Impact Report: Beyond the Statistics Workshop

National Museum of Uganda, 26 May 2017
Acknowledgements

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Authors
Elizabeth Storer, London School of Economics and Political Science
Dr Nicki Kindersley, University of Cardiff
Lily Rice, British Institute in Eastern Africa
Introduction
The scale and complexity of the current crisis in South Sudan challenges description. The advocacy of journalists and non-governmental organisations – whilst generally based on good intentions – often relies on statistical descriptors, explanations of ‘inter-ethnic violence’, and impersonal stories of victimhood which serve to flatten this heterogeneous emergency. In short, many of these current accounts actually tell us little about the many ways in which new South Sudanese refugees are striving to live in dignity and manage exile.

In response to this discursive challenge, the ‘Beyond the Statistics’ workshop was hosted on the 26th May at the National Museum of Uganda. The primary aim of the workshop was to present some diverse commentaries – visual, textual and oral – on the historical and present dynamics of conflict, and create a space for South Sudanese citizens to present papers and debate. The event brought together an audience of over 80 members of South Sudanese communities, academics, and regional activists to discuss various ways of seeing the long history of violence and displacement.

In two panel discussions, scholars explored the practical, intellectual and emotional politics and history of displacement. Panel One, ‘Reflections on Long-term and historic displacement,’ featured presentations from Dr Mohamed A.G. Bakhit, Atem Elfatih, and Dr Nicki Kindersley. The second panel focused on the contemporary displacement experience, and hosted Peter Justin, Clement Samuel, Ogeno Charles, and Bashir Ahmed Mohammed Babikir. This intellectual focus was complemented by an exhibition of photography, a theatre performance and a free session of one hour at the end of the conference for the floor to speak of their own experiences.
Panel 1: Reflections on Long-term and historic displacement

Dr Mohamed A. G. Bakhit, Department of Anthropology, Khartoum University
Atem Elfatih, Likikiri Collective, Juba
Dr Nicki Kindersley, School of Law and Politics, Cardiff University (UK)
Chair: Ter Manyang, CEO International Youth for Africa(IYA), Gender expert on South Sudan and Africa

This panel focused on the historic and personal aspects of South Sudanese displacement in different regional settings. Dr Bakhit opened by presenting his long-term ethnographic research on how South Sudanese citizens resident in the shanty towns of Khartoum – who were Sudanese nationals before the South’s independence – negotiate their new national identity and precarious rights as ‘newly-foreign’. Atem Elfatih provided a personal reflection on the displacement he has experienced as an individual: drawing on his family’s history of slavery, forced migration, religious and ethnic change and heterogeneity, he complicated the neat distinctions often drawn around the supposedly ‘black, African, Christian, tribal’ South Sudanese communities. Dr Kindersley concluded with a historical analysis of South Sudanese songs written during periods of war and relative peace, drawing out continuities of emotional history and common experience across ethnic and historical divides. The panelists urged the audience to look to alternative places, and at alternative sources of evidence in order to represent a multitude of different experiences of displacement and negotiation in different settings.

Dr Mohamed A. G. Bakhit: ‘The citizenship dilemma of Southern Sudanese communities in the post-secession era in Khartoum’

Dr Bakhit’s presentation explores his recent ethnographic research into processes and negotiations of citizenship for South Sudanese citizens who were formally considered as Sudanese citizens, and remain in Sudan. Between 1983-1991, an estimated 2.3 million Southerners took refuge in the North, of whom 1.8 million settled in Greater Khartoum. It is with those communities still resident in Khartoum’s informal settlements – specifically in the Al-Baraka shantytown of Khartoum, where South Sudanese people form the second largest ethnic group – where Dr Bakhit conducts his research. By contrast, he notes that little attention has been paid by either scholars or policy practitioners to the relationships between identity, nationalism and citizenship in Sudan, and attributes this to an underlying fascination with processes of South Sudanese independence. Following the December 2013 political crisis and ensuing violent conflict in South Sudan, questions regarding the lack of South Sudanese national identification and commonality have surfaced.

