3. Migrant experiences

### Drivers of migration

There are three forms of migration to Gulu town: Rural to urban migration from the Acholi sub-region, including former IDPs; from other regions of the country; and foreign migration from other countries, including refugee movements from South Sudan. Corresponding to these diverse groups of migrants is range of different drivers of migration. Although some of these are shared across these groups (notably economic drivers), others are specific to each group. These drivers of migration can be defined in terms of both push and pull factors. In particular, a common theme in the stories of migrant respondents is poverty, which is a key push factor in the decision to migrate from rural areas or elsewhere in the country. This directly links to economic opportunities in Gulu town as a primary pull factor.

#### *Land conflicts in rural areas*

The majority of returnees moving back to their pre-conflict homes faced challenges in reclaiming their land, with land owned under customary tenure the most contested.<sup>13</sup> Conflicts over land range from boundary disputes (e.g. failure to identify original boundaries due to the removal of markers; earlier returnees having extended their original boundaries into areas not belonging to them) to outright exclusion of particular segments of the population (e.g. orphans and widows with no close relatives to support their land claims). Land conflicts were exacerbated by weaknesses in local structures to respond effectively to land disputes.<sup>14</sup> Without effective mediation mechanisms, a significant number of returnees were left with no place to call home and make a livelihood. Failure to resettle in their pre-conflict homes forced many migrants from the Acholi sub-region to Gulu town.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> In Gulu District there are three main land regimes: Customary land holding, covering 86.9 per cent; freehold, covering 6.1 per cent; and leasehold, covering 6.2 per cent. Other systems cover only 0.8 per cent. Source: 'Gulu District Development Plan, 2016', 16.

<sup>14</sup> Before the conflict in northern Uganda, significant authority and control was wielded by lineage and clan-based structures. During the conflict, however, this structure of leadership dissolved as elders died and authority was reassigned to local councils, which took on conflict resolution functions. Local councils served mainly an administrative role as an extension of the district local government. They had little to do with the allocation of land such as that which existed before the conflict.

<sup>15</sup> Migrants from the Acholi sub-region to Gulu town arrive from the districts of Gulu, Kitgum, Pader, Amuru and Omoro.

### *Challenges of agricultural based livelihoods in rural areas*

For many people in rural Gulu, agriculture is not a viable enterprise, pushing them to seek alternative means of survival through rural–urban migration. For young people in particular, moving away becomes an attractive option (see below). Although land in rural Gulu is fertile and supports the growing of different kinds of crops on a large scale, there are a number of obstacles linked to agricultural based livelihoods. First, there are limited agricultural extension services in rural Gulu and small-scale farmers are no longer reached by either public or private advisory services. For example, the percentage of farm families receiving improved production technologies stagnated at 30 per cent between 2010 and 2014 and the extension-worker-to-farmer ratio dropped to 1:10,000.<sup>16</sup> Rural areas also lack modern agriculture implements, which is a legacy of conflict and displacement in northern Uganda. Respondents in rural areas confirm that communities lack access to agricultural seeds, are beset by poor post-harvest handling and low returns. Farmers also have limited access to financial services, such as micro-finance or other loans. In combination, these various challenges have dire consequences for agricultural production, thus impacting livelihood opportunities in rural Gulu District.

Second, rural Gulu District suffers from a number of crop and animal diseases.<sup>17</sup> Land left idle during the conflict often led to an increase in bush and wild game, and a corresponding increase in tsetse flies, ticks and other biting flies, exposing animals to nagana and humans to sleeping sickness. These various animal and crop diseases have also contributed to the low rates of return on agriculture production. The problems associated with these diseases are exacerbated by the fact that the majority of farmers in rural Gulu lack extension services, which adds to their difficulties in identifying and effectively addressing these challenges.

Third, as an agricultural officer for Bungatira sub-county explains, during the years of conflict, the period of encampment and life in Gulu town denied young people in particular the opportunity to acquire the agricultural skills necessary for rural livelihoods (which are largely based on agricultural production), thus making it difficult for them to readjust to life in rural areas. Although community leaders recognize this problem, youth training programmes in the camps largely focused on non-agricultural skills, such as tailoring, motorcycle mechanics, and information and communication technologies. The skills young people possess as a result of these training programmes can only be practiced in urban centres, where they find a ready market and basic infrastructure to support such skills. Many rural respondents report that even when young people do acquire skills that are useful in rural areas, they abandon such skills for life in town, as this rural respondent from Bungatira sub-county explains:

<sup>16</sup> 'Gulu District Development Plan, 2016', 31.

<sup>17</sup> According to an agricultural officer from Bungatira sub-county who was interviewed for this study, the most common crop diseases include cassava mosaic, cassava brown streak, anthracnose, groundnut rosette, blight and rust, while common pests include aphids, glow-worms, orange dogs, white flies, termites, nematodes and armyworms.

