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Problematic Ideological Humanitarianism: Generating more Resilient Markets but More Fragile Beneficiaries

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses circumstances under which post-conflict humanitarian-development interventions may post success despite exacerbating population's vulnerability. It concerns Mercy Corps' (MC) Revitalisation of Agricultural Incomes and New Markets (RAIN) project in Lamwo District, Northern Uganda. MC identified market access as key component of community resilience measuring it through technical feedback processes. In its own terms, RAIN has proved successful, and the market became robust. However, a less narrow evaluation revealed RAIN's negative impact including diminished food security, increased child malnutrition, domestic and gender-based violence. On any rational understanding of resilience, interventions appeared to compromise rather than enhance population's resilience.

Introduction

This paper presents a critical insight into a specific humanitarian development intervention in order to demonstrate the importance of detailed contextual knowledge for understanding the real impacts, on the ground, of resilience-based interventions, such as those directed at agricultural markets. Lamwo, one of the districts of post-war northern Uganda is chosen as a case study to examine the outcome of Mercy Corps' Revitalisation of Agricultural Income and New Markets (RAIN) project. This paper aims to offer valuable lessons on humanitarian-development interventions which talk the language of resilience but do not take resilience analysis for the short-term aid model which does not allow for understanding the underlying processes which accounts for the unintended consequences, but which they continue to perpetrate, nonetheless.

Lamwo District is part of Achoili region of northern Uganda, a region which emerged from the brutal and protracted Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) insurgency in July 2006 with its population subjected to widespread atrocities. To

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sustain the rebellion, the LRA abducted more than 20,000 children who were forcefully conscripted as child soldiers, porters, servants and sex slaves (Meier 2013). On the other hand, the Government of Uganda in the guise of a military tactic for winning the war, sought to cut the rebel-civilian links through a systematic and militarily harsh strategy targeting local population. Government, without any capacity or capability to provide or protect, forcefully relocated an estimated 1.7 million people into internally displaced peoples (IDP) camps, more than 90 per cent of the estimated total population in the region (Van Acker 2004, MoH 2005).

The camps were characterised by overcrowding, limited access or total absence of social services such as health care, water and sanitation, education and family support systems, violence and insecurity (Van Acker 2004). With more than 100,000 killed, those in IDPs saw their day-to-day coping and survival mechanism which had been built over several years of LRA conflict prior to the encampment were turned upside-down. As conflict came to an end in 2006 with the LRA withdrawing from the region and relocating to the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of Congo peace returned to the region and people returned to their shattered homes and villages.

The return to relative peace however only reframed perpetual crisis as several years of aid-dependency amongst the IDP population saw a generation and communities emerged in the post-conflict northern Uganda without the basic knowledge and skills to survival. Mercy Corps (2015a, p. 3) notes that ' … a generation raised in IDP camps lacked basic knowledge about how to cultivate crops, much less the tools to do so.'

The national population and housing census area specifics 2014 estimated post-war Lamwo District's overall population at 134, 371. When this demography is dissected, its characteristics reveals a picture of a district with a very Vulnerable population. For example, up to 36 per cent of the total population in the district were said to be under the age of nine, and 62 per cent of the total population of the district were under the age of 19 years (UBOS 2014). The remaining 48 per cent of the total population were aged 20 years and above, 56 per cent of whom were female and 13 per cent were adults over 60 years old (UBOS 2014, p. 6).

In response to overwhelming post-conflict challenges such as chronic poverty and widespread food insecurity and weak sociocultural institutions, humanitarian-development interventions in the region have constructed their programming and interventions almost exclusively around the concept of resilience as a driving paradigm. One such example, is the intervention that forms the primary focus of this paper, that is, RAIN program in Lamwo District with funding from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The programme sought to improve food security and economic growth in target areas through a focus on the agricultural markets.

Mercy Corps' intervention in Lamwo District is chosen because the organisation presents itself as the field's most engaged resilience-based NGO. Some of the organisation's materials used in this paper's analysis were presented as a contribution from Mercy Corps to the global debates around resilience that took place during the 2015 and 2016 when the Sustainable Development Goals was launched and the first ever World Humanitarian Summit took place.

Mercy Corps is a global non-governmental, humanitarian aid organisation operating in transitional contexts that have undergone various forms of economic, social, political, and environmental instabilities. They are driven by the understanding that the driver or the best locomotive of social or community change or long-term recovery is the local market and take a 'market system development approach to humanitarian development' response to crisis in more than 49 countries across the world (Mercy Corps 2011).

Through what it refers to as shared analysis, learning and action, MC adapts and operationalises a market oriented resilience approach aimed at helping affected communities identify and address underlying vulnerabilities, minimise exposure to risks and strengthen resilience capacities to achieve positive, inclusive change (Mercy Corps 2016a, p. 4–5). Mercy Corps calls this approach 'Market Systems Development (MSD)' and defines resilience as ' … the capacity of communities in complex socio-ecological systems to learn, cope, adapt, and transform in the face of shocks and stresses' (Mercy Corps 2016a, p. 7, 2016b, p. 3).

In Uganda, the organisation has been operating since 2006, helping to rebuild communities in northern Uganda emerge from decades of conflict. Between 2011 and 2015, Mercy Corps implemented RAIN project aimed at enhancing smallholder farmers' production and profitability; improve agribusiness performance in input and output markets; and expand access to financial services in rural areas while linking them to the global market system (Mercy Corps 2014, 2015a). RAIN was framed around MSD approach to humanitarian-development aid delivery to communities experiencing crisis.

