Wartime children's suffering and quests for therapy in northern Uganda

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Chapter Three

Social lives of primary school age children in Gulu Municipality

Introduction

This chapter presents an experience-near discussion of the social lives of primary school age children in child headed households, living in Gulu Municipality at the time of the study. It is an experience-near account because it represents an attempt to describe the proximal realities of children's daily life. Such a discussion is special because the analysis of these contextual issues has its basis in an intersubjective understanding of children's life worlds, and therefore the content of this chapter should provide the reader with insights into children's daily lives during armed conflict in northern Uganda.

The main purpose of this chapter is to show the micro-context in which the study population was embedded, and also to reveal how the wider context of armed conflict manifested itself differently at the micro-level. This is then linked to the illness experiences with which the children themselves were confronted. In order to facilitate the reader's grasp of children's lived experiences, information about the children's social lives is given, arranged into particular themes. Such themes include the phenomenon of night commuters' shelters, displaced primary schools, churches, children's housing, and their social networks. The themes were selected to facilitate a coherent presentation of the facts about children's social lives in institutional and informal settings, however I must mention that there are no strict boundaries between what constitutes institutional/formal and informal settings.

Although this chapter is mainly based on the experiences of the twenty-four children who were recruited for extensive study – and whose life experiences is provided in Appendix One – this discussion also draws from information obtained from other children in Gulu district. Further, empirical evidence from key informants is provided to give an impression of contemporary discourses in the task of alleviating the suffering of vulnerable people affected by armed conflict, especially children.

This chapter is organized in such a way that what constitutes children's life worlds as mediated by institutional settings will be presented first. Following that I will shed light on children's social lives at home, their typical days, and times spent in general informal settings. The rationale for this basic order is that at the time of this study, children spent much of their time in institutions, compared to other settings, and further

that contemporary interventions frequently exhibited a unique pattern in which even socio-economic issues became institutionalized, an issue to which I now turn.

3.1. Night commuters' shelters

In a phenomenon widely known as night commuting, every evening an estimated 40,000 children walk for miles from their villages to neighbouring towns in search of shelter and safety from LRA attacks (FP 2006; Allen 2006:54)[40]. A survey by Falk et al. (2004) in April 2004 of eleven night commuter sites in Gulu town found almost 20,000 children. The numbers varied according to how recent the attack had been. Figures from Lacor hospital show a rise from 3,000 in December 2003 to 6,000 in March 2004.

Noah's Ark night commuters' shelter was one of the first and main shelters which existed during the period of fieldwork in 2004. Its coordinator, stated that the organisation's main objective was to promote moral development and encourage peace building. Although most of its activities took place in the central districts of Uganda such as Kampala, in Gulu it was known for its provision of shelter to wartime children aged between four and seventeen years. According to the coordinator of one other night commuters' shelter:

> …in 2002 when the insurgency was at its peak, there was a desperate need for a shelter structure for the children who commuted to the safer Gulu Town. Such children spent nights in bus parks, shop verandas, church premises and other public places where they felt safe and could be warm. These children were, however, often taken advantage of and attacked, even by other residents in Gulu Town. For instance, bicycle men took advantage of the girls through promises to provide more comfortable accommodation. Petty thieves also sometimes took some of the children's belongings such as blankets. After carrying out a needs assessment, I designed a project for a night commuters' shelter which was readily approved by donors (Night commuter centre coordinator, during interviews in July 2004).

During the first phase of this research (July to December 2004) three hundred children regularly spent nights at Noah's Ark shelter also called *baghdad*. However, when rebel activities such as the abduction, maiming, and killing of civilians intensified, the shelter hosted up to four thousand children. "Some children will even be sleeping outside the tents when rebels begin attacks", disclosed the centre manager during an interview in August 2004. Prior to the establishment of the shelter, the centre staff registered orphans who commuted to Gulu Municipality for safety in the evenings, especially those children

[40] This statement is open to criticism since it portrays a very simple statistic, with the figure of 40,000 children lying at the upper limit of attendances of night commuters' shelters. This figure was especially applicable in 2002 and mid 2004, when insurgencies were at their peak, however when there was relative stability, the number of attendees at night commuters' shelters drastically declined. Such high figures have been known to be used by organisations seeking donations for the 'vulnerable children', who actually rarely accessed such funds. Nevertheless, it gives an impression of how, when the security situation deteriorates, there are a significant number of night commuters.

without adult caretakers. Although some children had parents in camps, such as in Palenga, Awer, Laliya, and Unyama, the parents would often send their children alone to the municipality every evening to ensure their safety from the abductions that were frequent in the camps. Nevertheless, records suggest that over 95% of the children who spent nights at the Noah's Ark shelter were orphans.

According to Noah's Ark's coordinator, the shelter was established to put an end to the problems associated with people fleeing insecure camps and attacks within Gulu Municipality, and to ensure that children were safe. In addition to providing a safe place for children to spend the night, counsellors were employed to tell children stories, pastors were regularly invited to counsel children, and children were encouraged to engage in music and drama activities to promote their mental wellbeing. It was such creative activities that attracted emergency aid funding, especially from NGOs focusing on promoting the psychosocial wellbeing of vulnerable children, which included War Child, Save the Children in Uganda, Gulu Support the Children Organization (GUSCO), UNICEF, World Vision, Medicines sans Frontiers (MSF), and the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC). As their contribution, Gulu's municipal Anglican Church (also called Christ Church) agreed that the children could use one of its structures, which was previously a conference hall, under Noah's Ark management. UNICEF donated tents, and other NGOs constructed bathrooms and pit latrines. The Madhvani group of companies donated portable toilets which were, however, never used due to difficulties in maintaining hygiene and disposing of waste.

With increasing numbers of children spending their nights at night commuters' shelters, more shelters were put in place. For example, Lacor Hospital, with funding from MSF, created a night commuters' shelter and employed psychosocial counsellors to facilitate children in processing the memories of traumatic events. Ojok – the boy whose case was used in the prologue – lived with his siblings at Lacor night commuter's shelter during the first ethnographic phase of this study, in July-December 2004. Gulu Regional Referral Hospital also provided a night commuters' shelter by erecting two tents close to a dilapidated unit where patients bed-ridden with tuberculosis were admitted, and the Holy Rosary Catholic Church put in place structures where vulnerable children could go at dusk to spend the night. At the district water processing centre, more tents were erected to ensure the safety of children and adults who fled their villages due to insurgency.

Box 3.1: Structure of Noah's Ark

At Noah's Ark night commuters' shelter, located at Kaunda grounds, there were nine tents where children came in the evenings for safety, and two brick and steel structures where younger children below nine years were accommodated. All these structures were enclosed by a barbed wire fence. Very close to the gate was a container-like structure which functioned as an office for the centre manager by day and a clinic at night. Although one of the permanent structures was intended to be used as a library and a venue where school children could do their class work, it was used instead as a dormitory for younger boys below nine years. It was here that they spent their nights on polythene bags, and where one unhygienic blanket provided by the shelter was shared by at least four children. Girls spent the nights in three tents in the upper section of the enclosure, and the younger girls below nine years sheltered in the larger permanent building donated by Christ Church to Noah's Ark. The tents were provided jointly by UNICEF and MSF, and the portable toilets and one permanent structure for bathing, located between the boys' and girls' tents, were donated by the Madhivan Group of companies.

One would quickly sense the stench in these dormitories, tents, and pit latrines. Over use, filth, and poor hygiene in every facility at the shelter is a mild way of describing the situation, and although four cleaners were employed to ensure the general cleanliness of the shelter, I observed no significant difference in cleanliness before and after 'cleaning activities' had been performed, due to the haphazardness of the work. Although the centre coordinator mentioned that the tents were treated with insecticides, the children complained of the numerous mosquitoes, lice, and bedbugs at the shelter, which I also observed during interviews in these tents in the evenings. In fact, some of the children during focus group discussions mentioned lice as a 'common disease', and one twelve year old girl complained that "These lice can bite. They are a disease in themselves. There is no one who sleeps here at the shelter who goes home without lice!" While scratching her head she described the pain of the bites, and how there were presently many lice in her clothes, hair, and blankets.