Through deploying a multi-dimensional concept of citizenship – as both a status obtained by belonging to a collectivity such as the state, and also a system of rights and obligations – Dr Bakhit observes that despite this lack of formal
citizenship, South Sudanese people in Sudan are engaged in using two standards of citizenship: legal citizenship and community citizenship. In doing so, his work builds on the influential scholarship of Mahmood Mamdani, who developed his notion of “community citizenship” based on the colonial construction of division between citizen and subject. Dr Bakhit argues that deploying the latter category has afforded considerable numbers of people who do not enjoy legal citizenship the chance to survive and sustain social life. Social capital is a key component of ‘community citizenship’, as it is negotiated, constructed and communicated through daily interactions between different but related groups, including former work colleagues, returnees from South Sudan, old neighbours, and old friends from Sudan. Community citizenship has quite different dynamics, therefore, in terms of how it is practiced, to legal citizenship.

But this position is fragile. Since independence, many people of South Sudanese origin who had been resident in Sudan have been stripped of their citizenship. Of course South Sudanese people still resident in Sudan face the very real dilemma that they lack any formally recognized legal status in the country they inhabit. As such, people live under the constant risk of being arrested, charged with violating immigration laws, and the subsequent threat of expulsion to from Khartoum, to South Sudan. Without formal status, people are denied entry to the legal job market. Many people have a somewhat ambiguous status: unable to claim the rights of refugees without being able to access those of Sudanese citizens. Although security and protection may be satisfactory relative to the situation in South Sudan, South Sudanese in the slum settlements of Khartoum often subsist at a minimum standard. As such, Dr Bakhit emphasises the need to question the extent to which community citizenship really gives people the protection they need.

Atem Elfatih: ‘The question of displacement and identity’

Atem Elfatih’s paper focused on the long history of South Sudanese migration to the north, and questioned the distinctions between war displacement, migration, and the issue of Southern identity. He notes how the migration of families and extended family dependents created people’s ‘own colonies’; and illustrated the complexity of migration experience through an emotive account of his own family history. Elfatih – born in Darfur in 1967 – gained a political education and understanding of his own identity through life in Khartoum since 1976. Being both South Sudanese and Darfuri, both Muslim and an attendee of Christianity lessons, Elfatih noted the complexity of identification for many migrants who do not fit the neat supposed categories of “Black, African, Christian” South Sudanese, or “Arab, Muslim” Sudanese people. He also highlighted the fertile conditions of displacement in producing political solidarity and national community beyond ethnic lines: he explored the alternative understanding of South Sudanese displaced communities in Sudan that they were not, in fact, displaced: ‘this is our land.’
Dr Nicki Kindersley: ‘Some thoughts on recording the emotional history of displacement’

The final presentation used songs to explore both the politics and experience of South Sudan’s civil wars, asking whether recording and analysing historical and current songs about the civil war and refugee experience help to document a deeper emotional (and political) history of South Sudan. Opening her presentation, Dr Kindersley noted the immense difficulty which outsiders face when seeking to understand the experience and politics of displacement, particularly in the case of the overwhelming scale and trauma of South Sudan’s successive, multi-generational civil wars. Whilst recognizing this, she cautioned against reductive and collective analysis which often serves to either reduce people to statistics, or to fetishize this trauma as representative of multiple complex contexts. As a means of understanding these complex histories, this presentation discusses the legacy and significance of the popular culture of songs and sung poetry across all of South Sudan’s communities, as a means to seek out a more diverse and locally-rooted history of displacement experience. This presentation was based on recorded songs from the early 20th century to the contemporary context.

Dut Anyak Dit – ‘Kongku rot dit’ (‘We must study our souls’), c. 1992, Khartoum
We must study our souls,
and come together
We first study ourselves,
then we will become one
Let’s not be misled by blackness
But let’s be united by facts.

Whilst contemporary songs which criticise current politics and economy have received limited international attention, Dr Kindersley’s presentation also draws on earlier songs, dating to those recorded by the anthropologist Archibald Shaw in the early 20th century. Since the pre-colonial period of slavery and commercial raiding in South Sudan, songs were a popular medium of hiding meaning from slavers, colonial or Sudanese officials, and of discussing contemporary challenges.

