Resilient and Self-reliant Life: South Sudanese Refugees Imagining Futures in the Adjumani Refugee Setting, Uganda

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Resilience and self-reliance have become central in humanitarian responses to refugee situations. Based on a two-year longitudinal qualitative study, this article explores how South Sudanese refugee youngsters in Uganda imagine and act towards their futures, and questions what resilience and self-reliance can mean in the temporary space of the refugee camp. Youngsters need to become accustomed to a future without substantial progress, or be ready to play the game of chance. As such, a resilience and self-reliance policy not only reveals the powerlessness of refugee youth, but also the limits of a humanitarian project to seek actual solutions to refugee situations. © 2018 John Wiley & Sons Ltd and National Children’s Bureau

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Introduction

Since the start of the South Sudanese civil war in December 2013, more than four million people have fled their homes. About one million have crossed the border into neighbouring Uganda, where the majority are hosted in refugee camps managed by the Government of Uganda (GoU) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (UNHCR, 2017a). South Sudan has a long history of war, displacement and exile, and life in the refugee camps has become a sustained experience for entire generations of South Sudanese. In response to this reality of prolonged displacement, Uganda has adopted the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF), an ‘integrated refugee management model’ under which refugees have access to land and social services. One of the CRRF’s key characteristics is its liberal approach towards refugee aid, which allows people to work and move freely. Central to the policy is a focus on refugee self-reliance and resilience.1 According to the UNHCR, self-reliance refers to ‘the ability of individuals, households or communities to meet their essential needs and enjoy their human rights in a sustainable manner and to live with dignity’, and resilience is defined as ‘the ability of individuals, households, communities, national institutions and systems to prevent, absorb and recover from shocks, while continuing to function and adapt in a way that supports long-term prospects for sustainable development, peace and security, and the attainment of human rights’ (UNHCR, 2017c, p. 2).

Uganda is often seen as a pioneer of a resilience and self-reliance approach for refugees, but the idea is certainly not new, nor specific to the Ugandan context. Over the past 60 years, the UNHCR has launched several initiatives whereby refugee assistance programmes have been coupled with longer-term development efforts, in which self-reliance has been one of the cornerstones. The first initiatives date back to the 1960s with the
'Integrated zonal development approach'; and the ‘Refugee Aid and Development approach’ in the 1970s and 1980s, by granting refugees access to land and social services, aimed to make refugees self-sufficient so that they would not become indefinitely dependent on humanitarian aid (Crisp, 2001; Harrell-Bond, 1986).

In Uganda, self-reliance became formalised in the Self-Reliance Strategy (SRS), which gained momentum in 2002, when the need arose for more sustainable solutions in light of the protracted situation of Sudanese refugees in the Ugandan districts of Arua, Adjumani and Moyo (Dryden-Peterson and Hovil, 2004). The SRS, a joint strategy designed by the GoU and UNHCR, had the overall goal of ‘improving the standard of living of the people of refugee hosting districts, including the refugees’ and aimed to promote self-reliance, bridge the relief-development gap, and improve ‘burden-sharing’ between the host country and the international community (Dryden-Peterson and Hovil, 2004; Meyer, 2006). The SRS became further institutionalised in Uganda’s Refugee Act of 2006 and the Refugee Regulations of 2009, which explicitly allow refugees the right to work and to move and settle freely within the country. While the Ugandan approach has been praised by the international community as a ‘model for Africa’ (UNHCR, 2009), the SRS has also been extensively criticised by scholars and activists who argue that it provides insufficient resources for refugees to become self-reliant and emphasises the need for burden-sharing and budgetary constraints rather than the improvement of refugees’ well-being (see e.g., Dryden-Peterson and Hovil, 2004; Meyer, 2006; Refugee Law Project, 2005). Nevertheless, the main principles of the SRS were maintained under the subsequent Settlement Transformative Agenda (STA) (OPM, 2015, 2017), the Refugee and Host Population Empowerment (ReHoPE) programme (UNHCR, 2017d) and, most recently, the CRRF. The CRRF was introduced by UNHCR and adopted by Uganda and a dozen other countries after the New York Declarations of 2016 (UNHCR, 2018). Largely in line with the SRS, the CRRF aims ‘to ease pressures on countries that host large numbers of refugees, to enhance refugee self-reliance, to expand third-country solutions, and to support conditions in countries of origin for return in safety and dignity’ (UNHCR, 2018, p. 5). Somewhat new in the CRRF is the focus on resilience, which can be understood in the wider evolution towards resilience in humanitarianism (Ilcan and Rygiel, 2015). Since the turn of the century, humanitarian care and maintenance programmes largely limited to the provision of food, shelter and health are increasingly being reconsidered in favour of humanitarian efforts that closely resemble development projects. Such projects essentially aim to prevent people from becoming indeterminately dependent upon humanitarian aid (Ilcan and Rygiel, 2015; Reid, 2010), and they have become increasingly necessary in light of unpredictable refugee crises and chronic underfunding by Western donors (Milner, 2014).