Importantly, the shelter was meant purely for accommodation purposes. No meals were provided in 2004. Sometimes, however, the shelter would give out different items to the children, especially when the numbers showing up were dwindling such as in 2005. Occasionally, very dirty children were given soap and counselled to go and bathe. The centre manager mentioned that the problem of dirt was common among all children, but particularly in younger boys.

Although the centre employed two nurses, they only administered first aid drugs and analgesics, and sometimes tranquilizers using the centre manager's office as a clinic in the evenings. By observation, the nurse largely provided pain killers such as Panadol, and on rare occasions a few antibiotics like Pen V, Valium, Flagyl, and Amoxicillin would be administered to sick children, though in insufficient doses. "If the child is given the first dose, s/he is expected to inform those at home to buy other drugs in order to complete the dose", explained one nurse.

Other shelters were quite similar to Noah's Ark in their physical structure and functioning. For example, Lacor hospital night commuters' shelter, GRRH shelter, Tee'okono, and Bukipa were characterised by overcrowding, insufficient facilities, and poor or non-existent sanitation.

The overcrowding and temporary nature of many of the night commuters' shelters facilitated an epidemic of scabies during the first phase of research. Scabies is a highly contagious skin infection directly linked to over-crowding, poor hygiene, and the sharing of basic necessities such as blankets, washing utensils, and sleeping mats. Night commuters' shelters offered such opportunistic conditions. For instance, at Noah's Ark, which hosted up to 3,600 or 4,000 children in July-December 2004, there were but a few structures where large worn out polythene mats were spread out in the evenings and which beneficiaries shared along with the few available blankets. Bathrooms, washing utensils, and all facilities were shared by everyone who spent nights there.

In 2005, and more precisely in the months of July-December, much as there was relative peace and stability in northern Uganda, there were even more night commuters' shelters put in place. Children referred to all these night commuters' shelters as *baghdad.* Save the Children in Uganda, through its partner Rural Focus in Uganda (RUFO), had established another night commuters' shelter neighbouring Noah's Ark to the west, and two more night commuters' shelters called Tee O'kono and Bukipa were put in place with funding from the Japanese government neighbouring Noah's Ark to the east. One counsellor at Noah's Ark disclosed how they were barred in August 2005 by Christ Church and the district security committee from using the biggest structure because their coordinator had declined to share some of the donor funding which Noah's Ark had received since it started functioning. Moreover, Save the Children and RUFO justified the existence of yet another new night commuters' shelter by claiming it was a real necessity for vulnerable children. There were, however, strict regulations governing this RUFO shelter, so that I was not granted permission to observe inside the dormitories.

In general, the reduced numbers of children reporting to the numerous night commuters' shelters in 2005 turned the humanitarian agencies into stiff competitors, which resulted in the introduction of 'pull factors'. In the period 2005-2006, some night commuters' shelters broadened their scope to providing food stuffs, exercise books, pens, and blankets, designed to attract children to the shelters even if they felt safe staying at home. Announcements or informal communiqués were made in advance about the likelihood of distributing such items on specific nights, in order for clients to pass on the information to other children in an attempt to promote increased attendance.

When I inquired one evening about the absence of children spending the night at the RUFO shelter, the centre manager discussed with me their policy of requiring registration at a specific time before clients could stay the night: clients of the SCiU and RUFO shelters could only report after 9:00 in the evening, which was very different from the normal 6:00 to 8:00 p.m. timing. What was disturbing about this was the fact that it was insecurity which prompted children to spend nights at the shelters, yet by having to wait until 9:00 p.m. to access certain shelters, the children were more likely to be exposed to danger. This is illustrative of the fact that although night commuters' shelters were instrumental in providing a safe place for wartime children and adults during the period when insurgency was at its peak, the entire activity also promoted the exposure of clients to increased dangers, in particular of girls to forms of gender-based violence, especially rape. For instance, at about 8:00 p.m. one evening in September 2004, I had just finished interviewing some children at Noah's Ark shelter and was walking back with my research assistant when we met a girl of about twelve years old who was crying and moving towards the shelter. She was being followed closely by five boys of about her age. Upon inquiry, she disclosed that the boys had attacked her on her way to the shelter. We accompanied her to the shelter and reported the issue to the centre manager and nurse, however this proved fruitless since they clearly showed no interest in the case. The centre manager asserted that such cases were very common and it was difficult for them to do anything about it; rather it was the girls' responsibility to report early to the shelter for their own safety. In another case, a fourteen year old girl who participated extensively in the study shared with me the experience of her friend who was attacked by secondary school boys on her way to Lacor night commuters' shelter. She was raped, but when she reached her destination she just went to sleep. Later, she told only close friends about her ordeal, but did not take any further steps – not even informing the shelter counsellors and managers – for fear of being shamed and ridiculed.

Night commuters' shelters also had a direct link with increased girl-child prostitution due to the fact that armed men, secondary school students, policemen, bicycle men, and other small scale businessmen were often strategically stationed at Kaunda grounds – an epicentre for night commuters in the evenings. Numerous press reports in The New Vision and The Daily Monitor, about the local north exposed how girls as young as ten years often exchanged sex for a small charge of 200-500 Shillings (0.09-0.22 Euros). In

one locally publicized scene in F.M. Radio stations in Gulu Municipality in September 2004, a policeman had raped a thirteen year old girl in one of the public pit latrines. He was, however, simply transferred to another district to avoid creating a negative image of the police as an institution.

In all of these shelters, activity schedules were devised to improve the wellbeing of war affected children, and usually involved various types of 'counselling', from traditional talk therapies with counsellors of various natures to singing, creative dances, prayers, and talks by Pentecostal preachers about moral support and peace building. The counsellors came from a variety of backgrounds as there was no uniform set of qualifications or training for such personnel; most commonly they were individuals who, regardless of their educational backgrounds, had undergone one to two weeks' training in counselling. I argue, however, that effectively these various counselling activities stand as an example of how humanitarian interventions in wartime reduce complex social, economic, and political problems to intrapsychic issues.

In sum, though night commuters' shelters in Gulu have been described by visitors and aid workers to this conflict zone as 'one of the most unique interventions in the face of the problems of armed conflict', they offered only limited short term solutions to complex socio-economic and political problems. They provided night time accommodation for vulnerable children, but also facilitated epidemic outbreaks of infectious diseases such as scabies. Night commuting was indirectly linked to an increase in incidences of rape, child prostitution, and the commercialization of humanitarian assistance whereby humanitarian agencies became competitors, sometimes going beyond their mandates in order to attract the limited targeted beneficiaries. Such practices led to agencies operating in secrecy, monitoring projects closely, and writing reports which did not reflect reality.

3.2. Displaced primary schools

If children living in child headed households in 2004 and 2005 who participated in this study were not at night commuters' shelters or their homes, they were likely to be found at displaced primary schools, of which there were six in Gulu Municipality during this period. Displaced primary schools came about when schools had to be relocated because their original structures were destroyed or plundered during the armed conflict, and/or because their original locations were too insecure or dangerous for civilian habitation. These schools in the main provided a formal education for children within

Gulu Municipality who had fled insecure villages, and were hosted by mainstream or recognized municipal schools which were less severely affected. It is also important that many wartime children of primary school age did not go to school either due to inability to provide for their scholastic needs, teenage pregnancies, and responsibilities of taking care of siblings. I however include this theme in describing children's social lives because all children who participated in this study attended displaced primary schools.

Displaced primary schools often consisted of several schools pooled together in one temporary location on a municipal school's compound, which by observation consisted of makeshift structures crowded with children who were either not in school uniform, or were wearing different types of uniform. For example, Gulu Prisons P.7 School to the west of Gulu Municipality hosted St. Peters Bwobomanam and St. Kizito Alero-cuku, merged into one school. Gulu Town P.7 School hosted Labong'gali from Amuru county, Kitino-tima from Acwa county, Angaya from Paicho sub county, and Bucoro and Gweng'dia primary schools from Awach sub county. Layibi P.7 School hosted Layibi Adera and Abole primary schools from Omoro County. Pece P.7 School hosted Coo-pii, Tee-got, and Atede primary schools displaced from Omoro. St. Kizito Agwee hosted Lapainati, Adak, and St. Mary's Lapiny Oloyo from Omoro County.

