Introduction: Making Resources in Northern Uganda

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What is a resource? A quick review of various dictionary definitions includes: 'Something that one uses to achieve an objective'; 'a useful or valuable possession or quality of a country, organization, or person'; 'a source of supply, support, or aid, especially one that can be readily drawn upon when needed', 'Something that can be used to help achieve an 'aim'; 'an available means'. There are thus two aspects of a resource. It is an asset—a property, quality or endowment. And it has a use, it is a means to an end—to sustain life, to deal with adverse circumstances, to improve conditions, and to create benefits. Briefly, we understand resources as assets mobilized for human purposes. It is the purpose that determines the resource. Something is only a resource in relation to an actual or possible use.

Natural resources are an obvious place to start. We think of them as already existing, as something 'out there' in the world that humans can exploit, maintain, deplete or conserve. Because of their potential value, they need management and may be objects of conflict. In northern Uganda, oil has become a powerful example of a natural resource with great potential for both economic gain and environmental risk, needing careful governance (Van Alstine et al. 2014). Researchers have studied other natural resources such as water (Nsubuga et al.), minerals, marble, stones and sand (Rugadya 2020), wildlife (Lenhart 2023), firewood (Miteva et al. 2017), and wild plants (Oryema et al. 2010). Land itself can be considered a natural resource (Meinert and Whyte 2023). And of course, money is the multiple-purpose resource that can facilitate education, health care and so much else (Muhangi 2019).

In this special issue, however, we widen the scope to include intangible resources as well. We consider resources to be both material and immaterial means available to achieve an aim. Resources might be personal capacities, like energy and focus, or they might be cultural, like indigenous knowledge. All kinds of assets can become resources when they have a potential or actual use. Looking at resources in this way raises the question of how specific assets become useful. They are not simply 'out there' as ready-made resources. They become resources in a social context that includes on the one hand, their production, cultivation, management and on the other, particular needs or purposes.

This view of resources as 'becoming' is central to the approach to natural material resources expounded by Richardson and Weszkalnys. They call for a relational understanding of resources: '...the combined examination of the matters, knowledges, infrastructures, and experiences that come together in the appreciation, extraction, processing, and consumption of natural resources' (2014:8). Their concept of 'relational assemblages' captures the 'practices, expertise, infrastructures, etc.'(ibid.:18) that together make resources. The contributors to this issue follow this general approach, applying it to the study of all kinds of resources. They recognize, as well, that: 'A multitude of political, economic, and cultural factors contribute to the shifts and disruptions in the way that resources are conceptualized and matter over time (ibid:15)'.

Political, economic and cultural factors are fundamental to the studies presented here. They all build on PhD research undertaken in connection with the Building Stronger Universities Programme, a partnership between Gulu and three Danish universities funded by the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Under the theme 'Rights, Resources and Gender', PhD research focused on northern Uganda, a region where these topics were especially significant given its history. Geographically distant from the centre of political and economic power, it has a distinctive colonial and post-colonial history. The long war between national military forces and the Lord's Resistance Army (1986-2006), with its internment of the population in camps, had massive effects on rights, resources and gender. Issues of transitional justice (MacDonald and Porter 2016) are still prominent after the war. So are rights to land, the only material resource remaining for many after leaving the camps (Meinert and Whyte 2023). Gender relations are an issue all over Uganda, but in northern Uganda they are marked by the distortion of life in the camps (Dolan 2009; Whyte et al. 2013) and efforts to establish claims to land after the camps closed (Hopwood 2016). It is within this setting that our contributors have considered the making and uses of resources.

Agatha Alidri examines prison labour as a human resource during the colonial period, with continuities up to the present. From the early days of British rule, prisoners were required to work; their labour was supposed to offset the costs of their incarceration and contribute to colonial revenue. Basing on archival records and interviews of elderly people in West Nile, she describes the situation in Arua, placing it within the overall context of the Ugandan colonial prison services. In an approach similar to that of Richardson and Weszkalnys (2014), she argues that prison labour resources were created and sustained through an apparatus that promulgated new laws, established courts to enforce them, imprisoned those who broke the laws and justified imprisonment by a racist ideology about civilising Africans. Alidri's concept of apparatus, comparable to the notion of assembly, broadens the perspective from the resource itself (labouring bodies) to the institutions and discourses that produced and justified penal labour. Over time, the value of this human resource was recognized more and more explicitly. Today there is clear affirmation of the need to make prisoners labour—whether on prison farms and public works, in prison workshops, or to maintain the facility. Prisons are grossly overcrowded, with more prisoners on remand than convicts. Arua prison, in West Nile District, has an occupancy rate of 611%. As a resource, prison labour has been made abundant.