Deng Fanan, untitled (N.D., 1990s)
What shall we do, brothers; what shall we do?
Makur and Majok!
What shall we do about North and South Sudan?
We have to sacrifice cattle
to free ourselves from hatred
It will need the sacrifice of cattle
to dispel hate from Sudan
We cannot let hatred destroy
an educated nation
We have to sacrifice cattle
to free ourselves from hatred
Makur!

Nuer song, c. 1960s (In notes of P. P. Howell, Sudan Archives Durham 77/2/1-195)
My home, Deng, my home has burned.
My home is cleaned out,
not even a place to sit.

... I hate going to town.
My money gets eaten by the British,
All of it.
I fear for the world:
Who can turn back the man
Of the village of Lie? (Ngundeng)
I fight the British who have teeth.
I crush the foreigners
Even as far as Ngok.
My wealth summons as many people
As the grasses of Yom.

As a medium, songs have a particular power to express and quite literally vocalise sentiments that might be difficult and even dangerous to express in other forms. Often, these creative ways of discussing deep-rooted issues can prevail over other forms of communication, such as the national press and radio, which often face intense state scrutiny. But crucially, songs have the potential to both unite, and encode difference. Whilst songs have proved to be healing and unifying forces and avenues to talk about some of the most painful experiences in some contexts, in others they have proved to be an effective means of promoting ethno-nationalist sentiments and hate speech.

In conclusion, Dr Kindersley reflected on the possibility for songs to enable a more personal understanding of a situation that exists on such a large scale, and suggested that South Sudanese scholars might want to involve a consideration for the changing themes, meanings and sentiments expressed in songs when approaching broader questions of how reconciliation and truth-telling might happen in South Sudan.
Panel 2: The Current South Sudanese Refugee Experience

Peter Hakim Justin, PhD Candidate, Wageningen University
Clement Maring Samuel, independent researcher
Ogeno Charles, Trust for Child Soldiers, and The Recreation Project, Gulu
Bashir Ahmed Mohammed Babikir, independent researcher
Chair: John Ryle, Rift Valley Institute

The second panel explored the dynamics of the on-going refugee experience, and questioned the actors and motives involved in perpetuating the present crisis. Opening the panel, Peter Hakim Justin questioned the de-politicisation of displacement in the current South Sudanese conflict, asking whether displacement was induced by ‘war’ or the state. He placed emphasis on the agency of South Sudanese citizens currently experiencing displacement. This emphasis was developed by Ogeno Charles, who drew on in-depth case studies from Northern Uganda to explain that in exile, a variety of familiar or cultural factors beyond conflict dynamics often govern decisions to remain in exile, or return. Clement Maring Samuel provided an in-depth account of current patterns in displacement in Uganda. Examining the religious dynamics of reconciliation instigated and witnessed by Salva Kiir, looking forward, he questioned what possibilities there may be for real reconciliation. The activist Bashir Ahmed Mohammed Babikir related this experience to the specific dynamics of displacement affecting Western Equatoria since 2005. Overall, this panel urged the audience to look beyond generalized accounts of crisis to the more nuanced factors which cause displacement and affect the experience of exile. Ultimately, such grounded analyses will be essential when developing strategies for reconciliation at multiple levels.

Peter Hakim Justin: ‘War-induced or state-induced displacement? The politics and dynamics of forcible displacement of civilians in South Sudan.’

Peter Hakim put forward four key questions: is forced displacement an unintended consequence of civil war? Does the state have the responsibility to protect displaced people? Is displacement seen as the movement of innocent civilians, who need protection? And who should protect them? The paper summarized some key arguments around the politics of displacement: Peter Hakim noted that displacement is a tool of war in some instances, and that the state can be actively engaged in displacing civilians as a part of conflict. He warned that this alternative definition of displacement, where the state is actively involved in civilian flight, challenges the international concept of ‘the responsibility to protect.’

