

## 9 | The IDP economy in northern Uganda: a prisoners' economy?

Morten Bøås and Ingunn Bjørkhaug

### Introduction

The IDP (internally displaced person) camps of northern Uganda are about to be closed, that is if the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) does not return to its place of origin, but continues to be based in the borderland between the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Sudan (North and South) and the Central African Republic (CAR). However, the extended experience of displacement in northern Uganda that started in 1996 was so unique that it is not only bound to have long-term consequences for the displaced, but also needs closer analysis, as there is no guarantee that this could not happen again both in northern Uganda and elsewhere in Africa. The first aspect of this particular displacement context which we must come to terms with is the sheer number of people displaced. As the war peaked in 2005, 1.3 million people were displaced; that is, almost the entire rural population of the districts of Gulu, Kitgum and Pader were physically relocated into IDP camps. Secondly, while these people were very effectively displaced, their displacement – and relocation – occurred at only a short geographical distance. In some cases, people could see their homes, but could not go there owing to the security regime under which they were placed by the Ugandan army (UPDF). Thirdly, the very tight regime under which they lived severely limited their mobility, failing to offer them security while leaving them in appalling living conditions from which any form of escape was very difficult. Fourthly, and consequently, they were constantly afraid and extremely poor. They had limited cash income opportunities, almost no credit available, and very few received remittances from relatives outside of the war zone. It is this combination of extreme and localized constraints over a sustained period which constituted the overall conditions for the IDPs of northern Uganda.

The consequence of these conditions was a violent life-world of inactivity, the kind of 'beggars cannot choose' prison-style economy whose very crude logic of governmentality forced people to carve out a living at the very margins of existence. In the IDP camps, life became 'life as biopolitics', where human beings were reduced to 'bare life' (Agamben 1998). Rather than living a qualified life, the IDPs were deprived of almost all rights and thereby the possibility

of dignity. As such, the IDP camps bear a resemblance to the concentration camps studied by Agamben and what he called the '*conditio inhumana*'. On the other hand, the IDP camps of northern Uganda were not governed by law or decree, but rather by vagueness and the unwillingness of the government to accept responsibility. Yet the effect on 'life' and 'body' was nonetheless almost the same, as what was supposed to be temporary – a brief exception – became the rule and the norm. In effect, life was reduced to the existence of 'bare life', as in Agamben's (1998, 2005) 'state of exception'. It was in this highly circumscribed state that the inhabitants of the camps were trading, bartering and begging, but mainly waiting for whatever little bits of material goods and money could come their way.

This represents a very extreme version of a displacement economy: of changes wrought in lives and livelihoods by a confluence of forced displacement and sustained confinement; such conditions created tragic paradoxes, but little in the way of productivity in a positive sense. The IDPs were effectively locked up in camps by a combination of the security approach adopted by the UPDF, and the international community's understanding of the LRA war. The latter resulted in a largely unquestioned acceptance of the approaches of the Ugandan state and army to the war and to the civilian population. This meant that the camps and the parts of northern Uganda most severely affected by the conflict were isolated from the rest of Uganda. This clearly limited livelihood opportunities for the IDPs, who had very little room for the kind of creative manoeuvring and social navigation in relation to events, agents and structures observed in refugee and IDP camp situations elsewhere (Turner 2010). As the war-affected north was politically isolated, there were few avenues for seeking political influence, and apart from for economic actors connected to the UPDF, there were few if any opportunities for the IDPs to invest in clientelistic relationships with potential patrons or 'Big Men'.

The story we tell from northern Uganda is therefore an extreme case, but we still claim that the prison-like economy that it created and the paradoxes that this entailed offers a picture of the conditions of displacement that is of value to a perspective that seeks to illuminate the paradoxes of crisis and creativity inherent in displacement economies. Even in an extreme 'prison' like the camps in northern Uganda there is some degree of productive agency, but in such a context this often primarily reflects a tactical agency that is short in time horizon and with a transformative capacity that is likewise low.

This chapter analyses this kind of life-world in northern Uganda by utilizing data the authors gathered in 2005 (see Bøås and Hatløy 2005).<sup>1</sup> This was the first large IDP profiling exercise implemented in northern Uganda. In this exercise, UNDP (the United Nations Development Programme) was the lead agency of the international community in Kampala, acting in collaboration with the Ugandan Office of the Prime Minister. However, UNDP also sought

co-financing from the European Union Acholi Programme, the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and USAID Uganda. The aim of the 2005 study was to gather systematic data about the situation of the IDPs. These data were to become the basis for national and international humanitarian interventions in northern Uganda. In addition, the chapter also draws on material gathered from a series of follow-up studies conducted in the region from 2006 and onwards by the authors (see, for example, Bjørkhaug et al. 2007).

