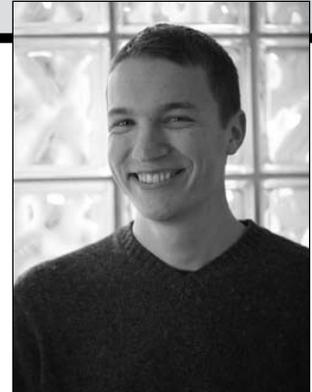


Barriers and Solidarity: An Outsider Navigates Northern Uganda and its Humanitarian Enterprise

BENJAMIN BECHTOLSHEIM '09

Entering Uganda

On May 12, 2008, as my Boeing jet took off, I left behind American comforts and familiarities. From the air, paved streets neatly lined with suburban homes disappeared below me. My iCal – which had been packed with classes, clubs, finals, committees, meetings, meals, and friends – had given way to two months of unplanned days, bookmarked by transcontinental flights and punctuated only by a weekly reminder to take malaria pills.



Two days later, as I descended from the fog of intercontinental travel, I could see grass thatch and mud cake real estate haphazardly scattered across fields and connected by worn paths. Each hut is an image of the other, differentiated only by the sleights of the hands that shaped them – sleights invisible when viewed from above. Their uniformity comes not from an architect's blueprint but from the paucity of material with which to do otherwise.

As I walked among these huts, their shape and form was so different from anything I had ever known. I realized that at some point between the beginning of time and May 14, 2008, when my plane touched down at Entebbe International Airport, the forces of geography, ethnicity, race, linguistics, and economics conspired to erect considerable barriers between the people of Uganda and me. While this narrative of events may be a bit deterministic – and wholly self-centered – for three months, it seemed to explain my situation well.

And it was because of these barriers that I was drawn to Uganda. I had chosen my destination precisely because it was exotic, precisely because it would be so foreign. The situation of the people with whom I would be working could not be more different from my own. They are internally displaced persons (IDPs) – refugees inside their own country. For twenty years, a civil war between the Ugandan government and the LRA rebel group has trapped millions of people across northern Uganda in its crossfire, leading to massive displacement and casualty.

The summer of 2008 came during a lull in the civil war. Just four years before I stepped foot in Uganda, Jan Egeland, the United Nations emergency relief coordinator, described the situation as “the biggest forgotten, neglected humanitarian emergency in the world today.”¹ While the war has reached a tepid stalemate, little has changed since then. The thousands of people killed, raped, maimed, and injured in the conflict are still forgotten. The hundreds of thousands of people displaced from their homes and forced to live in IDP camps are still neglected.

The barriers of distance and economics have made Uganda's civil war of little importance to the West. It has not disrupted our supply of oil or other resources. It has never threatened to spill into our borders or affect our countrymen. It has been easily forgotten and neglected. But people are suffering.

I have a home, stable and secure. The people with whom I worked live in IDP camps. I have spent my entire life in schools, well funded and well stocked. They have spent their youth fleeing from war and grasping at education only when stationary long enough to organize schools for themselves. I have been blessed with health, and when it has left me, I have been blessed with medical professionals and remedies. The IDP camps are filled with disease, incubated by the cramped quarters and lack of sanitation.

My desire to see directly how one organization combated these challenges was coupled with my desire to peer over the barriers that separated me, as an American, from war-torn northern Uganda and its people. I spent my summer interning for Reproductive Health Uganda (RHU), one of the many civil society organizations that has stepped in to fill the gaps and deprivation left by the war.

Upon landing, I knew little about the work that I would be doing. I knew nothing of the texture of Ugandan life. I did not yet know the stench of densely populated IDP camps or the sense of desperate anticipation that accompanied seemingly endless lines for basic medications. As I stepped off the airplane, my surroundings were novel. The language was unfamiliar. I was armed with little more than a Lonely Planet guide and good intentions.

