

‘She told me that life here is so easy’: Urban migration of Acholi youth, Uganda

Key Messages:

- Acholi youth migrate into urban areas for three primary reasons: the lack of economic options in rural areas, inadequate land access, and family disputes.
- Female migrants cited family disputes, being pushed off land, and physical and sexual abuse as reasons for migrating, in addition to economic pull factors.
- Migrants have strong economic, livelihood, and social and emotional ties to their rural places of origin. Those who did not—mostly women—were among the most vulnerable.

Methods

This briefing note presents findings on migration of Acholi youth (ages 15 to 35 years) to the urban areas of Gulu and Pabbo in northern Uganda and to Acholi Quarter neighborhood in Kampala, the capital city in the southern part of the country. We also interviewed families of migrants in two rural locations in Nwoya and Gulu Districts in northern Uganda. The qualitative data consists of 112 semi-structured, open-ended interviews with men and women in the selected locations. These interviews took place between March and May 2018. These findings are complemented by analysis from the quantitative SLRC, Uganda survey that occurred in three waves in 2013, 2015, and 2018. The quantitative survey is representative of all households in Acholi and Lango sub-regions of northern Uganda, and hence primarily providing data from rural households. The Acholi and Lango sub-regions are the two sub-regions most affected by the armed conflict between the Government of Uganda (GoU) and the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) and home to more than 3.5 million people.

Key Findings

Why do young Acholi settle in urban areas?

A range of factors contribution to the decisions of Acholi youth to settle in urban areas. In most cases, these were a combination of economic and social push and pull factors. Overwhelmingly, the economic opportunities perceived to be available in urban areas attracted people to these towns and cities. At the same time, the lack of

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Credit: Young woman carrying a mat in Gulu town, Uganda. Thomas Cole.

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economic options in the rural locations served to push youth out of these areas.

Having a social connection to someone in an urban area was a main pull factor. Most respondents had secured their first job in the urban setting due to the pre-existing social connections via a friend or relative. Social networks were also important in helping people to find housing after they arrived in the urban setting.

In addition to limited economic opportunities, lack of land access was a major push factor that encouraged people to leave rural areas. Lack of land as a driver of migration was most common for women, in particular those who attempted to establish land claims after the dissolution of a marriage or upon returning with children born out of wedlock. It is also worth noting that this sample of vulnerable woman was not picked up using the quantitative primarily rural based survey.

Personal struggles in rural areas also contributed to urban migration. These struggles took the form of a second marriage of a respondent's parents, abusive relationships (with partners, parents, or step-parents), or experiences or threats of witchcraft. Both male and female respondents highlighted these issue as push factors, but females were more likely to cite physical or sexual abuse as influencing their migration.

Some respondents moved to towns specifically because of the improved access to services, especially education. These respondents felt strongly that schools in the urban settings were of better quality than those back home. A number of respondents explained that the only reason they remained in the urban area (particularly, for instance, after a divorce) was because of the educational opportunities for their children. Notably, the study population also included adults who lived in town but sent their children to school back in the rural districts because of the lower costs associated with education.

The conflict between the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the Ugandan government contributed to urban migration in several ways. Many respondents in Acholi Quarter had moved during the war to escape the insecurity, or had settled in Kampala in the immediate aftermath of the conflict when the stability of the north was unclear. Other respondents who had grown up in the internal displacement camps were unaccustomed to rural life and opted to stay in or move to urban settings after the conflict ended.

What is life like for those who have moved to towns and cities?

Respondents engaged in a range of livelihood activities in town, mostly unskilled or low-skilled forms of labor. In Acholi Quarter, for instance, the most common livelihood activities for women were bead-making, petty trade, and stone quarrying. The most common activities for men were construction and working in the security sector. Men in Acholi Quarter were more likely than women to have a sole livelihood activity, whereas women were more likely to engage in multiple livelihoods. In addition, women's activities were much more diversified than those of the male respondents in Acholi Quarter, Pabbo and Gulu.

Men in Acholi Quarter were also more likely than women to be engaged in semi-skilled work and to have undergone some form of professional, technical, or on-the-job training. Very few respondents in the overall sample had formal employment, had signed a contract, or were receiving any form of benefits (such as health insurance, formal savings schemes, or paid sick or holiday time).

The most common secondary livelihood for respondents in Gulu and Pabbo was agriculture, and a number of people moved back to their rural homes on a seasonal basis to farm. Others travelled back on weekends or for a few weeks at key times in the harvest calendar. Some respondents in Pabbo lived outside of town and worked in their fields for a set portion of every day while also maintaining their urban pursuits.

The high cost of living was a problem repeatedly expressed by respondents. The top three expenses listed by nearly all respondents, though with variations in the order ranked, were school fees, rent, and food. The fact that 'everything needs money' was a particular challenge for recent arrivals to urban areas who were unaccustomed to paying for food, water, and housing. In comparing town life to urban life, respondents often cited the ease of taking food from the gardens as needed.

