

**Is the PRDP a Three-Legged Table?  
Challenges for NGOs in moving from humanitarian and short term  
interventions to longer term approaches in light of the PRDP and the  
conflict setting**

*Keynote speech given at NGO seminar for Scandinavian based International  
NGOs working in Northern Uganda*

Dr Chris Dolan<sup>1</sup>  
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Your Excellencies, the Ambassadors of Norway and Sweden, Ladies and Gentlemen, all protocols observed.

It is a great honour to be asked to give the key-note speech at this gathering at this very particular juncture in the story of northern Uganda.

I was asked to speak on the challenges for NGOs moving from humanitarian and short-term interventions to longer-term approaches in light of the PRDP and the conflict setting. I chose to frame my presentation in the form of a question once put to me by Moses Chrispus Okello, namely “Is the PRDP a three-legged table?”

As you can probably imagine, this is something of a rhetorical question, to which the answer, to my mind and probably Moses’ too, is an unequivocal “Yes”.

It is an important question as we wait to see what transpires with regard to the signing of a peace accord later today, and as we begin to think about the relationship between the PRDP and the processes and mechanisms which will be established if the peace accord is successfully concluded; Equal Opportunities Commission, National Reconciliation Forum, Traditional justice mechanisms, Special Division of the High Court, DDR, and so on.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Dr Chris Dolan is Director of the Refugee Law Project, Faculty of Law, Makerere University ([www.refugeelawproject.org](http://www.refugeelawproject.org)), and also Project Advisor to the Beyond Juba Project, a joint project of the Refugee Law Project, Human Rights & Peace Centre and Faculty of Law ([www.beyondjuba.org](http://www.beyondjuba.org)). The speech was delivered by Mr Moses Chrispus Okello, Head of Research & Advocacy, Refugee Law Project.

<sup>2</sup> In the event the agreement was not signed on 10<sup>th</sup> April 2008

The bad thing about three legged-tables is that they cannot support any weight without falling over. The good thing about them is that they can be fixed.

As such, while some of what follows is likely to probe and push a few sore points, the general thrust of the presentation is positive. I want to use the time available to me to support my assertion that the PRDP as it currently stands is a three-legged table, but also to make the argument that it can and should be mended, not least with the support of international NGOs and donors.

### **What are we dealing with here?**

Before I look at the PRDP and its missing leg, however, what is the weight it needs to carry? In other words, what are we trying to deal with here, whether through the PRDP or any other mechanisms?

Although for many people in this room these will be well rehearsed facts, they are worth repeating given that one of the challenges which frequently affects NGOs and detracts from their impact is a lack of memory and sense of history, due in large part to the rapid turnover of staff in conflict settings and a focus on dealing with short-term interventions designed to address the most “pressing” of issues.

In the country as a whole we are dealing with rather high levels of poverty coupled with major governance problems and the legacy of 22 armed conflicts in as many years. This is clearly evident in a north-south divide. Whereas in 2005 Gross Domestic Product per person was US \$330 per person, average annual income per person in northern Uganda ranged from US \$108 in the west to \$123 in the east. The PRDP itself estimates that conflict has cost the country a loss of productive capacity equivalent to US \$100 million - *annually!*

Add to this the fact that more than 40% of the population are under the age of 12<sup>3</sup> and less than 8% of the adult population in northern Uganda are in paid employment.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> PRDP, 2007: 66

<sup>4</sup> PRDP, 2007: 73

Northern Uganda in particular is highly militarised, and the country as a whole has been fragmented through a galloping process of decentralisation which has seen the number of districts double in the last ten years.

In many places the combination of past experience and present reality has resulted in a state which has little trust in its citizens and a population which has even less faith in its government. This is particularly true in the part of northern Uganda the PRDP refers to as ‘north central’ where, in the name of “protection”, the State has systematically violated, debilitated and humiliated its own citizens over the last two decades. The extremely slow rates of return from IDP camps in the Acholi sub-region (still only 6% have actually gone home)<sup>5</sup> is in large part attributable to that experience.