And soon, I began to see good intentions confront desperation around me. Expatriate NGO workers distorted local economies. NGOs funded by foreign donors employed locals, which in turn reorganized social structures and created new hierarchies. The Ugandan government's policy of placing people in camps in order to "protect" them wound up killing so many as disease festered in the cramped quarters. A volleyball game of American expatriates in the midst of someone else's war zone became a proving ground for racial stratification.

Amidst these images, I also saw incredible acts of generosity and healing: the RHU workers who devoted hours to dispensing medication for illnesses that would otherwise remain untreated. The logisticians who delicately, and with the know-how of their engineering degrees, figured out how to site new developments and camps to protect them from floods. The agricultural experts who worked with local communities to sustain themselves through techniques that produced fuller yields. My friend, Ocitti Samuel, an IDP and a casualty of the war, who would offer me a warm soda and a chance to relax and reflect on my final day in his resettlement camp.

These two narratives – of Westerners exacting a cost on the local community and of Westerners doing good while being honored by the host community – compete in my mind as I reflect on my summer. Each is present and each is grounded in something I observed. To acknowledge just one of these narratives is to either resign oneself to the inevitability of war and poverty or to blindly attempt to do good with little cognizance of how one can do better. I have left Uganda with a commitment to neither fall into fatalism nor to ignore the adverse effects that so often accompany good intentions.

To live in Uganda as an American is to stand at the precipice of an odd collusion of cultures and economies. Regardless of how much good one may do, the "humanitarians" and "aid workers" from around the world who have descended on the humanitarian emergency of northern Uganda remain distinctly outside. Even when geography has been erased by plane rides, so many barriers remain firm. We visitors are largely unaffected by droughts and unmoved by rising food prices. We are separated from crime and war by guarded compounds and high walls. We are insulated from disease by prophylactics. We are protected from changes in situation by passports that allow us to depart swiftly.

And so armed with prophylaxis, my passport, and a fellowship worth more than a Ugandan family of four's annual income, I entered Uganda.

Landscape

Going from Chicago to Uganda is akin to cultural whiplash. Uganda could not be more different than the surroundings to which I am accustomed. The suburbs of Chicago, where I grew up, are crisply defined. Streets neatly bisect towns, houses have fences, traffic follows patterns, and commerce is neatly laid out in strips along parking lots. In Uganda, there is no such definition. Homes open to fields and fields bleed into roads or burst into trees. The mud walls and grass roofs of a Ugandan home are, in many ways,

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as natural an extension of their environment as the steel rising from American asphalt. Instead of concrete foundations anchoring the structures, I imagined that the huts, like the trees shading them, had roots burrowing into the soil on which they sat and from which they were made.

Uniform in basic shape, but differently weighed by the forces of weather and primitive construction, the huts seemed to be alive. And the streets were as well. Roads are fiercely contested liminal spaces where vendors fight with cars and cars with bicycles and bicycles with pedestrians for a piece of dirt-pack real estate. Unlike America, outdoors is not the space in between

life's zones. In Uganda, life is lived outdoors. People cook outdoors; people laugh outdoors; people walk outdoors.

The vitality of the outdoors emerges throughout the day. At midday, adults are in the fields and children at school. As the sun sets, however, life is breathed into the landscape. Children, walking hand in hand, shout and laugh their way home. Women walk with their day's gather perched in baskets atop their head. Men emerge from their huts or return from their fields to congregate while sharing stories and drinks. When the sun hits the earth at a shallow angle, contrasts are heightened, so that the mango trees, at the peak of ripeness in early July, reveal their colors. The oblong, yellow fruits seem to pop off the trees after having been hidden and washed out by a harsh midday sun. The mud huts, which seem to be of one mold when lit from above, reveal their contours.

My first days in Uganda were a series of unfolding novelties: the novelty of life lived outdoors and the novelty of life lived in vibrant color. Gray asphalt streets were left in America. In Uganda, streets are a deep orange, turning to an earthy brown when dyed by the rains. Lawns are not turfed in green but rather layered by scratchy yellows and greens, and interrupted by bursts of wildflowers. Women are wrapped in swaths of color that seem to mirror the palette with which the crested cranes, guinea fowl, and kingfishers swooping overhead were painted.