Some youth are not given start-up packs after the training and they cannot afford to buy whatever they need for start-up. Hence they abandon the skills learnt. Others just sell off all the items in the start-up pack, while yet others—once the start-up items are gone—they cannot afford to buy anymore items. Hence their business collapses. This has pushed rural youth to move to town to work in already established businesses.

Another respondent, also from Bungatira sub-county, attributes the lack of enthusiasm for rural livelihoods among youth to laziness:

There is a NAADs (National Agricultural Advisory Services Development) project in the sub-county, which is basically agriculture but because the youth are very lazy, they are not part of the programme. They don't want to be involved in agriculture and claim it is too much work, preferring to move to urban areas where they can earn a living with a *boda boda* or car washing and construction work in town.

### *The youth bulge*

Young people below eighteen years old constitute 34 per cent of the Gulu District population. The majority of young people migrating to urban Gulu are mostly young men but with an increasing number of women, which reflects broader migration patterns across the world.<sup>18</sup> They also form the bulk of the most economically marginalized group in Gulu District.<sup>19</sup> The majority of youth in the district spent much of their formative years in IDP camps. In addition to a lack of agricultural skills, they have missed out on both formal and informal education, resulting in a lack of literacy skills, which hinders their ability to access the formal labour market. Nonetheless, rural to urban migration is a survival strategy for young people, who instead seek out livelihood opportunities in the informal sector in urban Gulu. Such opportunities pull youth to Gulu town because they require few skills, and allow for free entry and exit. The attraction of informal livelihood opportunities in urban Gulu, which are seen to offer quicker returns, is reinforced by the challenges linked to agricultural livelihoods.

### *Marriage and social relations*

The restructuring of family life—whereby more women are following their husbands to Gulu town and becoming part of the working class—further contributes to rural–urban migration trends. Would-be migrants tend to discuss the decision to migrate with family members, as this man from Luweero, in central Uganda, indicates, ‘Though it was a personal decision, I had to discuss it with my family that I wanted to leave for Gulu

<sup>18</sup> The International Organization for Migration reports that young people account for 30 per cent of international migrants. See: International Organization for Migration, ‘Migration in Uganda: A Rapid Country Profile 2013’, Kampala, Uganda: International Organization for Migration, 2015.

<sup>19</sup> ‘Gulu District Development Plan, 2016’, 58.

District to do business.’ This female migrant from Arua and Kampala (where she did a tailoring course) has lived in Gulu town for six years. She explains:

My main reason for coming to this town is that I followed my husband, who is a prison officer at Gulu main prison. Poverty was another reason. I needed a source of livelihood and there are lots of opportunities in Gulu Town. My husband’s income is not enough, so I also had to do something to supplement the income of our family. Some of the reasons [that drove me to migrate here] have changed now, like poverty. I don’t call myself a poor woman anymore, as I have established myself in business and I am making money.

Because of women’s increased economic participation, some urban households in Gulu hire maids, especially from rural areas, to fill the domestic care gap. In turn, this contributes to further migration.

### *Increased connectivity of Gulu to other districts*

Improved road infrastructure,<sup>20</sup> both within and to Gulu District, facilitates greater connectivity. This has resulted in a surge in public investment and along with it, an increase in migration from other parts of the country. These improvements have greatly reduced the time it takes to travel to Gulu, thus contributing to more efficient trade and transport, and opening up more economic opportunities. Not only have these road improvements attracted transport companies to Gulu, they have also given rise to better local transport services. As of 2017, around ten bus companies are operating through Gulu town to West Nile, Kampala, eastern Uganda, Juba, Kitgum and Pader, among others. The numerous *boda bodas* also facilitate travel between Gulu and Arua, Nebbi, Packwach, and Latoro, as well as to rural areas within the district. The influence of transport on migration is evident in the migratory routes taken to Gulu, according to a transport officer at Gaaga bus company: Bus company routes coincide with the major migratory flows into Gulu Municipality. High population movements are registered mainly during festive seasons, such as the Christmas and Easter holidays, as well as the start and end of school terms.

Improvements to telecommunications contribute to increased rural–urban connectivity, making migration easier. All mobile phone companies—MTN, Airtel, Uganda Telecom and Africell—have their networks in full operation in Gulu Municipality. Telecommunications improvements have also facilitated trade. Unlike previous years, traders in Gulu can now order goods from rural areas, pay for them using mobile money platforms and have these items delivered to Gulu, saving suppliers and traders time and money. The same transport officer for the Gaaga bus company explains, ‘Buses also act as conduits for cargo for traders in Gulu. ... Their goods arrive [in Gulu town] via the bus companies.’