In this article, we argue that the focus on refugee resilience and self-reliance in policies has repercussions for what a refugee camp is and the kinds of lives and futures that can be imagined within it. While the camps were originally designed as temporary spaces for the care and maintenance of vulnerable people until a durable solution had been found, today the camp is being reimagined as a space in which refugees can be empowered, educated, and prepared for a future in which they will no longer be supported (Duffield, 2008; UNHCR, 2017c). Several critical scholars have argued that, in adopting rationales of neoliberal governance, such projects essentially aim to prevent people from becoming dependent upon humanitarian aid indefinitely (Ilcan and Rygiel, 2015; Reid, 2010). A neoliberal mode of governing seeks to activate and encourage individual responsibility, rather than falling back on their membership in a society that ensures the support they need (Ilcan and Rygiel, 2015; Welsh, 2014).

This article analyses how South Sudanese refugee youngsters in Uganda imagine and act towards their futures in a humanitarian space that aims for refugees to become resilient and
self-reliant. Few studies have empirically explored the principles and practicalities of resilience and self-reliance policies in refugee contexts, leading to a dearth of critical reflection on what such policies really mean — both as conceptualised in discourse and as actualised in practice (Easton-Calabria and Omata, 2018). In examining what happens when youngsters become acquainted with the refugee policy and the options for the future that are available to them, this article casts a critical eye onto the extensive promotion of resilience and self-reliance, and explores what such policies can mean within the permanent temporariness of the camp.

Resilience, self-reliance and future in the camp

In an effort to understand what kinds of lives and experiences are possible within humanitarian contexts, Agamben’s notion of ‘bare life’ has been particularly valuable for making the argument that refugee camps produce the refugees as the ultimate bio-political subject or ‘homo sacer’, ‘a life which can be killed but not sacrificed’ (Agamben, 1998). Refugees in the camp can only appeal to a common humanity, and humanitarian organisations intervene primarily to care for and keep people alive, ‘a power of the powerless in the service of victims’ (Fassin, 2010, p. 276). A shift to a resilience and self-reliance approach, however, suggests that humanitarian actors aim for more than the refugees’ mere survival. As outlined in the definitions above, such an approach also strives to protect their human rights and aims to ensure ‘safe and productive futures for all those impacted by a crisis’ (UNHCR, 2017c, p. 3).

In governance approaches and documents, ‘resilience’ and ‘self-reliance’ are generally considered unproblematic and desirable principles (Duffield, 2015). Still, scholars have noted a worrying consensus across government, business and some quarters of academia that resilience is an unquestionably ‘good’ value to be striven for, invested in and cultivated throughout society at whatever cost’ (Brassett and Vaughan-Williams, 2015, p. 46). Resilience and self-reliance approaches are governing mechanisms that are based on certain assumptions that can have intended as well as unintended effects, and have repercussions for the kinds of lives and futures that are seen as legitimate (Evans and Reid, 2013).

The self-reliance and resilience policy as conceptualised in the CRRF also seems to be in tension with the contours of the camp, precisely the space in which it is supposed to be realised. Within the CRRF, the camp remains a temporary space, and voluntary repatriation remains the most desirable solution (UNHCR, 2017b) — which already promotes certain future options while disqualifying others. Refugee situations are also becoming increasingly protracted, and as a result, growing numbers of people spend years living in a refugee camp for an undetermined period (Milner, 2014). This raises questions as to how people make sense of this reality and imagine their futures within the camp as a place of permanent temporariness in the absence of tangible durable solutions.