**Origins of the camps** Several armed groups have been fighting against the Museveni government in northern Uganda since the National Resistance Army (NRA) seized power in 1986. The most durable of these has been the LRA. The LRA, led by Joseph Kony, was established in 1988, and from 1994 it operated from bases in southern Sudan. Since 2006, although no longer operating in northern Uganda, it has spread in and between the DRC, the CAR, Chad and Sudan (see Allen 1991; Behrend 1999; Doom and Vlassenroot 1999; Finnström 2003, 2005; Bøås 2004; Prunier 2004, 2009).

Kony and the LRA have never attempted to become a mass uprising. If we were to remove all the spiritual elements associated with it, it might be considered a brilliant but extremely brutal case of classic guerrilla warfare: operating in small, highly mobile units of often no more than four to five persons. In the beginning of the conflict, however, there was an unspoken agreement that the LRA's struggle was directed against the UPDF, and as long as the Acholi population did not actively support the government they would by and large be left in peace.<sup>2</sup> Thus, while the population lived in their original villages they could negotiate agreements with local LRA commanders. Some of these relationships were friendly and mutually supportive, others cordial, and some hostile. At the time, the behaviour of the UPDF was so violent – they plundered, raped and killed – that at least in some areas Kony's men could count on support from the local population. This relationship started to change, however, when the government initiated the 'bow and arrow' groups (local defence groups), and it deteriorated completely with the establishment of the IDP camps all over Acholiland in 1996. Both in Kitgum and Gulu districts the population was forced by the UPDF to form civil defence groups. These were not very efficient as a protection force, but Kony and his men interpreted their formation as a betrayal and treason against the cause they were fighting for. This marked the beginning of the relative isolation of the LRA from the civilian population they were supposedly fighting for. Driven further into isolation by the establishment of the camps, the LRA increasingly turned inwards, creating its own cosmology of violence nurtured by a sense of betrayal.

Some of these camps were established voluntarily, some by order and others by force. The stories people tell about the establishment of the camps

and the degree to which they voluntarily moved into them differ not only from camp to camp but also from person to person. Some reported that they received orders from the Ugandan army to leave their home and go to a camp. However, it is also clear that others moved voluntarily because they were afraid of the LRA, and wanted to be protected. The people who refused to go were moved with the use of different degrees of force by the UPDF (see also CSOPNU 2004a).

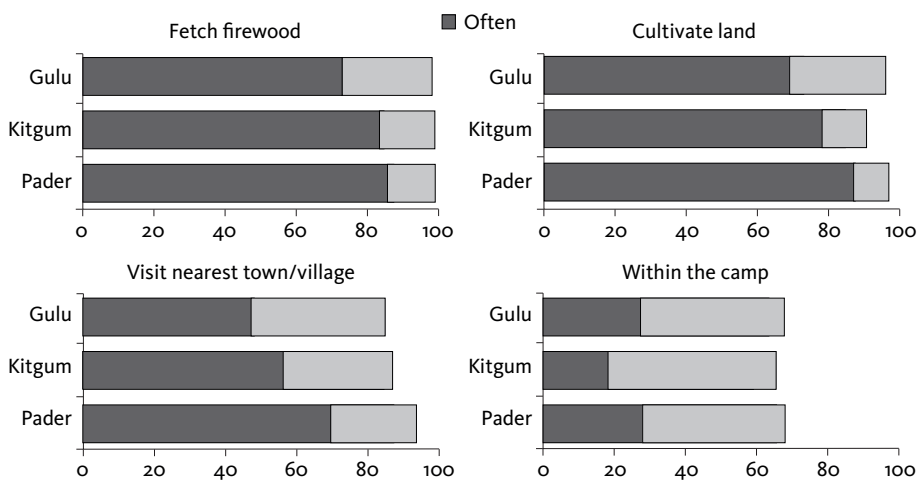
In Coo-pe camp in Gulu, the story commonly told was that people had moved to what had been started as a 'protected village' in 1999. Prior to the war, this was such a little village that it did not even have a name. More people arrived in Coo-pe owing to increased insecurity in 2002, and eventually so many had come that it was recognized as a camp in February 2003. As the camps were never officially declared as either being made or established by the Ugandan government, this meant that a camp like Coo-pe was recognized as a camp only when its inhabitants started to receive regular supplies from humanitarian agencies. In Karo Lapainat (also called Tee Tugi), another camp in Gulu, the common story told was a different one. The majority of the IDPs in this camp originate from Koro sub-county, and they were told by local UPDF commanders that they had forty-eight hours to leave their homes. As no directions had been given about where they should go, they first went to Gulu Town. However, Gulu was already overcrowded with IDPs, and there was very little space for them there. They were therefore relocated to Karo Lapainat by the government. The camp there was finally established on 18 November 2003. These and several other stories suggest that the establishment of the camps was undertaken in a haphazard and uncoordinated manner. In between ad hoc government approaches to the IDP crisis and an underfunded and understaffed international response, there was very little coordination among the different actors. The main reason was that the camps were meant as a short-term solution to an emergency situation, but they ended up as an almost permanent disruption and reorientation of traditional Acholi life.