<sup>20</sup> For example, between 2010 and 2013, the total length of roads in good condition increased from 249.2 km in 2010–2011 to 287.8 km in 2011–2012 and to 327.8 km in 2012–2013. The district has a total of 916.6 km of community access roads, of which 200.8 km have been rehabilitated. Source: ‘Gulu District Development Plan, 2016’, 42.

Moreover, prospective migrants are only ever a phone call or message away. Interviews with waitresses in Gulu town restaurants, for example, indicate that they received information about opportunities in Gulu from their friends or relatives using their phones, which facilitated their travel and settling in to Gulu.

### *Education*

Gulu is an educational centre that has attracted students and scholars working on Uganda. In part, the role of education as a pull factor can be attributed to the conflict in northern Uganda, which has drawn scores of scholars from inside and outside Uganda. The establishment of Gulu University in 2002 and the resultant student population soon became an attraction for trade and entrepreneurship around the university, further stimulating inward migration among a broader group of migrants. Gulu town is also home to three other universities, along with nearly 10 secondary schools and more than 70 primary schools.<sup>21</sup> The relatively high standard of learning in the region has attracted students from many other parts of the country and further abroad from South Sudan.

### *Growing economic opportunities*

In part, migration to Gulu is characterized by the movement of people from the rest of the country seeking economic opportunities in the town. As an emerging city, Gulu town boasts many job opportunities in the construction, hospitality (hotels and restaurants) and transport sectors, among others. For instance, young men from other parts of the country are attracted to the transport sector as drivers of trucks and heavy equipment, masons or engineers. There are also numerous opportunities in informal employment, with most related to petty trade.

In particular, the growth of the hospitality sector is linked to the plethora of visitors and humanitarian agencies working in Gulu during the armed conflict between 1986–2006. Humanitarian workers, students, volunteers, soldiers and drivers created a demand for restaurants, accommodation and leisure activities, as well as stimulated trade. Despite the conflict, a Pece division engineer explains, visitors and local residents alike found time to enjoy leisure activities such as dancing, and socializing at bars and restaurants. Migrants quickly found a niche in the growing hospitality industry, working as porters, kitchen staff, bar tenders, housekeepers and maintenance staff. Others with more developed employable skills took on office employment in human resources, accounting and management in the hospitality sector.

### *Refugee flows*

In 2017, Gulu was confronted with a wave of South Sudanese refugees residing in the town as self-settled refugees. The exact number, however, is not known. While govern-

<sup>21</sup> 'Gulu District Development Plan, 2016', 42. These figures include both government-funded and private schools.



ment policy is for refugees to reside in rural settlements where they can subsist on food rations, a significant number are finding their way into urban centres, such as Gulu town. A combination of factors explains this pattern.

First, there is a gradual shift away from agriculture as the main means of livelihood for refugees. Placement of refugees in rural settlements assumes that refugees are from a rural background and that they can sustain themselves through agriculture. Refugees are expected to grow their own food and achieve food self-sufficiency within two years of being granted asylum in Uganda; for many, however, this is not possible. The increase in the number of refugees, combined with a growing local native population, means available farmland is shrinking. For instance, with more than 270,000 refugees having arrived from South Sudan and settled in Bidi Bidi refugee settlement since 2016, competition for land has significantly increased.<sup>22</sup> The limited availability of land has made subsistence difficult.

Second, emerging trade opportunities in Gulu town has attracted refugees from both South Sudan and refugee settlement areas. The free entry and exit characteristic of employment in the informal sector has attracted refugees with entrepreneurial skills. Third, the prevailing culture of hospitality among native Gulu residents also facilitates the relocation of refugees from settlement areas to urban Gulu, where they enjoy a relatively harmonious relationship with the local population. In particular, Gulu Municipality officials who are interviewed for this study indicate that the refugee influx is treated in the same way that traders from Ethiopia and Eritrea are treated. There is no problem perceived, yet no programme in place for their protection or assistance. This, however, is likely to change if numbers increase even further.

## Role of social networks

Study findings indicate that social networks are important in the migration process. Social networks provide the critical connections that individuals need to settle in a new place, including a source of information on available livelihood opportunities (and later on, expanding existing opportunities) and social security. Once a migrant is settled, he or she is also expected to act as social capital for others back home. Networks of connect- edness are largely horizontal—between individuals with shared interests.

Many migrant respondents consider it important to belong to social networks given the opportunities they provide, as this respondent from Layibi sub-county in Gulu Municipality suggests:

To me, I feel they are okay [social networks], in terms of sharing ideas and borrowing money. And also in case you have problems, like sickness or if someone dies. They can help take the person to the health centre or transport

<sup>22</sup> UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), 'Uganda–Bidibidi Settlement, Yumbe', UNHCR Operational Update, Geneva: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 4 November 2016, 1.

the body home. Also having tribe mates gives one company. You feel you are in a family.