The colors, the wildlife, and the people are densely packed. Chickens roam through yards and people cook on their patios, so that by late evening, the smells of a neighbor's dinner waft through the streets and into open doors. American life, on the other hand, seems to be drawn on a rubber sheet and then pulled taut – so that the sinews of daily commutes are all that connect one's office with one's market with one's home. Homes are evenly spaced and dinner is a private affair. In Uganda, the trees that surround me are the same that feed me, and the homes in which my neighbors live spill into the area around them, and our lives run together in the streets. As I fall asleep at night, I can hear the shouts of soccer fans huddled around a radio nearby mix with the ecstatic songs of the community's Pentecostal church.

I focus my eyes and with the patient guidance of a local companion, I can begin to make sense of my new surroundings. The trees become legible, so that I can read the market's offerings into them. Bunches of plantains erupt from a palm, while avocados hang gently from their rounded trees. Papayas cling to the tops of thin trunks and large jackfruits seem to defy gravity as they hang. When looking closely, I have learned to identify the cassava or yams growing below the soil by the shape of their emerged leaves.

As I focus closely, I can also see the scars upon the land: scars of 20 years of civil war, of landmines and displaced persons, of abducted children and buried dead. The Uganda that I know is not what it was twenty years ago. Two decades earlier, it was the bare feet of subsistence agriculturalists that wore the roads. Now, it is the boots of army patrols or the spitting tires of humanitarian assistance. In some parts of the country, the scattered huts have been abandoned and hastily recreated in the neat rows of IDP camps – as if a piece of American urbanism had been transported halfway across the globe.

Except it doesn't fit. Such close quarters are unsustainable – fields are far away, water is scarce, and sanitation is inadequate. Now, the sinews of American life seem to emerge, except they seem to be pulled too tight, ready to snap. Food is not borne from fields, but rather arrives monthly in a convoy of United Nations trucks accompanied by army escort. New diseases have found hold in the cramped quarters of the camps, with medicine coming in weekly deliveries, doled out by credentialed individuals transplanted from universities in the capital.

The harmony that I saw when I first arrived in Uganda gradually faded throughout my summer. The wounds of war have challenged the long established ecology of the land and also my first impressions. Hunger, malnutrition, malaria, parasites, and poverty are all easily missed behind the unmistakable beauty of the lush, rolling landscape. But they are there.

“The Field”

I spent much of my summer in the IDP camps, where malaria and absent sanitation have challenged a long established order. Each morning, I arrived at the office of the RHU, the site of my summer internship, prepared for another day in an IDP camp. We called these camps “the field” – an oddly sterile term that seemed to normalize the fact that I would be the most transient of presences in the home of someone else.

This parlance is not my own. Rather, I quickly adopted it from my peers at the RHU. I took comfort in its sterility and the distance that it placed between myself and the world I was entering. I think it did the same for my Ugandan counterparts. Although I was the only American working at the organization, none of my coworkers ever expressed any sense of kinship or connection to the displaced persons we were helping. They expressed sorrow at their condition and extraordinary compassion for their situation. But they made plain that we were not IDPs.

We were “humanitarians” – an identity confirmed by the emblem blazing on the side of our pickup truck. The people we served were our “clients”: refugees, war victims, witnesses, child soldiers, child mothers, abductees, and orphans – a litany of evidence to contemporary atrocity. Their homes were our “field”: refugee camps and resettlement villages. Each day, when we ventured into “the field,” the litany of conditions would be matched with names and faces.