Mercy Corps presents MSD as a method of working through public and private sector actors to address the underlying systemic constraints that hinder the target population's access to, and participation in the market (Mercy Corps 2015a, 2017a, 2017b). MSD targets the supply and demand for goods and services to support economic growth and improve social outcomes by identifying and addressing barriers to market development. To achieve these objectives, MSD identifies and develops partnerships with local, national and regional actors critical to addressing market constraints and creating the right conditions for the market to prosper and to deliver improved sustainable productiveness (Mercy Corps 2017a).

The organisation perceives poverty as a systemic consequence of a distorted and dysfunctional local market, one which can only be solved through a system approach aimed at transforming it in to a stable resilient one, capable of facilitating sustainable and equitable economic growth. Through a facilitative approach, the organisation set out to identify leverage points within the communities of Lamwo in order to induce a positive impact onto an existing Socioecological System (SES) without creating a new one dependent on their aid programme (Mercy Corps 2015a, p. 5).

But because market facilitation requires utilising, creating, or manipulating existing social networks as opposed to direct service provision, the organisation primarily implemented their intervention by utilising existing partnerships or facilitating the establishment of new ones. It embarked on cultivating and establishing commercially oriented agro-business chain-link relationships with the private and public sector landscape. Typical members of these networks ranged from large established companies and financial institutions (most of whom, had not, historically worked with smallholder farmers in the program areas) to smaller savings and credit cooperatives (Mercy Corps 2015a, p. 5).

Social networks or social capital such as relationships and trust between individuals has been proven to be critical for crisis-affected households to share knowledge, find income opportunities, borrow money, and obtain resources that help them cope (Bimeny *et al*. 2021). However, one fundamental risk with MSD approach to creating and developing agricultural market through facilitative measures as this paper shall argue, is that the wrong kind of social connections can deepen existing power dynamics, potentially undermining local trust, and helpful social capital most of which are established outside the formal market framework (Bernstein and Oya 2014).

Following its project evaluation of RAIN in 2015, Mercy Corps posted some success as they identified improved market access which it perceives as a key component of resilience, a 'trigger of change' measured through technical feedback mechanism. In its own terms, the intervention was successful, and the market had become robust. The evaluation also revealed that, despite the project's success in ensuring a self-sustaining and resilient market, the same community continued to experience persistent food insecurity, infant malnutrition, increased incidence of domestic violence and intra/inter-communal land conflict among other post-war challenges.

Responding to this discrepancy, Mercy Corps argued, it appears that one-off, single sector development programs are unlikely to build the resilience of beneficiary communities and that a broader, multi-actor and multi-sectoral approach is needed, one which is less heavily reliant on the United Nations or other major players within the international political community (Mercy Corps 2016a). The organisation also argued that vulnerability is complex and multilevel, a product of intersecting pressures, and that single-sector economic development efforts were poorly positioned to tackle the social, political, and ecological sources of crisis and vulnerability on their own.

The organisation suggest that this helps to explain the discrepancy. It goes on to point out that such an admission allows Mercy Corps to present an alternative resilience agenda, one which understand that the ability to withstand a crisis is rooted not in the household or individuals, but in the society's collective assets (Mercy Corps 2016a, 2018).

Recent study conducted by Bimeny *et al*. (2021) in Karamoja region of north-eastern Uganda where such integrated intervention as Mercy Corps alluded to was implemented to boost the regions resilience capacity, found that ' . . . distributive, and justice issues such as increased poverty, inequitable income and resource distribution and access, and unhealthy relationships such as exploitation may have been' exacerbated rather than improved. The scholars attributed this to a persistent neglect of local population and their historical context by humanitarian-development intervention.

This paper's findings also highlight similar feedbacks of RAIN in Lamwo as that of Bimeny *et al*. (2021). Mercy Corps in trying to explain the discrepancy in the outcome of RAIN and its faith on resilience paradigm, shows that, it does not seem to think the problem could be in the notion itself as currently used in development theory and practice. Its definition and understanding of resilience are one deeply rooted in that currently in use in development theory and practice.

Resilience although attributed a range of meanings and definitions, is often defined in development theory and practice as the capacity of communities or socioecological systems or households or individuals to absorb setbacks and to still retain their functions and structure through reorganisation, offering a solution to the complexity and uncertainty presented by change (Cooper and Wheeler 2015, p. 96). Mercy Corps presents resilience as 'the capacity of communities in complex socioecological systems to learn, cope, adapt, and transform in the face of shocks and stresses' (Mercy Corps 2016a, p. 7).

The concept however, in its current form has been heavily criticised for its inherent inequality, politicisation and power, neglect and marginalisation of local political context including justice issues and shifting of responsibility away from global or national structures of inequality on to local victims of shocks and stresses (Cooper and Wheeler 2015, Bimeny *et al*. 2021).

Contrary to Mercy Corps assertion attributing the negative outcome of RAIN to a lack of a broader, multi-actor and multi-sectoral approach lees reliant on the United Nations and other international political community, this paper's findings highlight that the discrepancy is greatly due to an absence of a detailed contextual knowledge needed for understanding the real impact, on the ground, of resilience focused development interventions.

Dobson *et al*., (2015, p. 617) in a study on building resilience in formal settlements among the 'National Slum Dwellers Federation of Uganda' concluded that, ' . . . true resilience will not be designed and achieved by government alone but will need the active partnership of marginalised rural and urban residents in the definition and assessment of vulnerability'. This finding is very useful and applicable in both urban and non-urban settings like Lamwo. Communities who survive and emerge from shocks and stresses such as violence, conflict and war are not simply passive subject of these events, but rather, they are active agents whose knowledge and interventions actively build their resilience capacity.