The establishment of the camps was supposed to contribute to bringing a swift conclusion to the war: by clearing out the countryside the government believed it would cut off rebel resources and give free rein to UPDF units. The entire operation of moving people into camps was meant to be brief and decisive. Ten years later, however, people were still in the camps and their number had grown immensely (Bøås and Hatløy 2005).<sup>3</sup> After the start of UPDF's Operation Iron Fist against the LRA in September 2001, up to 95 per cent of the rural population of Gulu, Kitgum and Pader had been displaced into IDP camps (ibid.; Human Rights Watch 2003) as the war continued apace.

## Confinement and the production of fear

As noted above, the camps were supposedly established in order to defeat the LRA and to facilitate the army's ability to protect the civilian population. People were to be offered protection, and in order for their security to be increased they had to give up some of their freedom of movement. This entailed the establishment of security zones around each IDP camp, limiting the distance that camp inhabitants could walk from the camp in which they lived. Thus, one way of understanding the situation is that people either voluntarily or through force made a trade-off, very much like 'man' in Hobbes's *Leviathan*, between individual freedom and security (Hobbes 1958). However, with hindsight it is clear that these IDPs did not get what they may have believed that they bargained for. Having little choice, they moved to the camps, but this did not substantially increase their feeling or the reality of being secure. On the contrary, people were generally afraid both within and outside the camps. As Figure 9.1 shows, 90 per cent were afraid to leave the camp where they lived in order to fetch firewood; a large percentage feared cultivating their land or visiting neighbouring towns and villages; and as many as 60 per cent expressed fear inside the camp as well.

The size of the security zones around each camp varied substantially, from 300 metres to several kilometres, but generally movement was allowed only between nine in the morning and five in the afternoon. Beyond these hours a curfew was imposed, and those who ventured outside of the security zone at the wrong times ran the double risk of either being attacked by the LRA or accused of being a rebel or a rebel collaborator by the UPDF.<sup>4</sup> The UPDF experienced casualties regularly, and when it encountered people where no



**9.1** Fear of being mugged, attacked, raped, shot or harassed by LRA, by district in per cent by adult population

civilians were supposed to be, it was easy to act under the assumption that they must be LRA, or in collaboration with the LRA.

Movement in the bush around the camps was even more strictly regulated. As Table 9.1 shows, not many IDPs were able to move outside of the camp more than three kilometres. Some were not even allowed to move as much as one kilometre. Only 6 per cent could move more than five kilometres from the camp. The restrictions were the harshest in Pader, followed by Kitgum and Gulu. However, in all the three districts, such regulations limited the movement of people. Among the many implications of these conditions was that people were denied access to their land, which became a strong marker of the prison economy we discuss later in the chapter. Another of the increasingly severe effects was decreased access to firewood, needed for daily life inside the camps. The longer the camps endured the less firewood there was to be found near by – that is, inside the security zone. This made it especially difficult and dangerous for women to obtain firewood.

TABLE 9.1 How many kilometres people could move outside the camps, by percentage of the adult population

District	< 1	1	2	3	4	5	> 5	No restrictions
Gulu	2	9	37	26	10	8	8	1
Pader	1	27	36	25	5	2	3	0
Kitgum	1	19	46	17	5	3	8	0
TOTAL	2	16	39	24	7	6	6	1

The restrictions differed from camp to camp, and how they were handled was left to the local UPDF commander. The regulation of movement was enforced more pragmatically in some camps, where local leaders or groups of IDPs were able to negotiate either reduced restrictions on movement, or in some cases even provide escort services for women collecting firewood through the establishment of cordial relationships with local UPDF commanders. However, we also need to be aware that there were many extreme cases as well. One of them is Attiak, in the northern part of Gulu, along the road to Sudan. This camp was the site of one of the first major LRA massacres. This happened in January 1995 when LRA rebels under the command of Vincent Otti attacked the camp, killed several hundred people and burnt substantial parts of it. After the camp had been rebuilt, there were close to 29,000 people living there. This sizeable population was de facto locked up in this camp, which was constructed for some kilometres along each side of the road. Inhabitants could walk on the road only between 9 a.m. and 4 p.m., but to where? The nearest city was far away, and the security zone was no more

than 300 metres wide at its narrowest point. One can only guess at the kind of long-term psychological effects this had on the population. Formally, the camps may have had some of the features of protected IDP camps elsewhere in the world, but in essence they became prisons. Yet at the same time they were without adequate protection. This turned them into a system of spaces that mainly produced fear.

