

Research Application Summary

**Impact of social networks on food security among formerly displaced households in Lira, northern Uganda**

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**Abstract**

We examine the influence of social networks on resource access and food security in post-conflict Lira, northern Uganda. Based on an on-going food security recovery project targeting formerly displaced households, preliminary results of interviews with participating households show that households with larger and more diverse networks have greater access to resources. Furthermore, such households tend to produce, market and create more assets and as a result are relatively less food insecure than those with smaller and less diverse networks. A focus on social networks is vital for fostering sustainable solutions, especially in communities emerging from protracted conflicts.

Key words: Aid agencies, IDPs, post conflict areas, resource access, VEDCO

**Résumé**

Nous examinons l'influence des réseaux sociaux sur l'accès aux ressources et la sécurité alimentaire dans la région post-conflictuelle de Lira, au nord de l'Ouganda. Basés sur un projet de récupération de la sécurité alimentaire en cours, ciblant les anciens ménages déplacés, les résultats préliminaires d'interviews avec des ménages y participant montrent que les ménages avec des réseaux plus vastes et plus divers ont un meilleur accès aux ressources. En outre, les ménages ont tendance à produire, à commercialiser et à créer plus d'actifs et par conséquent sont relativement dans l'insécurité alimentaire moins que ceux avec des réseaux plus petits et moins divers. L'accent mis sur les réseaux sociaux est essentiel pour favoriser des solutions durables, en particulier dans les communautés sortant de conflits prolongés.

Mots clés: Les organismes d'aide, IDPs, zones post-conflituelles, accès aux ressources, VEDCO

**Background**

For over two decades, a brutal conflict in northern Uganda between the Ugandan Government and the rebel Lord's

Resistance Army (LRA) caused immense suffering and the displacement of 1.8 million people (IDMC,2008; Oxfam, 2008). Considered in 2003 to be one of the world's worst humanitarian crises (Wendo, 2003), northern Uganda has suffered social and cultural breakdown, acute food insecurity, loss of livestock, killings, rape, increased crime rate, excessive alcohol consumption, child abuse and loss of respect and family breakdown (IDMC, 2007). With the return of peace, people living in Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps have been returning to their home areas.

The challenge for the Ugandan Government, local and community based organizations and international non-governmental organizations and other stakeholders is to understand which approaches and methods of assistance best enable such communities to recover and develop. The predominant international response to such crises has involved food distribution during the emergency phase followed by seed and other inputs distribution to reduce vulnerability (Remington *et al.*, 2002) and encourage self-reliance. This strategy has been criticized for failing to address the causes of vulnerability and ignoring the resilience, capabilities and ingenuity of target groups, focusing instead on what the aid agencies can readily deliver (Longley *et al.*, 2001, 2007).

Recent efforts have progressed beyond emphasizing agricultural production toward understanding the dynamics of poverty and vulnerability. Livelihoods analysis and programme efforts enhance individual and collective capabilities to accumulate assets, manage risk, cope with shocks and stresses, and reduce vulnerability (USAID, 2008). Recognizing the value of local institutional development, small-scale farmers are encouraged and assisted to work in groups and form broader networks. To respond to new market opportunities, farmers need to become better organized, requiring higher levels of social capital, and to strengthen internal and external networks with group members, service providers and market value chain actors (Kaganzi *et al.* 2009). In post-conflict situations such as in northern Uganda, better social connections serve as a vital resource for risk pooling or risk reduction.

Volunteer Efforts for Development Concerns (VEDCO) is assisting returnees from internal displacement in Lira, northern Uganda, to reduce food insecurity and increase incomes. The overall goal of the project is to contribute to improved food

security, incomes, and health through four interventions: (1) farmer group development and transformation into legally recognized institutions, (2) increased agricultural production, (3) improved nutrition and sanitation, and (4) better access to markets for agro-based products. The present study assesses the influence of social networks on resource access and food security of households participating in VEDCO-assisted small holder farmers' groups in Lira district.

### Literature Summary

Social network ties are embedded with social resources and constitute an actor's social capital that may be used for pursuing economic and political goals and coping with crises (Lin, 2001). How well people do depends on their connections. Better connected people enjoy better health, faster access to information, greater resource access, and greater ease in dealing with crises or everyday problems (Small, 2009). For instance, reciprocity among neighbours is associated with increased household food security (Martin *et al.* 2004). Rural communities in Africa depend on extended family, neighbours and friends for mutual support that includes borrowing money, cereals and grains and sharing labour, communal crop harvesting and house construction (Kebede and Butterfield, 2009). Anecdotal evidence (Martin *et al.*, 2009) in northern Uganda shows that household social networks are playing an essential role in access to land and labour as resettlement continues. Given the predominantly agrarian nature of livelihoods, access to land is the single most important asset for rebuilding livelihoods.

### Study Description

The study is based on an on-going food security recovery project implemented by VEDCO in Lira district. A household survey is being conducted to gather information on household social networks, participation in groups, resource access, agricultural production, marketing and asset creation and food security for selected participating households. Quantitative and qualitative information is being collected in face-to-face interviews with 310 household heads and/or their spouses. The survey questions focus on household network size, diversity, composition, levels of resource access, household production, marketing and assets levels, participation in group activities and food security status. Multivariate analysis is being used to examine associations among size and diversity of social networks, levels of resource access, levels of agricultural production, marketing and asset creation and food security.

**Preliminary Findings**

Although the field work and data analysis are not yet complete, preliminary indications are that households with larger and more diverse networks have greater access to resources and produce, market and create more assets than households with smaller and less diverse networks. Participation in local groups involved in agricultural development leads to increased access to labour through ‘labour loans’ from members, information from extension workers and sharing among members, money through borrowing from group account or from among members, and ease of hiring land. Consequently, such household with larger and more diverse social networks are less vulnerable and relatively less food insecure.

**Research Application**

Insights gained regarding how development project assistance impacts livelihood activities and the dynamics of household social networks can help enhance the efficacy and sustainability of community development. This is a vital contribution when governments and NGOs are trying to rapidly facilitate development among people and communities recovering from conflict, displacement, trauma, and devastating losses in material and social resource bases and well being. In the Ugandan development policy context, the results will be used to improve VEDCO’s programming and those of NGOs and government agencies implementing recovery and development projects in northern Uganda and other communities emerging from protracted crises.

**Recommendation**

Development projects should prioritize interventions that help build larger and stronger networks among small-scale farmers, service providers, and market and value chain actors. This may prove instrumental in fostering sustainable solutions to food insecurity and low incomes.

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