The construction of displaced primary schools was essential in order to cater for the substantial number of children of primary school age who had fled their communities to go to the safer Gulu Municipality. The schools within the municipality were, however, reluctant to take in more pupils, especially those from rural areas because they were viewed as unable to compete favourably with their 'mainstream' students, thus separate displaced schools were created. In addition, the municipal schools were often having more students than the recommended school population. The prejudice against rural pupils was partly based in fact since such wartime children would miss whole school semesters or even years at times when the insurgency was at its peak. In addition, such children, like in any other rural schools in Uganda, were far behind in school syllabus coverage. As a general trend, fewer primary school teachers liked to teach in rural primary schools because of their remoteness, their lack of facilities, over crowding, and lack of scholastic materials, and the teachers that remained were often incompetent and had also personally suffered as a result of armed conflict. The district inspector of schools for Gulu was interviewed concerning the creation of displaced schools which produced the unintended

yet immediate effect of discriminating against rural, war affected children. In his defence, he said:

> Those schools would disappear if they were simply absorbed into municipal schools. Teachers who had fled their insecure locations to Gulu Municipality were still getting their salaries yet they did not teach. Therefore to ensure that they earned their income, the district council negotiated with NGOs to put in place structures for displaced schools. It is unfortunate that they were simply makeshift structures as in emergency aid. Presently, however, we want all of them [displaced primary schools] to go back to their original locations. They are posing a lot of sanitation problems for municipal schools (Field notes, January 2006).

Naturally, the need to separate rural pupils from the municipality pupils was received differently by teachers, national and international NGOs, district administrators, children in child headed households, and parents living in abject poverty in Gulu Municipality. Different stakeholders reacted differently to this unique phenomenon, for underlying their reactions were the various vested interests of the key players. To start with, World Vision, which had been long established in Gulu, registered with the district to construct displaced primary schools. Although the Save the Children (SCiU) coordinator for the Gulu office claimed on several occasions that *his* NGO had constructed numerous displaced schools for vulnerable wartime children within Gulu Municipality, all the displaced primary schools I visited bore World Vision logos, and the head teachers all disclosed that it was World Vision who had constructed them. One major visible characteristic of such schools was that they were poorly constructed makeshift shelters. Although there was agreement among teachers, administrators, and pupils that they were stationed there only temporarily, these structures were still very basic. The classrooms were small, and the buildings were without cemented floors, desks or chairs, windows, or door shutters. In the event that the region had windy rains, the children would have to gather in the relatively sheltered classes in the mainstream schools. Most frequently however, children would leave school if they predicted a heavy downpour to avoid getting wet.

The displaced schools were also characterised by a lack of basic scholastic materials. At the beginning of the third school semester in September 2005 at St. Peters Bwobomanam and St. Kizito Alero-cuku, all textbooks, important school records, food stuffs, and other scholastic documents kept in the headmaster's office had been destroyed by termites. The headmaster claimed, however, that this was not *his* problem since he had frequently requested that World Vision cement the classrooms and his office, but the NGO had declined. The teachers also variously indicated the need to complain to the

district education committee, WV, UNICEF, and SCiU, but added that they considered it a waste of time to do so as they would be told that it was not within these organisations' mandates to provide textbooks to the displaced primary schools.

Whereas it was a pre-requisite for children who attended mainstream municipal primary schools to wear school uniform and have school bags and shoes, these items were optional in displaced primary schools, in part because they were not practical regulations for the characteristically resource poor community. By observation, a substantial number of children attending displaced primary schools wore partially torn clothes, were often dirty and bare footed, and carried a plate and polythene bag so that they could have their meal and sit in classrooms. Since different primary schools were merged into one displaced school, in one classroom one could observe three or more different school uniforms, worn by those few who could afford them. Meanwhile, in mainstream primary schools, only one type of school uniform was acceptable, plates were distributed at school, classrooms were clean and had desks, and in general there were fewer children per classroom.

Box 3.2: Structure of a displaced primary school

Although the children who were extensively followed attended different displaced primary schools, sixteen out of twenty-four (66.7%) attended the Gulu Prisons P.7 School. This displaced school had two primary schools merged into one: St. Peters Bwobomanam and St. Kizito Alero-Cuku, whose original locations were in Alero in Nwoya County, 20km west of Gulu Municipality.

Part of Gulu Prisons P.7 School compound had two makeshift basic structures constructed by World Vision in the year 2000. The two buildings were only partially complete structures divided into seven classes, with one additional room between Primary Six and Primary Five reserved for the teachers' staff room and the headmaster's office. Apart from Primary Seven, all the classes had no furniture, were not cemented, and had no windows or door shutters. Some children improvised using polythene bags for seats on the haphazardly cemented floors, though more than half of the children per class simply sat on the dusty floors. By observation, the classrooms accommodated far more children than was their intended capacity, and there was often barely any space left for the teacher to place her chair in the fully packed classrooms. As will be discussed, this form of classroom arrangement had implications for the spread of airborne and contagious diseases such as flu and cough, and scabies and other skin fungal infections. The school had two pit latrine blocks approximately 100m away which were relatively clean in 2004; but by 2005, due to their over-use and misuse, they had become filled up. Dirt, stench, and houseflies were their general added characteristic. All the other displaced primary schools where other children who participated in this study shared similar characteristics.

Since displaced primary schools offered virtually free education services, a substantial number of parents in the lowest economic echelons in Gulu Municipality shunted their children from municipal schools to displaced primary schools. Thus, in general, displaced schools had more than twice the total number of children than they were planned for. Those children who attended displaced primary schools were largely those who had missed years in education due to war, children living in poverty, ex-combatants, children living in child headed households, and children whose parents resided in distant camps. Although such children did not pay school fees, they had to pay examination and school meal preparation fees, however this too was optional since most of the children could not afford it. But of course, only those children who paid this substantial fee were allowed to have prepared meals at school, and this regulation was implemented through roll-calls each meal time, identifying children who had made payments.

Another observable scenario was that even though the mainstream municipal schools and displaced primary schools shared the same compound, rarely did children from the different schools interact with each other. For instance, at break time children from Gulu Prisons P.7 School, in their white and maroon uniforms, went to the east side of the compound, while children who attended the hosted displaced schools made distinct groups with their fellows to the west and north of the school. When teachers were asked about this, they cited variously the poverty of the war affected children, their dirtiness, their inability to communicate in English, and in 2004 they cited the fact that these children were more likely to have scabies. Scabies is widely believed in Gulu to affect only dirty people, and mainly those who spend nights at commuters' shelters (it was indeed true that scabies, or any epidemic of an infectious nature, largely affected children who spent nights at shelters and attended displaced primary schools). The teachers' remarks, which reflected a substantial proportion of people's views in Gulu Municipality, in effect bordered on the subtle pathologizing of children who attended displaced primary schools, and such remarks can be understood within a wider framework of poverty, social inequality, discrimination, and prolonged civil war.

The teachers' assertions that children in displaced primary schools were often dirty and poor were further exemplified by the following event. One day in July 2005 a fourteen year old girl heading a household of five children was summoned by a schoolteacher for punishment because she and her siblings were often dirty, wore torn clothes to school,

showed no commitment to their personal hygiene, and lacked scholastic materials. However, this girl shared with me her difficult experiences of heading a household, and how she was constantly unable to provide for all her siblings. From this example I argue that it is impossible to comprehend the children's life worlds unless the wider effects of war, living in abject poverty and misery, and their general socio-economic condition are taken into account.

By observation in 2004, a substantial proportion of children in displaced primary schools did have scabies. Avoiding close contact with those affected was quite difficult in the over-crowded classrooms, and most of the children spent nights in congested night commuters' shelters, thus the epidemic spread like wild fire. What is more, the numerous children who attended displaced primary schools and slept in night commuters' shelters also occupied the lowest economic echelon, and could therefore hardly afford washing detergent and individual basics such as blankets, washing utensils, and other household items. At the shelters, some of these basic necessities were provided in insufficient quantities for *communal* use, and it is likely that communal use of such things facilitated contagion and transmission of infections.