Context and methods

For this study, 30 young South Sudanese refugees (about 15–20 years old upon arrival in Uganda) were followed from the moment that they arrived in the refugee setting in Adjumani, Northern Uganda, and were visited every six months for the next two years (four visits in total). The first time, we met the youngsters at the Transit Centre near the border between South Sudan and Uganda. From there, they were relocated to one of the refugee camps, where they received a $20 \times 30$ m plot of land and had to build a shelter and a new life.

Half of the participants were from the Ma’di tribe, an ethnic group living in both South Sudan and Uganda, speaking the same language as the Ugandan inhabitants of the Adjumani
district. The 15 other youngsters were from the Dinka tribe, the most represented ethnic group in the Adjumani refugee setting. The youngsters were recruited in the Transit Centre with the help of two research assistants, who spoke English as well as the youngsters’ local language (Dinka or Ma’di). The aims and design of the research project were explained to all refugees of Dinka and Ma’di ethnicity who arrived during a period of three weeks. Youngsters who met the criteria (Dinka or Ma’di, between 15 and 24 years old) could then contact the research assistants who recorded basic information such as name, age, sex, place of origin, family size and occupation. The youngsters were selected based on these characteristics, with the aim of compiling a diverse group of participants. The youngsters were then invited to the first interview, after which we double-checked whether they understood the aims and methods of the study, and if they agreed to participate in this 2-year longitudinal study.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim by a Ma’di or Dinka speaker, who also checked the translation from the local language to English. The first interviews were conducted at the Transit Centre after the youngsters had just arrived, and follow-up interviews were undertaken every six to seven months at the place where the youngsters then resided (in a refugee settlement or in a nearby town). Most of the youngsters remained in the camp for the next two years, three moved to the town of Adjumani after spending some time in the camp. Five of the youngsters went back to South Sudan in the course of the two years, but some also came back to Uganda. In total, 21 of the youngsters were in Uganda every time we visited, and 24 youngsters were visited and interviewed at least three out of the four times.

Data were collected using qualitative interviews, which focused on the youngsters’ history, their flight from South Sudan, their arrival in the refugee setting, their daily experiences of uncertainty in Uganda, and their imaginings of the future. Follow-up interviews focused on the same topics and included some general questions and some questions adjusted for each participant based on the previous interview. Interviews lasted one and a half to two and a half hours, and were often preceded and followed by informal conversations with the youngsters, their family members and friends. In addition to the interviews, data were also collected through ethnographic observations within the camp and informal conversations at places where youth were frequently present, such as the market, community centres or schools.

This article presents two of the 30 stories of the youngsters. The two stories were selected as the research process unfolded, using the methodological approach of bricolage (Kincheloe and others, 2011; Yardley, 2008), which is a transdisciplinary theoretical approach that includes a variety of research methodologies and allows for complexity to exist in methods, analysis and description (Earl, 2013; Kincheloe and others, 2011; Van Hove and others, 2017). While all of the stories relate unique experiences in terms of background, current lives in the camp and future perspectives, the two selected stories also impart the shared conditions of the camp and reveal some of the collective aspects that characterise the lives of refugee youth in Uganda. The two stories are undeniably singular in their experiences, but they are also topical in their reflection of particular ways of being and becoming in the camp (Fassin and others, 2008).

The two selected participants — Deng (a 16-year-old Dinka boy) and Evelyn (a Ma’di woman in her early twenties) — were chosen after repeated reading the transcribed interviews from all participants. Based on this initial reading, and two years of fieldwork in this setting, we identified certain elements and experiences that appeared to be significant in the youngsters’ narratives and their future imaginings. The two narratives were thus purposefully selected, as they differed regarding core experiences and characteristics such as family situation, gender, age and schooling background. As such, the narratives of Deng and Evelyn resonate different elements, dynamics and experiences that can be recognised from one story to
another within the group of 30 youngsters, and are particularly illustrative for some of the elements that were critical in the interviews regarding future imaginings. As will become clear from the stories described below, Deng’s and Evelyn’s experiences in the camp, and the way they imagine their future, were quite different — but at the same time, both stories allow for some broader conclusions to be drawn. Moreover, the richness of their stories and their ability to articulate their experiences were reasons for choosing these two accounts. Following the first stage of analysis based on all of the interviews, the interviews with Deng and Evelyn (eight in total) were subjected to a content analysis, following the inductive and conceptual mapping procedures suggested by Clarke (2005) and Charmaz (2014). After coding the interviews, recurring themes, common patterns and key points were identified by the first author (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998). The themes were examined for consistent patterns and exceptions, focusing on how youngsters imagine their futures. Nvivo 11 was used to organise information and maintains an overview in the multitude of data.