**Safety in numbers or a ‘fear factory’?** An important feature of camp life was the extreme population density. As Table 9.2 shows, one third of the households were situated on squares with eight households or more.

TABLE 9.2 Number of households in each Selection Area (SA = 625 m<sup>2</sup>) as percentage of Selection Areas

	Gulu	Pader	Kitgum	TOTAL
0–3 households	22	17	18	19
4–7 households	43	52	45	47
8 + households	34	31	37	34

There were of course variations between the camps in this regard. Some were better organized, some worse, some extremely densely populated and others somewhat less. One of the most densely populated camps was Labuje camp, just outside of Kitgum Town in Layamo sub-county. Here 17,000 people lived on just 17 hectares of land. This camp was established in August 2003 by the inhabitants themselves after they were directly threatened by Vincent Otti, the then second-in-command in the LRA. One of Otti’s many ‘wives’ originated from Layamo, but during the summer of 2003 she managed to escape. Otti made it clear to the population of her sub-county that he not only wanted her back, but also wanted compensation in the form of food, money and more wives and children, for the humiliation her escape had caused him. First the inhabitants of Layamo tried to ignore Otti’s threats, but when LRA units started to attack their villages, and told survivors that Otti had ordered them to kill all who lived in the area until his wife had been returned and he had been compensated, they saw no other protection than that to be found in density and numbers. People desperately afraid of Otti and his men established Labuje camp on a small plot of land. Initially they were not that many, but the camp rapidly grew in size as Otti’s men roamed the countryside searching for those who remained. Three years later 17,000 people lived there, still in constant fear, waiting for Otti’s revenge. None of them believed he had forgotten his promise to kill every single one of them. To the majority of the population, the camp became a ‘fear factory’, their lives characterized by constant fear.

Fear of the LRA and of particular commanders was one thing. There were, however, also many other factors of fear related to camp life. As many as 75 per cent of the female-headed households in Pader had more than three persons living in each hut. Such a dense living and livelihood context can clearly be defined as congested. About 60 per cent of the rest of the population were also living like this. This carried a number of obvious risks. For example, in such a situation of overcrowding both within and between huts, a small fire could easily set the whole camp ablaze. Similarly, the sanitary conditions were also a problem, as the limited space available for each household had to be shared by animals, children and adults, and was used for cooking, sleeping and storage (Bøås and Hatløy 2005).

It is against the background of the totality of the camp situation that one might understand the worries about the future that the IDPs expressed. Usually people think that tomorrow will be better than today, even under the harshest circumstances. This was not the case in Acholiland. When people expressed their perception about the future, as many as 55 per cent predicted it would be worse than the present, and 24 per cent predicted it would be the same. The people in Pader were even more pessimistic than their 'brothers' and 'sisters' in Gulu and Kitgum, where as many as 65 per cent anticipated life would be worse than it was now. This pattern was general across Acholiland. Overall, the living conditions were 'bad' in Gulu, even 'worse' in Kitgum and the 'worst' in Pader (ibid.).

**A reversing of space-time compression** By any standards, this was a deeply constrained and abject life. The IDPs were poor and hungry, and had insufficient supplies (of water and food) and services (health). The majority lived this way for a long time: some were displaced as far back as the early 1990s, but the majority between 1995 and 2002 (ibid.). Their misery was further increased by the fact that, unlike many other camp populations elsewhere (that is, both for IDPs and refugees), the IDPs in northern Uganda had not moved very far from their original dwellings and from the land that had previously allowed them an independent livelihood.

As shown in the report from 2005 (ibid.) only 5 per cent of the camp population were displaced to a district other than where they were born. One of four people lived in camps in the same place as they were born, and an additional 40 per cent lived in the same sub-county. This means that two out of three people were encamped in the same sub-county as where they were born and had been living prior to their displacement. Some of the IDPs, however, were forced away from their place of origin for a long time: 6 per cent had had to move for the first time even prior to 1991. Yet we should also note that the temporal pattern of displacement was not the same in the three districts that this chapter is concerned with. More than 50 per cent of the displacements



in Gulu took place in the period between 1995 and 2001, whereas the overall majority of the displacements in Kitgum and Pader first started after Operation Iron Fist was initiated in September 2001 (*ibid.*).<sup>5</sup>

In other parts of the world we are currently witnessing what is called ‘space-time compressions’ (Harvey 1989). The world is increasingly being made ‘smaller’ owing to modern communications and fast travel, meaning large distances are crossed in shorter time. In Gulu, Kitgum and Pader, the opposite was happening. The total size of Acholiland is roughly the same as Belgium,<sup>6</sup> yet most of this territory was completely emptied of people, apart from the occasional UPDF patrols and roaming bands of LRA, whose whereabouts nobody seemed to know with much precision. The IDPs, on the other hand, were by and large confined to their crowded camps on the edges of this vast, empty space, with restricted room to move. In many cases, the IDPs being interviewed could easily point out the direction of their place of origin and often it was even visible from the camp. The actual distance was not far at all, but they were effectively removed from it and unable to return. They could not cultivate their land and most had not even been able to visit it for many years. One can imagine the frustration of literally being able to see your land, your home, your place of origin, and not being able to visit it, to bury your dead there, or take care of your fields. Instead, your movement and everyday life are confined to the camp, the small security zone around it, and the roads, between nine in the morning and five in the evening. For the people of northern Uganda, war and displacement reversed the compression of space and time experienced elsewhere, by creating a vast gulf separating them from their homes, livelihoods and cultural heritage.