In January 2006, most displaced primary schools were closed by Gulu district's education committee, and children and staff were ordered to go back to their schools' original locations, regardless of insecurity. Most schools were declared a health hazard since some were already collapsing, all their pit latrines were filled and unhygienic, and no NGO wanted to help to construct other structures. Only the displaced primary schools at Layibi P.7 School and Laliya P.7 School were not closed, partly because they still had proper sanitation, and partly because the displaced schools' original locations in Anaka were still recognisably insecure. For the closed displaced primary schools, no attempt was made by mainstream municipal schools to use the remaining structures, and no one knew precisely what to do with them. One teacher at Gulu Prisons P.7 School mentioned that "their children did not like to use those substandard structures. They feared fleas and jiggers which inhabit non-cemented displaced primary school floors". Noticeably, one immediate consequence of the closure of the displaced primary schools was that a substantial number of primary school aged children subsequently dropped out of school. For example, Ajok, who was fifteen years old when the schools were closed, instead took up work with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) sweeping the

compound and washing cars in order to earn money to pay for her siblings to attend Bardege Primary School. Other children, such as Apiyo and her brother, relocated to the displaced primary school at Layibi.

Factors linked to poor academic performance records in displaced primary schools

Children in displaced primary schools on average achieved far lower academic standards than those in mainstream schools, and this can be attributed to several different socio-economic, as well as bureaucratic, contextual factors. For example, there was no child who passed in division one from all displaced primary schools within Gulu Municipality during the mid-year examinations for primary seven pupils. One immediate decision which was made by the local government and educational department in Gulu upon the creation of displaced primary schools was that they would have different schedules from municipal schools. For example, since children in displaced primary schools could not favourably compete in academics and did not pay school fees, they were given different types of examinations. Whereas the mainstream schools had typed examinations, displaced school children wrote their examinations on blackboards, and every examination except for the end of year examinations were handwritten by teachers. During interviews with one of the officials at the municipal schools' office, concerning the distinct programmes and structures for displaced primary schools, she argued:

> Displaced primary schools are beyond our jurisdiction. When we plan for school activities, even examinations, but we only target our forty-six registered municipal schools. It is the district inspectorate of the schools department to plan for such [displaced] schools.

Further, teachers who were better at their work, and who had authentic diplomas, preferred to teach in mainstream municipal schools, therefore it was the norm that in displaced schools there was a severe shortage of teachers. On average one teacher took responsibility for more than one hundred pupils, a figure far higher than the national recommended figure of forty children per class. During my fieldwork in displaced schools it was also common to observe children sitting outside in the school compound rather than attending classes, and they were often unwell due to *koyo* (fever), *abaa wic* (headache), vomiting, or acute respiratory tract infections (ARIs). This study partly links the high prevalence for infectious diseases to the overcrowding and congestion in displaced primary schools. Episodes of infectious diseases have been reported to have a significant effect on school

performance (MOH 2004), and hardly a day would pass without seeing a sick child who upon inquiry would assert that they had malaria, or simply *koyo* and *kum ki lit* (their body is sick). The teacher on duty would either tell the child to go home or go to *ot yat adit* (Gulu Regional Referral Hospital) where healthcare services could be accessed free of charge. In later chapters where I discuss the illness experiences which the children named, I will shed more light on the dynamics involved in seeking treatments at state aided health centres. At this stage, however, it suffices to mention that children commonly preferred to buy pharmaceuticals directly from private healthcare sources instead of going to line up at *ot yat adit* the whole day only to be told to go elsewhere to buy medicines.

By observation, children at displaced primary schools commonly came to class without exercise books, pens, or pencils; rather, they would borrow from friends if possible. Appendix One outlining the twenty-four children's biodata and experiences in wartime shows how the children indicated classmates as being in their social networks, and how friends lent them basic school supplies. In the month of October 2005, more than forty of the 105 children in Primary Five, where Oketch was a member, did not attend mathematics classes since the teacher had made it a prerequisite that only those with mathematical sets could attend his class. Oketch approached me with this problem in the first week after the teacher passed this regulation, and I gave him money for it. However, in the third week I observed that Oketch was sitting with the children who were not allowed in the mathematics class. Upon inquiry, he gave conflicting answers: at first he said it had been stolen, but after in-depth enquiry he disclosed how on the day he was given the money, he had used some of it to buy food, and the remaining money had not been sufficient to buy the mathematical set. I did not press Oketch further on this issue.

Meanwhile, the teachers also had to adjust to this difficult situation. One teacher stated that his role was merely to teach and complete the syllabus, therefore the issue of children not being able to afford exercise books and pens was beyond his jurisdiction; perhaps this was the responsibility of the NGOs. In general, however, NGOs indicated their need to function within their mandates, which meant that only registered clients – in practice merely a select few – could be assisted. World Vision, for example, had only twelve registered children in the two displaced primary schools at Gulu Prison P.7 School.

During weekdays within the school semesters the children attended different classes, and had meals *if* they were provided at school. It is *if*, because meals were not always provided because various factors influenced whether it was possible to prepare them at all. In the months of July to September 2005, both St. Kizito Alero-Cuku and St. Peters Bwobomanam displaced primary schools did not receive any food supplies from the World Food Programme (WFP). When the WFP distributed food rations in mid-September, six of the displaced schools visited still could not prepare meals since few children had paid the school meals charges. That meant that there was neither firewood for cooking nor money to pay workers in the school kitchen. It was not until November that all the displaced primary schools could provide meals for their children. By observation, fewer children, especially in the lower classes, attended school when there were no meals prepared. During morning and lunch breaks a substantial number of children would simply lie in the shade under the trees around the school or talk to each other in classrooms. Furthermore, since fewer teachers worked after the lunch break, the children would not wait for the official closing time of 4:00 p.m. to go home. Therefore, in the months when no meals were prepared at school, in practice, schools would close at 1:00 p.m.

Children frequently left school early because they needed to secure their food needs, which they could do by performing various jobs including fetching water for construction sites and neighbours, or carrying farm produce to the market for money. As thirteen year old Ojok mentioned, "when the food reserves are about to get finished, I do not go to school at all so that I can do *leja leja* (farm labour for money)". It is therefore likely that when there were intermittent supplies of foodstuffs provided by the WFP, fewer children would attend school in order that they could earn enough to eat, and for a fee of 1,500 Shillings (0.65 Euro) it was possible to purchase enough grain and green vegetables for a day's meal in the open markets.

It is important to know that while the WFP had regular schedules for monthly food distribution, things were rarely ideal, and sometimes it would be two months or more before a particular community received food rations. This reinforced the need for wartime children aged between seven and sixteen years to engage in farm labour and other income generating activities during the times when they should have been attending school. Such absenteeism was quite unheard of for children attending mainstream municipal schools. However, even within the displaced schools some children did not particularly engage in

farm labour during school hours; for example, in Olobo, Ojok's friend only went to seek *leja leja* on weekends, and not during class times, since he lived with both his parents.

A further factor influencing academic performance was that since wartime children often resided farther away than children in mainstream schools, the school teaching programme started an hour and a half later, at 9:30 a.m., rather than the usual 8:00 a.m. for municipal schools. By 9:30 a.m. children like Ajok, who walked over 5km to school, would have arrived for the day's first lesson. The day's schedule was interrupted twice, between 10:00 and 11:00 a.m. and between 1:00 and 2:30 p.m., to allow for some of the children to access meals, and since the children needed time to journey back home, the displaced schools closed at 4:00 p.m.

It was therefore a combination of factors which contributed to poor performance in displaced primary schools, ranging from the fact that many children had missed semesters and sometimes years in their education; some had only a limited grasp of the English language; they followed a different schedule from mainstream schools; the student to teacher ratio was high; and their rural background possibly had a significant impact. Further, these children were faced with poverty, often came from child headed households, and lacked basic scholastic materials.

Key informants' perspectives on poor academic performance in displaced primary schools

From an interview with the Gulu District Inspector of Schools (DIS), I learned that the DIS attributed poor performance in displaced primary schools to the fact that, among other factors, "both teachers and pupils are traumatized". Workshops had therefore been organized by his office to sensitize teachers about the underlying causes of children's lack of motivation and psychosocial wellbeing. Needless to say, regardless of the intensiveness of these sensitisation courses, the DIS recognized that there was no substantial improvement in performance in such schools.