The researcher as bricoleur makes a collage of pieces of separate stories, but looks for precision, liveliness and thick description. In weaving the stories of Evelyn and Deng through the 30 accounts of the youngsters in the camp, and from field notes based on ethnographic research in the setting, ‘the bricoleur assembles a theoretical montage through which meaning is constructed and conveyed according to a narrative ethic that is neither naively humanistic, nor romantically impulsive’ (Yardley, 2008, p. 1). Exploration of the youngsters’ imaginings of the future and how these change over time, and scrutiny of these narratives within the framework of the literature on resilience and self-reliance approaches in humanitarian contexts, provided an understanding of the youngsters’ narratives about the future within the specific social and political context of the refugee camp aiming for refugees to become resilient and self-reliant individuals.

**Two narratives of camp life and future**

*Deng – “Everything will be possible”*

Deng was 16 when he ran from Pariang in South Sudan and came to Uganda. He stayed in the Transit Centre together with a young woman who he called his sister, but later I learned that she was someone he knew from his village. His other family members had fled to Juba and planned to look for work there. Deng told me that he came to Uganda for two reasons: war and education. The coupling of these two purposes reflects many of the youngsters’ stories we heard in the Transit Centre after they had just arrived: people ran away from war and violence, but they also ran towards something — a place where they hoped to find opportunities for their future. In most of the youngsters’ stories, education was central, because, as Deng explained: ‘If you are educated, everything will be possible’. When he was still in the Transit Centre, he went to a nearby camp and saw the schools that had been established there. He believed that educated people were able to go anywhere — like I (the first author) had come from Belgium to Uganda. His idea that everything would be possible appeared a bit unrealistic, but he explained that no one could ever really know what could happen in the future, which left an open-endedness to both good and bad possibilities:

> Even when we were in South Sudan, no one would be certain. Like the crisis, no one was certain about it, but it happened, and you yourself, you do not know how you will wake up, but you are guided by supernatural powers.

Many of the youngsters who just arrived in the camp were convinced that uncertainty and crisis were conditions of life, and that the future was heavily dependent on supernatural powers.
Six months later, after he had been relocated to the refugee camp, Deng told us about how his life had improved since he came to Uganda, how there was peace and stability, and that he did not hear gun shots anymore. At that time, he was in the fifth grade of primary school. He told us that ever since he was a child, he had the dream to become a pilot, and here in Uganda, NGOs were sponsoring children to go to school. Because the NGOs encouraged the youth to study hard, he was hopeful towards his future: ‘my chances of achieving the future are high for example, the best performing pupils are taken care of by NGOs, so if I pass well then I might get a scholarship.’ The presence of the NGOs in the refugee camp thus seemed to create expectations towards the future, which became more tangible than when the youngsters were still in South Sudan.

Again half a year later, the third time we visited the youngsters in Uganda, the first thing Deng told us was that his life was not going well. The food ration had been reduced and was no longer sufficient to survive on. People partly had to cater for their own food, for which they were highly dependent on the products sold by the nationals living around the camp. Deng explained how his life in the refugee camp became more and more difficult. In the semester that had just passed, he did not participate in the exams because he could not pay the required examination fee (13 000 UGX, about €3). He tried to get support from the NGOs, telling them that he was an orphan, but ‘it all ended up in vain’, he said.

People had started to return to South Sudan; some went back home or to Juba if their home areas were unstable. Also Deng started to realise that people had only come to the camp to stay temporarily:

People have built houses that are short-lived, they are temporary houses. And then the environment where people dump human wastes along the roads is not favourable and no one can stay there. The community, it seems, does not like people. And then you realise that the food issue is pushing everyone away.

While he also planned to go back to South Sudan one day, he wanted to finish his education first. But taking care of himself and his school career became more and more difficult when support of the NGOs diminished. Just as several of the other youngsters, he started to realise that it would become more difficult to achieve his imagined future if he stayed in Uganda. He started asking me about ‘the paper’, which referred to a form through which refugees could apply for resettlement to a third country. Almost anyone in the camps we talked to had relatives living in Western countries (mostly Australia, Canada or the USA), resulting from some large-scale resettlement programmes that had been set up for Sudanese refugees in the 1990s. At the time of research, however, there were no resettlement programmes for refugees in northern Uganda. Yet the dream to be resettled, although unattainable at the time, persisted:

We put our trust in God so that he creates a way so that UN can relocate us and maybe there we can get some freedom. (…) But everything is God’s plan and if it is so hard for it to happen, then it will not happen.

