

Reflections from Northern Uganda

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In January 2008, Natalie Parke began a four month stay in Northern Uganda to conduct research for her MALD thesis entitled, *The Relationship Between Transitional Justice and Economic Development in a Post-Conflict Setting: Case Study, Uganda*. The following are some of her reflections on her experience in the field.

I'm seated cross-legged on the cement floor; my laptop is propped open on the welded metal frame of the bed that also serves as my desk. The converter that feeds power to my computer is buzzing, and every once in awhile, if I punch the "Shift" key in just the right place, I'm jolted by a small electric shock. Over the course of the day, the tin roof overhead absorbed all of the rays this equatorial sun had to offer, making the cool cement floor the most comfortable place to sit. The sun is sinking to my favorite angle of the day, when everyone's skin starts to glow gold. Outside, the girls in the family with whom I'm living are pounding our dinner in the mortar.

I'm spending the next three months in northern Uganda conducting research on the region's recovery from conflict with the Lord's Resistance Army. The LRA was active in northern Uganda for over twenty years. Nearly two million people were displaced, many of them living in camps for Internally Displaced Peoples (IDPs). The region has enjoyed relative calm for the past year and a half, though a peace agreement has yet to be finalized. With this stability, many people have returned and will be returning to their ancestral homes and parishes. The ability of IDPs to access their former agricultural land is essential in assisting the region in its recovery process. However, this ability could be hampered by the nature of displacement, by the impact of the conflict, and by the complexities and ambiguity of Ugandan land tenure. I am interviewing populations in two sub-counties of the Lango Region, where many IDPs have returned, to identify any land challenges they have encountered or expect to encounter.

I thought I was more-than-prepared for this first attempt conducting research "in the field." After all, I've lived and worked in Africa before. When I began my research, I consulted Ugandan colleagues, friends who'd lived in Uganda, experts on

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the situation in the North, and professors at The Fletcher School. I made contacts in the country. Last spring, I took a course entitled “Qualitative Research Methods in Post-Conflict Societies.” I did background reading. I submitted my application to the Institutional Review Board. I meticulously planned my itinerary and budget. With the assistance of a team, I conducted a preliminary research phase last month in Uganda. And yet, I sit here on the floor of this mudbrick home, feeling overwhelmed and under-qualified.

I am humbled.

The Fletcher School “bridges theory and practice.” I wonder, though, whether theory and practice have any connection—any relationship—at all. I’ve loved my experience at Fletcher, and there isn’t another institution at which I’d prefer to study. However, each lesson in academia—whether it’s an instruction on research methodology, a debate over humanitarian philosophy or a discussion of post-conflict reconstruction programming—doesn’t help me much here. Indeed, I don’t think that anything can prepare me for “practicing” field research except “practice,” itself.

On a good day, I reassure myself that I’m doing the best I can, given my lack of experience. I’m working hard, and there wasn’t much more that I could have done from the US to prepare myself. All researchers have to start somewhere. There’s a possibility that the results of this work may even be of value and of interest, but if that’s not the case, then I can look at this as an incredible learning opportunity.

On those days when I’m less-confident and less-forgiving, I feel like a voyeur. This is the biggest contributing source to my feelings of inadequacy. Without the assurance that my research will actually be valuable and will positively impact my “research subjects,” it’s hard for me to justify my scrutiny and invasion into their lives. “Who are you—young white girl—to come and ask me about *my* life and *my* life challenges?” They don’t say this, of course, but they could—and maybe they *should*.

What happens if my research doesn’t turn out to be valuable? What happens if it turns out to be misguided and misinformed? What happens if I have nothing to show for three months in Uganda but my own selfish edification? What then?

But there’s something else that gnaws at me. Even if I *were* confident that my research would be useful and informative, I’m not sure that justifies my presence here, in this foreign place. Even when people do read these reports and the recommendations they offer, do they have an impact if a country’s policymakers don’t care? Perhaps I’m just another rich westerner coming here “to help” but really only fulfilling my own desires to escape life in the U.S., to explore the world, and to ease the guilt over my white privilege.

Of course, it’s easy for us to soothe ourselves by rationalizing and justifying our presence. As a Peace Corps Volunteer, I used to tell myself, “Well at least I’m contributing to cultural exchange, even if I’m not actually teaching people very much.” Tourists tell themselves, “Well even if this safari seems exploitive and culturally insensitive, at least we’re contributing to the local economy.” Humanitarian workers tell themselves, “Well we may not be effective as we’d like, but at least we’re not ‘doing any harm’.” Here’s the question: Even if the impact of our presence is negligible, does that give us a right to be here in Africa?

My most recent justification for remaining here is my love of this place and for my friends here. I love that I'm woken in the morning either by the neighbor's rooster or by the call to prayer. I love licking my fingers clean after filling myself with millet and sesame sauce. I love haggling over the price of a pineapple with the mommies in the market. I love that there seem to be more stars in Africa than anywhere else in the world.

So, in spite of my ethical misgivings, I stay.