Peter Hakim also emphasized the need to examine displaced people’s own agency, not least in their involvement in the on-going conflict, as ‘warrior refugees.’ He noted that people make conscious choices in flight – not just ‘running anyhow’ – and that displaced civilians continue to confront the state, including through violent resistance and joining insurgent groups.
Clement Maring Samuel: ‘The consequences of the on-going conflict on the IDPs, and refugees’ way out’

Clement Maring, an ex-civil servant and refugee from South Sudan, took the audience through a comprehensive survey of the situation for South Sudanese refugees in Uganda, and for internally displaced communities still within South Sudan – including the risks of famine. His paper focused on the historical legacies of repeated cycles of conflict, emphasising that many of those displaced or forced into international refuge in the current civil war and economic crisis will have experienced displacement and civil war before, in the 1980s-2000s or even in the Anyanya civil wars of the 1960s-1972. Clement concluded with a demand for analysis of displacement to take these historical legacies of trauma and wartime experience into account. He explained, ‘the pain and trauma caused by the current conflict from December 13th throughout July 8th 2016 to present has deeply wounded the hearts of South Sudanese, and caused bitterness, hatred and stress, compared to the level of the stress caused during the past Sudan’s civil war of 1983-2005.’

In economic terms, Clement drew on a 2017 UN World Food Programme Report to highlight that more than US$1.4 billion is now needed to facilitate South Sudanese refugees inhabiting six neighbouring countries. In Uganda, there are 898,000 refugees, 170,000 refugees in South Kordofan, refugees in South Darfur 375,000 refugees in Ethiopia, 97,000 in Kenya, 80,000, 76,000 in Democratic Republic of Congo, 2,200 refugees in Central African Republic and 1,793,000 Internally Displaced Persons(IDPs). He made clear that the current crisis in South Sudan is felt throughout East Africa.

Beyond these regional impacts, Clement explored what could actually constitute “real” healing and reconciliation. Interestingly, Clement then applied these ideas to the apology and apparent reconciliation of Salva Kiir during an SPLM meeting in early 2016. His paper elucidates:

‘Genuine apology includes all the people wronged, he could have said it like this: “I have reconciled with myself and with my enemies, and with God”, to make his reconciliation complete and to remove the mask of being a hypocrite.

However, the fact that he had said “I am sorry…”, send laudable message to the world, that he spoke it out of innermost conviction and felt remorse of what his leadership have failed the country to go for a meaningless war.

Paradoxically, the trust was lost when the crisis of July 8th erupted at J1. If that can happen in the shortest possible period of time following his public apology, what is the guarantee that the national dialogue will succeed?’

Clement noted the impact of trauma on ordinary people, and the bitterness of exchanges on virtual sphere: as such, the way forward must involve high-level peace negotiations, involving IGAD, AU and UN bodies, to pressure the government of South Sudan into implementing peace agreements.
Ogeno Charles: ‘Push-Pull factors: refugees from South Sudan’s long history of conflict and cross-border movement’

Ogeno Charles explored the complexity of decision-making among South Sudanese refugees, with decisions based on far more difficult factors than simply “war” or “peace.” He emphasized the importance of seeing family factors within the conflicts, for instance young women fleeing forced marriages, and movements dependent on the difficulties of receiving financial remittances from family members resident elsewhere in the region or abroad.

Bashir Ahmed Mohammed Babikir: ‘The challenges of researching and writing on displacement’

Bashir Ahmed explored the importance of seeing continuities of displacement from peace to wartime, using the example of Western Equatoria (located on the border of South Sudan, bordering Central African Republic and Democratic Republic of Congo), where displacement has continued since 2005 by the LRA and by the South Sudan national army.

Bashir explained how the people of Western Equatoria have been facing continued insecurity since the signing of Comprehensive Peace Agreement. The Lord’s Resistance Army entered South Sudan and carried out killings, rapes, abductions, lootings and burned houses and properties. The state army and the Government did not take any action to protect its people, so the community organized themselves to defend their locality.

When the December 2013 conflict started in Juba, Western Equatoria was said to be peaceful, but as Bashir argued, a lot of injustice had been happening behind the scenes.

Bashir’s presentation focused on the difficulties faced in writing and researching on the displacement, due to the restrictions from the authorities. For example:

1. Displaced people were forced by the government to return to the insecure area. For example in December 2015, refugees were moved to the charity ADRA’s compound for safety, but were then forced to return to their homes, though their houses had been burned, property looted and women raped.