The tangible hope that Deng had during the first months he spent in Uganda, nurtured by the presence of NGOs who sponsored children to go to school, seemed to have shifted back to an abstract hope that was again heavily dependent on divine powers outside of anyone’s control. The lack of opportunities weighed heavily on Deng, and he had the feeling that he had to stop thinking about his future: ‘It is because I do not know where the UN is and that is why I wanted to stop thinking about it. But I just have to cope with it since I cannot erase it.’

The last time we went back to Uganda to visit the youngsters, two years after they had crossed the South Sudan-Ugandan border, Deng told us how his life had not changed during
this time. We could see that he had built a more permanent house on his plot (instead of a provisory shelter under a white tarpaulin), and that he had started planting maize. He was now in P7, the last year of primary school, preparing for his final exam that would take place a few months later. But apparently these changes meant ‘nothing’ to him. Life in the camp had become ‘worse and worse’. He described how people had started eating leaves from trees because there had not been enough food, and how there were no drugs in the hospitals. With his final exam coming up, he increasingly started to worry about the fact that the camp had no secondary school. Those who were sponsored by the humanitarian organisations were sent to a secondary school outside the camp, but this was only a possibility for pupils with the highest grades, and many of the youngsters believed that, even then, you needed to know one of the refugee leaders or someone in the organisations. Over time, many of the youngsters came to realise that education was an option for the lucky few, rather than a real opportunity within the camp, and they believed that a supernatural power decided for whom this was reserved.

Evelyn – ‘if you cannot afford it, then you leave it’

When we first met Evelyn, she told us that she ‘grew up through challenges’ after her parents died when she was a child. She grew up with her uncle and then with her grandmother, but she had never had the opportunity to go to school. Around the age of 15, she got married and had two children. In 2015, she fled from South Sudan from a region close to the Ugandan border, after she heard that there would be ‘serious war with massive killing’. After two days of walking, she arrived at the Elegu border point with her two kids. Her husband had stayed in South Sudan, but planned to come later.

This was not the first time Evelyn had fled to Uganda. When she was a child, she had lived in a refugee camp in the Adjumani district for a couple of years. She seemed to have a fairly clear idea of what lay ahead for her and her family. When we first talked to her, she knew that she would probably be taken to a camp called Maaji, and she knew it was far from the Adjumani town. Just as in South Sudan, where ‘nothing is for free’, she expected that it would be challenging to make money in the refugee camp. What she did hope for was to be trained in tailoring by the humanitarian organisations. She explained why:

My life will prosper, it will improve my status changing from worst to better, it may make me to push my child to secondary school. [...] I want to be capable, to be able to get my own things, instead of begging every now and then, people will get tired of me.

So even while she had modest expectations of her economic possibilities, she did cherish hope for change in her and her children’s future as a result of opportunities available within the refugee camp.

When we met Evelyn again after six months, she explained how she had been experiencing many difficulties after the relocation to the Maaji refugee camp: ‘they just brought us and left us in the bush’. Clearing the plot of land that was given to her and putting up a shelter for her and her kids to live in had been a huge struggle. Apart from that, she told us how getting money in the refugee camp was even more difficult than she had expected. Unlike the first time we talked to her, she stressed the differences between life in Uganda and in South Sudan. In South Sudan, she explained, ‘life was a bit easy and we were feeling good, like as if we were rich. But here there is nothing like that, and I wonder if I will ever go back to that kind of life.’

Evelyn expressed repeatedly that she wanted to take care of herself rather than being dependent on humanitarian aid. She said that she wanted to ‘sacrifice herself and work hard’ so that her kids could study. As her eldest child was only four years old at the time, this
illustrates how, rather than being stuck in the present, she was clearly occupied with her future and that of her children. Evelyn also imagined her own future in terms of hope for her children's future:

I had nothing until when I got a kid. I did not have anything I wanted. Then I asked myself a question: what should I do? I decided that I should send the child to school. If he studies and completes school, he will bring me out of nothing to a very nice place, like a place across the borders. There they even have permanent buildings with iron sheets. After studying, I want him to do something good for my life, like for instance building for me a permanent house with iron sheets or maybe, by God's grace, he will take me out. That is what I want to happen in my life. It all depends on the child, because for 20 years of my life, it has been nothing.