### **A prison economy**

The combined conditions of dislocation, confinement, isolation and continued insecurity and violence ensured that the IDPs in northern Uganda remained poor and marginalized. They had little or nothing in terms of basic household equipment and tools, had little money, and were almost exclusively without access to both formal and informal credit arrangements. One therefore needs to ask what sustained those who survived under such debilitating conditions.

**Dependence on aid** Given the extreme forms of securitized enclosure and lack of opportunities for production or exchange, the majority of those living in the camps were almost entirely dependent on humanitarian assistance (Bøås and Hatløy 2005). As Table 9.3 shows, 85 per cent of the households interviewed had received food aid. Approximately half of the households also reported receiving non-food items such as jerrycans, blankets, cultivation tools and seeds. However, this assistance was not equally distributed across camps.

People in Kitgum reported having received most assistance in terms of such items. There might be a number of reasons for this, but the most likely one is that these are items distributed less frequently than food and other daily essentials. There was more of this type of distribution in Kitgum as the camps were established there much later than in Gulu. In Pader, on the other hand, this kind of assistance had not yet started properly at the time of the study in 2005.

TABLE 9.3 Humanitarian assistance received by percentage of households

	Gulu	Kitgum	Pader	ALL
Food aid	83	93	85	85
Jerrycans	36	72	47	46
Blankets	38	76	36	45
Cultivation tools	41	67	34	45
Seeds	39	67	32	43
Kitchen utensils	29	73	26	37
Medicines	31	29	23	29
Clothes	9	12	5	9
School fees	5	6	5	5
School supplies	6	2	3	5
Shelter material	5	4	1	4

There may be several reasons why some households reported not having received food aid,<sup>7</sup> but one is the relative isolation of some camps. There were certain camps that were not serviced directly by the World Food Programme (WFP) owing to security considerations. In a camp called Omee Lower in Gulu (currently Amuru District), the inhabitants reported that WFP did not come to their camp for such reasons. This camp was very isolated with a distance of over twenty kilometres to the next camp, and the road was extremely narrow and the bush surrounding it dense. The escort service from the UPDF did not feel comfortable driving on this road when we visited the place in 2005. In theory food was delivered to this camp, as supplies were dropped at the nearest camp 20 kilometres away. The only option the inhabitants therefore had was to walk to collect it along a long and dangerous road. Another challenge involved in this process was that, for security reasons, the scheduling of WFP supplies was kept secret (in theory). It could therefore take quite some time before the inhabitants of Omee Lower were informed that supplies were waiting for them in the other camp. They reported that often, when they finally arrived to collect their supplies, there was not much left for them as other IDPs had helped themselves to their supplies. This kind of ‘opportunity’

to benefit from others' vulnerabilities reflected a context of desperation that compelled one marginalized group to steal from another.

The question about whether or not people had ever received assistance was important. However, given the extreme levels of dependence on such aid, it was even more crucial to know when they had last received food and non-food items. Among the 85 per cent who reportedly received food aid, as many as 15 per cent had not received assistance in the previous two months (Bøås and Hatløy 2005). This is a high figure given the fact that the rations were intended to cover 70 per cent of household needs for one month.<sup>8</sup> This shows that even though most people did receive some food aid, there were still nearly 30 per cent of the households which either did not get any food aid at all or received it irregularly. However, it should also be noted that the supply of food that did take place saved a number of lives, as the alternative would have been a situation of mass starvation.

**Coping through food aid and petty trade** As shown above, the IDPs mainly survived on humanitarian aid, including food and non-food items distributed by WFP and other humanitarian agencies. Yet, even if the economic opportunities in the camps were few, people still tried to negotiate their everyday existence by brokering the few deals that could be made. The typical IDP in northern Uganda was therefore a figure existing betwixt and between the 'beggar' and the 'broker'.

Some IDPs were involved in petty trading, and all the camps had some sort of market. Some of these markets were well established; this was particularly the case for the larger camps that were situated along major roads and/or close to frequently travelled crossroads. The rest tended to be much smaller and more informal.