Bimeny *et al*. (2021, p. 3) note that when genuinely engaged with, these local knowledge and interventions can prove critical for development interventions that seek to improve their capacity to cope with shocks and crises. The scholars show how contextual knowledge of local Karamojong population provided the 'best window through which to develop a more nuanced understanding of how the population negotiates fundamental change to their sociocultural, economic and livelihood choices' (Bimeny *et al*. 2021, p. 3).

This paper highlights similar situation in Lamwo District where the local population's context, knowledge and coping mechanism were neglected by RAIN programme. For instance, prior to RAIN, sesame was predominantly used as household food crop but also as an item for building social cohesion. However, RAIN turned its production from household consumption to production for sale both in local and global market but without much consideration or understanding of its potential unintended consequences on the local population. Consequently, Mercy Corps failed to predict or develop tools and mechanism that could better manage the unintended consequences or what it refers to as discrepancy in project outcomes such as increased childhood malnutrition and increased burden on women and children and unhealthy gender-based social norms.

This paper's main argument is that resilience driven humanitarian-development interventions as Lamwo District indicates, in its current form, at least, only serve to increase vulnerability of local communities, especially where their own indigenous and historically successful coping mechanisms continue to be regarded as problematic or otherwise unsustainable. Mercy Corps in its resilience assessment report on Karamoja region in 2016 noted that, 'resilience is not the outcome of good development, but rather an ability that allows development to continue on positive trajectory despite disruption' (Mercy Corps 2016b, p. 7). This implies that resilience integrated into development programmes are never about the local population and their everday survival but rather, that of development intervention being offered to them by external actors.

This paper is a contribution to further debates that interventions need deeper historical understanding of local context and the effects of extra-local dynamics therein to have any sense of what might happen while trying to maintain or modify a particular aspect of their everyday life. Its main thesis is that understanding the dynamics of the positive and negative feedback loops which determines systems state of (in)stability if unintended consequences are to be better pre-empted and avoided.

This paper's understanding of the notion of resilience deviates from the SES based definitions currently used in development theory and practice including, by Mercy Corps, due to its neglect of distributive and justice issues at local level. The paper instead leans towards recent alternative perspective of resilience that can be seen in the works of Liao and Fei (2016), Vindevogel *et al*. (2015) and Dobson *et al*. (2015) and most recently Bimeny *et al*. (2021). These groups propose deriving a locally meaningful definition of resilience which links local practices and understanding of coping to pre-existing local concepts and their uses instead of an externally imposed definition. The benefit of using concepts and methods derived as much as possible from within or through dialogue with intended recipients as scholars point out is that they are more likely to better mobilise and empower communities to foster their resilience through collective actions (Vindevogel *et al*. 2015).

Methodology

This paper comes at the back of what began as a discussion with a Mercy Corps official overseeing project implementation in Northern Uganda in 2012 during Agago District Coordination meeting between the Local Government and its development partners. I was working as the District NGO Forum Co-ordinator responsible for the engagement between the Local Government and development partners on issues of service delivery and policy reforms and secretary to the coordination meeting. In the meeting, the official, while giving updates on their activities in the district, also introduced RAIN, a project they had initiated in Lamwo District.

The discussions later moved on from the meeting and over the following years, the interaction continued as I keenly followed RAIN's progress. I was captivated by the idea of developing a market system in a remote and underdeveloped post-conflict context as Lamwo District using conventional commodity like sesame. This market was then linked to the global market system turning sesame into the most valuable product in the district. By the time I left northern Uganda and moved to the UK in 2014 to begin my academic career, sesame was increasingly becoming if not, the most lucrative agricultural commodity not just in Lamwo but also its neighbouring districts due to its global demand and the huge profits and investments it was attracting. This was a remarkable turnaround.

As part of a research for the *Deconstructing Notions of Resilience* ('DNR') project at the Firoz Lalji Institute for Africa at LSE ('FLIA'), focusing on the post conflict settings of northern Uganda, I returned to northern Uganda in 2017 to take a critical perspective at RAIN through in-depth fieldwork to see what lessons could be drawn. On return, I found that most of the officials from previous years were still at the organisation and that following success in Lamwo, RAIN had been expanded to other districts in the region. I was able to reinitiate earlier relationships and continued our discussions which occurred severally during my fieldwork between September 2017 and April 2018 and later remotely on social media upon a return to the UK.

In addition to discussions with key informants, this research also relied on extensive review of numerous project documents that were available on the organisation's online database and were publicly accessible. The documentary review concentrated on projects centred on Mercy Corps' resilience-based MSD approach to humanitarian-development intervention. The project reviewed were RAIN in Acholiland; 'Growth, Health and Governance (GHG) program in Karamoja; 'Managing Risk Through Economic Development' in Far West Region of Nepal; 'Making Vegetable Markets Work for the Poor' in the Southern Shan and Rakhine states of Myanmar; and 'Effective Seed Storage' in Timor-Leste.

This was aimed at ascertaining whether there were any similarities in the kinds of feedback patterns coming from these interventions since all were constructed around the MSD pillars. The analysis returned almost identical feedbacks for all projects reviewed. That is, whilst the reviewed projects were returning market improvement, other social and political issues such as negative gender-based norms and social capital vital for coping for the vulnerable did not improve correspondingly. These preliminary findings helped provide relevance to this paper's aim of generating greater insight and evidence that contributes to the debate that resilient driven humanitarian-development interventions in their current forms only serve to increase local population's vulnerability due to their neglect of local and historical context of the target population.