She further explained that 'taking me out' meant going to America. She had heard that in America 'you just relax and do not even cook food. You watch videos on a screen and just grow fat'. This idea about her future was not simply based on abstract ideas but was influenced by what she had witnessed in the Ugandan refugee camps when she was a child:

When we were in the camp at Alere, some women left their husbands in Sudan and they struggled to send their children to school. And after some time, they started going to America. When they had been there like for one or two years, they started sending money for people at home, so even the life at home started changing.

This dream of going 'outside' was something that was touched upon in several of the conversations with the youngsters, but it was also seen by most as something rather unrealistic. Most of their imaginings about the future were contingent upon the possibilities within the camp: if there would be resettlement programmes, they would apply for them. But if not, people would remain in the camp and try to get used to the life there, and maybe go back to South Sudan when there was peace. They seemed to be ready for anything.

Six months later, the first thing Evelyn told us was that the food ratio had been reduced and that people had been eating sorghum and beans every day. She explained how her situation had changed since she had first arrived in the refugee camp:

At first, when I had just come, I was a bit calm and happy – but now, I feel there is no change and my suffering does not seem to end. At least before they would give us food – you get half of it and take to the market for sell and then buy other things to change diet. But now they have even reduced the size so women are facing a lot of challenges so there is no change.

She tried several things to make money, such as cutting and selling grass or brewing alcohol, but none of her efforts had brought significant results. According to her, this had to do with 'all the rules and regulations in the camp', referring to the fact that the nationals had prohibited the refugees from cutting grass, and the fact that it was difficult for refugees to go outside the refugee camp because of the long distance to the town. She also talked about the absence of the humanitarian organisations in the Maaji refugee camp, and to their excessive focus on 'immediate support', which 'is not what you think in your heart about what you want in the future'.

The last time we met Evelyn, after she had been in the Maaji refugee camp for two years, she told us that life was still hard because it was difficult to get money. The only difference with the time she had just arrived in Uganda was that now people were no longer given the full food ration, so they could not sell a part of it and buy other necessities like soap or different kinds of food. She also explained that the humanitarian organisations were 'saying that people have settled, when they are giving people more problems.' This was worrying her. To be settled, she said, meant to be independent, to be able to make money and buy the things that you need. Here, she felt 'like a kid', depending on other people, and the support
was not even sufficient. The reduction of support, quite paradoxically, did not mean that people had become less dependent on the support, but rather it stripped people of the little control they still had to make use of the support in their own ways.

When we asked Evelyn how she looked back on the two years she had spent in the camp, she explained how she was ‘going backwards’, ‘confused about what to do’ and felt ‘powerless and discouraged’. Over the years, Evelyn had become less and less hopeful about the future that she imagined for her and her children. But she tried to accept things as they were:

If there is no peace in Sudan, you cannot refuse to stay here in Maaji because it has disadvantages and advantages as well. It teaches you how to be flexible when situations are bad and you have to survive. . . . There is no one in the world who does not want good things. But if you cannot afford, then you leave it.

Such resigned discourse was quite common in the stories of the youngsters who remained in the camp. Not being able to move to the town or to return to South Sudan, they tried to come to terms with their condition in the camp. Evelyn explained that she would just continue her efforts to send her kids to school, so that ‘God could open windows of opportunities for them’. The future Evelyn imagined for her children was a life that consisted of everything that her life was not. And over the two years, she came to realise that she was the only one who could struggle for her and her family’s future. Just like Deng, she increasingly projected her hope onto some supernatural power, rather than on concrete possibilities.

**Discussion**

The stories of Deng and Evelyn are quite different, but they also resonate some of the shared conditions for youngsters in the camp: the way they imagine their futures, and what self-reliance and resilience can possibly mean within the camp.