Migrants often draw on social networks prior to departure but will then establish new networks upon arrival, such as becoming friends with persons with whom they do not share the same ethnic origin. Trust, then, is considered vital in social networks. It is not just about reciprocity and fellowship but also having confidence in the person or group of people. This migrant from Bugisu, in eastern Uganda, highlights the value of social networks (especially those based on family relations) in terms of trust. Although he has no relatives in Gulu, it is clear that he appreciates what such a social network can offer:

It's good for security purposes. Like for me. Here, I am alone. If I was having my relatives here, I could leave them at home [to protect my belongings] and move around with my business without fear or worries of being robbed or my things getting stolen [when I'm gone]. They're also company.

Migrant respondents offer evidence that the social networks in which they are involved in Gulu tend to be based on at least two types of connection or linkage. Savings groups are also third point of connection through which migrants can create and develop social networks (see discussion of financial practices below).

### *Networks based on family relations*

These are prevalent among close family members. In such networks, wives mainly move to join their husbands in new workplaces. These networks are considered the strongest and regularly facilitate the migration process to Gulu. Information is shared about opportunities in the town, including those that are work and education related. It is also common to find students who have come from rural areas staying with relatives in Gulu, only returning to their rural sites of origin for holidays.

Although some migrants are enthusiastic about such networks—citing advantages of friendship, social support and a source of quick loans—others dislike being hosted by relatives, especially because of the associated costs of being in their homes. As a female migrant from Masindi, in western Uganda, explains, 'To me it is a burden. I am more comfortable staying alone. Relatives disturb a lot. They ask too often for money and criticize anything that I do.' Another female migrant, originally from Arua, in northern Uganda, similarly remarks, 'To me it is not important. They are burdens to me. They need money all the time.'

### *Networks based on ethnicity, place of origin and language*

While some migrants have social networks based on family relations, others do not. This leads to the creation of networks of reciprocity based on ethnicity or shared places of origin. These networks are found to be particularly common among people from eastern Uganda, especially the Bagisu and Alurs. Such networks are also strong among the Lugbara, from West Nile, and the Baganda, from central Uganda. The uniting factor

is usually a shared language. In such networks, individuals frequently settle in the same area or division of Gulu Municipality. In addition, people from the same ethnic group tend to meet both formally and informally at places of entertainment, such as restaurants or pubs. Migrants who are new to Gulu town and have no prior social networks often make their first contacts at such places.

Joining or creating a social network based on shared ethnicity or place of origin is not, however, universal across ethnic groups. While people from eastern Uganda and West Nile seem to have strong social networks, this does not appear to be the case among those migrants arriving from central Uganda (apart from the Baganda). Mistrust is often rife among migrants from central Uganda, creating disunity. This can be attributed to several factors, including religious differences, and experiences with theft and cheating. A woman from Mityana, in central Uganda, whose business has been destroyed multiple times, illustrates this aspect of migrant experience. Despite her difficulties, she still acknowledges the value of a social network: 'It's good for companionship and sharing ideas.' But as she goes on to say, 'Now, as in my case, I have enemies all around me. I have no friends. Most times, I am on my own.'

## Opportunities and challenges

Gulu town remains a place of mixed fortunes for adults and young people, both women and men. Migrants who come to town experience different life trajectories. For many, the expectation of finding an immediate work opportunity and settling down is never realized. Instead, they have to devise ways of earning a livelihood based on the given realities they encounter and as these realities evolve. For many, integration into Gulu town is a gradual process that is partly facilitated by a migrant's capital endowments in terms of social networks, financial resources and human capital, such as entrepreneurial skills.

As this migrant's experience indicates, these opportunities can be transformative: Originally from Mukono, a young woman first came to Gulu in 2010 with her aunt, who was then working at one of the most popular restaurants in town. The restaurant employs about ten young women in their early twenties, mainly from central Uganda. The young woman's aunt helped her get a job there. She says working at the restaurant has transformed her life. She earns a regular income, which is supplemented by tips from patrons. In addition to meeting her personal needs, she earns enough income to send part of it to her mother, who uses it to support her little brother with school fees. With her income, she is also able to return home at least twice a year to visit her mother and other family members.

For others, entry into the economic life of Gulu town takes a different path before they find employment that better suits them. A thirty-four-year-old woman from Masindi, tells her story:

I came to Gulu from Masindi in 2012. I came for business. A friend who lives here convinced me to come and do business. When I came, I first lived with her. That is when I discovered that she was into commercial sex. At first I hesitated to join her in the business but she told me that I had to contribute to rent and to food. So I found myself going into commercial sex. After about six months, I found someone who introduced me to a restaurant in town. I work in the restaurant during day as a waitress and in the evening I do food vending by the road side opposite Gulu Main Market. Street vending is far better than prostitution. Ever since I came to Gulu, my life has changed tremendously. I rent for myself and can afford to buy food. I also plan to bring my child, who I left at home with my parents in Masindi. I want her to live with me. She can also go to school here.