The assertions by the DIS concerning poor performance in displaced primary schools are in line with the existing discourses of numerous aid agencies, which attribute even complex socio-economic problems in wartime to trauma and Post Traumatic Stress Disorders (PTSD hereon). Thereby simple solutions, including counselling and sensitization seminars, were implemented with limited success. At the time of this study, psychologists' and psychiatrists' working perspectives in northern Uganda shared similar

limitations. For example, thirteen year old Oketch, who was mentioned above, was referred to a psychiatrist for assessment. Concerning Oketch's poor performance in class, the regional psychiatrist noted:

> Oketch scored an average of thirty aggregates last term. This is a poor performance given that the best score is four aggregates. It is because Oketch moved to Gulu after witnessing the brutal killing of both parents by the LRA in 2001 and whilst in Gulu, he had another tragedy in that the brother who was their caretaker was killed in early 2005 in a road traffic accident. Subsequently he has constant nightmares of his mother coming back to collect him. This poor performance in class is because Oketch is sad and depressed. Another contributing factor to his poor performance is that the class teacher constantly refers to him as an orphan. This reference makes Oketch upset and unable to concentrate in class.

In sum, the phenomena of displaced primary schools were useful in giving wartime children living in abject poverty, who were often orphans or living in child headed households, a chance to access formal education. However, after many schools serving the resource poor communities in conflict areas had become too unsafe, or had been plundered, attendance at displaced primary schools became overwhelming. Children attending such displaced schools faced institutionalized discrimination, stemming from the clear distinction made between the resource poor and those who were relatively better off, and further discriminating conditions such as overcrowding which facilitated a high prevalence of infectious diseases, and sources of emotional suffering.

3.3. Churches

Gulu is a predominantly Catholic region, therefore on Sundays many of the children indicated going to one of the prominent Catholic cathedrals within the municipality, in particular the Holy Rosary. They talked about the importance of these churches for praying for the sick, telling them 'good news', advising them on how to behave, and in general as a place where they listened to God's messenger. Seven of the twenty-four children (29.2%) who participated extensively in this ethnographic study, including the fifteen year old Omony and Okello, were saved [41], and they therefore attended Pentecostal churches, including the Bridge Builder's Church (BBC) which had branches in Gulu Town Primary School, Layibi, and Kirombe suburbs, the Pentecostal Assemblies of God (PAG) in Kirombe, the Lifeline Ministries neighbouring Gulu district offices, and

[41] *Saved* is a noun in reference to persons who profess strict adherence to Christian values. Such persons often attended Pentecostal churches in Gulu. In an act of being saved, an individual is told to confess their sins and surrender their lives to Jesus Christ. Saved people are therefore admonished to tell others what Christ has done to them – as in testimony. Often the testimony is that Christ has set them free, loosed them from the bondages of Satan and sin, and also healed them of their suffering.

the Deliverance Church in Cereleno suburb. Noticeably, five children who were taking care of kin sick with HIV/AIDS attended Pentecostal churches. A fourteen year old girl with epilepsy also said that she had been saved because the preacher had told them that God would heal all impossible diseases. Another common phenomenon was that ex-combatants who were rehabilitated at the WV centre for formerly abducted children also attended Pentecostal churches. Their main problem was in needing to deal with *cen* (spirits) which commonly disturbed them.

I participated in a substantial number of Pentecostal church services, especially the healing and counselling sessions. I will return to the importance of Pentecostal churches in conducting healing services, especially for those with persistent headaches, a-specific body aches, stomach aches, and *cen,* in Chapter Eleven. It suffices to mention here that these religious communities instilled some hope, and promoted emotional – and for lack of a better word – what I will call unintended healing/cure in this population, which had to confront extreme forms of suffering related to wartime.

3.4. Child abductions and the rehabilitation of former child soldiers

Evidence suggests that children of school age (five to seventeen years) were at the greatest risk for abduction. In the event that such children escaped or were 'rescued' from captivity, the now former child soldiers were rehabilitated in two main centres in Gulu. Below I will elaborate on how the rehabilitation process became institutionalized in Gulu.

Evidence suggests that children of primary school age represented the greatest proportion of victims, and were at most risk in the northern Uganda conflict. UNICEF publications show that children account for three out of every four abductions, mostly of school age (UNICEF 1998:24), and they are generally abducted at night when the LRA raid villages, camps, schools, and churches. It has also been reported that both the LRA rebel group and the UPDF targeted children because of their vulnerability to control and manipulation, and prepubescent girls were especially targeted as less likely to have AIDS or other sexually transmitted diseases (BBC News 2005; Human Rights Watch 2003:17).

Human Rights Watch (HRW forthwith) reports show increased and widespread atrocities as the LRA stepped up the abduction of children for use as combatants, sexual slaves, porters, cooks, and domestic workers (HRW 2003). One HRW report revealed

how children abducted by the LRA described being forced to carry out raids, burn houses, beat and kill civilians, abduct other children, and fight against the UPDF, while girls were used as domestic servants and forced into sexual slavery as 'wives' of LRA commanders (HRW 2004; UNICEF 1998:3).

The issue of child abduction is therefore essential for this thesis, not only because the study respondents fell within the age group at greatest risk, but also because the UPDF, which was supposed to ensure their protection, also violated children's rights. According to a HRW report, since 1996 the UPDF were responsible for breaching fundamental human rights, for while Protocol 11 of the Geneva Convention allows for civilians to be moved if their security is threatened, or other imperative military reasons demand it (Article 17), the forcible displacement of civilians in northern Uganda did not actually improve the security of those moved. Children of primary school age who had been moved, or who had migrated to Gulu and its neighbouring districts to the north, were at a considerably higher risk for abductions, yet in camps and villages neighbouring Gulu Municipality, security was not guaranteed; instead, they were left unguarded and exposed to LRA attacks, abduction, rape, and murder. The government of Uganda even admitted to recruiting former abductees and wartime children and exposing them to dangers on the battlefield. Statistics suggest that approximately 800 children below eighteen years of age had been recruited (BBC News 2005). In March 2003, HRW documented the ongoing recruitment of children into Local Defence Units. They were intended to provide security to local villages, but were reportedly being used to fight alongside the UPDF against the LRA. The same children were separately deployed alongside the UPDF in operations in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Sudan. Recent reports from the Coalition to Stop Use of Child Soldiers indicate ongoing child recruitment into the UPDF, including children who had escaped from the LRA (HRW 2003:13).

A complex phenomenon has emerged, especially since 1997, whereby a substantial number of children abducted by the LRA have either been rescued or have escaped from captivity. These formerly abducted children or ex-combatants were often handed over to two prominent rehabilitation institutions for counselling and subsequent reintegration with their kin. Akello et al. (2006) highlight the dilemmas and controversies in dealing with this pertinent issue; suffice it to mention here that the process of counselling and subsequent reintegration of ex-combatants yielded limited success in northern Uganda.

Interview results do suggest that as a result of the numerous sensitization seminars for teachers, administrators, and children, ex-combatants were viewed as traumatised; traumatised because they had witnessed extreme events or had been forced to carry out atrocities, and central discussions about ex-combatants by international and national NGOs focused on the ideas that ex-combatants exhibited characteristics such as hyper arousal, lack of interest in activities and poor concentration, restlessness and aggression. The local idiom for these symptoms states that ex-combatants had *cen* (evil spirits). Children in schools therefore constantly made fun of former child soldiers, called them names, and avoided interacting with them. I will demonstrate later how it was this very response by communities towards ex-combatants which partly contributed to the various characteristics they exhibited. For example, Apiyo narrated how classmates distinctly excluded her from their interactions, but when they had been sensitized they initiated conversations which they later used against her, thereby reinforcing her aggressiveness, isolation, and hyper vigilance. Such practices were central to the limited success of the reintegration process in northern Uganda.

3.5. Wartime children in informal settings

Since I am making a transition from institutional settings to informal settings, I will give a brief introduction to what I mean by non-formal/informal settings. Night commuters' shelters, displaced schools, and churches are viewed in this study as institutional settings in wartime children's life worlds. In this following section, I attempt to describe the non-formal settings in which this study population moved. For instance, I shed light onto what their residences and homes were like, their daily challenges, how they confronted them, and their social networks. Firstly, I will present information about where they carried out their activities when outside institutional settings, and shortly following I discuss children's typical days, the routine activities they performed, common problems at home, how their social networks were shaped by age and class, and other dynamics.