Initially, Deng’s and Evelyn’s hope for the future seemed to be contingent upon the presence of organisations, which in that sense became ‘distributors of hope’ (Hage and Papadopoulos, 2004). But both stories also show how, during the first two years in the refugee setting, tangible opportunities for a better future were repeatedly disappointed. When organisations reduced support, and opportunities seemed to be available only for the lucky few, the youngsters gave up the tangible hopes they had for the future and any coherent vision of the future seemed to disappear. At the same time, both Deng and Evelyn would shift their hope onto an imaginary (often supernatural) power, and ambitions and hopes, such as becoming a pilot or moving to America, seemed to have little grounding in actual possibilities. To express this in Bourdieu’s words, the youngsters’ imagined futures ‘oscillated between fantasy and surrender, between flight into the imaginary and fatalistic surrender to the verdicts of the given’ (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 221). These future projects were, however, completely detached from the present situation and the youngsters became disillusioned by what happened in their daily lives.

While traditional care-and-maintenance programmes in refugee camps did not include any future project, and were criticised for producing ‘bare life’, the resilience and self-reliance initiatives under the Ugandan refugee policy seems to entertain a future project that is fundamentally open-ended and uncertain, fostering hope for the future but also engendering almost dream-like future imaginings. Several authors argue that self-reliance and resilience are manifestations of a neoliberal mode of governance, which fosters individuals and institutions that can endure, and perhaps even embrace, situations of naturalised risk and uncertainty (Evans and Reid, 2013; Joseph, 2013; O’Malley, 2010; Welsh, 2014; Zebrowski, 2013), rather than strive for agency and activist efforts to bring change to the broader system. Ilcan
and Rygiel (2015) assert that the emergence of resilience in the field of humanitarianism ‘aims not only to protect and shelter refugees through the provision of accommodation, food, medicine and infrastructure projects in refugee camps, but also to create self-governing and entrepreneurial refugee subjects who will be responsible for their futures’ (p. 337). What remains of resilience and self-reliance in the camp is a rather bleak picture: the ability to become accustomed to a future without substantial progress, or to be ready to play the game of chance. Evelyn is perhaps the epitome of a resilient and self-reliant refugee: always looking for new possibilities, willing to take care of herself and conscious of the fact that change goes slowly. She accepted her challenges, whilst also seeking ways to maintain her functionality and keeping hope alive for her children’s future. But it was difficult even for her, because being self-reliant seems to be determined by the practical and funding constraints of organisations rather than by the refugees’ ability to ‘meet their essential needs and enjoy their human rights in a sustainable manner and to live with dignity’ (UNHCR, 2017c, p. 3).

Deng’s story shows how the youngsters quickly learned that they need to be willing to struggle for the limited opportunities that are available only for the lucky few. As this study shows, the resilience and self-reliance policy as implemented in the Ugandan context gives the youngsters’ efforts, hope and future perspectives little to no support or future viability and resilience and self-reliance are reduced to individual efforts, whereby the other actors can easily shirk their responsibilities. When resilience and self-reliance are reduced to individual efforts and are externally defined and disconnected from the constraints on the refugees’ lives, such policies risk reinforcing current power structures and disempower rather than empower refugees.

While it is tempting to see resilience and self-reliance merely as tools of a neoliberal mode of governance, various authors argue that there is in fact no essential connection between resilience thinking and neoliberal governance (Chandler, 2014; Grove, 2017; Grove and Chandler, 2017). Instead, ‘any affinities are contingently worked out in particular contexts, in response to specific problems of government’ (Grove, 2017, p. 185). Such a view urges us to look for the limits of resilience and self-reliance in a particular context rather than viewing them as a general critique of the policy per se. Overall, the resilience and self-reliance approach in Uganda seems to assume some ‘ideal’ conditions which are needed to fully implement the policy. For example, it is a requirement that additional funding for long-term development becomes available, and the expectation is that refugees will return to their home countries when peace is established (UNHCR, 2017b). As a result, resilience and self-reliance approaches are manifestations of the unpredictability of aid and the chronic underfunding of refugee crises. Furthermore, the expectations in the CRRF towards refugees and their available power and resources to achieve resilience and self-reliance within the structural constraints of the refugee setting seem to be overestimated, and recall many of the critiques that were formulated by scholars on Uganda’s SRS (Dryden-Peterson and Hovil, 2004; Ilcan and others, 2015; Meyer, 2006; Refugee Law Project, 2005). Meyer (2006), for example, argued that self-reliance is often seen as the opposite of dependency and thus legitimises a quick reduction in support, while in fact more, rather than fewer, resources and support should be made available in order for people to become self-reliant. The narratives in this article have likewise illustrate that the availability of food aid gives refugees the opportunity to start their own businesses and demonstrate agency, while the reduction of food aid leads them to feel ‘like a kid’. Several authors who have worked on resilience emphasise the need for the availability of social and economic resources on which refugees can build (Barber, 2013; Masten and Narayan, 2012; Sleijpen and others, 2016), and they point to the interplay between individual and collective domains of functioning when designing resilience interventions (Ager, 2013; Rutter, 2012; Vindevogel and others, 2015). By the same token, the
ability to be self-reliant depends fundamentally on the refugees’ access to rights and protection (Easton-Calabria and Omata, 2018; Kaiser, 2006; Meyer, 2006). While there is relative consensus in academic literature about a holistic and systemic approach towards resilience and self-reliance, such an approach seems difficult to achieve in practice in the context of the camp. Formulating resilience and self-reliance policies are not merely a technical question of how, and for how long, what kind of support should be provided, but also entails complex ethical questions about who is to become resilient, by what means, and based on what grounds. As such, resilience and self-reliance policies in humanitarian contexts require constant adaptation and self-reflection by all actors involved (Chandler, 2014).