The research also used observation as well as semi-structured interviews with selected participants identified using a list of individual farmers and farmer groups in the sub counties such as Palabek Gem, Palabek Ogili, Padibe East, Paluga and Agoro. In total, there were over 100 active registered farmer groups. The office of the District Community Development also had a record of more than 100 community-based organisations whose activities included but not restricted to farming from which I selected members to observe. Participant observation was particularly useful not just because of the number of participants it allowed at a time to be observed, but also that I could observe and record households and individuals' daily schedules and behaviours without any interference. Observation included how long they took in their plantation; who were left behind (including their estimated age and gender); and how those left behind coped in the absence of their adults; who did what and when in each household; and how they spent their time outside farming.

As a matter of conformity with ethical requirements and to avoid putting individuals at risk, this paper avoid stating any names or identifying details of individuals. The paper also acknowledges the difficulty to accessing information that would help establish baseline data to establish trends and patterns over time due to the hard reality that war destroys information infrastructure and the ability to compile reliable and accurate information. These impacts do not stop as soon as the fighting stops but may persist several years into peace times. To overcome information challenges, this paper used and corroborated data capture in project reposts including RAIN but with the awareness of potential issues of reliability, but these insufficiencies do not compromise the findings and lessons highlighted in this paper.

Presentation of Findings

The Reinforcing/Positive Feedback of RAIN

RAIN capitalised on sesame, an agricultural product in the area previously produced for domestic consumption at household level, expanding its productivity, monetary value and its links and appeal to the market system. However, Lamwo did not have a self-sustaining market system and because sesame was an existing product in this setting, to open up this new market opportunity, linkage had to be established with market systems outside Lamwo and new networks to facilitate interactions. These links also improved input supplies and the market development catalysed new wealth in northern Uganda, leading to a sesame boom.

Consequently, there were positive feedback loops suggesting progress towards the intended market as agricultural productivity in terms of output (sesame) and its resulting incomes registered a significant increase. This indicator is corroborated by data from agricultural commodity buyers reporting nearly US $10 million in purchases from farmers which reflects investment farmers were putting into the production of sesame. In its 2015 project report, the organisation posted an estimate of 36,000 households as having had their annual income increased beyond the global poverty line or from a little over a dollar a day to two dollars a day.

Whilst the statistics highlighted here appeal to an audience outside the project area, to the local communities, this representation do not necessarily reflect what or how they envisage themselves. For instance, one official noted during a discussion that while conducting a strategic resilience assessment (STRESS) for Acholiland, the research team intended to facilitate focus group discussion (FGDs) with different cohorts in each of the selected areas. The cohorts were predetermined as 'wealthy households', 'poorer households', 'off-farm livelihoods', 'women', 'young women', and 'young men'. He further recollected that the STRESS team faced a daunting hurdle in determining which potential participants would participate in the wealthy or the poorer households FGDs. The problem arose when the team tried to come up with locally accepted definitions of what it meant to be wealthy or poor. On a macro scale, widely accepted definitions of wealth and poverty allow programmes and organisations such as MC to work on similar projects towards a common goal. But the challenge is that these kinds of definitions are extremely daunting to tease out at micro level as the STRESS team experienced. The team came to realise that in Acholiland, few households would self-identify or even identify others as being poor simply because they do not have money or finances.

This is because in the absence of income or capital, most have access to resources through various networks of support, that is, family, clans, and communities. In addition, assets, and resources such as land are communally owned and governed rather than private ownership. Conversely, the local definitions of wealth often differ from the macro definition and do not necessarily include monetary wealth. This, of course, from an external perspective, even from an Acholi from outside the village sphere, would invariably contradict their understanding of what it is to be poor. To an outsider, a lack of cash and readily useful capital defines poverty while the opposite defines wealth (Mercy Corps 2015b, 2016a). The application of robust analytical tools such as STRESS is said to help MC capture and reconcile such contradictions as they may arise at individual, household, community, and system levels. However, the macro scale feedback will only have meanings if it reflects real change at the micro scale.

Nevertheless, the market chain-linkages especially between local farmers, the financial institutions, agricultural input supplies and the agricultural product buyers improved. For instance, the organisation reported 5,000 farmers in 2013 to have purchased inputs through networks facilitated by the organisation. This number more than doubled in the following year to 11,022 smallholder farmers (Mercy Corps 2015a). By the end of RAIN project in 2015, the number of smallholder farmers purchasing improved inputs increased to 33,000 and the local input dealers meeting these supply needs were registered at 151 (Mercy Corps 2015b). The organisation also runs an initiative which leverages the financial partnership to extend credit to local businesses in the area. The financial partnership is said to have facilitated market expansion especially agricultural (sesame) markets as well as an increase in savings with 70 per cent of households reportedly saving more consistently larger amounts in 2015.

MC facilitated the establishment of specialised storage facilities, providing a platform for organising local harvests; agricultural produce cleans up, packaging and storage in one single roof where external buyers efficiently access markets that had previously been scattered amongst dozens or hundreds of smallholder farms. The establishment of a one-stop centre for agricultural produce is presented as having driven down the cost of doing business especially for companies in the output purchase and input supply chain. A company called Gulu Agricultural Development Company (GADCO); a large agribusiness driven by the lucrative global prices of sesame ventured into the Lamwo's emerging sesame market. Once in, GADCO set out specialised storage facilities which also doubled as bulk purchasing centres. These centres also acted as hubs for smallholder farmers to access market information, training, and enhanced networking. The engagement with local farmers and the guaranteed return on sesame drove up the demand for sesame and land to accommodate increasing production.