TABLE 9.4 Use of food aid by district and by percentage of those who received food aid

	Gulu	Kitgum	Pader	ALL
Used by household members	92	94	98	94
Sold food ration	19	10	7	14
Shared with others	18	10	6	13
Saved	5	1	1	3

*Note:* Households might use the food aid for multiple purposes; the percentage adds up to more than 100

Table 9.4 shows that the majority of the households used the food distributed to them for their own consumption. However, it was also common

to sell some of the food aid. Here there is a difference between the districts – it was much more common in Gulu to sell part of the food rations than in Kitgum and Pader. This was not because people were poorer in Gulu, but because there were more opportunities for this type of trade in Gulu than in Pader especially, but also in Kitgum. Gulu is more centrally located than the two other districts and the roads passing it were also more frequented by people with some purchasing power than in the two other districts. Gulu is the political and economic centre of Acholiland, and therefore there was generally more economic activity and more money in circulation there during the war.

**Access to land and cultivation strategies** As already indicated, the IDPs in northern Uganda – despite continued close proximity to former homesteads – were almost completely dislocated from their land. However, some were still able to supplement their household income with limited small-scale agricultural activities. This was usually conducted in the form of small garden plots in the security zone surrounding the camps, along the roads, or on small plots around their huts. A few people also continued to commute back and forth to their home of origin to cultivate their land, despite the huge personal risk this involved. But as shown in Table 9.5, only one out of five households had access to land outside the camp.

TABLE 9.5 Access to land for cultivation adjacent to the camp, percentage of households

	Gulu	Kitgum	Pader	ALL
Access to land	26	18	16	22
No access to land	74	82	84	78

Yet not all those with access to land cultivated it. As Table 9.6 shows, 13 per cent did not cultivate the available land. The reasons for this were mainly linked to security concerns (see also Figure 9.1).

TABLE 9.6 The use of cultivation land – percentage of households with cultivation land adjacent

	Gulu	Kitgum	Pader	ALL
Not cultivating on accessible land	13	9	18	13
Cultivating on accessible land	87	91	82	87

The volatile security situation, alongside the extreme spatialized constraints of the IDPs, also led to some changes in agricultural practices. LRA units by and large sustained themselves on what they could loot, and those that were most vulnerable to looting were mainly the civilian population (that is, the IDPs). This led some people to start cultivating crops that were not as easy to loot or which demanded careful preparation before they could be consumed. Crops such as rice and cowpeas were less attractive as loot for the rebels, who most of the time relied on hit-and-run tactics and high mobility. Another new coping strategy for those who were able to cultivate was to sell their products as soon as possible after harvesting, in order to avoid the looting and destruction of their granaries (see also Finnström 2003). This provides one example of how people adapted strategically to the events happening in their midst and the conditions of existence over which they otherwise had little if any control.

**Alternative coping strategies** The hardships in the camps led to a life where it was difficult to make money and living was mainly a matter of barely surviving. This is further illustrated by looking at people's income in the month preceding our interview. This is captured in Table 9.7. Few were engaged in economic activities as a result of limited economic resources and the lack of external trade networks. In all districts more than half of the population reported zero income the previous month.

TABLE 9.7 Preceding month's income by those who had engaged in economic activities in the previous year, by percentage of adult population

	Gulu		Kitgum		Pader	
	No activities	Activities	No activities	Activities	No activities	Activities
0 UGX	63	53	71	61	78	67
< = 5,000 UGX	17	17	12	22	14	15
5,000–10,000 UGX	6	10	5	5	4	7
10,000–30,000 UGX	9	10	7	6	3	7
Above 30,000 UGX	5	9	5	6	2	3

Note: one dollar = 1,715 Ugandan shillings, reference year 2005

As in all war zones, one possible and also obvious coping strategy, in particular for young men, is to join an armed faction or an army. War-making can without doubt be seen as (violent) labour, and in the case of northern Uganda, the most likely option was the government-established Local Defence Units (LDUs). LDU recruits were normally employed on short-term contracts,

but should have, in theory, received a month's training, a uniform, a weapon and ammunition, as well as a monthly salary of 40,000 Ugandan shillings. Most of the recruits did receive some payment but it was highly irregular,<sup>9</sup> leaving the LDUs without much motivation. For those who did receive their pay cheque at relatively regular intervals, this was invaluable as it was one of the few ways of making some money. Nevertheless, it appears that the IDPs did not trust the LDUs very much as they were generally perceived as badly trained and little match for a battle-hardened crew of senior LRA fighters. However, the cash income they injected into the community was certainly appreciated, given how few other sources of cash were available in the camps.