3.5.1. Housing in Gulu Municipality

Children and adults who migrated from their villages to Gulu Municipality due to insecurity, and who needed to access formal education, mostly resided in the suburbs with cheapest housing such as Pece, Cereleno, Kanyagoga, Kirombe, Bardege, Aywee, and Agwee, Kasubi, Layibi and Koro camps. In these suburbs was a distinct pattern

of residence characterized by numerous closely spaced huts, largely mud and grass shelters.

By observation, several huts would be built around one larger hut (or mud and iron sheet house, or a brick and iron sheet house), where the landlord lived. This new residential pattern is directly linked to the period of displacement and the severe shortage of accommodation for those who had fled their rural and village residences to the relatively safer zone within Gulu Municipality. In an attempt to provide accommodation to those in urgent need of housing, property owners within Gulu Municipality and other safer areas constructed as many huts as possible within their compounds. However, such huts had no sanitation facilities such as pit latrines or washing shelters, which led to the common complaint from children about the lack of sanitation facilities, and about landlords who were hostile to those who over-used the pit latrines. Five of the children's homes visited were located close to the filled up, over-used, and unhygienic pit latrines, catering for most of or even the entire neighbourhood. Such areas had characteristic smells and houseflies which are known transmitters of diarrhoea-causing pathogens.

In addition to poor sanitation, the suburbs, including Pece, Kirombe, and Kanyagoga, had few sources of clean water, were highly populated, and had high crime rates. Subsequently, children in child headed households were not only exposed to the health hazards associated with living in such fetid conditions, but were also a target group for criminal attacks. For example, children's ready exposure to infectious diseases and frequent complaints about malaria, diarrhoea, cholera, and persistent headaches and stomach aches can be partly linked to such living conditions. Another common complaint from girls who lived in these suburbs was about the night attacks by men who wanted only to rape them without taking their property.

Another important dimension of this haphazard housing situation was that owing to insecurities in areas outside the municipality, in the event that individuals died – unlike prior to the civil war where the deceased persons would be transported to appropriate burial grounds (each village having specific ancestral burial grounds) – such burial ceremonies were performed within the over-crowded areas themselves. Due to the limited space, it was common that people were buried very close to the huts where people resided.

Depending on how numerous the graves became, some landlords had difficulties in renting such premises, which therefore meant that they would go to persons in the lowest economic echelons, often children in child headed households and children taking care of sickly and disabled persons.

Although these premises were avoided by many for fear of *cen*, and children too indicated fear of the polluting spirits, they devised various mechanisms for dealing with *cen* and generally integrating such suffering into their daily life. I will come to this issue in Chapter Eleven where emotional forms of suffering are addressed through the use of medicines for sleep, placing branches of *atika* plants at the doorposts, and smearing *atika* leaves and seeds on the forehead and mats before going to sleep.

Making monthly payments for housing was not only a new responsibility for wartime children, but was also an activity which they performed with great financial difficulty. Given their lack of reliable or constant sources of income, and the responsibility to fend for themselves, such children often faced severe eviction threats. They were 'severe' since intermittently the property owners would close their huts with their utensils and belongings inside for days or weeks until payments were made. On some occasions, property owners would simply throw out the child tenants' belongings while hurling insults at them, and when the landlords received offers from other tenants, it was common for the children to be instructed to vacate the premises with immediate effect. On three occasions in 2005 I interacted with children who were residing at one of the Catholic cathedral's compounds due to such acts. During the first phase of the study in 2004, approximately twenty children who lived at one night commuters' shelters disclosed having experienced severe evictions by property owners, and further, a change in the policies of night commuters' shelters in 2005 compounded children's exposure to emotional suffering since they were only permitted to stay at the shelters during the nights and not during the day. A visible complex scenario stemming from this was that in the event that children were evicted mercilessly by property owners, they had to stay at one of the Catholic cathedral's compounds, bus parks, or displaced primary schools during day, and spend nights at a night commuters' shelters.

Though landlords and property owners were central in providing accommodation for people who fled their homes due to war, there were many families – such as those of Ojok, and Apiyo – who could not afford such expenses. Since they were Catholic, they were offered some land at Laroo Forest to reside on for a specific period of time.

In October 2005, the administrators gave them notice to vacate the land because they had not put in place any sanitation facilities, and were therefore accused of misusing the church's forest. In addition, the surrounding villages were still insecure. Although Ojok managed to get a hut to rent in Pece, with some financial support, it was still difficult to know what would become of him and his sickly father, who was taking ARVs at the time. Ojok and his family chose to stay in their precarious situation because, in part, they were still uncomfortable with the idea of going back to their village where there had been sporadic attacks on people who had attempted to return, and also because – since World Vision had registered them for the Laroo division antiretroviral (ART) programme – they would find it difficult to access counselling services and intermittent food supplies if they moved to distant areas. This connects to another issue which relates to the frequent mobility of persons in wartime, and the lack of economic capacity to afford basic needs and meet daily expenses, for such mobility meant that individuals and families would miss WFP food supplies if their names were not on that zones' list, they would miss out on formal education, and they experienced homelessness and difficulty in integrating into other communities.

In summary, this section concerning housing for children in Gulu Town has outlined where these children lived, the health hazards that were directly linked to their living conditions, and how the children confronted these and other problems. Explicitly, I argue that the described living conditions had a direct link with the prevalence of children's illnesses, including exposure to infectious diseases and deep rooted forms of emotional suffering.

3.5.2. Living conditions in wartime children's homes

In assessing the thematic areas for this study – children's common illness experiences and ways of dealing with them – the children were asked about common problems they faced at home. Results indicate that children commonly lacked basic needs, faced diseases, insecurity, hunger, poor shelters, and were in constant need of money for rent and school uniforms. These are the issues on which I will shed more light in the subsequent chapters.

To give a short but comprehensive description of children's homes, which in general reflected a specific pattern in their nature, location, and constitution, I will use my impressions gained from visits to the homes of several different children. Wartime

children who attended displaced primary schools were likely to live in the overcrowded and resource poor suburbs of Kirombe, Kasubi, Pece, Cereleno, and Bardege, all of which had high crime rates. All of the children lived in grass thatched huts, apart from Apiyo Malaika who lived in a completely iron house[42]. In 2004-2005 within Gulu Municipality, such huts were rented out at 3,000-10,000 Shillings (1.30-4.35 Euro) per month. A hut is a mud and wattle structure, often round and covering an area of less than two square metres. Where tenants paid a lesser fee, it was often due to the location, in particular if it was neighbouring a graveyard as people fear polluting spirits. In most cases, it was the most disadvantaged – including child headed households – who occupied such premises. Oketch was only paying 3,500 Shillings since the hut was poorly maintained and was very close to a filled up and filthy pit latrine. Ojok also paid 3,500 Shillings because the property owner had sympathy for his and his siblings' suffering and had significantly reduced the rent charges. The hut, however, had severe leakages and was poorly maintained.

The children prepared meals, washed utensils, processed foodstuffs, stored all their household utensils, and slept in these small huts. Apart from Oketch's house where I found an extra item of a green mosquito net donated by MSF, all the huts visited had two or three saucepans, one or two Jericans for fetching water, worn out blankets, and one or two papyrus mats. Depending on whether the WFP had recently distributed food items, there might be signs of cooking beans or cowpeas at the fireplace. This fireplace also served another purpose – which I will come to later – for burning branches of *atika* plants on partially broken pots to ward off *cen,* mosquitoes, and sleeplessness.

One common danger of these huts, especially during dry seasons, was that they very easily caught fire and within a few minutes would totally burn down. Only on rare occasions would the owners manage to save their utensils or household belongings. In a workshop where children diagrammatically represented incidents they feared in their lives, forty out of fifty children represented burning huts. One child drew their younger sister who was burnt in their hut in 2004. Ojok, in an in-depth interview about severe events in wartime, demonstrated extensively how he had 'almost become insane' when his sister-in-law burnt their hut with all their belongings and the money he had earned for a month.

[42] The structure of this house resulted in quite high indoor temperatures. Apiyo, however, often said that regardless of the heat, at night she still covered herself completely with a blanket for fear of *cen*. Such houses were originally intended for armed men and police forces who had subsequently been transferred to different stations.