Spurred by a growing global demand for sesame, GADCO's investment helped catalyse a local sesame boom moving from about 2,000 UGX (0.54USD) to 4,320 UGX (1.16USD) per kilogram from 2012 to 2014 respectively (Mercy Corps 2015a, p. 8). There were over 17,000 farmers registered with GADCO, representing a third of all farmers in Lamwo in 2015. In the 2014–2015 seasons, GADCO purchased 3,168 tons of sesame, valued at about US$3.1 million (Mercy Corps 2015a, p. 8). Another reinforcing feedback loop emerging from the intervention in addition to the product boom was the expansion in the cultivation of new farmland.

Households who once planted one or two acres of sesame, as a response to the boom in sesame, were reported to be planting twice or several times more with yearly average acreage increasing from 4.5 to 6.5 acres of new farmland in 2014 and 2015 respectively.

The Negative Feedback Loops of RAIN

As earlier pointed out, positive feedback loops are those system behaviours that reaffirm the state of a system as heading closer to the desired goals. It is assumed that these reinforcing feedback loops produce exponential growth (Gharajedaghi 2011) as a function of abundant resources, which is not necessarily the case. The strain on resources impedes exponential growth which is furthered by the delay function[1] resulting in unexpected oscillation or counterintuitive behaviours of a system (Gharajedaghi 2011). In other words, a negative feedback loop of a complex system is a product of two functional realities that is, resource constraints (material and immaterial) and delay functions combining to produce oscillation.

The implication for both policy and programming are that the negative feedback becomes the fundamental regulatory mechanism of any complex SES that one must navigate to understand the current state of any complex system. Whilst growth in income, productivity, opportunity, and in the agricultural sector more broadly can be linked to RAIN, the equally unintended negative feedback emerging from the same system becomes a crucial point through which we can evaluate the systems evolution.

It is also this very negative feedback that is telling of the capacity of actors within this system and their ability to navigate the three components of an SES (resilience, adaptability, and transformability). In the case of RAIN in Lamwo, by 2015, it became clear that, whilst market facilitation had significantly boosted household incomes and opportunities; promoted innovation and catalysed measurable growth in the agricultural sector; RAIN had to some extent failed to translate into overall improvement in community's susceptibility to shocks.

Levels of undernourishment in under-fives increased amongst the population with community members attributing it to parents working prolonged periods in distant sesame fields, leaving children on their own (Mercy Corps 2015a, p. 10). Rain was meant to improve food security in the district but instead, the project ended up distorting communities' existing coping mechanisms that would otherwise manage infant malnutrition. For instance, whilst communities had been planting sesame long before RAIN, its production was primarily for household consumption and communal cohesion building as members shared local brew made from sesame locally known as '*kasimuru*'.

In the region, sesame is one of the most important food crops in the day-to -day diet of an average household serving not only as food, butter, oil (cooking and baby products) but also as a financial safety net as surplus is sold or exchanged for other commodities. It was and still is in some areas used in spiritual and ritual ceremonies. Participants noted that the commodification of sesame, commercialisation of its production; and the financialisation of the agricultural sector by the organisation exponentially increased profitability of the product. The implication for households was that it totally distorted their calculations and priorities as their view of what was previously a food crop primarily for household consumption shifted to cash crop.

In some instances, sections of society were priced out of the emerging market as they no longer could afford to pay the new prices. For example, among the low grade salaried civic workers[2] interviewed (primary and pre-primary teachers, nurses, and support staff), a number of them complained that sesame, a staple ingredient in people's daily diet, had become too expensive to use forcing them to substitute with non-traditional cheaper unhealthy alternative in cooking oil. They blame the inflated prices on external players (buyers from outside the district) who have introduced the bulk centre which has replaced the local distribution channels and priced out a good number of the local population.

In some cases, households reduced cultivation of vegetables and other food crops for domestic consumption to meet the labour demand for sesame production. This is partly because the technology used in the production of sesame did not move at the same pace as the expansion of the market and production (acreage) demands. Trade-offs therefore had to be made between matching of dietary needs to ensuring food security for households by producing food crops and meeting the new market's demand for sesame. Whilst this supports the argument that resource constraints impede the realisation of systems goals, the increase in undernourishment among children in the project area raises the issue of it being a consequence of delay function or a complete failure to respond to unexpected oscillation

Different proponents especially the market-system-oriented neoliberals may present an alternative perspective arguing that with the increased income, households are better placed to meet other basic needs or dietary requirements as they can utilise earnings from sesame for such purpose (Tiffen 2003). This perspective resonates from their basic assumption of the market system that producers use the earnings from the exchange of their commodity in the market to reproduce themselves (Tiffen 2003, p. 1346–1348). That is, they use their earnings from the sale of sesame to replace and perhaps expand their means of production as well as buy their means of consumption.

New Institutional Economics (NIE) scholars argues that 'well-functioning markets can co-exist with widespread poverty since distributional and equity issues are not directly dealt with by the market' (ADB and DFID (Department for International Development) 2005, p. 3). It is worth remembering that prices, as earlier mentioned, are already distorted and higher than what the local population can or is willing to pay, driven by the global market for sesame. Sesame prices in the local community had increased by more than 100 per cent from those at the beginning of the project. The locals who did not grow sesame and would want to consume from the local market would now have to pay heavily. Equally, those farmers who sold almost all their produce and would like to purchase from the local markets for consumption will also find market prices too high. Sesame, a commodity previously affordable in the local market is now beyond the reach of some section of the local population.

Scholars of agrarian reforms in Africa present that most interventions attempt to make the survival of smallholder farmers compatible with the growing expansion of global agribusiness. In African agriculture for example, interventions tend to be presented as some form of 'win-win' scenario (Bernstein and Oya 2014, p. 11). These 'win-win' solutions must however navigate the tensions between improving 'market accesses' and introducing non-market drivers that stifle competition in addition to introducing new sets of vulnerabilities. For instance, the global structures of inequality inherent in the global market systems.