Observers have described this situation in a number of ways.

*Sverker Finnstrom*, for example, drawing on ethnographic research and the voices of his respondents, has talked of how people struggle to live ‘with bad surroundings’.<sup>6</sup>

*Jan Egeland*, then the UN Secretary General’s special representative for humanitarian affairs, famously described northern Uganda in 2004 as one of the world’s worst humanitarian crises. Certainly it had by that time become the world’s third largest internal displacement situation.

*Olara Ottunnu*, former UN Under-Secretary General and Special Representative for Children in Armed Conflict, in January 2006 described the situation in northern Uganda as one of genocide, and argued that the so-called “protected villages” were akin to concentration camps.<sup>7</sup>

I myself have made the case that the situation is better described as one of ‘social torture’, in which the symptoms of torture which are normally found in individual victims are to be found inscribed in society as a whole. In social torture the arena is not the torture cell but rather the day to day environment more normally labelled the ‘war zone’.<sup>8</sup> And in social torture, as in individual torture, the general idea is to keep the victim alive as an

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<sup>5</sup> Uganda Humanitarian Situation Report, 1-29 February 2008

<sup>6</sup> Finnstrom, S. (2003). *Living with Bad Surroundings: War and Existential Uncertainty in Acholiland*, Northern Uganda. Uppsala, Uppsala University

<sup>7</sup> ‘Profile of a Genocide’ in *The Monitor*, 8 January 2006

<sup>8</sup> Dolan, Chris *Understanding War and its Continuation: The Case of Northern Uganda, 1986-2006*, PhD Thesis, London School of Economics, 2005

example to others who need to be intimidated, though of course things at time get out of hand.

Whichever of these various descriptions and analyses you pursue, several things seem to me to be indisputable;

- firstly, you cannot have twenty years of violence and deprivation without both social change and a back-lash against such change.
- secondly, the fate of northern Uganda is now being played out on a global stage, as evidenced in the UN Security Council resolutions pressurising the Government of Uganda into action, in the attempts of the International Criminal Court to establish its credentials as *the* arbitrator of international justice, and in the lobbying activities of civil society actors in an ever more congested global village.
- thirdly, Uganda has long been and will continue to be a testing ground for a variety of issues and approaches. In the three year post-Juba period envisaged in the PRDP, which UN policy makers refer to as the ‘early recovery’ period, Uganda looks set to become a testing ground for how to ‘do’ transitional justice where there has been no political transition.

In short, whatever scenario the PRDP moves northern Uganda towards, it will not be simply a recovery of what was there before, but will include a fundamentally changed society, whether in terms of its internal arrangements, its engagement with the outside world, its economy and its significance to the international community.

### **The PRDP**

Against this background, what are the prospects of the PRDP - as currently conceived – actually bringing about peace, recovery or development?

In some respects the PRDP is an ambitious proposal (I call it a proposal as, to the best of my knowledge, the funding while available is not yet in place, and the coordination and delivery mechanisms for the various activities outlined are still under discussion). It is ambitious given the serious gaps in Government staffing throughout northern Uganda, whether in terms of administrators, police or judiciary.

It is a strong and welcome proposal in its emphasis on tangible change, whether in terms of in the numbers of police-men, kilometres of road, and development of industrial capacity.

However, the PRDP is also very much a containment exercise, a set of technical solutions to a gamut of political problems. It is promoted as a solution to the national imbalances which threaten to undermine the implementation of the national Poverty Eradication and Action Plan (PEAP).