The current reality in Uganda, however, is one in which resilience and self-reliance seem to fit perfectly with a project of sociopolitical exclusion and the subsequent inclusion of refugees within the permanently temporary camp. Complexity and uncertainty are used as justifications to shy away from responsibilities rather than as starting points for continuous ethical reflection.

Therefore, resilience and self-reliance become imaginary ideals that obscure the difficulty (or perhaps impossibility) of contemporary humanitarian projects to challenge what is considered ‘the natural order of things’ (Malkki, 1995) and to genuinely engage with the futures of not some, but all, refugee youth. If so, resilient and self-reliant life risks becoming the contemporary version of Agamben’s (1998, p. 65) ‘bare life’ — and his criticism that humanitarian organisations consolidate sovereign power and ‘despite themselves, maintain a secret solidarity with the powers they ought to fight’ remains crucially relevant today.

Conclusion

By exploring how young people imagine their futures in a refugee camp, we tried to understand what resilience and self-reliance can mean in such a context: the ability to become accustomed to a future without substantial progress, or to be ready to play the game of chance. Youngsters’ future imaginings seem to oscillate between fatalistic surrender to a life in the camp without substantial progress, or flight into the imaginary. Both are disheartening. What this study advocates is a reconnection to the perspectives and future imaginings of the refugees themselves — not only on a discursive level but also in actual practices and in the refugees’ lived experiences. Humanitarian actors and refugee hosting governments should thus engage with the future imaginings of refugees rather than frame the future as ultimately contingent, which gives refugees no other option than the permanent temporariness of the camp. In order to keep hope alive and let different futures be possible, opportunities should offer something more than an absolute necessity (e.g., becoming a farmer in the settlement), but also something more concrete than the (currently) absolute impossibility (e.g., moving to America). Completely imaginary visions of the future should be nuanced. At the same time, viable alternatives, like sufficient opportunities for secondary education or a meaningful livelihood activities should be made available. Another option could be to strengthen support to refugees to self-settle (e.g., in urban areas), so that youngsters’ imaginings of the future could also become shaped in a context that is not necessarily the one of the camp. Such practices may counter, rather than reinforce, refugees’ (sense of) powerlessness.

What is needed, it seems, is reflection on whether humanitarian interventions in camps — especially when they increasingly start to engage with the future — may actually enable people to ‘live with dignity’, and ‘support long-term prospects for sustainable development, peace and security, and the attainment of human rights’, as proposed in the UNHCR’s definitions of self-reliance and resilience (UNHCR, 2017c, p. 3). In other words: whether a humanitarian project can be a political, and not just a moral, project that is concerned with people’s futures.
Notes

1 These principles are enshrined in the Refugee Act of Uganda (2006), the Refugee and Host Population Empowerment (ReHoPE) strategy, which aims to overcome fragmented programming, the Settlement Transformation Agenda (STA), a holistic, integrated district-level refugee management approach that includes refugees in national development plans, UNDAF, the UN Development Assistance Framework, and, most recently, the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (UNHCR, 2017b).

2 Many of the Dinka youngsters had finished their primary school in Arabic, but they had to repeat several years in primary school in English when they came to Uganda.

References


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