While Gulu town offers opportunities, these can also expose migrant job seekers to exploitation. Employing large numbers of staff, for example, the hotel industry has improved the livelihoods of people working there, although the majority complained of exploitation and little pay. Respondents who have established themselves in the informal sector can be particularly vulnerable to limited earnings. As this Gulu government official explains, ‘There is no minimum wage set and there is no control over payments to girls and boys working for foreigners, resulting in exploitation and sexual harassment of the workers.’

There are also tensions around these opportunities, especially in relation to formal employment. In particular, there is tension between indigenous Acholi and migrants, with the former often viewing migrants in terms of competition. For example, young migrants from central Uganda, who work with road construction companies, indicate that many of their colleagues have been discouraged from doing so and instead have opted to move to other areas of Uganda or to seek other types of employment in the region. A migrant respondent who works as a driver for an NGO based in Gulu shares his experience:

I worked as a driver for the Chinese road construction company. When we arrived in Gulu, work was not as easy to find work as I had thought. Like other Baganda, I faced harassment from the Acholi, who wanted to beat us because we were taking away their jobs. These people are united when fighting for their jobs. ... In Kampala, an Acholi can be a buddy but when you come here [to Gulu], they cease to be friends.

These tensions are exacerbated by a sense of favouritism towards the Acholi by the municipal administration. The justification is to protect jobs for the indigenous residents of Gulu, which is a deeply competitive market as a result of Gulu’s expanding population. For example, some local governments sign a memorandum of understanding with construction companies and NGOs to ensure that the majority of their staff are recruited from among the indigenous population. This practice acts as a limiting factor for migrants who come from areas outside Gulu Municipality to readily find job opportunities in some sectors, forcing many to move on to other destinations. Many migrants

see this as discriminatory. This tendency to favouritism also hinders the attraction of skilled workers to Gulu. This practice further raises the question of reciprocity, whereby Acholi do not face the same level of discrimination in other parts of the country when they migrate for reasons of work.

In addition to discrimination in access to formal employment, migrants face a myriad of other challenges that highlight the mixed opportunities in Gulu. These challenges are detailed in two interview extracts below.

*Respondent 1: A male migrant from Luweero, who has lived in Gulu town for two years and intends to remain until he has earned enough money to invest back home.*

Q: What were you doing in your previous place of residence?

A: I was in agriculture but it was not lucrative enough. Of course, I could get food from it and a little money. But it was not enough due to the demand I have at home. I have a wife and children. Paying [school] fees was a burden. Meeting healthcare costs in the event of sickness was also a problem, etc. Generally, life was hard.

Q: Why did you come to Gulu?

A: My main reason for coming to the town was because of poverty and the hard life I was going through taking care of my family financially, in my previous place of residence, so I came to look for money.

Q: So what is your business?

A: I deal in a lot of merchandize, such as clothing, shoes and handbags, among others. And I can say it is going pretty well because we have customers, especially those coming from South Sudan. The only challenge is the insurgency in South Sudan, which has slowed business. But I think if everything settles, we shall be in good business again, as we used to be prior to the insurgency.

Q: Do you think your welfare, and that of your family members back home, has improved?

A: Yes, I can say so. Because at least I have some money, though I can say it's not that much. But at least I am able to rent here, buy food and send some money back home to my family members for upkeep and school fees.

*Respondent 2: A male migrant from Mbale District, who has been living on his own in Gulu town for eight years. His family members, including parents, siblings and two children, are back home.*

Q: Why did you come here?

A: I came here because of poverty. I wanted to earn money and there was no way of doing that in Mbale. Here I have access to farmland around the swamps—the water-logged areas that are not being used by the Acholi community. I farm maize, cabbage, onions and other vegetables that I sell in town.

Q: Has your life changed since you came here?

A: A little bit. Since I just farm, my earnings are seasonal—when I harvest and sell. But I intend to invest the money I get in other business ventures, like general household merchandize, but I need a lot of capital to do so.

### *The specific challenges of youth employment*

Rural to urban migrants in Gulu town face significant challenges related to the risks of unemployment and underemployment, which is especially the case for young migrants. Despite opportunities, in particular in informal employment, young people in Gulu District and Gulu town remain constrained by their inability to access education. Life in the IDP camps denied young people an opportunity for schooling. With no income in the camps, parents and guardians could not afford the necessary school requirements such as fees, uniforms and books. In the post-conflict setting, the introduction and promotion of universal primary and secondary education has likewise not proven particularly beneficial to young people, as this woman from Bungatira sub-county explains:

School fees are not the only requirement for sending children to school. They need books, stationary and lunch while at school. In addition, children need transport to school when the schools are far away from the community. Many children are bound to drop out of school.