With the exception of one sentence deep in the body of the policy (I quote: “The IMTC recognises the underlying structural causes of these series of conflicts and the necessity to ensure dialogue with all stakeholders around ways for their resolution”), it focuses on symptoms of problems rather than the underlying dynamics.<sup>9</sup>

The first pillar of the PRDP, for example, has as its objective ‘The Consolidation of State Authority’. While the exercise of state authority through civilian policing and judicial structures is a key objective, a prior one - ***which is neither discussed nor addressed by the PRDP*** - should be ‘the Establishment of State Legitimacy’, for it is the absence of state legitimacy which is the underlying structural problem. Real legitimacy resides in mutual respect, not fear.

Although doubling the number of police does have some potential to consolidate both State Authority *and* legitimacy, there is no automatic correlation. If all people are given is quantity and not quality - as has arguably been the case with under-trained Special Police Constables drawn from Uganda’s bloated hodge-podge of 31,000 auxiliary forces – the potential of this intervention will be limited.

Furthermore, while improving the number of police and judicial officers will hopefully improve access to justice, it will not be able to resolve the fact that even where they are operational, Uganda’s formal justice mechanisms, inherited from the British, do not speak to the majority of people’s sense of justice.

The third pillar of the PRDP (Revitalisation of the Economy) only partially confronts the major political problem of a north-south divide. It does so by

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<sup>9</sup> PRDP, 2007: 22

emphasising how northern Uganda will catch up with other parts of Uganda in terms of basic services, rather than re-visioning what an integrated Ugandan economy could actually look like.

There has been little movement in this regard since I attended a workshop to look at NURP II in late 1999 at which the most radical suggestion from Gulu district was that the road from the town centre to the airport should be tarred! While such interventions create a (tiny) feel-good factor, they do little for economic dynamism. Rather than tar the two kilometres, why not turn Gulu into Uganda's second international airport? And where is the highway from Soroti to Arua via Moroto, Kotido, Kitgum and Gulu? When will the rail link to Juba and Mombasa be functioning?

It is the fourth pillar of the PRDP, however, 'Peace Building and Reconciliation', which really can be described as both the missing and the *broken* leg of the PRDP. It is missing in the sense that, at US \$16.4 million, the budget for this pillar represents only 2.7% of the overall PRDP budget.

It is broken in the sense that, rather than deal with the structural issues noted by the Inter-ministerial Technical Committee, it focuses on the micro level of peace building and reconciliation, particularly the individual and clan levels, and has little to offer in terms of *national* reconciliation.

It can further be argued that the whole budget is extremely modest given the scale of what needs to be done: It is important that we, as civil society, do not allow the PRDP to be seen as reparations for more than 20 years of deprivation. Reparations schemes should, in fact, be separate from reconstruction and should be both presented and seen as such. For the Acholi alone, if a figure of 1 million people were used, and we were to estimate that they are owed at least a dollar a day each in reparation for the ten years that mass displacement lasted, then we would be talking of US \$3.65 billion, not the \$606 million currently envisaged.

### **Challenges**

Given this overall analysis of what we are dealing with, namely a highly complex political situation and a program proposal which repeatedly shies away from this political complexity by offering some rather two-dimensional and under-budgeted technical fixes, it is appropriate at this juncture to identify some more specific challenges. Some relate to the

political context, some relate to the very nature of international NGOs operating in such a context.

At the political level, an assessment needs to be made as to whether the PRDP is an important signal of Government commitment to addressing the wrongs of the past, or, alternatively, represents a further example of the Government's reluctance to acknowledge its own role and responsibility in the sufferings of northern Uganda.

It could be argued that the PRDP's apparent limitations reflect a pragmatic assessment of what is realistic and feasible, a determination not to bite of more than you can chew. It could further be argued that the agreement on comprehensive solutions drawn up in the Juba talks (Agenda Item 2) is a more suitable vehicle for Government acknowledgement of the wrongs of the past. That notwithstanding, key points in the PRDP itself suggest a form of denialism, a refusal to confront the legacy of so many years of violence.