2. Gaining access to Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) is difficult since it is not possible to identify them, and researchers are not allowed to interview IDPs.

3. In 2016 people were displaced in Yambio county while trying to cross to Democratic Republic of Congo; the army were instructed by the Government to block the road.
4. When people are displaced they often stay within their neighbouring communities, making it harder to reach the IDPs.

The above challenges contribute to lack of humanitarian support for the affected communities. Bashir concluded that most of the violations and incidents are kept undisclosed, leaving the community vulnerable and putting people at further risk.

The Q&A session was particularly lively, with the audience debating the utility of regional and international states’ involvement in the civil war in South Sudan; and the increasing ethnicisation of South Sudanese politics, and how this tribal view colours trauma and structural understandings of conflict resolution.

Part 3: Theatrical Interlude: South Sudanese United Students Association

Under the auspices of the wider South Sudanese United Student Association, young people within the Zande Community in Arua, West Nile have channelled their experiences of dislocation and exile into creative production. Through developing the script and regular performances of different theatrical works, Zande youth leaders aim to invigorate and unify South Sudanese city dwellers living across the urban space of Arua, whilst using drama to keep alive memories of life in South Sudan.
The various productions of the association depict the challenges faced at home – in Yambio, Western Equatoria – created through decades of war. Their productions grapple with diverse themes, from maintaining faith at a distance, and overcoming spiritual temptations of exile, to re-establishing a Zande Kingdom under the rule of King Gbudwe.

During this workshop, the theatre group offered a ten minute theatrical interlude from their play ‘Healing through God’s Power’. In its entirety, the play pans over different settings, all rooted in daily life in Yambio. In an opening scene, two young actors play a man and wife in an argument. Sitting opposite each other, the husband boldly declares, “I don’t need God, I need money”, whilst his wife gently reminds him that “it is God who brings the money”. In reply, the husband challenges his wife, “did I marry you or did you marry me. Don’t confuse yourself honey, money is man-made”. Other scenes capture scenarios where alcohol consumption, bad relationships and the use of witchcraft disrupt the harmonious balance of family and religious life. What follows is an exploration of how various South Sudanese citizens, in different life situations have turned away from their faith in God and religious activities during a period of relative peace in South Sudan, and are slowly encouraged to rebuild his faith. In short, their various works offer a grounded commentary into moral and spiritual commentaries of conflict and exile.
Part 4: Ethnographic Photography: Enduring Exile Exhibition

*Enduring Exile* explores the spiritual and material logics through which South Sudanese citizens endure exile, on an individual and communal basis. Deploying a visual narrative approach, in keeping with the theme of this workshop, this photo series aims to challenge commonplace, repetitive representations which equate the refugee experience to one of near total victimhood. The creators posit that the activities and logics through which those in exile construct community and live out their lives bear significant meaning. As such, *Enduring Exile* draws attention to aspects of local experience silenced by mainstream statistical explanations of refugee crises.

Specifically, this project is constructed on relationships built through on-going ethnographic research by Elizabeth Storer, beginning in 2016. All images were taken by Katie G. Nelson in late 2016. The project documents the lives of South Sudanese citizens living outside refugee camps in Arua Town. Since the outbreak of war in South Sudan in 2013, and the intensification of conflict during 2016, many South Sudanese have been forced to flee to the borderlands of northern Uganda. Estimates are continually changing, but at least one million people have been internationally displaced. Within that statistic, a diversity of different situations of exile are concealed.

Of course, many have little option but to seek refuges under the auspices of the Ugandan Government “self-settlement” project. Such groups have often been the
target of media attention, who are perhaps dubiously optimistic about the lifestyle afforded by these camps. But others have opted to live outside the gaze of the international humanitarian apparatus, often in Ugandan towns. One such city is Arua.

Owing to its location near to the border of South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo, Arua has long hosted a cosmopolitan population. Over prolonged periods of civil war since the 1960s, South Sudanese have periodically sought refuge within the city limits. Some have developed long standing links with resident communities of West Nile. Activating these networks is once again crucial for their survival. Living in this urban setting has the benefit of laying foundations for the future: education provides an essential investment for families. However, as exile continues, and the South Sudanese currency deteriorates further, meeting the costs of urban living is increasingly challenging, and life becomes increasingly precarious.