### **An economy of fear and uncertainty**

On the other side of the coin, the LRA itself had to find its own ways of surviving. In strictly military terms, it was not particularly strong. It was not an armed movement that could overthrow the government. Nevertheless, it should not be underestimated either. The LRA has been able to keep its struggle going for a remarkably long time by strategically using fear to maximize perceptions of threat. Its violence in northern Uganda was random, unpredictable and highly visible and symbolic. Its killings, mutilations and abductions were a method implemented to institute control over the population, and the randomness of its violence compensated for its inferiority in numbers. The situation in Pader was a good example of this. Dominic Ongwen, the LRA commander in this district, did not have that many men at his disposal. The numbers reported by different UPDF commanders varied from eight to twenty.<sup>10</sup> But owing to the ability of these men to move great distances at high speed in a random pattern, they were very hard for the UPDF to catch, and the extreme violence they unleashed when they attacked instilled immense fear in the civilian population.<sup>11</sup>

**An economy of abduction and violence** Abductions, killings and shootings were all too frequent. As Table 9.8 shows, as many as 14 per cent of the households interviewed in 2005 had been the victim of a crime or a violent encounter in the previous month. The most frequent encounter was abduction; up to 7 per cent of all households had experienced this. The issue of abduction, and in particular the number of children who were abducted, is one of the key features of the war in Acholiland, but also remains a highly contested issue with regard to scale. The actual number of abductions remains unknown, but it is obvious that the figures described in most reports about this subject do not correlate with the number of active LRA soldiers. This means that the number of abductions reported must also have included attempted abductions and temporary abductions, as well as more long-term abductee situations. In-depth interviews suggested that a significant number

of the abductions lasted only for a short time, from some hours to a few days. People were captured by LRA units and used as porters to carry looted goods to certain destinations, and thereafter released.

TABLE 9.8 Households with victims of crime or violent encounter during the month prior to interview, by percentage of households

	Gulu	Kitgum	Pader	ALL
No victim	85	87	86	86
Abduction	8	7	6	7
Assault/beatings	2	1	3	2
Armed robbery/theft	1	1	2	1
Murder	1	2	1	1
Harassment for money or goods	1	1	1	1
Shooting	1	1	1	1
Mutilation	–	0	0	0
Verbal threats	1	–	0	0
Other	0	1	1	1

While in the battlefield, the LRA's strength was its mobility and ability to separate into very small units, often just two or three fighters moving together. When this was the case, taking abductees to be kept for a long period was not an option. It was neither physically nor economically viable. This only took place when units were moving back to more permanent bases outside of the war zone. In addition, in the same category, we also have cases where people were abducted but either set free by the UPDF or they were able to escape themselves because the LRA unit that had captured them was engaged by the UPDF.

On the other hand, levels of violence were consistently high. Table 9.8 shows that 1 per cent of the households interviewed in 2005 experienced the killing of a household member in the previous month. Even though the exact number is difficult to estimate with any great degree of precision, it does suggest that a high number of people were violently killed every month in 2005.<sup>12</sup> What all this adds up to is that the IDPs felt helpless and forgotten, unable to change or influence the circumstances under which they lived. It had a great impact on both their feeling of insecurity and on the economic situation they faced every day. From their point of view, each attack by the LRA undermined the government's authority and legitimacy because it was seen as a demonstration of the latter's inability or unwillingness to protect them (see also Doom and Vlassenroot 1999). In this interpretation, Joseph Kony was beginning to be viewed as omnipotent, his forces being able to strike the IDPs apparently at will. Of course, this was not the case in reality. The LRA

also experienced heavy casualties and its room for manoeuvre in the area decreased after the signing of the peace agreement in southern Sudan. And yet this was not necessarily how the situation was perceived in the camps. There, the IDPs were still effectively locked up in a regime of control combined with an environment of immense fear and insecurity.

The stories told by people living in camps close to a place called Omoro Hill in Gulu illustrate this. This is the area from which Kony originates, and according to local beliefs he is supposed to receive his powers from Omoro Hill, a small hill with a rather particular stone formation on the top of it. In order to preserve his power he must return to Omoro Hill once a year in order to perform certain rituals. Nobody could or wanted to specify what these rituals consisted of, but several people related that they had seen fire with many colours coming from the mountain followed by explosions during the night. This was believed to be Kony performing his rituals. Whether this was true or not is of little relevance. What is much more important is how this was interpreted. As one informant bitterly complained, 'why doesn't the government blow up this mountain', whereas another bystander argued that 'the UPDF should deploy around the whole mountain to catch Kony'.

When asked why they thought the army was not doing this, two explanations were offered: first, that the UPDF 'does not care about us'; secondly, that its soldiers are afraid. Of the group we talked to when we stopped on the road to look at this hill, the majority supported the second explanation. The soldiers, they believed, were afraid of venturing near the mountain; they were scared of Kony's spirits. The real strength of the LRA was (and most likely still is) not its numbers of men at arms or the violence it used in itself, but rather its symbolic connotations and the perceptions of strength, power and threat that it instilled in the population living in the LRA area of operation.

