**CHUSS Researchers Call for Review of Rules on Acquisition of National IDs to address the Plight of the Aguu Floating Populations in Northern Uganda**

Researchers from Makerere University College of Humanities and Social Sciences (CHUSS) led by Prof. Josephine Ahikire - the Principal Investigator have called on government to revise rules pertaining to the acquisition of National Identity Cards (IDs) to address the question of the *Aguu* floating population of the Acholi sub- region in Northern Uganda.

The Aguus are largely the Acholi floating population who were displaced during the LRA war. Some lost their parents or were born during captivity. They think they are not part of society. Most of these, are largely street children without fathers and mothers and, do not own or have access to land and all sorts of amenities. For that reason, they have to struggle to survive and in the struggle to survive, they engage in criminal and violent activities. They way-lay people, rape, steal and storm functions to loot food.

The researchers are also calling for the implementation of the Juba Peace Agreement, particularly to address the human aspect, repair their souls and skill them for survival if the region is to return to the original social cohesion.

The communities according to the researchers have to change the orientation that creates the floating population and to accept that they were disrupted by the war and therefore understand that these children need to regain their humanness.

Since 2019, CHUSS in collaboration with Amani Institute, Uganda in Gulu, has been conducting a study on Gender Justice, Livelihood and Rights in Northern Uganda. The collaborative study was conducted under the Gender Justice and Security hub, funded by the London School of Economics and Political Science, through the UK Research Innovation.

The Research team comprised Prof. Josephine Ahikire (Co Director Gender Justice and Security Hub), Dr. Amon Ashaba Mwiine (Lead Researcher), Ms. Acayo Gloria (Researcher), Ms. Harriet Pamara (Researcher) and Mr. Aklam Amanya, (Researcher). The study covered the Acholi sub-region where the team purposively sampled four districts of Gulu, Pader, Amuru and Omoro.

On 14th December, 2023, CHUSS, in collaboration with Amani Institute, Uganda hosted a national convention at Fairway Hotel I Kampala to foster a national conversation with a special focus on the issue of floating populations, specifically the Aguu phenomenon in the Acholi sub region as one of the factors that undermines return to social cohesion.

This convention built on previous conversations that have highlighted categories of populations that emerged from war with a loss of social identity and belonging aimed at amplifying voice on these post war social struggles as issues with broader national implications.

The convention brought together national level stakeholders, policy makers from ministries, Departments and Agencies, local governments, academics and researchers, cultural leaders, and civil society organizations in and beyond the Acholi sub region region under the Theme: *The Aguu Phenomenon: Floating Populations and the Quest for Social Belonging in Acholi, Northern Uganda*.

The Principal Investigator Prof. Josephine Ahikire said, Northern Uganda was chosen on the argument that, even though the guns are silent and despite the significant investments in post war recovery, there is still violence of another kind.

The Research team according to Prof. Ahikire, explored the existing post-conflict conflicts and the gender layering within them, examined the dynamics within rights claims on land, livelihoods and gender justice and took stock of the community’s resilience, efforts and initiatives towards return to sustainable peace.

“We started with land conflicts and then as we were looking at women’s land rights, we bumped into this issue of *Aguu* - children mainly whose fathers are not not known, they are castigated and they are floating in a sense.

And the conversation in the fora that we have been in Gulu is that, according to the Acholi culture, there is no child that should float. That a child is always a child. So, if a child is born out of wedlock or if the father is not known, that particular child, is supposed to belong to the mothers clan,” Ahikire explained.

That sort of cultural terrain according to the PI was disrupted by the war as people got displaced, as land got grabbed and got individualized, they created new norms which have castigated these children because it means that they do not have a claim to land.

Prof. Ahikire said, the research team also heard from government officials that because the *Aguus* do not have claim from known clans, they cannot have national Identity cards.

“This is a very big issue but which has been securiticised as criminal gangs. These are not criminals. These are children that have been excluded from belonging and that is why we thought of performances using the theater to bring the point home that these children need belonging. It is a cry, a voice from *Aguu* –give us social belonging and an identity. If we don’t, in all discussions, it has been seen as a new war - they kill, rape, steal and some are armed, it is a big national issue, a gender issue and a development issue.”, the Professor warned.

As a government, Ahikire stressed that there is need to engage the communities to change that orientation that creates the floating population and to accept that were were disrupted by the war but now need to regain humanness.

Prof. Ahikire emphasized that government has a role to play, because it has a bigger mandate to ensure that the region returns to the original social cohesion.

She credited government for the reconstruction of materials things like roads etc but observed that, the repair of the human aspect and the soul was not done. The disgruntled people and children born in captivity according the researchers came back to a strange place that castigates them and that is where the energy needs to be put.

“The Ministry of Gender, the Ministry of Justice and Constitutional Affairs and rules around national IDs have to change because, if a child is born and does not know the origin or the father, does that mean that a child was not bon in Uganda?