In his foreword to the PRDP, President Museveni does not even mention 22 years of conflict and failed attempts at peace, saying simply:

“Northern Uganda has consistently fallen behind the rest of the country within the realm of human development. For example, access to basic services such as water and sanitation, as well as health facilities is poor by national standards”<sup>10</sup>

As an introduction to what could be the flagship of a new-found Government commitment to a historically marginalised population and region, this is hardly inspiring.

A key problem related to this lack of a transition in attitudes, is the persistent attempt to lay the blame for failures at the door of the population rather than the state. Thus in His Excellency's 14 point strategy for the recovery of the north he talks of the need for the ‘Re-education and reorientation of the minds and hearts of the population towards peace and development rather than war’.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> PRDP, 2007: iii

<sup>11</sup> PRDP, 2007: 19

Having spent the last ten years watching civil society call ardently for peaceful solutions, and Government pursuing as adamantly the ‘military option’, I find this call from His Excellency quite hard to swallow.

## **The nature of NGOs and the PRDP**

**One of the key challenges which I see as confronting international NGOs as we shift from short to longer term approaches, is whether or not they are able or willing to embrace complexity and drop the humanitarian imperative as an organising framework.**

Humanitarians are notorious for letting the so-called ‘humanitarian imperative’ rule determine their decision-making and denying that in the process they also contribute to legitimising otherwise illegal practices... the consolidation of the protected villages through humanitarian intervention springs to mind as an example of this tendency.

It is unfortunate that the humanitarian imperative is at some points used to override or ignore government (particularly local government), and at others used to justify uncritical support of government (generally central government); both are damaging for ordinary civilians humanitarians aim to assist.

**A second threat to real engagement with the complexities, which comes from both within and outside the humanitarian and development sectors, is the mantra of ‘coherent interventions’.** I am concerned that the foreword to the PRDP emphasises that it offers a single paradigm within which all development partners *should* operate.<sup>12</sup>

For while the wish to establish a degree of coherence between different actors *is* sensible in terms of resource efficiency and effectiveness, this should not be reduced to a situation in which you are either ‘with us or against us’. After all, what is so great about coherence if what you are doing so coherently is the wrong thing?! Peace, recovery and development (as opposed to the PRDP) may at times be best served by letting a thousand flowers blossom.

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<sup>12</sup> PRDP, 2007: 3

There is need to maintain the scope to be critical: A few weeks ago I was gently reprimanded for the RLP's briefing paper on urban IDPs. This, I was told, threatened to open a Pandora's box, and should have been discussed within the NGO sector rather than going public. Personally I find this fear of public discussion somewhat suffocating and contrary to the development of critical capacity in civil society.

**Thirdly, NGOs seem to me to have a tendency to define issues – and to categorise people - in terms which serve their own institutional purposes even where this is harmful to their supposed beneficiaries.** Targeting discrete beneficiary groups, for example, while making things more manageable for us, can quickly lead to further fragmentation of already stressed and fractured social relationships. Agencies separate out women from men for a variety of practical and political reasons, and in the process can aggravate incidences of domestic violence.

Linked to this is the question of where to intervene. In this regard the parish-based approach, as advocated since mid-2007 by UNOCHA, seems to pose a number of opportunities to work in a ways which will help to bring services closer to people and thereby promote return movements and consolidate state authority by re-establishing parishes as units of administration.

**A fourth tendency which I feel poses a major challenge to effective work on peace, recovery and development, is the urge to manage populations, particularly their movements.** The 1951 Refugee Convention sets an important precedent for this when it argues that refugee status can be revoked where it can be established that there are 'ceased circumstances' in the country of origin. In other words, where the situation appears to have reverted to 'normal', there is no longer justification for being a refugee. Everybody can be put back in their places and tidiness and order re-established.

Such thinking wholly ignores the reality that while from an external perspective, the circumstances which led to movement or flight may have ceased, for the individuals concerned the whole process and experience of flight and exile are unforgettable and cannot simply be erased or reversed. As such, looked at through the lens of psychology, there can be no such thing as 'ceased circumstances', even if, from a management point of view, this would seem like a good way of looking at things.