Many South Sudanese citizens fear encounters with the Ugandan state. Families are often stretched across different territories, the national jurisdictions of home and exile. As such, the experience of exile can be isolating. The different denominations of the Christian church are sometimes the only institution offering support for those individuals often subject to growing financial pressures, and sometimes social isolation.

Based on local realities and experiences of everyday life, this project follows the lives of South Sudanese women in their homes, public spaces and churches. This exhibition includes a series of photos from the Bishop Alison Theology College, Pajulu; Ambiriambati Anglican Church and the South Sudanese United Student Association Theatre Group. These extended glimpses of settings are complemented by images from St Charles Lwanga Catholic Church and portraits of the South Sudanese women who were involved.

A priority of this project was to involve participants in the shaping of this photo project, and their guidance and opinions were central in shaping the settings of the work. Furthermore, it was considered essential to share images with participants and church communities. In order for those involved to view their images at this exhibition, nine return tickets from Arua were funded through the Haycock Grant. The theatre group pictured also performed an interlude from their performance photographed in the grounds of St Charles Lwanga Catholic Church Oli.

The full range of images can be views at www.enduringexile.com. All images involved in this project were taken by Katie G. Nelson. Curation for this exhibition was provided by Kara Blackmore, funded jointly by the Haycock Grant and the AHRC/ESRC Politics of Return grant.
Conclusion

The open conversation that concluded the workshop was both challenging and emotional, with many audience members reflecting on their personal experiences, frustrations and fears. Those present offered a diverse range of life experiences in relation to the continuing conflict, emphasising the present regional and social differences in how the effects of war are felt within and beyond South Sudan.

Attendees were from a variety of professional and scholarly backgrounds, as indicated by the figure below. Many were connected to civil society or aid organisations, and engaged in projects with displaced groups. Others attended because of their frustrations at their inability to voice aspects of their current experience. Several stakeholders from Ugandan institutions emphasised the shared recent history of displacement and exile, particularly in West Nile and northern Uganda. The possibility of sharing lessons from on-going reconciliation in northern Uganda was also raised.

Moving forward, it is important to note that narratives of conflict remain dominated by particular narratives, often generated by outsiders. There are few spaces and
options for South Sudanese citizens themselves to challenge such accounts which often coalesce around tribalising narratives of violence, and generalised experiences of war-induced displacement. Many attendees commented on their limited power in challenging these narratives and prejudices, and focused on the need to discuss common trauma across political lines and the violence perpetuated by South Sudanese state actors.

Questions and comments raised included:

- how do we work against the exclusionary, tribalising, radicalising forces of the current civil war?

- What should the state look like in South Sudan? How should it relate to its citizens?

- The responsibility of truth-telling: versus the risks of accusations, cycles of violence, and failures of reconciliation;

- the silencing effect of distant refugee camps.

Many participants noted that this workshop was the first opportunity they had to voice their views and debate the experience of displacement in Uganda. Going forward, many attendees highlighted the need to facilitate more fora for South Sudanese citizens to speak freely of their experiences and ideas for the future.

Beyond this, routes onward could include providing support to regional primary, secondary and higher education institutions to host similar discussions, or more creative outlets including art or theatre projects. At present, whether based in camps or in cities, many South Sudanese in Uganda experience a sense of disconnection and dislocation. Many based in the refugee camps live in distant geographical locations, encountering little, regular institutional contact or support beyond what is deemed necessary for their basic survival. In many of the camps, there was also a consensus that life is becoming more uncertain, for instance as some food rations are reduced following limited notice.

Whilst many may be increasingly involved in camp-based UN and international non-governmental projects, there is little support for more political ideas to be discussed and heard, beyond perhaps (in some cases) dealing with immediate emotional trauma. A clear message from this workshop was that as interveners, it is important and urgent to stop a process of depoliticising ‘trauma’, instead giving space and support to refugee communities for intellectual and social solidarity.