In Lamwo, by employing MSD approach, MC had to navigate similar terrain. The success of its intervention became a matter of how effectively the organisation could deploy and accurately utilise the SES regulatory mechanism. In other words, its capacity to first, effectively influence existing system without tipping it over the threshold into chaos and secondly, build the capacity of other actors to cause and manage the desired changes in the SES.

The project also reported a rise in domestic and gender-based violence and a new set of conflicts experienced among households. One key informant argued that the increase in income came as a huge surprise and rather too quickly for the farming households as they were less prepared for such a drastic shift in their earnings. Based on analysis of returns filed by different bulking centres in the district, up to UGX 8.2 billion shillings in revenue is said to have been generated from the sale of sesame alone in 2013 (equivalent of USD $2.2 million) (Labeja 2014).

This according to the district chairperson was a huge increase from the UGX 2.2 billion (USD 0.59 million) in 2012 (Labeja 2014). Although these figures are close to the USD $3.1 million paid by GADCO to purchase sesame as presented earlier, it is difficult to corroborate as the 2017 investment profile of the district published by Uganda Investment Authority (UIA) neither presented sesame as the core revenue generating crop nor the revenue generated by the crop (UIA and UNDP 2017).

Rather than investing this new income in productive assets as a market-based thesis would assume, instead alcohol sales and consumption increased together with their encompassing negative consequences for households and community. The District Chairperson in an interview pointed at rising alcohol consumption among farmers as threatening progress, a problem his executive had identified and were drafting ordinances to regulate. This indicates that in Lamwo, the market functions quite differently and perhaps in a more controversial manner generating feedback quite contrary to that assumed by RAIN.

One MC official noted that this was partly due to limited investment options. For instance, if a farmer wanted to construct a living structure (iron sheet-roofed house), productive materials and its suppliers were not present in Lamwo. Whilst this perspective holds, it perhaps underlines a particular problem inherent in MSD, particularly their choice to base their intervention on a single agricultural product (sesame). The development of the sesame market did not necessarily entail the development of other aspects of market retrospectively as might have been assumed by MSD.

Problems associated with a lack of diversification not only on the financial, demand and supply side per se but also on the tradable products needed to be negated. Essentially, the marketing period in Lamwo was not embraced quick enough by other actors as was assumed would happen to counteract these imbalances associated with an undiversified market. Yet big beer companies such as Nile Breweries and Uganda Breweries, beverage companies such as Coca Cola and Pepsi Cola, and medium size companies dealing in local spirits from central region easily introduced their products into the same market.

Whilst MC attributes the domestic disputes and other gendered violence to the financial benefit accruing from participation in the project, on the contrary this paper finds evidence of unintended oscillation and a new set of vulnerabilities linked to RAIN. For instance, in Acholiland women are traditionally responsible for household duties with men expected to play supportive role to the women. However, in the period following the end of the LRA decades long conflict, several researchers (Adams *et al*. 2013, Sengupta and

Calo 2016) indicate overwhelming numbers of men abandoning their traditional roles whilst contributing very little to household duties. RAIN changed existing social power dynamics as women were forced into taking on additional responsibility, that is, the responsibility of producing the additional acreage of sesame working extremely long hours in the farmland. This consequently resulted in a double burden for women.

Yet, RAIN did not alter the traditional perspectives of men and the privileged positions they occupy in society as men still held key decision-making powers and control over household finances. For some, notably women, the market, whose development promised prosperity, inclusive participation, and improved standards of living, only reframed, and intensified their vulnerabilities. A research by Uganda Women's Network (UWONET) in the district revealed that the most common acts perpetrated against women included denial of control over productive resources and control over benefits from productive resources among others (UWONET 2011, p. 3). The research further highlighted that these situations escalated significantly 'during harvesting season mainly due to the struggles between partners on how to control and manage the sales of harvests'(UWONET 2011, p. 3). The research found that these same issues were still persistent among communities in Lamwo even after RAIN's implementation.

As the education performance statistics for the district reflect the number of children dropping out of school and those not attending school,[3] it is likely that many women were forced into relying on their children to fill the extra labour demands. During fieldwork, as I walked through communities, I observed several school aged young girls and boys during school hours out of school helping in the garden; caring for younger siblings at home while parents worked in the garden; and help with other household chores. Education statistics for Lamwo captured in the national population and housing census 2014 published in 2017 indicated that up 6,361 (14.9 per cent) of persons aged 6–15 years (male and female) were not attending school (UBOS 2014).

The 2014 census also indicates that of the 25,041 (79.8 per cent) children aged 6–12 years enrolled and attending primary school, only 5,401 (26.6 per cent) go on to attend secondary education (UBOS 2014, p. 21). There are of course several contributing factors to school non-attendance, however, intervention's contribution comes from the fact that as households increase on the size and acreage of sesame production, but with limited investment in technology, only intensify labour demand. Considering that the section of working population in Lamwo as earlier present is already stretched as children account for 61 and elderly 13 per cent of the population respectively, women and children are the victim to take on this addition responsibilities.

As earlier mentioned, land in Lamwo as in Acholiland is communally owned and governed. MC's attribution of increase in the average household's farmland to the boom in sesame does not take into account the tension it generates between their project beneficiaries and the rest of community members and the distributive issues. Research participants attributed this increase in the value of land and land grab as the leading cause of land conflict in the district. Research by Hopwood and Atkinson (2015) indicates that of the seven districts of Acholi sub-region, Lamwo had the least total land dispute cases registered in the formal justice system at 136 compared to 496, 452, 388, 251, 249 and 139 for Gulu, Agago, Pader, Kitgum, Amuru and Nwoya Districts respectively. These numbers, however, provide a false picture of the complexities in these districts.