## **Conclusion**

As this chapter has demonstrated, the IDP situation in northern Uganda is among the most extreme cases of displacement. The conditions people faced, as discussed in this chapter, had a profound impact on their life choices and livelihood opportunities. Very few of the more common social navigation opportunities available to refugees and IDPs were within reach in northern Uganda. Here, the IDPs were constantly afraid and extremely poor, physically confined, and highly dependent on humanitarian aid. In effect they were locked into a camp situation that was meant to be temporary but turned out to be almost permanent exile from their homes and fields. The fact that they were so close to their former homes – many could even see their fields from the camps in which they lived, but could not go there – added a particularly painful dimension to their displacement.

This situation of such complete dislocation and confinement over so many



years affected people's aspirations for the future. They did not think that the situation would improve; they rather thought it would deteriorate further. Time after time the government had told the inhabitants of Acholiland that the LRA would soon be defeated: it was 'the last kick of a dying horse', as the UPDF commanders preferred to call it. However, in the IDPs' experience, the situation was getting worse year by year, month by month, even day by day. They found themselves living in what can best be described as a 'fear factory': they were afraid both of the LRA and the UPDF. But this was not the only source of insecurity that the IDPs were concerned about. Just as much as they feared for immediate violent threats to their lives, they were also faced with profound and persistent food insecurities. This produced a sense of constant waiting: waiting for the handouts of food from the international community; waiting for the few customers that might show up at their market; waiting for the LRA or the UPDF; but more than anything else, just simply waiting as there was so little left to do and so few places to go.<sup>13</sup> This could be said to reflect a condition of 'bare life': an existence that could be said to be the very essence of Agamben's state of exception. It suggests a place where not much happens and the days pass silently and uneventfully for those confined, with few to bear witness.

And yet, through a displacement economies lens, one is pushed to explore the interweaving historical, spatial, structural and social layers that constitute a displacement context, and to uncover some of the less visible dynamics that coexist alongside a condition of seeming inactivity. Adopting such an approach, the discussion here has underscored the fact that even in, and in fact because of, such a severely circumscribed displacement context as the IDP camps in northern Uganda, some kinds of productive – if primarily survivalist – activities are at play.

## Notes

1 A combination of quantitative and qualitative data was collected for this study. The quantitative data came from a household survey of 3,000 households. In addition, one randomly selected individual was interviewed in each household, and a number of qualitative interviews were conducted during the fieldwork.

2 This was also confirmed in the many interviews we conducted with IDPs for the northern Uganda Internally Displaced Persons Profiling Study (see Bøås and Hatløy 2005), but the findings from this part of the interviews were not published in that report.

3 One should note that this was

not the first time such camps were established in Uganda. They also existed during the war in the Luwero Triangle (1981–86). Each time Milton Obote's forces reclaimed an area from Museveni's National Resistance Army, they forced the civilian population into camps, under the presumption of improving their security but actually to control them (see Kasozi 1999).

4 The risk of falling prey to the LRA was higher than the risk of ill treatment by the UPDF. However, several IDPs interviewed also worried about being discovered by the UPDF outside of the security zone (see also Human Rights Watch 2005).

5 These figures correspond well with the numbers provided by WHO/Ministry of Health (2005).

6 The combined size of Gulu, Kitgum and Pader is 29,787 square kilometres, whereas the size of Belgium is 30,513 square kilometres.

7 Cases of under-reporting cannot be ruled out as it may make sense for people living under conditions such as this to under-report on assets and assistance, and over-report on household members, as this could mean that they would receive more assistance if the data collected were used to plan future humanitarian interventions.

8 Interview with Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) representative, Gulu, 8 June 2005.

9 It was claimed that it was not uncommon for LDU members to go almost six months without any pay at all. The main explanation for this is corruption within the ranks of the UPDF. See also Prunier (2004).

10 Most likely another case of under-reporting, as the LRA 'brigade' Ongwen led out of Pader to South Sudan in 2006 was clearly a larger force than this. IDPs we have talked to who met them talked about 'hundreds' and 'many', 'many'. The only one who may know the exact figure is Ongwen himself.

11 Ongwen has been indicted by the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity together with four other LRA commanders; these four others are Joseph Kony, Vincent Otti (confirmed dead), Okot Odhiambo and Raska Lukwiya (reported dead). Ongwen has a reputation as a brutal commander and he is much feared, but his case also highlights the human tragedy of the war as he is reportedly a former abductee himself who has grown up in the movement. As the older generation of commanders either dies or surrenders, his generation has moved up in the LRA hierarchy under the supreme leadership of Joseph Kony.

12 In the Health and Mortality Survey, there is an estimate of 3,971 people killed

from January to mid-July 2005. See WHO/Ministry of Health (2005).

13 One might compare this with the kind of 'active' waiting Jones (this volume) discusses.

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