These are artificial things we put as human beings to organize ourselves as clans but this should not be a major determinant for a person to get a national ID. That is something simple that government can do to ensure that these children can be long and function as citizens”, the Professor advised.

Prof. Ahikire further called for more rehabilitation of the *Aguus* in terms of skill building to make them productive and self-reliant. Those who can go to school can be enabled to go to school and those who can be helped in terms of vocational skills can be helped but the bottom line according to Prof. Ahikire is that something has to be done quickly because the region is going into the silent war, and if it becomes of a major scale, it will not be managed because these children are becoming adults giving children and therefore the whole region and nation will be at stake.

Ahikire reported that the *Aguu* is subculture and un underground culture whose numbers are not known. What is known is what they do. They way-lay people from the markets, those going to the university, and storm functions such as parties, funerals and weddings causing harvoc, looting and eating food as a means of survival and some even have guns.

Because it is an under culture, Ahikire said, there has not been an effort to count them and this is the time, if they are given that chance to come out.

She acknowledged that local government in Gulu district has tried to bring some of the *Aguus* out through initiatives such as cleaning the city but this is not enough-it has to be a very intentional intervention that seeks these children out, show them love, and nurture them as citizens that belong to nation called Uganda, to the culture called Acholi and the neighboring districts.

Representing the Vice Chancellor of Makerere University, Assoc. Prof. Henry Alinaitwe commended CHUSS for an inquest into the *Aguu* floating population in search for solutions.

“*Aguus* are people who are displaced, people who have no identity and for survival are forced to involve in criminal activity and seem not belong to a particular society. So this function is basically to find solutions for such people in Acholi sub-region.

Makerere university is a research-led university. So we research on all aspects of life in order to find solutions. This research is on Aguu population and our researchers are presenting their findings and engaging MPs from the region, government representatives, the CSOs and the representatives of the Aguus, in order to find solutions”, He said.

The dissemination involved theatrical performances using art and music as a tool directed by Dr. Viola Karungi and Dr. Milton Wabyona from the Department of Performing Arts and Film. From the performance, the Aguus think society is the problem and society thinks Aguus are the problem but concludes that if the common solution can be found, everybody will live a decent life have a sense of belonging and Acholi sub-region will be secure.

**Government reminded to fully implement the Juba Peace Agreement**

Presiding over the convention as Chief Guest, the Minister for Justice and Constitutional Affairs Hon Norbert Mao expressed the need for government to fully implement the Juba Peace Agreement if the question of the Aguus is to be solved.

The function was also graced by officials from the Gender Ministry, members of parliament from Acholi sub-region, NGOs and CSO, Members of the academia, children called by the derogatory name Aguu and students of Performing Arts and Film.

Minister Mao commended the researchers for the collaborative nature of the study and shading light on the status of the people of Northern Uganda. He also interested the research team to highlight the cause of the Aguu phenomenon describing the academicians as the Gurus (dispellers of darkens).

“In that respect, a university has a very important role because a university is supposed to be a protected area – a knowledge reserve the way forests, lakes and wetlands are …what we call academic freedom – a freedom to research, the freedom to publish, the freedom to think and the freedom to express what you have found out.

This therefore is a collaboration which we should salute- a collaboration between an academic institution which has the duty to shade light”. The minister commended.

Hon. Mao called for more government commitments to building a post conflict society especially the full implementation of the Juba Peace Agreement.

The minister implored parliamentarians from Acholi, Teso and West Nile regions to treat the Juba Peace Agreement as their key document and manifesto.

“You must master it and use it as the standard of debating with government. Treat it as a written and bounced cheque by government, where you should go back and demand”, Hon. Mao advised

The minister also implored all stakeholders to address the Aguu question by moving away from the symptomatic assessment to finding out the causal relationship between the abortive demobilization, disarmament, reintegration and resettlement project.

“As a government of Uganda, we have framed the Aguu issue as a problem of the criminal justice system. So, we are directing the Aguu as a security problem, as criminal justice and were are not looking at it as asocial and humanitarian problem”, Mao stated and hailed the university for creating awareness through play. The presentation in play concluded that the blame game creates a vicious cycle as the Aguus blame society and vice –versa .

The Minister assured participants that it is the duty of the state to ensure that it is very risky to kill any Ugandan, to snatch ladies handbags, injure anyone or threaten anybody going home from the market and that, it is the duty of the state to draw that line and make sure that whoever does it, does it at a very high risk and there should be no incentive.

Hon. Mao’s central thesis is that the *Aguu* phenomenon which is characterized by violence and disorderly conduct is neither genetic nor hereditary, it is a learned behavior, a coping mechanism and a response to circumstances and social environments.