To understand the situation on the ground, one must look at the proportion of reported land disputes cases that involved use of violence. It is in the violence associated land dispute cases which Lamwo posts the second highest percentage in the region at 32.4 per cent of the total registered cases. This is compared to 35.3 per cent, 30 per cent, 18.1 per cent, 15 per cent, 12.4 per cent and 6.7 per cent for Nwoya, Gulu, Amuru, Pader, Kitgum and Agago respectively (Hopwood and Atkinson 2015, p. 6). The District Security Committee, Lamwo attributed the violent land conflict to three key triggers including population pressure, economic value attached to land in post conflict situation, and incitement and land grabbing. Of these factors, RAIN at least contributes to economic value attached to land as research participants described sesame as '*white gold*' and that the more land you have the higher the output; and land grab as members seek to acquire more land than the communal ownership and governance permits.

Implication of the Findings

Sceptics of the resilience concept point out that the most fundamental problem with resilience thinking is its failure to address issues regarding distribution of benefits and risks or the unwanted consequences that might accrue with such benefits. In doing so, it ignores justice issues (Cretney 2014, Weichselgartner and Kelman 2015, Coaffee and Lee 2016). In other words, while MSD might have succeeded in establishing a resilient self-sufficient market system in Lamwo, a community that had previously survived without such a system, distributive issues such as inequitable income and resource distribution, unhealthy power and gender relations may continue to persist. In Lamwo, the unintended oscillation or negative feedback loop emerging from the site such as the surge in child malnutrition, domestic and gender related violence, land conflict, and unhealthy power relations only help confirm the flaws in a resilience driven approach to humanitarian-development interventions.

Gharajedaghi (2011) and others have argued that at any time and point in the life of an SES, or at any scale, the system is always a sub-system of the whole panarchy. The behaviour of any SES at any time is influenced by both exogenous (global market prices, regional demand, supply and prices, political environment) and endogenous (capacity of actors) drivers.

Placing this perspective of resilience thinking in the context of RAIN, the counteracting feedback loops from RAIN might not necessarily conform to or depict failure of a resilience-based development intervention. For it is the negative feedback loops which help flag the difference between the desired goal of a system and its current status to initiate corrective actions aimed at bringing the system closer to its goal (Gharajedaghi 2011). Rather than acting as an indicator of intervention failure, negative feedback loops play a crucial role in the regulation of any complex system, that is, the dynamic behaviour of a system.

However, as earlier noted, for any intervention to be able to influence actors in any SES, interventionists must have good understanding of why actors in the SES do what they do (Gharajedaghi 2011). Interventions must go beyond information and knowledge, where information deals with the what question, knowledge, with the how question, and understanding with the why questions. In addition, they also must deal with projecting and understanding the possible outcomes of their project to better deal with unintended outcomes during implementation. Whether or not, this is something possible within the current international-humanitarian development aid regime, is debatable.

In Lamwo, MC came to the realisation that successful market facilitation through a MSD approach may not necessarily translate into a resilient society. Upon experiencing the negative feedback loops, it became clear that 'in northern Uganda, building resilience is stymied by problems beyond the scope of any program or NGO' (Mercy Corps 2015a, p. 12). That governance challenges such as incoherent development plans, inconsistent or poor regulation, and poor infrastructure investments all impact the outcomes of intervention. For instance, the organisation points out that, ' … expanding supply chains and building market linkages will mean little if, during the annual rainy season, the roads are flooded, and goods cannot get to the market. Or if poor regulation routinely undermines investment.' (Mercy Corps 2015a, p. 12). They therefore acknowledge that the ability of societies to withstand a crisis is rooted not in household, but in the societal collective capacity as whole. However, what MC fails to understand is that the society have existed and lived through all these challenges, and as a result all this rich context is missed because they are not explored or acknowledged.

The implication for RAIN as they soon found out is that interventions' focus on MSD is no guarantee for avoiding or negating the effects of interventions counteracting feedback loops that resist change. In other words, ' … expanding supply chains and building market linkages will mean little, if for instance, when legitimate drug suppliers are squeezed by a black market in smuggled and expired drugs that Uganda's National Drug Authority has, to date, been unable to police' (Mercy Corps 2015a, p. 12). Whilst this is crucial for the survival of the market, MSD present several threats to established survival mechanisms of societies.

A question we owe to address is, how the 'critical loop' of a system and its feedback mechanism identified in the first place. Experience from RAIN indicates that due to the limited knowledge and capacity of actors within SES, it is very challenging to achieve the desired system at the programme's onset. Rather, interventions ought to 'start simple and grow in complexity' in their approach to resilience. Whilst the 'start simple and grow in complexity' notion may appear simplistic at first glance, the practitioners' face-to-face encounter with this approach highlights two caveats critical to this approach. The first requires that we act and observe/pause/learn iteratively so as to increase our sequential understanding. The implication of this is that we can only understand a system in action to reveal its dynamics.

However, caution must still be put on the extent to which one can concentrate on the day-to-day dynamic behaviour of a system as this may undermine understanding of historical dimensions that have contributed to the current system. The time dimension of a system is as crucial as the current functioning of the system for one very important reason, that we acknowledge its possible regressive characteristics. As reflected in this paper, crucial as it is, the historical aspect of a system is extremely daunting to understand leave alone interpret. It requires time and attention to be invested. Time dimension is a commodity that is particularly scarce within the international humanitarian development intervention context. Yet it is one constant variable that is the most important of them all, when it comes to interventions.