Omony discussed how in early 2005 their hut was accidentally burnt by neighbour's children playing with fire. All their food stuffs, exercise books, and utensils were burnt within five minutes. Other severe incidents of course included abductions (all fifty children represented this in another workshop as children being held in captivity, tied together, and being directed to move by an armed child or adult), and the killing of civilians by either the UPDF or LRA. In diagrams or interviews children rarely differentiated between the two warring factions; nevertheless, there were illustrations where children clearly indicated how the NRA burnt down huts and at the same time ordered villagers to move to camps.

Regarding the lack of basic needs at home and the sharing of worn out blankets, and sometimes having no blanket at all, I am reminded of one day during fieldwork when siblings of Ajok came to collect me to visit her, since she was sick with malaria. At Bardege where they lived we found Ajok lying on a mat which was partially damp since it had rained in the night and the house was leaking, and covered by two torn blankets which could not keep her warm. I find it difficult to know exactly whether Ajok's fever was due to malaria, or because she was sleeping in a damp and cold place. Or was it that Ajok, who recovered after taking a sub-therapeutic dose for malaria, had emotional suffering. If the immediate problems which wartime children named reflected a lack of basic needs, hunger, and living in abject poverty and misery, when it came to discussing their illnesses, they largely talked about infectious diseases. Infections, poverty, poor sanitation, and congestion in the context of armed conflict have direct links. Such are the grey areas which I intend to analyze in subsequent chapters.

3.5.3. How children dealt with challenges at home

I have already begun to address in the sections above how wartime children of primary school age dealt with their daily life challenges. Since for this study my main focus is on illness experiences and therapy quests, I will briefly give examples of what children considered their priorities and coping strategies, given the context in which they lived. When I made inquiries into common problems which the children experienced, the children largely answered that they lacked basic needs, experienced hunger, lived in poor shelters with poor sanitation, confronted infectious diseases, and faced numerous other problems including abductions and attacks by the state army. The children actively engaged with these problems, though their engagement can be categorized into constructive/positive

and destructive/negative survival strategies.

3.5.4. Children confronted with living in abject poverty

One particular characteristic of the children who participated in the study is that they lived in abject poverty in the fetid over-crowded camps and cheaper suburbs of Gulu Municipality. They did, however, get by through performing various income generating activities and survival strategies. To facilitate a coherent presentation of the empirical data concerning children's survival strategies, I categorise them into constructive/positive and destructive/negative practices. By positive practices I mean activities with minimal harmful unintended consequences, and which are socially acceptable livelihoods in wartime, such as *leja leja*, fetching water for sale, smearing and thatching other people's huts for money and taking care of neighbours' children. Meanwhile, negative practices are those which are harmful or had major negative unintended consequences, and as such these activities are not socially acceptable. These include theft (although the children also often warned others of the dangers of theft), begging, lying, and child prostitution.

Constructive survival strategies

Children performed various income generating activities such as fetching water for sale, doing *leja leja,* carrying farm produce to the market, and for Oketch and his family, taking care of the property owner's child in order to get foodstuffs. In this study's prologue, which presents an exemplary case, Ojok performed various activities in order to enable him to access basic needs. The activities ranged from doing *leja leja,* slashing the hospital courtyard and *boda boda* (carrying people on a bicycle[43]) for money. Ajok elaborated on how she dealt with daily challenges by performing income generating activities as follows:

> When I think that I have worked the whole day doing *leja leja* and I can only buy food for one day, *pi loya* (I am totally discouraged or frustrated with living). This is because all of us now have only torn clothes. I even fear washing my two sisters' clothes because they will get torn beyond repair if I did that. Sometimes I just sit and think about it until I have a lot of headache. And in any case, *can dek dwong ba* (the problem of lack of food is enormous); there is no way I can use the little money we get from *leja leja*[44] to buy clothes. That is why it makes me angry each time dirty children at school are barred from entering class; all of us [Ajok and her four siblings] are always part of them.

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[43] There are various ways an individual could get a bicycle to do this business. Mostly, as in Ojok's case, it was rented from relatively richer people. The money earned during the day would then be shared, or simply a small proportion of the earnings would be given to people like Ojok at the end of each day.

[44] This activity was particularly demanding since it involved moving to distant places to find where the peasant farmers needed extra labour.

Through my personal contact with this family, I observed that they did indeed wear torn clothes and often complained of hunger and a lack of food. They would attend class without the basic scholastic materials, had a dirty appearance, and frequently became sick with easily preventable and curable illnesses. One child from this household even contracted tuberculosis.

In another narrative, Ojok said that he had gone to Lacor, about 5km from Kirombe, to do *leja leja*. A day's labour was rewarded with 1,500 Shillings (0.62 Euro). For the same day's labour in villages neighbouring Gulu Municipality an adult would receive a minimum of 5,000 Shillings (2.17 Euro) – more than twice the amount paid to children. There was, therefore, a preference for using children as labourers, though it was a frequent complaint of the children's that land owners declined or under paid them because of shoddy work, and claimed that they would have to get an adult labourer the next day to re-do the same work. Perhaps this was due to their feeling that children were unlikely to pursue legal procedures in demand for their wages, and the situation was made more complex by weak or non-existent legal structures in Gulu during the time of the study.

Fetching water for sale

A substantial proportion of children mentioned fetching and selling water as a survival strategy, especially in the suburbs within Gulu Municipality – including Kirombe, Pece, Kanyagoga, and Cereleno – which had insufficient water supply at the time of this study. Regardless of the distance to the water sources, a twenty litre Jerican of water will cost 50 or 100 Shillings (0.021 or 0.043 Euros). Some children still preferred to fetch water from much distant water sources since the closest ones frequently had more people and longer waiting times, however it was, of course, difficult to fetch more than ten Jericans of water for sale in one day from such a distance. A few children also indicated rare opportunities for fetching water for hut builders or other construction sites where they earned more income.

Smearing and thatching people's huts

Wartime children, especially girls, would smear huts for other people at a fee. This was, however, a risky activity since some children were subsequently exposed to gender based violence, including rape. I will come back to this point, and provide examples from children's narratives which describe extreme experiences. Boys mainly collected

grass from distant villages to sell to property owners, but sometimes they also thatched huts at an additional fee.

Small scale trade

A substantial proportion of children engaged in small scale trade. One child discussed extensively how with a day's meagre earnings she and her four siblings would purchase sugarcanes which they would carry over a distance of about 5km in order to sell them. For this they would make a 'profit' of 300-500 Shillings (0.13-0.2 Euro), much to my surprise. Thirteen year old Oketch would take care of her landlady's child as she conducted her small scale business, in exchange for a day's meal.

In seven focus group discussions and interviews, the children revealed some of the difficulties involved in engaging in small scale trade; for example, they would invest their meagre day's earnings into a business prospect, but would lose their money when people did not buy their commodities. One fifteen year old boy discussed his difficulties in conducting small scale trade as follows:

> …..When I came back to Kirombe, I revived my business of selling boiled eggs, paraffin, and salt. My uncle kept borrowing money from me without repaying it, until the business collapsed.

Fifteen year old Omony would carry farm produce for peasants to the market, and sometimes his wage labour involved carrying firewood for small scale traders from neighbouring villages to the market. A day's labour would earn him 1,500 Shillings, regardless of the demands required of the work, and yet – to give the reader an impression of the meagreness of such earnings – such an amount was only sufficient to purchase one meal in the cheapest restaurant in Gulu Town at the time of study in 2005.

A randomized controlled study by Bolton et al. (2006) which was conducted in Gulu district suggested that there was a link between participation in Interpersonal Group Therapy (IPT-G) and economic wellbeing. However, from my research I did not find the claimed links. There was no single child who mentioned the need for group therapies in order to ensure their economic wellbeing. It is probable that indeed Interpersonal Group Therapies "helped children to figure out ways of earning money or start income generating activities; reducing their thoughts of suicide…" (Bolton et al. 2006:29), but nevertheless the validity of such findings are, to my mind, quite doubtful, principally because there are difficulties in linking the aims of counselling and talk therapies for adolescents with ways of addressing their socio-economic needs.

Destructive coping strategies

The following findings were not explicitly discussed by wartime children, however through observation at the night commuters' shelters I noted how many men, including policemen, UPDF soldiers, bicycle men, and small scale businessmen, often converged on these places to pick up girls willing to have sex for money. In one locally publicized incident, a policeman was transferred to another district as a result of the community's outcry over the fact that he had raped a girl at a public pit latrine at Kaunda grounds – an epicentre for night commuters' shelters. Other people, however, argued that such a phenomenon was not new since a substantial number of girls engaged in sex for money. Perhaps, they suggested, the concerned girl had raised the alarm because she was not paid. During a focus group discussion a vignette was presented portraying a scenario at Kaunda grounds, in which night commuting boys and security personnel exploited girls; the children excitedly discussed what they often 'saw those people (mainly security personnel) doing with girls who sell their bodies without shame'. One twelve year old boy disclosed how:

> ….with people coming from the villages, especially girls, they see many nice things in the town. They also want to have them, and therefore they sell their body in order to get the money.

The vignette below features a child living in abject poverty, confronting hunger due to lack of food and basic needs. The children were called upon in informal group discussions and focus group discussions to consider how they would advise such a child.

> Bongomin always comes late to school. This is because he comes from very far and he just walks that long distance. Bongomin stays only with his younger brothers and sisters. He has no parents. He does not eat anything before coming to school. When it is time for break, Bongomin just plays with friends. He has nothing to eat as well. And when food is not cooked at school, he just stays hungry. Now when Bongomin goes home, he has to fetch water, light a fire, and prepares food for himself and his sisters. He has to sleep early because they do not have paraffin for their lamp. Bongomin and all his sisters share one mat and blanket…

In twelve out of fifteen focus group discussions, children of all ages advised the child in the vignette not to steal. Below is the response of one twelve year old child:

> Stealing is a bad thing, since people in the camps can be very cruel and tell him to leave the camp. In Pece, there was a *latin kwan moo* (a school going child) about fourteen years old, who was always stealing people's food and anything from neighbours. He was only rescued from death by police when one time people laid a trap for him with food. When he went to pick it, those who were watching started screaming and called others to beat him up. It was because people were tired of him picking their clothes, food, and sometimes he could steal all the food someone had just collected from World Food Programme (Field notes, December 2005).

Subsequently, in all fifteen focus group discussions, the children discussed their experiences of living in abject poverty, which was characterised by lack and an inability to secure even food and other basic needs. In the main, however, children mentioned begging from other children, especially those of the property owners, for the things they needed. In one focus group discussion, five twelve to fourteen year old boys disclosed how they would deceive their landlord's children by saying that they had been sent by the landlord to collect certain items. More commonly, if the children noticed that a new person was interacting with other children, immediately it was interpreted as an NGO representative recruiting vulnerable children for an upcoming project; they would then try to enrol themselves on the project as well. I had to deal with this issue personally, since even the teachers and head teachers of displaced primary schools tried to draw my attention to children they regarded as particularly vulnerable and who needed to be registered, not only to participate in my research but also to benefit from an upcoming NGO I might create. I will return to this issue in subsequent chapters.

In sum, I have shed light on wartime children's stressful living conditions. The categorisation of children's survival strategies into constructive and destructive strategies is not meant to suggest differences in children's morals, but has been done for coherence's sake, largely because it was common for an individual child to engage in both constructive and destructive survival strategies. Further, it is very important to note that it was the contexts in which children lived which forced them to engage in such negative coping strategies, and yet – as the children themselves disclosed – it exposed them to such things as HIV/AIDS, hostile treatment by neighbours, evictions, and incarcerations in Gulu municipal juvenile prisons.

3.5.5. Typical days

In extensive interaction with wartime children, they were asked to give an overview of their typical days and weekly routine activities. Further, through participant observation, it was possible to holistically assess their daily lives. Since the study population attended displaced primary schools, from Monday to Friday during school semesters they were obliged to be at school by 9:30 a.m. and stay to 4:00 in the afternoon. However, as described above, during weekends and sometimes during school time as well wartime children sought casual employment. A substantial proportion of children – whose parents lived in distant camps but who rented huts for them in Gulu Town in order for them to

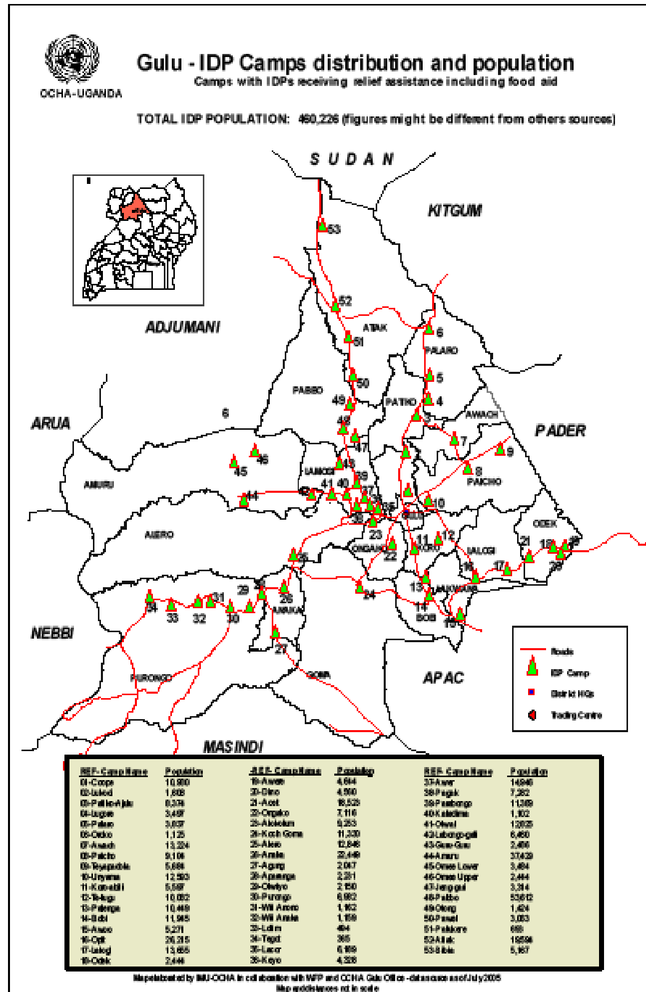
access formal education – would go back to the camps on Friday evenings. For instance, fifteen year old Apiyo often left school by 2:00 p.m. on Fridays in order to walk back to Palenga camp where her father resided. During the weekend, she helped him by selling papyrus mats and alcohol, and also participated in any small scale trade managed by her father; on Sunday evening she returned to Layibi suburb. Omony, Anek, Acan, and Ajok were some of the wartime children who went to Alero, Anaka, Opit, and Unyama camps for their livelihoods during weekends, and then more regularly when school closed at the end of a semester.

Fifteen year old Ojok indicated that it was only when he could not find any income generating activities on Sunday that he went to church. He was an *ajwaka* (indigenous healer), and children often referred to him since he knew a wide range of herbal remedies for most illnesses. For example, during one workshop on herbal remedies commonly used by wartime children, Ojok gave a distinct presentation where he elaborated on herbal remedies for common diarrhoea, bloody diarrhoea, and cholera. He also gave an overview of different types of *atika* plants and how to use them appropriately, to the children's amazement. In general, it was children who had to confront extreme events – such as ex-combatants, girls who were victims of sexual violence, and boys whose deceased kin demanded in their dreams for *guru lyel* (last funeral rites) – who commonly shared their experiences with using *atika* plants and seeking healing in deliverance sessions in Pentecostal churches.

Conclusion

In presenting the social lives of wartime children I have addressed issues pertinent to who they were, where they lived, and how they came to live there. I have also shed light on their daily lives, the challenges they faced, how they confronted them, and how key actors in conflict zones influenced these processes. My conclusions are therefore multifaceted, viewing wartime children as actors, as vulnerable, as beneficiaries, and as young people in wartime. Evidence suggests that wartime children were actors in their own social world; they defined their priorities and dealt with problems, whether they were socio-economic, health related, or psychological/ emotional in nature. However, the same children were also vulnerable. They were among those in the lowest economic echelons, were resource poor, and were taken advantage of by key institutions – including NGOs offering emergency aid interventions – which claimed to know better than they what their

problems were, and then offered only haphazard solutions. Wartime children were also maltreated by the very communities and adults who were supposed to provide security, exemplified by child abductions, underpayment for their labour, and social exploitation through child prostitution.



Photograph 1: A 'protected' village in 2006

Illustration 1: LRA activities in abducting children

Illustration 2: UPDF activities in 'protecting' children in displaced persons camps