Limited access to education negatively impacts young people's ability to gain the employable skills they need for greater economic productivity.

Nonetheless, living in Gulu town introduces youth to economic activities that earn them a faster and easier income compared to the uncertainties associated with agriculture. At the same time, the skills that many of them learned during their years in the IDP camps (mechanics, tailoring, telecommunications, and so on), and with which they now could earn a living also present young people with a challenge. They need start-up capital to translate these skills into income generating activities. For some community members, however, youth simply lack initiative, as this respondent, also from Bungatira sub-county, asserts:

The youth are not innovative in that after getting the skills, they don't struggle to get the tools or materials they need to practice their trade and generate capital or money to keep the business going. They prefer to sit on their skills and knowledge and wait for handouts and easy ways of making money, like theft and robbery or prostitution.



Moreover, lack of education and limited employable skills also means that the majority of young people find it challenging to borrow from financial institutions, as a way to begin or continue viable income generating activities. Young migrant respondents indicate that they find it difficult to engage with banks and micro-finance institutions for both loans and general financial advice. The precarious nature of informal job opportunities in Gulu town is summed up by this rural respondent: 'One accident and the *boda boda* is no more.'

## Financial practices of migrants

A key goal of economic migrants is not only to earn money for themselves but also to send money back home to support their families. The ability of migrants to meet their livelihood needs in Gulu and to contribute to the welfare of those they left behind greatly depends on the size of their enterprise or their earnings from either formal or informal employment. The number of family members that live with them in urban Gulu also factors into this equation.

Sending and receiving money is made possible by the widespread availability of financial services, including banks and mobile money platforms. Although Gulu has 11 commercial banks, the majority of migrants prefer to send money using mobile money platforms, which is easier and less costly. Mobile money platforms are used for sending remittances, borrowing money from friends when in need, paying in or out of a saving group and paying for merchandise or produce in petty trade, among other things.

### *Remittances*

A primary financial practice migrants engage in is sending remittances to their relatives in rural areas. Many migrant respondents report that they send money to meet basic needs, such as school fees and family upkeep. It is these needs that largely inform how much is sent. Often the only fixed amounts are school fees, which are pre-determined in most cases. Migrants also send money for household emergencies, such as sickness and funeral expenses.

For migrants working in the informal sector, remittances are not regular and rarely have fixed amounts due to uncertainties related to their earnings. A thirty-eight-year-old Lugwara man from Arua is in informal employment, selling clothes. As he explains:

In the village, I support four family members and it is to these ones that I send money three times a year. Most times I send 20,000, 30,000 or 50,000 shillings [USD 5.5, 8 or 13.5], depending on need. During the festive seasons, I also send them clothes with my village mates, when they travel back.

Some migrants who work in the informal sector do manage to send remittances on a more regular basis. For example, this twenty-eight-year-old who migrated from Mbale and sells Irish potatoes and onions in Gulu, indicates that he regularly remits money to his mother:

At home, I only support my mother. I send her money whenever she asks for it using mobile money because it is cheaper and easier to use. I usually send her money twice a month unless it is an emergency, like sickness and she needs medical attention.

Very few of the migrant respondents do not send remittances to their place of origin. Among these, some instead must use their earnings to support family who have migrated with them to Gulu town. This Muganda migrant is a case in point. He is thirty years old and his principle livelihood activity is petty trade, from which he earns little:

Q: Do you receive from/send remittances back home? How often?

A: I don't receive and I don't even send back home.

Q: How many family members do you support? How often do you send money? How do you decide how much to send?

A: Back home, I am not supporting anyone. I am only supporting my family here in Gulu.

### *Saving groups*

Many migrants in Gulu belong to saving groups. These are associations that bring people together for the purpose of saving money and giving out loans to its members on a rotational basis. Savings groups are therefore also a form of social network (see above). Type of business, more than ethnicity or other types of social linkage, brings individuals together in saving groups. There are two types of saving groups. The first is where individuals are given a lump sum of their savings at the end of the year, which they can use as they see fit. A member of a savings group in Gulu explains:

Yes, I am a member of a saving association here in Gulu town. The association lends and gives loans to its members. The association saves money of the members from January to December and it's in December that the money is given to the members, according to the records on how they have been saving.

The second type of saving group is commonly known as a 'merry-go-round'. Here, each member saves a specific amount of money every month, which is collected in the monthly meetings. Pay puts are given on a rotating basis, such that after one full cycle of the merry-go-round, each member of the savings group has had a turn. In essence, members put money away until it comes back to them as a larger sum based on the contributions of others in the saving group. This migrant respondent explains how the order in which members of the saving group receive their share is determined:

It is all about saving. We save [together]. Each one picks a number and you are given money according to the number picked. If you are number one, you get the money first; two, you get the money second, and it moves along like that. All members save. The money is gathered together and given to one person at a time.