RAIN's experience exposed that to pull a community through a crisis, policy and programs seeking to intervene should seek to integrate across programmes and systems, to harmonise efforts and knowledge of local communities, governments, the private sector, donors, and NGOs. This would require changing what is done; how it is done and most importantly, the capacity to understand and manage the interplay between the negative and positive feedback loops. That is, rather than simply defining goals at the outset, and pursuing them without reflection, the mechanism requires the capacity to understand, anticipate unforeseen challenges (negative feedback) and opportunities (positive feedback) in a quick and flexible manner.

Even when all this is taken into account, interventions must still overcome the politics within resilience resulting from what critiques refer to as the 'rise of inhabitation in the form of widespread withdrawal of international aid workers into gated-complexes and fortified aid compounds' (Evans and Reid 2014, Duffield 2016). The consequence of this 'defensive retreat' as Duffield (2016) calls it, is that aid-industry beneficiaries are encouraged to embrace the development potential of risk at the same time as they are being effectively abandoned to uncertainty. That is, how do you engage the local community and their knowledge; understand, anticipate unforeseen challenge or opportunity in real time to address them as SES regulatory mechanisms dictates when programme staffs are based in Kitgum Town and Kampala rather than Lamwo?

The problem of identifying the 'critical loop' of a system and the misinterpretation of the problem at hand therefore comes from disconnect between the interventionists and the beneficiaries due to the remote distance between them. 'While aid beneficiaries live in permanent emergency, aid elites manage this condition from a distance' (Duffield 2015, p. 139) aiming to ensure that the poor and vulnerable have options and opportunities to become fully integrated into the system. But this is done with persistent susceptibility to contextual naivety on the side of aid-workers.

The disconnect and the remote nature of aid-organisations' operation and their inability to fully understand or correctly interpret how systems support communities infers that the intended interventions come short in navigating uncertainty and unpredictability inherent in both the system and their intervention. RAIN initially intended to enhance communities' capacity to cope and deal with adversaries but unintentionally unsettled their existing equilibrium making them even more vulnerable to shocks than they already were. This was despite the reported success in the project development of the market. After all, real 'resilience is not the outcome of good development, but rather an ability that allows development to continue on positive trajectory despite disruption' (Mercy Corps 2016b, p. 7) to the local population's daily survival.

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted that in the course of implementing in Lamwo District, RAIN witnessed significant progress particularly in addressing issues relating to an underdeveloped agricultural market. Agricultural productivity increased and the market chain-linkages between the producers (farmers), the financial institutions, and agricultural supplies improved. In other words, the market became more resilient.

However, there were other unintended negative outcomes and feedback from the intervention. For example, domestic and gender related violence experienced among participating households increased; land disputes and conflicts related to land increased, majorly attributed to the expansion in agricultural production areas and the anticipated property value; cases of malnutrition in children under five and food insecurity increased even though production of sesame was on the increase.

In summary, market does not alleviate poverty if, for example, governance does not provide an enabling environment, such as good infrastructure investment or institutions that can regulate and ensure the protection of property rights. Knowledge and understanding of local context, the capacity of local actors and their engagement are also crucial. The RAIN project demonstrated that whilst the market was expanding and becoming more robust, stable, and resilient, there was regression on the side of community's resilience capacity.

The broader implication relating to policy and programming for interventions towards crisis and societal vulnerability is that, once a 'critical loop' to redressing vulnerability or recurrent crisis is identified, the following must be considered. The first steps require a comprehensive understanding of how the system functions within its internal environment but also its interaction with its external environment. In other words, market as an independent system and market as part of a bigger system in the case of RAIN. For instance, if distortion, poverty and inequitable income distribution, dysfunctionality and instability are identified as some of the feedback being given by the market system prior to intervention, the question to ask would be what this feedback tells us about first, the market as a critical loop; and secondly, about its interaction with other systems.

If the goal of the intervention is to eliminate these undesirable characteristics and improve the day-to-day standard of living for people living in Lamwo by establishing a self-sustaining market through a MSD approach, the capacity of actors to correctly and effectively identify, accurately interpret and efficiently understand the systems' feedbacks is key. That is, the ability to understand early on that market is not sufficient a tool for addressing issues regarding poverty in the first place as it perpetuates inequitable income and resource distribution.

Secondly, in the case of negative feedback, the issue would be whether a policy or programme is cautious of the narrative that intervention projects that are intended to enhance the capacity of communities to cope and deal with adversity may unintentionally unsettle the existing coping mechanisms of such society making them even more vulnerable. For instance, if actors within the SES have the appropriate capacities to effectively manage the SES regulatory mechanism, the negative feedback loop would act to trigger corrective action within the shortest possible time or better still, anticipated and counteracted early on.

The delay function is therefore dependent on the capacity of the systems' actors to identify the nature of the feedback effectively and efficiently being given by the system, to correctly interpret and promptly take appropriate corrective actions so as to deviate as necessary. The implication for RAIN is that the overwhelming and persistent negative feedback loop such as domestic and gender related violence experienced among participating households; land related dispute and conflict; cases of malnutrition in children under five; and food insecurity brings into question not just the capacity of actors but also the appropriateness of the critical loop identified.

Notes

1. The difference between the time a disruption in a course towards desired goal is observed and corrective action is taken.
2. The nature of their work does not afford them time to cultivate their own making them reliant on market accessibility and affordability.
3. There are of course several factors impacting school attainment that do not relate to parents but rather attributed to government policies and quality of education services.

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