This brings me to comment on the definition of the Brookings Bern Institute of when displacement ends: They argue that it ends ‘when the protection and assistance needs [of IDPs] would be no different from similarly situated citizens’. This seems to be to be a very minimalist definition which is institutionally convenient but may well not result in adequate interventions in support of people trying to deal with a traumatic legacy of violence and displacement.

### **Can the fourth leg of the PRDP be mended?**

Notwithstanding the various political and institutional challenges identified, can the fourth leg of the PRDP be mended at this point? If my analysis is correct, mending the fourth leg to achieve an effective synergy between economic and political recovery would require a much more extensive budget in order to support a broader range of peace and reconciliation related activities than those currently envisaged under objective 4.

The work of the Beyond Juba project, a joint initiative of the Refugee law Project, Faculty of Law and Human Rights and Peace Centre, suggests that there are a number of cross-cutting issues which need to be incorporated into the peace and recovery related interventions.

For example, armed violence in Karamoja, which is currently construed as a law and order problem to be addressed through violent and oppressive disarmament tactics, may be more effectively resolved if it is understood as a symptomatic reaction to the ever-tighter stranglehold being exercised on pastoralist livelihoods through a variety of (government instigated) mechanisms of sedentarisation. The drive to sedentarise – and the discrimination and devaluation of Uganda’s heterogeneous culture – are undoubtedly an obstacle to sustainable peace.

We would also argue that the PRDP needs to work harder on addressing militarization and its impacts on gender relations and gendered violence. While a limited number of the 31,000 auxiliary forces have been or are set to be incorporated into the police force, the vast majority are still to be demobilised.

There is also need to take a fresh and critical look at decentralisation, in particular as it impacts on the creation of divisions and conflicts at the sub-regional level.

The justice system does not just need to be rebuilt; the whole model needs to be adapted to Uganda's reality; if it is to speak to people's sense of justice, then the codification of traditional mechanism from throughout the country, and their incorporation into national law, may well be a matter of urgency.

Given combination of a weak judicial system which is inadequate in the public eye, and the reality of significant and unaddressed psychological legacies arising from 22 armed conflicts in the country as a whole, there is an urgent need for psycho-judicial support programming. Such programming essentially entails looking at issues from both a legal and psychological perspective simultaneously and ensuring that legal measures are fully cognizant of the psychological realities of those involved in a case.

All of these require open minds and real consultations - I should also note here that I was struck when reading the PRDP proposals for industrialisation – sugar, bio-fuel, fruit processing – that the oft repeated call for cement to be produced in Karamoja rather than the raw materials being extracted and sent to Moroto, was not reflected!

### **Conclusions**

In conclusion, the challenge to all concerned with the PRDP is to broaden its vision. Reductions in poverty, which is the current focus of the PRDP, cannot be detached from Governance and the specificities of the situation which have created the poverty.

It is an exciting challenge for this is a moment of opportunity. As was recently noted in the UN's protection cluster, the PRDP represents an element of hope. We would probably all agree that the outcome of the Juba talks represents another one. The real question, it seems to me, is whether these two elements can be combined into one.

While nobody should be allowed to try and pass the PRDP in its current formulation as a form of reparations to the north, the broadening of the reconciliation elements of the PRDP is a distinct possibility: If, as we hope, the Juba agreements are signed, the way is open to developing the various mechanisms and processes envisaged under the different agenda items.

Given that the PRDP is not, as yet, fixed in stone, there is scope for revision to the core document to more accurately reflect the achievements of the Juba talks. In this way, with corresponding revisions to budgets to reflect the

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development of instruments such as the Equal Opportunities Commission, a National Reconciliation Forum, and a reparations programme, the PRDP could become a very strong and four-legged table, well able to carry the weight of issues arising from Uganda's troubled past.



I thank you for your attention and wish you fruitful deliberations.