Support to families in rural areas was a major source of financial out-flow for most urban residents. The amount, frequency, and form of remittances varied greatly based on the economic circumstances of the respondents and their relatives back home. Urban residents with more secure or better-paying jobs or those who were not also supporting dependents were generally able to send money more regularly and in greater amounts. In contrast, those with demand-based jobs such as petty trade, selling snacks, and bead making were more likely to send small amounts of money (often in the 10,000 to 30,000 UGX range, or \$2.65 to \$7.96) when they had some extra cash on hand. Many respondents explained that their remittances were specifically for school fees of those at home. Others (often those able to send money less often and in smaller amounts) were contributing to the general maintenance of households. People normally brought items such as salt and soap home with them when they visited; those who were better-off also brought clothing. A number of respondents in Acholi Quarter also sent food stuffs to the north, often by putting packages labeled with the receiver's name and phone number onto a public bus. Despite the regular sending of remittances, many respondents lamented that they were unable to adequately support their relatives who were living at home.

While the ability to make money was essential to getting by in an urban setting, social connections—or the lack thereof—may have ultimately determined who was able to succeed or fail in towns or cities. These social ties enable people to find employment and accommodation. They also serve an important function in times of hardship or emergencies, such as financial or medical crises. These social connections may have been newly established, such as neighbors or co-workers met after moving to the city, or with linkages to the rural home,

such as kinship ties. Not surprisingly, people who had been living in the urban locations for a longer period described more expansive and varied social networks.

How connected are young, urban dwellers to their places of origin?

A key finding from this study was the extent and depth of the social and emotional connections between urban residents and their rural places of origin. These often overlapped with economic and family ties and were reinforced through the exchange of remittances, food and other commodities. Importantly, almost all of the respondents interviewed in urban areas had either immediate household members (spouse or children) or close family (such as siblings or parents) living in the rural area. People stayed in touch through regular phone calls and visits, although visits were less common for those who lived farther away, such as in Kampala. Adult respondents in Acholi Quarter were often unable to afford regular visits to the north, but many reported that they sent their children to stay with relatives in the north during the Christmas school holidays.

The emotional connections to rural places of origin appeared to have a strong impact on identity and sense of self. Almost all respondents in Acholi Quarter, including those who lived there almost their entire lives, spoke of being ‘Acholi’ and the importance of raising ‘Acholi children, not city children.’ This was the case even for a young man who had been born in Kampala and had visited the north only once as a boy.

Some of the most vulnerable members of the study population were those with limited or non-existent connections to their place of origin. Several patterns exist across the narrative of these respondents, who were almost entirely women. First, they had normally experienced abusive inter-personal relationships, whether with male partners, parents, step-parents or in-laws. Second, they had often made unsuccessful attempts to access land. Third, they normally had experienced intentional or unintentional loss of contact with immediate family members. These women were more likely to be struggling to get by in the urban environment and lacking in support networks.

Importantly, economic support also flowed from rural to urban areas. Urban respondents reported receiving regular deliveries of food—especially in the post-harvest period—and occasionally cash. The receipt of cash seemed to be the most common when the migrant was younger and was initially establishing him or herself in town or in the event of an emergency.

A number of respondents in the study had specific livelihood connections to their place of origin. These included making regular investments in farming (such as by sending money for the purchase of seeds or to hire laborers) or in livestock (such as dedicating a portion of remittances to buy a goat each month), as well as those who were maintaining a business in the rural areas (such as brick-making). In addition, a small number of male respondents explained that they were in town

for exact and time-bound livelihood purposes, usually to save enough money to buy specific assets.

What do rural relatives think about family members’ urban migration?

Rural family members hold a wide range of views on whether urban migration is positive or negative for their household. Overall, however, most rural interviewees expressed understanding of and support for migration, especially when the rural family was receiving financial benefits from the migrant.

The diversity of economic opportunities in urban areas when compared to rural life was seen as an understandable and at times unavoidable reason for migration.

Youth migrants generally confirmed that their rural family members supported their move to an urban center. A notable exception was for women in the service industry—i.e., restaurants, bars, or hotels. This line of work is often associated with the sex trade, and urban respondents explained that they often told their friends and relatives at home that they had a different occupation. The sex workers in our sample either concealed their occupation or had no contact with their families for other reasons, including a history of abuse.

What are people’s longer term hopes and aspirations?