Saving groups tend to run for one calendar year, with regular meetings among the members. Savings are often remitted using mobile money, which also helps individuals to keep track of how much they are saving with the group. A chairperson is responsible for calling meetings and reminding members of their obligations.

The goals migrants have in relation to their participation in saving groups can be quite variable in ambition, as these two migrant respondents indicate:

‘I am also a member of a saving group. Through this group, I have plans to save more than 2 million shillings [USD 540] and build myself a house in the village. And expand my business.’

‘I am a member of a saving group. The goal is to save a little for my family to help in case of sickness, for school fees and food. Nothing much because my earning is not much. I save in the group’.

### ***Financing migration***

Study findings indicate that migrants finance their journey to urban Gulu through a variety of means, such as individual savings, sale of agricultural produce, family sponsorship and borrowing from friends. For the majority of respondents, however, individual savings are the main source of finance for travel, as this migrant says, ‘When coming to Gulu, I relied on my savings. I started saving while in Luweero and later on in Mbale District.’ Often, however, these resources are not sufficient to cover the cost of travel and upkeep. Family members and close relatives are called upon to contribute to covering the costs of migration. But once they arrive in Gulu town, they are expected to make their own way. There are very few cases of migrants receiving remittances or support from the people they left at home.

Another key resource in financing rural to urban migration is the sale of family assets. In particular, this is the case for young people, who sell off family land and go to Gulu town to start businesses in the informal sector, such as driving *boda bodas*. The sale of family assets in post-conflict northern Uganda is closely linked to the failure of young people to reintegrate into rural communities. Although selling family land enables their move to Gulu town, this also puts young people in an especially vulnerable position. This not only leaves families landless but it means they have no fall-back option should migration to Gulu town not work out.

### **Impact on sites of origin**

Rural to urban migration is perceived as having both positive and negative impacts on the site of origin. Interviews in two rural sites in Bungatira and Lacor shed light on the benefits and challenges of migration.

Rural to urban linkages are well established in Bungatira sub-county, which lies on the road between Gulu and Paloro sub-county in Aswa County. Bungatira is endowed with

fertile soil and the main livelihood activity is farming. For the majority of the Bungatira population, however, agriculture is not a viable activity, forcing many to opt for other economic activities in Gulu (see discussion about drivers of migration above).

Through remittances, migrants help support the local economy at their site of origin. Generally, it is assumed that for those who migrate to Gulu town, the remittances they send will be used as an investment in productive activities back home. In this study, however, findings indicate that although migrants often remit money to their relatives (and sometimes to friends) back home, these remittances are generally used for basic needs, such as school fees, rent, food, healthcare, clothing and other household items. On rare occasions—particularly for those with more prosperous businesses ventures in Gulu town—sufficient money is remitted for the construction of residential houses, the development of commercial agriculture and land purchases.

The story of a forty-five-year-old Acholi woman from Lacor–Obiya in western Gulu District offers a comprehensive overview of how remittances from her husband have improved the family’s life back home:

I am married with three children, who are sixteen, eighteen and twenty years old. All three children are in secondary school. I have a diploma in education, while my husband is a secondary school dropout. Only my husband moved out of the household to Gulu. He went for employment. He had no job here in Lacor. He got a job in Gulu and settled there. Poverty forced him to leave to go and find work in Gulu.

We never had enough to support the children in school. We decided as a family [including his parents] that he goes and I stay behind to take care of the family. To facilitate his travel and settlement, his parents contributed some money after selling some foodstuffs. Since I was already in business, I gave him some money, too. I also packed him food to take.

Ever since he went to Gulu, he regularly sends us money, which has greatly improved the well-being of the family. On average, he sends me 150,000 shillings [USD 40] every month for up keep and sends school fees separately for each child. These he pays in instalments from the beginning of the school term. We use the money he sends for farming, buying seeds and paying labourers. In fact, our crop yield has improved tremendously. He also sends money to me to invest my business, such as when the business is going down.

I can say that life is relatively easy. Our life has improved ever since he went to Gulu. Ever since he migrated, life has improved. Our crop yield has improved. My business, which was struggling, is now okay. And the children are going to school.

Social relations have also improved. He communicates often, comes back and relates with friends, neighbours and other people in the community. He also comes back to attend funerals and marriage ceremonies.

There is nothing bad since he migrated. Although he is not here most times, he comes back to visit during holidays and even during school time. He communicates and provides all that is needed.

At the same time, migration can pose problems at the site of origin. For rural respondents, migration is often linked to a loss of family labour, which can increase the risk of poverty: 'Migration has brought poverty to the household. ... Crop production has reduced since my daughter, who used to help us with farm activities, left.' When (young) migrants sell off rural family assets, including land, to finance migration to Gulu town, this can increase the risk of homelessness and greater poverty, both for the migrant and for those who remain at home.

### **Onward migration**

Gulu town serves as a gateway to northern Uganda and to neighbouring countries. This has made the town a centre of migration, which is also facilitated by social networks and information shared about prospects across national borders. Onward migration out of Gulu is anticipated as long as the economic circumstances of the migrant do not improve for the better—however slight these improvements might be.

The movement of some migrants from one urban area to another, including through Gulu town, indicate that migrants have the potential to seek out new destinations in their search for economic opportunities. Young people who cannot find viable work in Gulu or those who are denied access to available opportunities in Gulu town because of tribe or region of origin are likely to move onward. Onward movement, therefore, is driven by a failure to harness economic opportunities in Gulu town or in the surrounding rural areas. Migrants from other parts of the country are more likely to be forced to move on because of competition and conflict with the indigenous Acholi population for available job opportunities.

Although it is an example of inward (not onward) migration, the presence of Ethiopian, Eritrean, Somali and South Sudanese entrepreneurs in Gulu town reinforces the flexibility that migrants can have in pursuit of economic opportunities. That these migrants shifted their business enterprises from Juba to invest in Gulu town in 2013 points to the fact that they remain agile and willing to move on to new destinations where economic opportunities arise.

## 4. Conclusion

Gulu town is among the top ten fastest growing cities in Uganda. The rapid growth of Gulu is a result of population displacement due to the conflict in northern Uganda and rural to urban migration from Gulu District. Rural to urban migration can be attributed to a range of push and pull factors. Poverty (which also cuts across the specific drivers of migration in Gulu District) in rural areas and the failure of the returning population to reintegrate into pre-conflict communities drive people to migrate to Gulu town. Simultaneously, migrants are pulled by the promise of economic opportunities in Gulu, as well as the relative availability of social services (schools, healthcare) compared to rural areas. Improved infrastructure has greatly improved communication and reduced the time it takes to travel between Kampala and Gulu, which further enables migration.

There are three main types of migration to Gulu town: Rural to urban movement from Gulu District and nearby rural areas in the Acholi sub-region, including former IDPs; movement from other parts of the country; and foreign migration from other countries, including refugee movements from South Sudan. Evidence from this study suggests that migrants estimate the costs and benefits of moving before making the decision to move. Migrants are often aware that successful migration and insertion in Gulu town requires financial resources, individual skills, social networks and technologies to reduce risks. Savings, the sale of personal assets, and borrowing from relatives and friends are some of the main ways migrant respondents finance their migration to Gulu town.

While Gulu offers various economic opportunities, these are mainly in the informal sector, such as street vending, driving a *boda boda*, market vending and commercial sex work. Informal sector activities are shrouded in uncertainties, risks and are often (but not always) defined by horizontal economic mobility. With limited industrialization and no robust commercial sector, migrants unable to find the envisaged quick returns in Gulu town are likely to move on to other destinations. For migrants from other areas of the country, Gulu serves as a transit point to other destinations, where economic opportunities may be more promising.

For the site of origin, rural to urban linkages are largely advantageous. Migrant remittances to rural areas have improved the purchasing power of households and remain critical in meeting basic needs, such as healthcare, school fees and funeral expenses, as well as for other emergencies. Despite this, loss of family labour and the sale of family assets, including land (to facilitate migration or as a result of land disputes among returnees), pose significant challenges for rural areas. Corresponding to the loss of rural family assets (land) is the loss of a fall-back position should migrants fail to establish themselves in urban Gulu. This can increase the risk of homelessness and greater poverty.



The government of Uganda has a responsibility to create a conducive environment for economic development in the rural areas. To stem rural to urban migration for economic reasons, rural areas need to be made economically viable. While community leaders regularly condemn young people in particular for being complacent, little has been done to organize this segment of the population for agricultural production and to harness the abundant land in Gulu District for agricultural development. Moreover, government agricultural policies have further marginalized agricultural production as a viable enterprise that can spur growth and development. A taste of the market in South Sudan prior to 2013 points to the fact that agriculture can be lucrative, if the right market exists. Indeed, there is a market, defined by a growing population in Uganda, a refugee population and a demand for food products in neighbouring countries.

Factors that hinder the successful return and reintegration of former IDPs into their pre-conflict homes need to be adequately addressed. Land conflicts, for instance, need to be resolved as part of a review of customary land tenure. While the Acholi people adhere to customary ownership of land, land grabbing throughout the region, along with the denial of access to customary land for particular segments of the population (namely, widows and orphans with no close relatives to support their land claims) necessitates a review of customary practices.

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