

Acholi Sub-region in Northern Uganda – past, present and future

After driving six hours up north from Uganda's capital city, Kampala, one arrives in Gulu; the main town in the northern area. The Acholi Sub-region comprises eight districts – Gulu, Agago, Amuru, Kitgum, Lamwo, Nwoya, Pader, and Omoro. The area is a traditional dwelling place of the Acholi people.

What we cannot avoid when we talk about Acholi is the conflict history. From the mid-1980s for 20 years, northern Uganda endured armed conflict between rebels and the government army. Acholi Sub-region is where the worst atrocities were committed by the rebels group. They treated villagers with despicable cruelty. The number of internally displaced person (IDP) was estimated to be 2 to 3 million and they were forced to live in IDP camps with limited freedom. Twenty years from the mid-1980s is from the time I was an elementary school student to my university period. The childhoods of the boys and girls were stolen and they had to spend the precious period of their lives as soldiers or as refugees. How they must have suffered.

Since the cease-fire agreement between the government and the rebel group was made in 2006, the security situation improved and many organizations came in to provide emergency humanitarian support. Infrastructure was developed and people left camps and resettled back in their original areas.

About 10 years since then, the Gulu town was filled with energy. Despite the dark history, or may be people are deliberately trying to but the past behind them, the population in Acholi appeared jovial and it looked as if they are trying to live positively. I also see that children of generations that do not know the armed conflict are growing well. The scene was unexpected as I was anticipating a somewhat dark atmosphere in a town overshadowed by the terrible past.

However, not everything is going well. One of the issue is the limited farm incomes. Over 80 percent of people in Acholi Sub-region are farmers and therefore the agriculture sector is an important industry. Despite that, agricultural products in markets are largely transported from other areas such as Kampala city or Mbale District, except for local leafy vegetables. According to the market vendors, they “do not

like to deal with local produce as the quality is low.”

One reason for this substandard production is the farmers' lack of sufficient technology and experience. Although people could resettle after the armed conflict, they could not succeed traditional agricultural techniques in IDP camp, and people who knew it were lost by the conflict or long years of life in IDP camp. Cultivation fields I visited were not managed well. It is not because farmers are lazy. It caused that they simply do not know what to do and how to do it.

Agricultural potential in Acholi Sub-region is high. There is still ample farming land and the soil is soft and rich in organic contents. The land is vast and flat and the climate is also favorable. The average highest day temperature is 29 °C and lowest 17 °C, and the precipitation is relatively ample being 1,500 mm annually. In addition, the fact that the local markets are full of products from outside the district means that that if quality product are produced locally, they can sell well. Furthermore, Uganda exports a large amount of vegetables to Juba – the capital of South Sudan. Acholi is located on the main road to Juba and it is possible to develop export marketing as well as for local consumption.

We can say that the period of emergency aid for Acholi Sub-region is now over. Organizations that provided humanitarian support already withdrew. However, there is still a lot to do for the development of Acholi Sub-region and the improvement of peoples' livelihoods.

I am working in this area from now on. It has a good agricultural environment. The markets can be expected. People are full of energy and smiles. This area has a huge potential. I am looking forward to witnessing Acholi's future!

(By Sawada, 2016)



Location of the Acholi Sub-region in Uganda (source: Wikipedia). As it is a pre-2006 map, only Gulu, Kitgum, and Pader District are shown. As of 2016, these three districts were divided into eight districts.



Local market full of smiles



Most of the vegetables are from outside the district



Tomato farm; it is well managed but neither fertilizer nor plant training techniques are used.



Neighbors gathered while we were revisiting the farm. People seem to have high interest.