“So we must look at the social environment and the circumstances. Our children have been exposed to a lot of violence and that partly explains their aggressive behavior because the major feature of being an *Aguu* is aggressiveness.

*Aguus* are well-known for mobs. If there is a burial they go and position themselves and when the time for food comes, they physically disrupt the serving. When there is a wedding, there are there but they fear guns”, the minister explained.

The minister also reported that the *Aguus* have become mercenaries and hired gangs because there is a vacuum by the security forces to enforce the laws. Otherwise, he said, they would have become irrelevant. They see that violence is the only way to get what they want and only way to solve problems.

Hon. Mao further said, the *Aguu* is largely, a local government issue on grounds that it is their duty to put these people in places where they can acquire new habits of waking up and knowing that money is worked for.

“These young people should get new habits because, if your habit is to wake up in the morning with a list of where there is a funeral, public function, with spies everywhere, how can it be un done?- by inculcating a culture of work. Our young people must be made to love to work”, the minister stated.

Minister Mao also attributed the Aguu phenomenon on parenting as another frontier.

“I also know that parents have resigned. It is natural to be rebellious. Given how young Uganda’s population is , we must have a program which gives young people an opportunity to turn that corner, it is never too late, let us tell our young children that it is possible to change . We must plant a seed in the minds of all children that they have potential to change for better and be useful to society”, Moa advised all including parents and relatives.

**The Research Process.**

The Lead Researcher Dr. Amon Mwine from the School of Women and Gender Studies said the study investigated people’s everyday experiences of return from protracted war, their relationships on land, livelihood patterns, emerging post conflicts and how these influence gender relations.

The study he said drew on a mixture of methods of collaborative knowledge production in different phases of field visits.

Dr. Mwine said the dominant discourses identified by participants in postwar Acholi was on the emerging categories of population called the floating population, a social term referring to categories of people with precarious identities in the post-conflict setting ie those born in camps, returned from the bush, people with no known parents, no clan identity and no ancestral land (identity) also, described as people who are detached from Acholi history and culture, described by denigrating labels.

Besides the theme of the floating population, Dr. Mwine said several social concerns were identified. These included land conflicts in form of contest over boundaries, shifts in customary land tenure systems and increasing intolerance of nephews and nieces fearing land claims from children with multiple identities.

The research team also noted the dominant conversation on social disruption and psychological trauma that hardly gain precedence in post –conflict recovery agenda.

Mwine also reported that there were increasing cases of gender based violence, teenage pregnancies and psycho- social trauma and reported spike in the cases of male suicide in the region

Mwine also reported that, there have been increasing reports of criminality in post-war Acholi sub region in both conventional and social media committed by the Aguu terrorizing community residents and travelers across the region. He said the Aguus were reportedly very organized groups with zones of operation with its leaders. They have identification marks like body piercing, tattoos, hairstyles that help them identify each other and communicate easily.

While some actors especially local government have intensified security crack down on what is perceived as urban criminality, Dr. Mwine said other actors focus on rehabilitation and rethinking the role of social structures such as clan, families, religion and traditional institutions in restoring lost social values.

**Policy implications**

The Aguu phenomen according to Dr. Mwine has far reaching policy implications

1. Issues of Identity and belonging e.g. the Aguu are complex social relations often taken for granted and not centered in post-conflict recovery programming. They are currently addressed with strategies that constitute Aguu as an issue of morality and criminality, and a problem to economic development, commonly addressed through security crackdown.
2. Because of their unclear social identity, i.e. no known parents, no clear cultural heritage, and the precarious social settings they operate in, Aguu are most likely to be excluded by the formal citizenry systems eg registration of nationals such as during acquisition of Identity cards;
3. Aguu are said to be using tactics and methods closely similar to the ones used during the LRA insurgency- their actions are similar to those individuals who had been in the bush; they use ruthless means like stabbing people with knives, looting people’s property, torture and no value to human life. Aguu not only instil fear in the population but also threatens sustainable peace in the community.

**Learnings and key messages**

Dr. Mwine reported that having engaged communities in several dialogues, different lessons were taken from the research process.

1. One particular learning is on how economic centered post conflict programming e.g. prioritizing investment in physical infrastructure and economic ventures often takes for granted social aspects of recovery.
2. The centrality of social vitality or the loss of it and its implications for the return to social cohesion in post-conflict communities is apparent.
3. The question of Aguu as part of the population at the margins of the post –conflict northern Uganda does reveal the need to prioritize post-war social identity. The case of Aguu and the state measures to respond to it declaring security operations is a critical juncture. It points to the need to rethink the place of culture, traditional systems in enabling belonging and social cohesion.
4. Rediscovering social connectedness, cultural heritage and a sense of identity in the Acholi community might be one of the core aspects needed to address the Aguu question and facilitate a return to relative social cohesion.

By

Jane Anyango

Communication Officer, CHUSS