Charles Okumu's piece on the great writer Okot p'Bitek reflects on the colonial period as well. Okot grew up and received his British education before Uganda's independence in 1962. Much of his work is about the effects of colonialism and European influence on Acholi society and culture. Okumu explores the ways in which Okot drew on his own experience and knowledge in his novel *Lak Tar* (*White Teeth*) and his most famous poem 'Song of Lawino'. From his parents Okot imbibed a style of storytelling and an appreciation of poetry, song and dance. From his anthropological studies at Oxford, he gained some distance and came to see Acholi culture as a rich resource—for his academic work, but even more for his literary creations. The term 'auto-ethnography' usually refers to studies carried out by scholars doing research in their own culture. Okumu suggests that Okot was an auto-ethnographic poet. He used his knowledge, some of which was developed through anthropological fieldwork, to write poetry packed with ethnographic detail and critical reflections on the state of Acholi culture. In recreating the Acholi world in his writing, he made it a literary resource. What he might otherwise have taken for granted, became a resource used to long-lasting effect and consumed far beyond the narrow circle of those who read his academic works.

The impact of the LRA war on Acholi material resources is the topic of Sulayman Babiiha's contribution. He traces the formation and efforts of the Acholi War Debt Claimants Association (AWDCA), which works to get compensation for the cattle lost during the war. In focusing on cows as a lost resource, rather than other livestock, crops, houses or human beings, the Association claimed for an asset that was tangible, but valuable and significant in many ways, both material and immaterial. This resource shifted shape in the course of claims against government. Compensation was in money not cows. Like other resources, these were in the process of becoming. In this case, cattle became cash, a much less visible resource. When the government finally released some money for the AWDCA to distribute to claimants, there was suspicion about who got what and how much the Association kept back as overhead. Babiiha shows how the organization, established in 2005, managed to become the voice of Acholi war claimants. Without support from government or donors, it became the social infrastructure for one aspect of transitional justice. Yet in recent years, government has moved away from using the organization, preferring to deposit the limited compensation it provided directly into individual bank accounts. As a resource, lost cattle were the reason for the creation of the association. The shift from cows to cash as a resource had deep implications for the association. Thus, Babiiha's article demonstrates two points about resources. They change or become in particular political-economic contexts. And they themselves can change the context, as money changed the politics of the Association.

Enos Kitambo writes about another post-conflict attempt to make resources. In view of high youth unemployment, the Youth Livelihood Programme (YLP) aimed to support youth groups for income generating projects in northern Uganda. Like Babiiha, he focuses on resources for reconstruction, but whereas the AWDCA struggled to obtain funds, financing was available in Kitambo's case. The challenge was to make it productive in small scale businesses and agricultural enterprises. Kitambo considers three kinds of resources being mobilized in the Youth Livelihood Progamme. The obvious asset was money, the multi-purpose resource that could be used as capital for a variety of enterprises—to buy oxen, purchase seeds, or begin trading in agricultural produce. The second resource needed for almost all the enterprises was land. While the Programme provided financing, the youth had to mobilize land, having none of their own. Yet even with these two resources, many of the entrepreneurial efforts failed. Kitambo found that a third resource, subjective and intangible, was often missing according to his respondents. Personal assets were necessary in order to effectively use the other resources. These included determination, self-discipline, competence, and persistence, together with knowledge and skills. Programme and district officials blamed the youth for being lazy and unmotivated. Surprisingly, even some of the youth criticized themselves for lack of commitment and entrepreneurial 'mindset'. The question is: how could the necessary personal resources have been cultivated? One answer is through better training and technical supervision. A whole assemblage, or apparatus, of institutions, equipment and ideology is necessary to create and cultivate resources. That assemblage was insufficient in the Youth Livelihood Programme.

The final contribution, by Doreen Chemutai, reinforces this view of resources as created and maintained within a broader assemblage. She analyses the way in which women Members of Parliament cultivate voter perceptions in order to win elections. Women compete with men for the open seats in every constituency—not very successfully. But female representation is ensured by the Ugandan system of affirmative action through reserved seats for women MPs in every district. They are expected to advocate especially for issues affecting women. Chemutai shows, first of all, that voters' perceptions are shaped differently in rural and urban areas. Cultivating them in rural

areas requires presence in the constituency, personal interaction, and provision of material benefits in the form of projects or gifts. Urban more educated voters attend to performance in Parliament, so MPs cultivated those perceptions by representing the political views of their constituents. Thus, the resource of voter perceptions, is contextual. Cultivating it must be sensitive to different situations. The assemblage within which voter perceptions were shaped and changed included political parties and their popularity within different districts. Voters considered whether their MPs were more beholden to a political party than to constituent interests. The career ladder within Uganda politics could mean less time spent in the home district. An assemblage includes ideologies, and Chemutai shows that gender ideals and expectations play an important role in the cultivation of perceptions. Displaying qualities of motherliness and modesty helps to ensure positive perceptions.

With these five articles by Gulu University scholars, we hope to show how research illuminates some of the fundamental aspects of the resources being cultivated for different purposes in northern Uganda. We appreciate Gulu University, the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Building Stronger Universities programme for the opportunity to build our own resources.

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