Overwhelmingly, urban respondents stated that they wanted to return to the rural north. Timeframes differed: some described short-term plans for such a move, while others said it would be ‘when they were old’ or ‘when the children finished school.’ Importantly, many of those who expressed a desire to move ‘home’ in the short term had been in the urban area for an extended period, and such plans may have been more aspirational than realistic. Some respondents, particularly those who had been unable to access land in their places of origin or who had experienced abuse, stated that they wanted to settle in the rural north but not in their original village. A few respondents, who were normally better-off and well-established, said that they wanted to continue living in town, but to own a property in the village in order to visit on a regular basis.

Comparing SLRC, Uganda qualitative and quantitative findings on migration

The SLRC, Uganda quantitative work also included questions around migration that were asked of rural households in Acholi and Lango sub-regions in 2013, 2015, and 2018. In addition, we added a module to the survey in 2018 that sought to capture household members who might have migrated but were not listed in the roster of people living in the household. Two key findings relating to migration emerge from the quantitative analysis.

Emotional connections to rural places of origin appeared to have a strong impact on identity and sense of self.

First, people conceive of 'migration' in very different ways, as there was little overlap between those households who reported that someone had migrated to pursue livelihood activities (as illustrated in the panel survey data) and those who reported that they had a migrant living elsewhere in Uganda or in another country. This implies that the way survey questions on migration are framed is of critical importance. One very likely omission in the quantitative survey is capturing information on the most vulnerable migrants, particularly women who might no longer have a connection to their rural home, as identified in the qualitative data.

Second, the data from both questions (the panel data and the 2018 module) indicate that migrants are predominantly male, slightly older than the general population, and have higher levels of education. Domestic migration was associated with better-off households, and migrants are more likely to be working in public or private sector.

Conclusions and Implications:

The majority of Acholi migrants interviewed for this study moved to urban areas in search of economic opportunities. While many had made lives for themselves in the cities, ties to rural areas were deep and strong for most respondents. Many expressed their financial obligations to relatives back home, and a number explained that they were in the urban area with the sole purpose of providing for their families. Split-households were common, as was seasonal or regular movement between urban and rural areas. Livelihood activities are diverse, particularly for women, but primarily un-skilled, ad hoc, and poorly paid. Job security and opportunities for career advancement are nearly non-existent. However, most migrants said that they would encourage friends or family members in the rural areas to move to the cities. The promise of wage labor is compelling, although most migrants in the north seek to retain a foothold in farming.

The implications of these findings for national and international programming and interventions are significant. Urban areas will continue to expand, and services—particularly education—need to expand in response to these needs. People are making decisions about where to live based not only on themselves but also on the needs and expectations of family members back home. Importantly, parents are weighing the quality and affordability of education for their children in their decisions about moving to or from urban areas.

While economic networks and skills are important for life in

urban areas, social networks and connections appear to be even more important for many people. Interventions often measure outcomes in terms of skills learned or incomes improved. This study implies that what people do with their money or skills—who they help, support, and educate—is a potentially even more important outcome.

Key differences exist between males and females in the sampled respondents. Overall, women worked more jobs in poorly-paid, less-skilled, and less formalized sectors. Men were more likely to have jobs that provided training and to work more hours in a single and often better-paying activity. In addition, the range of 'acceptable' livelihood activities are constrained by gender, with women who find labor in the service sector having to defend their reputations back home and among relatives. Interventions should seek to analyze the influence of social expectations and repercussions in the type of work people engage in. Taking this analysis into account, interventions should aim to improve the quality of work and levels of pay for both women and men.

Another important gender difference relates to vulnerability. The most vulnerable in the study population were women who did not have ties to their rural home or kin. Other respondents sought to balance support networks across rural and urban settings, but these women had no ability to fall back on rural food stocks, to send children home to relatives, or to move back to a village if things became too difficult in town. Notably, females in this category were not picked up in the SLRC, Uganda quantitative survey that focused on rural areas, presumably because they had weak or non-existent ties to rural households.

Differences in how households in the SLRC, Uganda quantitative sample understood 'migration' imply that future studies need to be fine-tuned to more effectively capture migration patterns. Such adjustments could include mixed methods approaches, over-sampling in rural areas to capture a sufficient number of households with migrants, and adjustment of survey questions to better capture split-households and the presence of female or youth family members with weak or limited ties to the rural area.

Interventions should aim to improve the quality of work and levels of pay for both women and men.

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Related work:

Mallett, R. Atim, T. and Opio, J. (2017) '[Bad work' and the challenges of creating decent work for youth in Northern Uganda](#). Briefing 25. London: Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium.

Mallett, R. Atim, T. and Opio, J. (2016) '[Youth on the margins: in search of decent work in Northern Uganda](#)'. Research report 14. London: Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium.

Marshak, A. Mazurana, D. Opio, J. Gordon, R. and Atim, T. (2017) '[Tracking change in livelihoods, service delivery and governance: evidence from a 2013-2015 Panel survey in Uganda](#)'. WP 59. London: Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium.