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UNHCR's withdrawal from Kiryandongo: anatomy of a handover

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Introduction

The Kiryandongo settlement for Sudanese refugees is located in the north-eastern corner of Uganda's Masindi district. Part of a former cattle ranching area, land there was gazetted by the Ugandan government for use by refugees in 1990. The first transfers of refugees took place shortly afterwards, and the settlement is now well established, with land divided into plots on which people have built houses and have cultivated crops on a small scale. Anthropological field research (towards a D.Phil. in anthropology, Oxford University) was conducted in the settlement from October 1996 to March 1997 and between June and November 1997.

During the course of the fieldwork UNHCR was involved in a definitive process whereby it sought to "hand over" responsibility for the settlement at Kiryandongo to the Ugandan government, arguing that the refugees were approaching self-sufficiency and that it was time for them to be absorbed completely into local government structures. The Ugandan government was reluctant to accept this new role, and the refugees expressed their disbelief and feelings of betrayal at the move. These responses provide a starting point from which to examine the networks of relationships and modes of communication which existed between the vying interest groups and which are introduced below. Consideration of the attempt to hand over responsibility offers insights into the positions of the main players and also demonstrates how their respective involvement with the refugee situation interacts with their other related concerns. In this sense, an analysis of the way in which a handover was planned, the kinds of consultation which took place, and the steps which were taken, situates the settlement in its broader political and economic context.

An ethnography of the settlement at Kiryandongo which excluded the activities and assumptions of non-refugee actors would be misleading and incomplete. The frames of reality which are constructed and experienced by the refugees through time and across space are fundamentally influenced by the way in which they are able to interact with other powerful groups and institutions. In this paper, therefore, I document the position of some of these external players and consider the way in which their political and economic agendas generate some of the conditions the refugees are obliged to negotiate to make an acceptable life for themselves.

Contestation of the "handover" continued, to a lesser or greater extent, throughout the entire field work period and after. In January 1997 UNHCR withdrew InterAid, its implementing partner, from the settlement, and a new era began. InterAid's already reduced role in the settlement was taken over by personnel from the Ministry of Local Government (MoLG), financially underwritten by UNHCR. Meanwhile, negotiations over the proposed but not yet agreed handover continued. While UNHCR had failed to extricate itself entirely from the settlement, even at the time of my departure and beyond, the absence of an "implementing partner" in the settlement after this time sent a clear message about its desire to disengage.

For the refugee population, the idea of a handover was concomitant with ongoing feelings of individual and collective insecurity in the context of a life of uncertainty. The refugees

were again obliged to deal with a world in constant flux in the face of continual demands that they should invest in the present environment as if it were a static, certain one. News of the imminence of a UNHCR withdrawal provoked a lot of speculation among the refugees about its possible causes and likely consequences. In the fear for the future, the mistrust of Ugandan government personnel and other responses expressed by individuals, a picture began to emerge of the social effects of uncertainty and disruption on an abused, if adaptable, population. An examination of the handover negotiations and implementation also reveals the extent to which, despite an explicitly voiced desire to make the process participative in relation to the refugees, this was not achieved by the institutional actors who held power. The issue of the handover and the refugee population's perception of the role in it of each of the stakeholders is revealing of the way in which their political understanding of their predicament was constructed.

According to official statistics,¹ the population of Sudanese refugees currently living at Kiryandongo settlement numbers more than 9,000, although it is widely accepted that about another 3,000 unregistered individuals also live there. This population has in common with other refugees in Uganda being more often defined or labelled by others than they are by themselves. For many of the people and institutions with whom they come into contact, they exist as a structural or administrative problem about whom something must be done. There is little sense of the population, outside its immediate orbit, as one composed of ordinary people with complex and often contradictory priorities and preoccupations.

The Kiryandongo population is constantly aware of its refugee identity which interacts with other forms of self-identification and is crucially qualified by context. The fact that they are "*loring ayela*", or "people who have run away", is one feature of their experience from which they cannot escape, and they use it to mediate elements of that experience as necessary. For assistance-providing institutions, unfortunately, the label is generally considered unproblematic and sufficient as a way of characterizing them. The consequences of this reductive categorization as a way in which institutions relate to the Kiryandongo population in the course of their humanitarian activities are far-reaching.

The understanding of the assistance providers of their clients and their predicament appears to be one-dimensional. They fail to take into account the social and political ramifications of the refugees' situation, even when this has consequences for their economic survival. Inevitably a tension therefore exists between the efforts made by the refugee population to survive on their own terms, and those of the assistance providers who dismiss some of these efforts as unnecessary in the extreme circumstances of exile. Here, I examine the objectives and strategies of the key institutional and other actors, on the basis of whose attitudes and activities the external framework of the refugees' lives is constructed. In the first instance, a brief account is given of the various categories of people and organizations who are involved in the drama. Later, the relationships, competition and modes of communication between these actors are explored in the context of an analysis of the attempted "handover" of the Kiryandongo settlement by

¹ Compiled by one of the Ministry of Local Government representatives in the settlement.

UNHCR to the Ugandan government. This has implications for refugee populations in Uganda in general, and for the Kiryandongo population in particular.

The interest groups

Each of the players in this complex political situation has external pressures and priorities driving them. The extent to which the varying perspectives and assumptions of the different interest groups overlap and interlock is a complicating factor. Alliances and shared interests shift over time and in the context of different issues.

The refugee population in its socioeconomic context

The first frame of reference described is that of the refugee population who live in the Kiryandongo settlement. In March 1989, on the arrival of the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA) in Parajok in southern Sudan's Torit district, the population collected there fled towards the Ugandan border. The majority of the group were Acholi from Parajok and its surrounding areas; others had already been displaced from their homes by the fighting and had taken initial refuge in Parajok. Shortly after reaching Uganda, the population was accommodated at an Oxfam-managed transit camp in Kitgum district. Here they lived until constant harassment by rebels of the Ugandan Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) persuaded the Ugandan government and UNHCR that the refugees should be moved to a safer location. This took some time to arrange, although in the short term some refugees were airlifted to Adjumani and housed in camps and settlements there. These people have subsequently been subjected to further attacks by the LRA and the West Nile Bank Front (WNBF) in the Adjumani camps. Meanwhile, the Ugandan government was in negotiation with Masindi district over land for the settlement of the remaining refugees. The land in question was uninhabited, having been gazetted in the 1970s by the regime of Idi Amin Dada as a ranching scheme comprising 39 ranches.² In mid-1990 the arrangements were completed and the refugees in Kitgum were transported by lorry to Masindi and once again placed in a transit camp at Kiryandongo, prior to the establishment of the settlement there. Shortly afterwards, Oxfam withdrew from the settlement and were replaced by Médecins Sans Frontières as the implementing partner of UNHCR. They in turn were replaced by InterAid in 1992 and this organization remained in the settlement until early 1997.

While in transit, the refugee population lived on food rations provided by the World Food Programme (WFP), having no land or capacity to grow their own food. In 1992, however, a process of plot allocations was begun, and families started moving out of the transit camp, building homes and planting crops on the land which had been allocated to them. By the time this field research began in 1996, the transit camp was officially closed, although in practice a few people remained there. Also by 1996 most of the residents of two of the three ranches which make up the settlement were no longer receiving food

² The area in question has now been re-appraised and reorganized under the auspices of the government's Ranches Restructuring Board.

rations, having reached the level of self-sufficiency according to the evaluation of UNHCR.

In addition to people who came to Kiryandongo under the circumstances outlined above, the population increased under official family reunion schemes and as a result of influxes of people who were registered in other settlements or who had not previously registered as refugees with UNHCR. In 1995 a final census and re-registration process was undergone, and those who had been staying in the settlement illegally were formally recognized and allocated plots. By 1996, when I arrived in the settlement, approximately another 3,000 were illegally resident there, having arrived in the settlement after the 1995 cut-off date, after which the settlement was declared closed to new arrivals apart from those reuniting with immediate family members.

The implications of the presence of these “illegal” residents of the settlement are far-reaching. Their situation is extremely precarious, they have no land on which to build or farm and are forced to rely on the generosity of friends and family to support them, or to lend them a piece of land. Given the lack of employment opportunities locally, and the absence of sufficient capital with which to become involved in trade or other business, these refugees are often the most impoverished of all. This is particularly true of unmarried, abandoned or widowed women with children to support, and may partly explain the increase in polygamous marriage in the settlement. If life is difficult for them, it is often no less difficult for their connections, who are morally and culturally obliged to assist them, which most are absolutely willing to do. Nevertheless, registered family units which might stand a chance of achieving some sort of economic stability are often undermined by the presence of their unregistered relatives, in the face of institutional refusal to provide the latter with any assistance at all.³ Perhaps even more significant than this is the fact that the social services which are provided in the settlement are under enormous pressure, catering for a 30 per cent larger population than they are designed for. UNHCR and the Ugandan government insist that lightening their load by providing further resources would encourage unregistered refugees to stay in Kiryandongo instead of returning to those settlements where they are registered. In fact, UNHCR and the Ugandan government regularly attempt to oblige the unregistered refugees to leave the settlement, in the knowledge that many of them are registered in settlements where security is extremely unpredictable.

The locality

A few kilometres from the boundary of the settlement runs the main road from Kampala to Gulu, which crosses the river Nile at Karuma falls, some 25 kilometres to the north-east. On the main road are a series of towns and trading centres, the closest of which is Bweyale, where most of the refugees’ external trade is done and where a market is held twice a week. Kibanda county, in which the settlement is located, has an ethnically and linguistically diverse population. It is on the far side of the district from the district

³ During a discussion of poisoning incidents in the settlement at a refugee general meeting in 1996, some contributors implied that the unregistered refugees from Achol-pii settlement were responsible, suggesting that tensions did exist between some of the registered and unregistered refugees.

headquarters, Masindi town, and is in many ways isolated and marginalized from it. Masindi is part of the ancient kingdom of Bunyoro, whose Runyoro people are represented in Kibanda, at some distance from the centre of the kingdom. Other ethnic groups or tribes present are Ugandan Acholi, Alur and even small numbers of Karomojong, who were re-settled there in the 1970s.⁴ No version of the ethnic composition of the county as a static summary of the situation is very helpful, however; the identity of the area is predicated on an explicit self-consciousness of the diversity of the population which is a source of pride and amazement. During the 1990s the area has seen a rapid and significant influx of Acholi from the areas around Gulu and Kitgum, the two towns hit hardest by the activities of the LRA. These internally displaced people are themselves difficult to categorize and are perhaps most obviously characterized by their wide economic differentiation. Some are from powerful and prosperous families who have moved to Kibanda with many of their resources to start or continue successful business ventures. Others are absolutely dispossessed and have fled from situations no better than those of the Sudanese refugees. They have negotiated access to land with local councils in the area around the settlement, and subsist with virtually no external assistance. In this sense, the refugees are comparatively better off, as they at least receive the regular attention of UNHCR.

No single language predominates around Bweyale; Luo, Swahili and Kinyoro are all used and many people, especially tradespeople, speak more than one. The market is a busy one, selling foodstuffs, tools and imported, manufactured goods including clothes, toys and household items. Craftspeople such as cobblers, tailors and the like also congregate around the market area. Most of the official stallholders are local people, but may not live in Bweyale, since they also sell their wares at markets in Kiryandongo and Kigumba to the south and in Diima to the north. Every market day sees a flood of refugees walking the distance to Bweyale to participate in what is effectively a social as well as a commercial occasion. A handful of refugees themselves run stalls at the market, but these are relatively few because of the difficulty of finding the capital to start such an enterprise.

Kibanda county is generally rather underdeveloped, with the majority of people relying on subsistence agriculture for their living. Others work for the government as teachers, health workers or other public officials. During the time of the fieldwork, the main road through the area was being renovated, and this provided a significant amount of work for casual labourers from the surrounding villages. There is a hospital at Kiryandongo; it is poorly stocked and understaffed. Medical referrals are made to Masindi and to Gulu for serious cases, for refugees and nationals alike. Most people travel between the trading centres on the main road on foot, by bicycle or by public taxi, since there are almost no private cars. The area, as I mention elsewhere, is known for its maize production, and it is this which makes it possible for some people to generate cash for non-food needs.⁵

⁴ As early as 1954 Kenyan refugees were resettled by the British in Kigumba area of Masindi District as a result of the Mau Mau emergency. They “brought to that area the agro-culture of large-scale maize growing, that has, since, remained characteristic of the Kigumba area.” Ginyera-Pinyewa in Ginyera Pinyewa (ed.), 1995:16.

⁵ In 1994, the future programme manager of Kiryandongo settlement conducted some brief research in the

UNHCR and its implementing partner, InterAid

The mandate of UNHCR relates only to the protection of refugees, and does not oblige them to provide material assistance. UNHCR and Ugandan government policy in relation to refugees in Uganda is that they should be maintained in camps and settlements, in the latter aspiring to economic self-sufficiency on the basis of agricultural production. This objective is seen as desirable until the refugees are able to return to their homeland, the explicitly preferred “durable solution” of UNHCR and the Ugandan government. Kiryandongo is one of the oldest of the Ugandan settlements and its almost unique location south of the Nile, in a relatively safe district, has made it possible for UNHCR to apply a developmental approach there in some respects.⁶ The Refugee Affected Area (RAA) approach has been taken very seriously in Uganda and it is estimated that 40 per cent of the assistance provided by UNHCR in Kibanda has been directed to the area surrounding the settlement in order to facilitate a general improvement in living conditions there and to mitigate possible resentment of the refugees by the Ugandan population. It is acknowledged that in some other cases failure to spread assistance in this way has led to hostility between the refugee and local populations. One such example is Kakuma camp in north-western Kenya, where the local Turkana population feels alienated from the political economy of aid and have vented their frustration against the refugees living there.⁷

Plots were allocated in Kiryandongo from 1992; in this way it represents one of the settlements which has had most time to evolve into the kind of environment which UNHCR aspires to providing. Under a special grant from the German government (through its development agency BMZ), the implementing partner of UNHCR, InterAid, was able to provide more than usually comprehensive support in the early days of the settlement. This was focused primarily on facilitating income generating activities (IGAs), including training and support for various associations, including those for widows and orphans, the disabled, bee-keepers, poultry farmers and an agricultural co-operative. The funding for these projects finally ran out in July of 1996, since which time most of these groups have collapsed. In 1996 a UNHCR publication was publicizing the virtues of these successful schemes.⁸ The status of Kiryandongo as a model settlement and resounding success story was carefully constructed and maintained by UNHCR.⁹ This was necessary on one level, in order that similar strategies which were being attempted in the more volatile border camps, might be justified. In addition, Kiryandongo’s location, only 200 kilometres from Kampala, made it an ideal place to which UNHCR could bring visitors to inspect it. As such, it has had to be seen to be

area surrounding the settlement. This report, entitled *A Socio-Economic Survey of Kibanda County, Masindi District, Uganda*, is by Glenn Patrick McGrory, InterAid Uganda.

⁶ During the period of my fieldwork another settlement was opened to Sudanese in Hoima District. This is the settlement to which UNHCR and the Ugandan government want to move refugees from Kiryandongo who are currently unregistered.

⁷ Ekuru Aukot (1998).

⁸ This was in its Kampala Branch Office newsletter, July 1996.

⁹ In the UNHCR publication *Refugee Network*, they wrote: “UNHCR considers Kiryandongo a success story. Refugees have achieved a considerable level of self-sufficiency especially in the area of food production and may soon be selling their products to willing customers including the World Food Programme. *This is an example UNHCR would like to see emulated elsewhere*” (emphasis added).

functioning well, and to be sustainable. On one occasion, for example, a delegation on a fact-finding mission from the Ethiopian embassy was brought to the settlement to learn about successful settlement establishment and management. Rarely were such visitors ever given the opportunity to talk privately with any refugees; indeed few UNHCR staff ever did this either.

UNHCR is not an implementing agency in Uganda; it operates through what it calls “implementing partners”, who are usually required to sign a tripartite agreement with UNHCR and the Ugandan government. In this case, the implementing partner was InterAid, a non-governmental organization (NGO) which when the agreement was signed (1992) was organized internationally and was registered in the United States. In 1996, however, the international organization broke up, with some of its individual country offices re-registering in them as local NGOs. InterAid (Uganda), as it now is, also functions as implementing partner to UNHCR in Kampala, where it runs the Urban Refugee Project to assist refugees permitted, for extraordinary reasons, to live in the capital. The relationship between UNHCR and its implementing partner in the settlement was in some ways problematic, and this fact had consequences for InterAid’s withdrawal and the eventual attempt to “hand over” the settlement.

The Ugandan government

In 1998 the Ugandan government shifted responsibility for refugees from the MoLG to a new Ministry of Disasters and Emergency Preparedness. The creation of this new ministry, located within the Office of the Prime Minister, can be seen as a reinforcement of the centralization of the management of refugee affairs in Uganda.¹⁰ Despite a general decentralization of power under the National Resistance Movement (NRM) government, refugee affairs have always been controlled from Kampala. Some of the consequences of this will be discussed later. During the period of fieldwork it was the MoLG that was responsible for refugee affairs in Uganda. Its Refugee Directorate was headed by a Deputy Director for Refugees (the Director being the Permanent Secretary to the Ministry) to whom reported refugee desk officers from regions of the country with a refugee presence. The refugee desk officer for Arua, for example, was responsible for the camps and settlements in and around Arua, including Ikafe and Koboko. Day-to-day responsibility for each camp or settlement fell to a “Camp Commandant” assigned to it from the MoLG, and this person reported to the desk officer.¹¹ In the case of Kiryandongo there was no desk officer, since it was the single refugee settlement in the district. Consequently, the commandant reported directly to the MoLG in Kampala. Also relatively unusually, in this case the settlement was also assigned a deputy commandant. These two individuals were based in the settlement and dealt with administrative matters such as the issuing of travel permits, liaising with local authorities such as the police, and

¹⁰ According to a former MoLG employee (in December 1998), the move also relates to the co-ordinating role played by the Office of the Prime Minister in relation to line ministries involved in refugee affairs. These include the ministries of Health and of Education. Furthermore, the Office of the Prime Minister also deals with some external issues, such as donor funding.

¹¹ This structure of commandants and deputy commandants still exists under the auspices of the new ministry.

administering grants for educational purposes. According to the policy of UNHCR and in an attempt not to create parallel systems which might undermine government structures, grants for services were paid by UNHCR to the MoLG, which subsequently administered them in such areas as the sponsorship of secondary and tertiary education. The mechanics of this system sometimes caused problems, as is discussed elsewhere.

The language used by officials of central government with reference to refugees in Uganda is one of solidarity and brotherhood. Some of them have also experienced exile, in Sudan in the 1980s, and their humanitarian response is based on the kind of understanding which is not evident in the international agencies and in many of the NGO staff. Government policy towards refugees is described by UNHCR as “progressive and liberal”,¹² and is generally accepted to be generous and sympathetic. Refugee legislation, however, is currently enshrined in the 1964 Control of Alien Refugees Act, which, as its name suggests, focuses primarily on mechanisms of control and does not express current Ugandan thinking. New legislation is in process, but in the meantime government personnel are quick to point out that in practice, the harsher components of the 1964 legislation are not enforced.

The prime concern of the Ugandan government, represented by the MoLG with reference to the refugee population of Kiryandongo and elsewhere, is the maintenance of security. Its preoccupation with issues of national security and relations with the government of Sudan and the SPLA, have had inevitable consequences for the Kiryandongo residents. Indulgence towards refugee populations is predicated on an absence of insecurity and it is fairly clear that the legislative mechanisms of containment which are nevertheless applied to them, such as restrictions on political activity, are geared towards this. The position of the refugees is ambiguous. Assumed by their own government, by virtue of their presence as refugees in Uganda, to be supporters of the rebel SPLA, they are in this sense defined as clients of the Ugandan state, which opposes the Khartoum government. While Uganda’s support for the SPLA is assumed in the region, the government is not in a position to assert this publicly and maintains an ostensible neutrality in relation to the political position of the refugees. In reality, insecurity relating to the activities of the SPLA is much more likely to be experienced in Uganda through corresponding LRA activity than it is directly. Nevertheless, the government is determined that the refugees should not be a focus for unrest under any circumstances. In Masindi district this is not explicitly a problem. It has been much more so in Arua, which is closer to the border, where the government is forced to negotiate the informal presence of SPLA personnel and their supporters, even in settlements such as Ikafe. The role of the SPLA in the repatriation of the Ikafe refugees in 1997, after a period of extended insecurity in the district caused by the activities of the WNBF, demonstrates the way in which it is possible for different forces of insecurity to interact with each other. Without an intimate understanding of the activities of the security forces of the Ugandan government itself, it is probably impossible to be sure how this relationship is played out.

¹² UNHCR 1999 Global Appeal – Uganda Funding and Donor Relations. UNHCR Website <http://www.unhcr.org>

The Ugandan government insists that refugees are an international and not a national concern. This is as much a claim for economic assistance as it is an assertion of ostensible neutrality with respect to the military insurgency which brought the Sudanese refugees to Uganda. This being the case, they maintain that refugees must be managed from the centre, since it is on this level that international dialogue and assistance to refugees is negotiated. It is clear that implicit in this position is a refusal to accept total responsibility for the refugees which the country hosts. Its view is that by providing a place of asylum, the country has fulfilled its part of the burden sharing in relation to the refugee problem. Furthermore, it implies a desire tightly to control the refugees and the industry which they spawn, maintaining a role in decision making which refers not only to the present, but also to the way in which benefits for the future might be accrued.

The district

The Ugandan government also has an interest in the settlement through the organs of local government, the district authorities. The government is represented at district level by three distinct offices. The resident district commissioner (RDC) is a political appointee who directly represents the President and the NRM, of whose members the government is composed. The chief administrative officer (CAO) is a civil servant to whom district heads of the line ministries report. Finally, the chair of the local council V is the elected head of the district-level council of grassroots government. More will be said about these councils shortly.

One of the strategies of the NRM government during the 1990s has been a process of decentralizing many of its functions. For most of its activities the district writes an annual budget, indicating its needs regarding sectors such as health, education, agriculture and public works. After negotiation, a version of this is approved by the central government and funds are disbursed to the district level to allow them to carry out the day-to-day running of the district. Involvement in or management of the refugee settlement did not figure the Masindi district budget plan up to and during the handover negotiations. It is usually assumed that UNHCR, through the MoLG in Kampala, is financially responsible for the settlement. Refugee affairs, notably, have not been decentralized, principally for the reasons related above, and there are practical and political consequences of this. Government personnel, such as agricultural and health extension workers, worked in the refugee settlement under an arrangement by which UNHCR provided them with allowances do so. In general, however, the management of the settlement had little to do with the district authorities in real terms, despite some liaising between the settlement and government officials, but was geared towards the centre, Kampala.

Each of the three organs of government referred to above was consulted about the presence of the refugees in the district, and each in turn indicated that their prime concern was that the refugees should not be allowed to introduce insecurity into the district. This fear is inextricably connected with the ethnic identity of the majority of the refugees. As Acholi, albeit Sudanese Acholi, they are associated in the minds of the district authorities with the Ugandan Acholi and the insurgent LRA in northern Uganda. It is feared that some communication between the refugees and the rebels must exist, and one senior

official asked me to give him feedback on the level of support for the LRA which existed in the settlement. It is clear that little or no attempt has been made by the district to establish whether there are grounds for their fears, since it would take them little effort to discover that the Sudanese refugee population has no solidarity with the LRA, understanding themselves to be victims of this group, from whom they have fled.

As the National Resistance Army (NRA) made gains in the lead-up to their taking power in 1986, they set about establishing a system of participative government. The system still exists today and is the NRM's answer to claims that they should reintroduce multi-party politics to the country. The President asserts that this system is a way of ensuring that all constituencies are represented in government, without resorting to a multi-party system which he believes would divide the county along ethnic and religious lines. The local council (LC, formerly resistance council) system consists of five levels of elected committees. LC I is elected by all members of a single village, LC II by all members of a parish, LC III by all members of a sub-county, LC IV by all members of a county and LC V is elected at district level.

The sub-county authorities are technically the most closely involved with the refugee settlement through the workings of LC III. The relevant council has its offices in Kiryandongo town, which is also the headquarters of the deputy RDC and the deputy CAO. There is very little direct contact between these institutions and the management of the settlement, still less between them and the refugees. Both sides agree in principle that a closer working relationship would be desirable, yet each waits for the other party to make the first moves. On consulting the deputy RDC and CAO in 1997, I found that the former had visited the settlement only once, the latter never. Some contact exists through settlement authorities attending local meetings at which these officials are present, but the sub-county authorities are in practice only aware of the settlement in the vaguest way. Both expressed significant interest in the settlement and its workings when I approached them, and interviews during which I expected to learn about their relationship with the settlement were transformed into opportunities for them to question me about the settlement. The refugee population have their own representative structures, which have been based on the LC system, but these also generally fail to connect with corresponding local institutions.

It will be clear from the above that the priorities and preoccupations of the various institutional actors in this scenario are often different, even contradictory. While UNHCR looks towards a future when they have little to do with the settlement, the refugees having achieved self-sufficiency and been integrated for the short term into the local population, the central government maintains that as the representative of the international community, UNHCR has no option but to remain centrally involved. Despite the explicit policy of integration for the refugees which is stated by each of these actors, the local authorities are only minimally involved in the settlement.

The handover

In the accounts above of the position of the various institutional actors, it will have become evident that each considers the refugee situation in terms of its own frame of reference. Even in the case of UNHCR, whose business refugees are, it is not possible to situate the Kiryandongo settlement at the centre of their frame of interest. It functions within the context of a range of political and economic imperatives and as one of many settlements within their remit. For the government, the refugee situation represents a complication in an already complex political scene, and they are reluctant to pass up the opportunity which the refugees also represent. The district authorities are constrained by the policies of the centre and are only capable of resisting rather than of making any positive moves of their own. The implications of the positions of these vying groups and of the frames through which they view the settlement and its refugees have serious implications for the way in which a handover was attempted and responded to.

For the whole of the 1990s large numbers of Sudanese have been in exile in Uganda. Most of them have been accommodated in camps and settlements close to the Sudanese border on land provided by the Ugandan government, and their maintenance has implied heavy expenses for the international community under the auspices of UNHCR. Unable to foresee a speedy resolution to the conflict in southern Sudan, the policy of UNHCR and the Ugandan government has been to move refugees as far as possible from care and maintenance transit camps to agricultural settlements where they are allocated plots of land and assisted to start producing their own food. The objective of the institutions has been that the refugees achieve some kind of self-sufficiency, reducing the burden on the Ugandan government and the international community, and that they become integrated to some extent into their host populations. This strategy sits comfortably with a developmental approach to refugee management and is facilitated by the fact that assistance has also been provided to Ugandan communities in the vicinities of settlements. The consequence of this situation for UNHCR has been that they have seen an opportunity to take their policy one step further and aspire to relieve themselves altogether of the humanitarian assistance element of their current role. With the refugees self-sufficient and integrated, they argue, there is no longer a need for them to play an active role in terms of the provision of assistance. On this basis, their objective is to “hand over” settlements to the Ugandan government so that, to all intents and purposes, they become part of the Ugandan population in administrative and economic terms. This implies a new role for the government in catering for the needs of refugee populations in relation to the provision of social services and infrastructural maintenance.

UNHCR argues that this is not a new policy, that it “handed over” settlements occupied by Rwandese refugees in the 1980s, but in fact their circumstances were rather different. According to UNHCR, in 1996–97, once settlements were handed over to Ugandan government control, their own financial responsibility should end, and the government should meet the costs of maintaining services in the settlements through the budgets allocated to the districts each year. This represents a serious challenge to the government, not least because of its financial implications, but also because of its policy of centralized control of refugee affairs. Allowing costs to be met in this way would be tantamount to

decentralizing refugee affairs, and allowing the district authorities to govern refugee policy at the grass roots level.

Due to its age and secure location, Kiryandongo is the first of the settlements for Sudanese refugees which UNHCR has attempted to hand over to the Ugandan government on this occasion. Its carefully constructed reputation as a model settlement, as “the most successful settlement in Africa”,¹³ has been used by UNHCR to demonstrate that it is no longer needed there. Instructions to begin a process of handing over Kiryandongo were received by the Kampala Branch Office of UNHCR from UNHCR headquarters in Geneva. The decision seems to have been made partly on the basis of a PTSS¹⁴ mission to the Ugandan camps and settlements the year before my research was undertaken. Two principal imperatives seem to have been operating. First, at the time of the research UNHCR was having another of its regular financial crises, and the need to cut budgets, especially in relation to long-term expenditure, was pressing. Secondly, the settlement at Kiryandongo has long been held up by the Kampala Branch Office as an example of the success of its settlement strategies in Uganda. It seems to have been considered necessary to make an exit from Kiryandongo in order to demonstrate publicly that this programme had been comprehensive and sustainable. Justification for a handover policy by UNHCR was largely based on putative achievement of a set of imprecisely defined goals and informed by inadequate data.

It should be noted that UNHCR has been under huge pressure in the late 1990s, burdened with responsibility for refugee crises regarding Rwandan refugees in Tanzania and Zaire as well as other, ongoing refugee situations in the region. The fact that they were obliged to attempt to manage these with inadequate and uncertain budgets hints at how a policy of handover was expedient in the context of their particular frame of activity.

As early as 1995 UNHCR requested that InterAid provide it with a handover report on its activities and recommendations. This was apparently not forthcoming, and the implementing partner claims that it did not know what was planned for the settlement or what the timescale was.¹⁵ Claims of ignorance became a very common strategy during the attempted handover and will be discussed below.

Accepting a handover of responsibility for the settlement from UNHCR was seen as impossible by the MoLG for two main reasons. First, it rejected the idea that resources for the refugees should now be absorbed into the Ugandan budget and that the international community need no longer contribute to their financial upkeep. Secondly, as mentioned above, in order to include the refugee population in the provision of services for residents of Masindi district in the course of a true integration, it would effectively be necessary to decentralize to the district level authority for the refugees. The MoLG was prepared to accept a greater degree of involvement with camp administration but only if

¹³ UNHCR staff member – personal communication.

¹⁴ UNHCR Programme and Technical Support Section Mission 23 January–13 February 1996. The resulting report was entitled “Northern Uganda. Review of Rural Settlement Programme for Sudanese Refugees”.

¹⁵ A draft report of this kind was written by InterAid in 1995 and was in their files, even if it never reached UNHCR.

personnel and other expenses were met by UNHCR. This was initially rejected as impossible by UNHCR, which asserted that it was not looking to the government to be a new implementing partner, but that it should take over altogether. The government refused to contemplate the notion that financial burden sharing between it and the international community should cease with respect to the refugee populations in the country. This attempt to hand over responsibility for Kiryandongo was understood as a precedent for other settlements in northern Uganda and was entirely unwelcome. Furthermore, the government rejected the vocabulary of UNHCR, asking how a settlement which, by virtue of being in Uganda, has been “owned” by it throughout its existence, could be “handed over”.

Concerns of the government at the district level centre on the economics of any integration of the refugees into the formal structures of the district. Without an agreement from central government to decentralize authority for the refugees, the district refuses to contemplate any absorption of the residents of Kiryandongo into its service provision further than has already happened. Unauthorized to generate taxes from the refugee population, it describes itself as incapable of providing services to them without additional capitation, which it assumes can only originate with UNHCR and be filtered to them through the MoLG. While UNHCR persists in rejecting this possibility and in insisting year after year that the refugees should be included by the district authorities in their annual budget (which they have so far declined to do), a stalemate situation exists. There is a definite discourse of sympathy relating to the refugees from district officials and their circles, but this is not seen as capable of being translated into action by them, without some initial decision and action being taken at central government level. Specific problems include the extent to which it would be possible for the district to employ Sudanese rather than Ugandans as teachers and health workers, especially when their qualifications are in doubt. In addition there are complications regarding the registration of settlement schools, which had to be completed before the district education office could take responsibility for them under present rules, criteria for which remained out of reach of the refugees. Another controversial issue was the extent to which the Ministry of Health would be in a position to provide enough drugs for the medical dispensary in the settlement.

Negotiations were characterized by confusion and by claims by each of the parties that they were kept in ignorance of developments. This is in fact truest for the refugee population, who were rarely included in discussions and whose own structures within the settlement failed to disseminate information to the people at large.

Meetings were conducted in Kampala at a high level between UNHCR and the government. The latter appears to have employed stalling tactics in its bid to prevent being abandoned by the international community. In the meantime, it was difficult for UNHCR to proceed on the ground, since the settlement was patently not ready for the future which was proposed for it. This necessitated a series of urgent but frustrating meetings between UNHCR personnel and staff from InterAid, who were required to wind up their activities by January 1997, but were also warned that although they should relieve themselves of extraneous personnel, they should also be ready to continue working if needed. InterAid was accused by UNHCR of having neither completed nor

documented its work in time, but claimed in December 1996 still to be unaware what the handover plans were.¹⁶

The most obvious obstacle to a handover of any kind was the fact that the district authorities had not, as they had been instructed to do by UNHCR, included a proposed budget for the settlement in their district budget for 1996–97. The withdrawal of UNHCR would consequently have left the settlement completely unassisted in terms of social services. Meetings which were scheduled to be held in Masindi between UNHCR and the district authorities were often foiled by the absence of district personnel who, it seemed fairly clear, refused to become involved in negotiations for which they had no mandate from the central government over activities for which they had no budget. Meetings which did take place were often confrontational and unproductive, with accusations of blame bandied about and little progress made. On one occasion, when I was lobbying for the invitation of refugee representatives to a meeting in Masindi, I was informed by a MoLG representative that this would not be appropriate, since it would make it impossible for them to argue with UNHCR. A UNHCR official later supported the idea that refugees should be present, but no action was ever taken and the refugees remained excluded.

Ultimately, and in direct contradiction of what they had stated throughout the process, UNHCR wrote a budget for the settlement for a further year (i.e. for 1997). It insisted that it would still withdraw InterAid, and that the handover would go ahead, with the MoLG taking responsibility there, albeit financially underwritten by UNHCR. This move itself was protested against by the government, which claimed that it should have been for them to write a budget, and for UNHCR to approve and provide it.¹⁷ Meanwhile, UNHCR informed the district once again that it should include expenses for settlement management in its budget for 1997–98, which request was once again ignored by them.

“Handover day” was set for January 8 1997, although it was agreed that it would be a quiet affair, with no major ceremony or celebrations. On 7 January I was informed that the MoLG had decided to refuse the handover outright and that any handover which took place would be from InterAid to UNHCR. The MoLG would not be a party to it, having not received any official confirmation that it had been planned. In ignorance of this, InterAid made its preparations, and the Acting Country Director arrived, ready for the handover to go ahead. InterAid indicated that it would be prepared, if asked, to assist the MoLG for help with planning and strategy, but that it would not make the first move. In the event, UNHCR outmanoeuvred the other institutional actors by failing to arrive at the settlement at all. Its personnel had been called away to another camp in the north, and the handover was to be assumed. In the absence of anyone else to fight with, and with no reference to or consultation with the refugees, the MoLG and InterAid proceeded to spend a farcical period in what can only be described as scrapping over the programme assets. This absurd situation went as far as the padlocking of storage containers by both parties, so that neither could remove its contents without the other’s knowledge.

¹⁶ Both of these claims are somewhat undermined by InterAid’s production of a report in December 1996 entitled *Interim Report on the Completion of Activities Under the Rural Settlement Programme for Sudanese Refugees in Kiryandongo December 1996*.

¹⁷ MoLG official, personal communication.

Throughout this whole period, most refugees had only the vaguest idea of what was going on. Most knew that a “handover” had been proposed, but assumed that this meant that InterAid would leave and another agency arrive, as had happened in the past.¹⁸ I was inundated with people asking if I knew who the new agency would be and the idea that The MoLG would be wholly responsible for them was horrifying to many people. While UNHCR and the settlement authorities had discussed the handover with the refugee welfare council (RWC), this body appeared not to have passed on this information to the population generally. There may have been several reasons for this. On the one hand, it might have been faced with calls for action it was impotent to take, demonstrating the weakness of its position. On the other hand, and perhaps more significantly, they may not have believed that the handover was truly going to take place. Given the confusion and mixed messages which abounded at an institutional level, this may not have been as naive as it sounds. In fact, the resistance strategy of the RWC was not dissimilar to that of the government itself. In the meetings to which they were admitted council members argued that a handover was impossible for a range of short-term and practical reasons, without addressing the acceptability of the policy itself. When it became clear that UNHCR was prepared at almost any cost to be seen to hand over the settlement, even at the expense of the fudge represented by their new budget for it, it was too late for the RWC to do anything.

For the mass of the population in the settlement it was inconceivable that UNHCR would abandon them, and news of a handover was often treated as nothing more than rumour and scaremongering. Their extensive understanding of what it is to be a refugee, gained not only by experience but also on the basis of observing the Ugandans in Sudan during the 1980s, did not allow for the absence of the international community, represented by UNHCR. The organization had gained a fictive kinship status in the everyday discourse, often being referred to as the “mother and father” of the refugees, on the basis of the provision of assistance in extremis which it offered. Even educated and experienced individuals failed to predict that UNHCR would leave. One man informed me that it would be illegal under international law for them to do so until peace existed again in Sudan. A woman maintained up to the last minute that they could not be on the point of departure, as no evaluation team had recently been seen in the settlement, indicating some understanding of the systems employed by the international organizations. Some informed individuals had agitated for some kind of resistance towards the time of the handover, but they were assured by the RWC that matters were in hand and panic should not be allowed to spread. On 12 December 1996 a group of educated refugees took the pro-active step of writing a letter to the Country Representative of UNHCR on the subject of the handover. In it they outlined the reasons why it was felt that UNHCR should not withdraw from the settlement, stating

Speaking for ourselves and on behalf of the entire Sudanese Refugees in Kiryandongo settlement, we the undersigned persons with deep regret would

¹⁸ It should be noted that several refugee informants spontaneously made comparisons between their situation in Kiryandongo, and that in Sudan in the 1980s, pointing out that the developmental organization (Norwegian Church Aid) which had been assisting them there had never referred to a future time of departure. That the assistance of UNHCR could be finite in terms of duration was consequently difficult for them to come to terms with.

like to air our grievances before you concerning the following for your fatherly consideration and positive response please ...the pulling out of UNHCR at this moment for the so-called self-reliance or self-sufficiency is not justified. What we know is the contract of the InterAid has ended ... but not UNHCR to whom we are looking forward for our security and protection, until we go back to our country.¹⁹

It seems that UNHCR personnel did not feel themselves to be in a position where they could trust refugees, individually or collectively, and they dismissed any representations as evidence that the refugees would never admit that they were ready to stand alone, preferring to rely on free gifts from them. Modes of communication were sometimes incompatible and this did not help the dissemination of information in the run-up to the handover. On one rare occasion a UNHCR social services mission came to the settlement, intending to consult with InterAid and refugee representatives about their own preparations for the handover. They were furious to discover that no senior InterAid personnel were available and that no refugees had been “mobilized” for a meeting. A hasty alternative was set up, a gathering of nurses, assistants and traditional birth attendants at the dispensary. The UNHCR team had planned an informal discussion which would allow them to learn about preparations which were being made locally for the organization’s departure. The managers of the dispensary, however, could not conceive of such a gathering and laid out a room for the meeting in which UNHCR personnel were seated on a high dais and behind a desk, some distance from the women, who were seated on low benches. Silence reigned throughout, with the exception of one or two women who summarized the fears and preoccupations of the women, to the frustration of UNHCR team. After a relatively short time, they had to leave in order to reach Kampala by nightfall, and the women were left dazed and confused by the visit. On their departure, pandemonium broke out, with the possible significance of the visit being discussed, but this UNHCR missed.²⁰ On this occasion at the dispensary, the discussion focused on the women’s fears that health services would deteriorate dramatically on the withdrawal of InterAid, if this really were going to take place.

For several days after the departure of InterAid, people went to their offices to see if they had returned, or if another agency was preparing to move in. Some of the more sceptical went to search for evidence that files had been burnt, or other nefarious activity. Nothing was there. The prospect of being left in the hands of “local government” was faced with fear and trepidation. While MoLG staff had been accepted in tandem with a controlling agency presence, it was assumed that left alone, they would exploit and abuse the refugees. “Local government” is an expression used colloquially, when it refers to a botched or barely adequate job, and this accurately represents how the refugees felt about

¹⁹ Letter from Kiryandongo refugees to UNHCR 12.12.96. The existence of this letter was publicized by a subsequent article in the *New Vision* newspaper 21.12.96, headlined “Kiryandongo Sudanese refugees protest to UN”.

²⁰ Missions for social services and education were sent to Kiryandongo by UNHCR in December 1996, to appraise the extent of preparedness for the handover. These resulted in two internal reports: “Social Services Mission to Kiryandongo, 3–4 and 16–17 December 1997”, by S. Norton Staal, and “UNHCR Education Mission Masindi, Hoima, Fort Portal, Kasese, 3–7 December 1996”, by Tim Brown, UNHCR Education Advisor.

the likelihood that The MoLG would manage the settlement effectively. Conditioned to believe in the indifference and corruption of government officials, the refugees were not sanguine about the future in Kiryandongo. One student speculated about UNHCR's awareness of the extraordinary capacity for suffering of the southern Sudanese and asserted that only on these grounds was it possible for them to leave. Many people talked about returning to Sudan, saying that there would be no help for them in Uganda anymore, and that if they were to face complete poverty and an inadequate infrastructure, it might as well be at home. Having said this, there is little evidence that many people resorted to this. Finally, as another student wryly said,

Nothing will happen now. We will just stay, and people will suffer silently. It will not be very obvious, but those in the villages will suffer and some will die. It is not exciting, it will be a slow death caused by diseases of malnutrition and weakness, they will not even know that it is happening. What can we do?
(Interview 21 January 1997)

In December 1998 the Ugandan government and UNHCR were still involved in high-level negotiations regarding policies of handover and integration.²¹ At Kiryandongo, the situation remained much as I had left it, with UNHCR still providing a budget for the work of the Ugandan government in the settlement. In 1999 UNHCR personnel in Kampala were working with the Ugandan government to develop a strategy for a new approach: "self reliance". While districts are proving more amenable to incorporating refugees into their administrative structures, this is certainly related to UNHCR's continued willingness to finance this.

Integration and self-sufficiency

Two of the principal objectives of UNHCR and the Ugandan government for the refugees of Kiryandongo, and a conventionally accepted strategy of the developmental approach to settlement management, is that the refugees should become self-sufficient and that they should be integrated into the host community. What is very often unclear is what, exactly, is meant by this and the extent to which it has been achieved in any single case.

The MoLG's definition of "integration" as a stated objective is very different from that of UNHCR. Uganda has a long and complex history of hosting refugees. Most significant in terms of the way in which they have entered the public consciousness was the case of the Rwandan refugees, who started arriving in Uganda in the 1950s and represented a formidable force in the population until their large-scale repatriation after the military victory of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) in Rwanda following the genocide in 1994. In the press and in conversation, particularly with urban, educated Ugandans, it is clear that the experience of hosting the Rwandans has left Ugandans sensitive to the dangers of allowing other refugee populations to become too settled and to attain positions of authority in the country. There is a clear discourse concerning the way in which the Rwandans were left free to "take over" some areas of public and business life. This

²¹ Personal communication by a Ugandan refugee desk officer and member of the Ugandan Refugee Bill drafting committee.

feeling has consequences for the extent to which the MoLG is now prepared to relinquish control over the Sudanese and other refugee populations.

Peter Nabuguzi (1995) makes a convincing argument for the idea that camps and settlements in Uganda are designed to prevent true integration, rather aspiring to marginalize and control. He asserts that,

Also to ensure the isolation and segregation of the refugees from the Ugandan administrative bureaucracy, the government has set up a parallel administration for the refugees with “commandants” reporting to senior “commandants” in charge of large refugee zones, who in turn report directly to Kampala headquarters, thereby bypassing the local district authorities (1995: 99).

The “integration” for the refugees at Kiryandongo to which the government aspired is partial and temporary. It involves their peaceful coexistence with the Ugandan population for whom it also represents a continued claim for assistance, without entailing for the refugees the rights and responsibilities which are held by Ugandan nationals. Integration can only be temporary, according to this view, because it exists in the full expectation that the presence of the refugees itself is only temporary and will be brought to a conclusion by an eventual repatriation. It is notable and symbolic that until 1996 there was no signboard proclaiming the presence of the settlement visible from the main road or at the entrance. When a refugee organization erected one, it was removed by the government, which stated clearly that they were not keen that people should know of its existence unless they needed to. In the end, however, the MoLG itself had one erected after the handover, indicating its new position there.

Despite the insistence of the MoLG that the more draconian provisions of Uganda’s refugee legislation are not enforced, it is still illegal for a refugee to travel outside the settlement without a written permit from the MoLG authorities within the settlement. Refugees are questioned about their destination and the reasons for their visit and are obliged to present their documentation to the settlement commandant or local council on arrival at their destination. It can take several days of waiting to be awarded such a permit, which clearly does not make moving around, on which integration might be supposed to depend, easy for refugees. When invited to comment on the issue of integration, government officials at central, district and settlement level refer in general terms to intermarriage between refugees and their hosts as an indication that this has been achieved. In fact, as an example, this is a bad one, since the refugees now claim to be wary of marrying Ugandans as they are perceived to be a risk on the grounds of the high incidence of HIV/AIDS in the country.

Another example which is offered by government personnel is the great extent to which local services are shared by refugees and non-refugees. While this is the case, the situation exists primarily to the benefit of the Ugandans, who come into the settlement to take advantage of lower fees for medical treatment and education. Whether this can be said to denote social integration is doubtful. It is certainly true that on a superficial level the two populations co-exist without any major difficulties. To say that they are therefore

integrated, however, might well be going too far. At present the local population does not perceive itself to be in economic competition with the refugees, given their assistance from the international community. Their attitude towards the Ugandan internally displaced people with whom they also live is much more hostile, for they do see these people as an economic threat, and as a threat to their access to resources such as water. Economic relations between the refugees and the local population are based principally on refugees leaving the settlement to work for the latter. This kind of work is usually agricultural and is known as piecework or “lejaleja”. Payment is usually very small and can be made in kind rather than in cash. For individuals who have no other source of income, such as unregistered refugees, however, it represents the only way of contributing to the household. This kind of interaction is indicative of a tolerance of the refugees rather than true socioeconomic integration, but in fact it fulfils the requirements of the government. Any more comprehensive integration would not, in reality, be desired by them. The negotiated accommodation between two or more communities implied by a true integration would extremely difficult to achieve under the present circumstances.

In Arua district, in north-western Uganda, the institutional actors notably failed to provide the conditions under which integration could have been facilitated for the population of the Ikafe settlement. In this case, a significant amount of hostility was observable on the part of the local Aringa population towards the refugees. Perhaps inevitably, resentment was caused largely by institutional mismanagement rather than by the activities of the refugees themselves. It was very strongly felt by the population of Aringa county in Arua that they had been marginalized in terms of the benefits associated with a refugee presence in the county, and that the international organizations had not done enough to allow them access to these benefits.²² Particular issues related to the location of the permanent buildings which were to function as Oxfam’s offices for the settlement: while it was felt by the local population that these should have been situated in the local administrative headquarters at Yumbe, Oxfam insisted that they should be within the area gazetted for refugee occupation. This position was not unreasonable, but it was seriously at odds with the hopes of the Aringa that such buildings could eventually be used as leverage by them in their attempts to have the area defined by the government as a new district. This objective was not without precedent; the district offices of the new Adjumani District, which was inaugurated in 1997, are housed in buildings constructed by UNHCR on the basis of the refugee presence. Meanwhile, prevailing conditions of insecurity in Arua were exacerbated by this tension as well as by the outsider status of some of the agency personnel. Clearly, none of this facilitated the integration of the refugee and local populations, and the former were ultimately subjected to attack by rebels associated with the latter. The lesson here is that “integration” is only a meaningful category if considered both locally and at the level of the regional political economy.

For UNHCR the concept of integration of the refugees is closely tied to their notion of “self-sufficiency” which is apparently equally ill-defined. Integration of the refugees is conceived of as something which is achieved by the government of the country treating

²² For example, in the early stages of the establishment of the settlement, some staff were “imported” (Payne 1998:14) from other Oxfam programmes rather than being recruited locally. This caused major resentment in the area.

the refugee populations as they would their own nationals, and implies a bringing together of the management structures of both. This is blatantly not the case in Uganda. One need only cite the government's much lauded policy of universal primary education, which was introduced for nationals after promises made during the presidential campaign of 1996, and note that refugees are entirely excluded from its benefits. The refusal of the Ugandan government to decentralize refugee affairs plays its part here too; while social services are managed for the nationals at district level as opposed to the control of refugee services from the centre, administrative integration will be impossible. The refugees will not achieve parity with Ugandan citizens according to this policy. Whether they are in a position to achieve "self-sufficiency" is consequently also debatable.

The legal position of refugees in Uganda is predicated on their eventual departure.²³ While they technically have access to the judicial system during their stay, Zachary Lomo (1998) has demonstrated that enjoying these rights is difficult, if not impossible. Time spent in Uganda as a refugee does not count towards the period of residence required for naturalization as a Ugandan citizen. Allowing the refugees to stay in Uganda is not considered an option by the Ugandan government, and this is clearly understood by them.

The concept of "self-sufficiency" is often referred to but has never been adequately defined, and this is significant in relation to the very grounds on which the handover of Kiryandongo was attempted. The UNHCR team took the position that the refugee community was "as well off" as the surrounding Ugandan communities, despite having never conducted library or field research to confirm this. Claims by them that the refugee population had achieved an adequate degree self-sufficiency for a withdrawal of assistance to proceed were made partly on the basis of this assumed comparable economic standing.

It was very obvious, when I attended meetings between UNHCR, MoLG, district and refugee representatives, that "self-sufficiency" was not understood in the same way by each party. John Rogge's summary of the conventional usage of "self-sufficiency" is very far from the experience of the Kiryandongo refugees. He writes:

"Self-sufficiency" is used to denote the subsequent attainment of complete independence from any form of external help, when refugees are not only self-reliant in their food production, but are able to generate all their own infrastructural needs and requirements, so that settlements are fully self-contained units.²⁴

UNHCR appears to have a de facto definition of the term which deals only with the capacity to generate enough food to live on. This is contrasted to a wider understanding, as above, which implies that in an agricultural economy, enough of a surplus is generated to allow a population to acquire other basic necessities of life from its sale. Not all households in the settlement had achieved the same levels of prosperity at the time of the handover, and it was clear that many, even most, were not at the economic level that this

²³ For a summary of the international and national instruments of refugee law in Uganda, see Khiddu-Makubuya 1994.

²⁴ Rogge 1987: 87.

definition suggests. UNHCR had for some time been describing the settlement as self-sufficient, however, and was presumably substituting an evaluation of food self-sufficiency for its broader category.

Food self-sufficiency was asserted by UNHCR on the basis of food assessment missions conducted by teams consisting of representatives from this organization, the WFP and the MoLG. My observations suggest that these missions are inadequate to the task of identifying self-sufficiency for a population except at a basic agricultural level. More importantly, the refugees in the settlement had little confidence in such surveys and felt excluded from participation in them. It is very strongly felt by the refugees that UNHCR is “fed” with the data and information that it is assumed to want to hear, by those people in a position to be advantaged by doing this. This may well be the case. The refugees feel strongly that they are not asked or consulted about their status during these surveys, and that too little time is spent on the ground for assessors to make an independent evaluation. Material gathered by the district agricultural officer was also felt to be biased, selected from plots doing particularly well.

Another issue is the unpredictability of food security for this and presumably other refugee populations. Even families who usually produce enough food to feed themselves are affected by unexpected or unpreventable crises. In May and June 1997 the refugees suffered, as did many Ugandans, as a result of the poor rains earlier in the year which undermined their capacity to produce enough food. This is routinely referred to as the “time of hunger” and indicates the necessity of constant monitoring of the food security situation. In a non-refugee situation, one would expect to find a population with more diverse economic interests than it is possible for the refugees to generate, for the reasons outlined above. “Income generating activities” in Kiryandongo were unsustainable and had largely failed by the “time of hunger”, and had little to offer the refugees in terms of an economic alternative. This kind of situation is one in which there is a marked difference between the situation of the refugees and that of the Ugandans around them which is unacknowledged by assistance providers.

The most significant difference in relation to self-sufficiency and a comparison between Ugandan and refugee communities is that the former have recourse to wider social and economic support networks of a kind with which the Sudanese are familiar but to which they no longer have access. This is a direct result of being a refugee community. In an “average” Ugandan village there are people who are extremely badly off and face problems similar to those of the refugees. However, economic differentiation is greater and implies the presence of some people who are better off. Their relative prosperity has an effect on the people around them. Systems of patronage are, of course, still very strong in Ugandan and Sudanese culture, and the presence of people in the village or elsewhere, on whom Ugandans facing serious problems can call for help, is one of the major advantages they have over the Sudanese, who rarely have this kind of safety net in Uganda. This situation is clearly demonstrated by the difficulties experienced by refugees at Kiryandongo who are attempting to assist relatives and friends from insecure settlements.

The principal mandate of UNHCR is that they must protect refugees. In Uganda, their protection role appears to have been overridden by the logistical element of the work they do. A concern with the protection of refugee rights seems to have been sacrificed to a preoccupation with their material circumstances, which are themselves inadequate. This may not be true at the level of policy, but it does seem to be the case at village level, and from the point of view of the refugees. In a very real sense, the assistance work which they do in the insecure border region and in the interior seems geared towards the ideal of refugee self-sufficiency more than anything else. When self-sufficiency is achieved, as UNHCR claim it has been in Kiryandongo, some of the contradictions which are inherent in their position, but which have been capable of being masked in the earlier period, become more clearly visible. In Ikafe it was possible to blame the failure of the refugees to achieve self-sufficiency on a situation of massive insecurity. In fact Oxfam – the implementing partner of UNHCR in Ikafe – had been complaining even before this became definitive that the prospect of self-sufficiency was being undermined by the Ugandan government and UNHCR as they overloaded the settlement with too many people. In Kiryandongo, the refugees strongly feel that in being judged to be self-sufficient by UNHCR, they are in danger of losing the protection of that organization, and being left with no recourse to any other source of legal and material protection.

The insistence of UNHCR that it need play no further role in Kiryandongo after a successful withdrawal demonstrates that the refugees are to a large extent justified in their fears. A major contradiction exists in the fact that while participative and consultative processes have been publicly espoused by the institutional actors, the refugees in Kiryandongo have felt entirely uninvolved in the handover negotiations and discussions. They reject the idea that they are self-sufficient, pointing to the inability of many of them to cover expenses for even health and education, and fail to understand how an organization whose mandate is their protection, can contemplate abandoning them to their fate at the hands of the under-resourced Ugandan government.

In August 1997, when the harvest had finally arrived – late because of the inadequate rain earlier in the year – many refugees expressed concern at the extent to which grain supplies were being sold off for cash by many others of their number. Although this action promised hardship later in the year, when grain stocks would be low and prices higher, numerous people had no option but to sell to survive in the short term. The “time of hunger” experienced in May and June 1997 had left some with debts to repay, while others had waited to attend to medical needs when the harvest was finally gathered. As one family head put it,

What else can I do? I know that later I will need this food for my family, but even now they look to me and ask for things. One needs assistance with materials for school, another waits to attend the dispensary, and the small ones need slippers for their feet. The price for maize is low now, but at least I can get something. I do not know what we will do later; it will be hard but I have no choice. (Interview 28 August 1997).

It is difficult to understand how this scenario can be taken to represent self-sufficiency. Camp and settlement situations are often conceptualized as mechanisms of power (cf.

Malkki 1995) involving a pyramid of power with the refugees themselves fixed firmly on the bottom level. In the context of the partially achieved handover of the Kiryandongo settlement this vision appears to be confirmed, since the refugees have been almost entirely excluded from the process. The function of the refugees is to act as object to the institutional subjects, and yet this is not the whole picture. At its highest level, the debate relates to the deep-seated desire of the institutions for an eventual repatriation of the refugee population, and yet, even in terms of this objective, since the principle has different implications for each of the actors, attitudes and behaviour are contradictory.

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