Our team was made up of two clinicians, a counselor, an educator, and a driver. Before we arrived, long lines of people waiting to see the clinician were already formed. Malaria and parasites from unsanitary water accounted for nearly the entire caseload. Antibiotics would be dispersed while the line would slowly move. One hundred people would turn to fifty in two hours, and after two more, the clinicians would begin to pack up their medicine, if any remained. Sometimes the supply of medications dwindled before the line did, and the clinicians would be forced to turn others away. While the line neared its end, the educator would speak to women about available methods of family

planning while their children would watch videos about hygiene.

As the intern, I was often tasked with keeping records of our clientele. Later, the data would be compiled, packaged in tri-fold brochures, and sent to donors in a country far away. The names of the clients were also noted, but stored separately for medical records. For the brochures, it was not names that mattered; it was condition.

David Rieff, a war journalist of twenty years, refers to the “caricatural journalist who arrives in some zone of atrocity pointing a microphone and asking, ‘Anyone here been raped and speak English?’”² This comes unnervingly close to my own role this summer. Stories were unnecessary and personalities superfluous; the categories I recorded were two-dimensional tales of hardship. How many malarial orphans did we treat? How many former child soldiers came to our programming? How many witnesses to violence sought our counseling? I penciled numbers on my yellow notepad. When I returned to town, they migrated to an Excel spreadsheet – the most antiseptic of media for the most horrific of data. A few clicks and the records would be e-mailed to the organization’s central office, where they would be repackaged for the brochures destined for more affluent hands.

I have spent much of my life reading these very documents. I remember that when I was growing up, every few months an appeal from a humanitarian organization would arrive in my family’s mailbox. The round-eyed, emaciated children would stare out from the glossy brochure. I knew nothing of who they were nor the countries in which they lived. Black skin told me it was Africa. Gaunt faces told me they were poor. The urgency of the appeal told me they were suffering. And the check my mom wrote told me that they would be helped. The money would go from our mailbox to a noble humanitarian who would deliver the necessary succor.

In Uganda, it was I who was documenting for these appeals. The data I collected has made its way to brochures. The photos I took – of gaunt faces and emaciated bodies – are currently splashed across the RHU’s website: “credit card donations are accepted.”

As I would venture through the “field,” I felt as though I were retracing the steps of the RHU’s foremother. In the mythology of the organization, enshrined on brochures and websites, the RHU was created when Edith Gates, an American, first visited Uganda in the 1950s. “Dismayed by the state of prevailing poverty, high maternal deaths, closely spaced children, malnutrition and the poor health

of women.”³ Edith Gates was determined to do something. Hers is a wonderful story of despair being turned into action; still, in my most cynical moments, I cannot help but also read paternalism and imperialism into her story.

And, in my most honest moments, I cannot help but read the same into my own project. How else could I venture daily into “the field” aboard a vehicle – with its humanitarian emblem displayed in bold blue lettering atop the gleaming white surface – and leave armed only with data for someone else’s consumption? I think money given to the RHU is worthy and warranted, but what could be more paternalistic than being prodded to give by the most anonymous and caricatured of faces: place money in an envelope, help a round-eyed, emaciated child.

After having stood both in “the field” and at my kitchen table in front of the brochured image of the same, I am painfully aware of the inherent tensions in the enterprises of charity and humanitarianism. Without these images, it would be easy to remain obdurate to the plagues of the poor world.

However, even while I claim the most cosmopolitan of values, it is domestic ills that move me most. As another season of hurricanes punishes my country’s southern shores, I am moved more deeply as flood waters rise than I was this May, when an earthquake rocked so many schools

off their foundations in Sichuan. For me, New Orleans is not “the field”; Galveston, Texas, is not the “field.” They are pieces of my own country and their citizens are members of my own community. In the face of these emergencies, my cosmopolitan values seem to collapse watching my co-nationals flee their homes; my heart breaks wider than when faced by any of East Africa’s wars.

Seven years ago, when a Tuesday morning shattered into a plume of smoke, I remember the shocked silence of my classmates as we heard the news. It is a silence that still rings in my head. Six years prior, I remember no similar silence accompanying word of Bosnia

or Rwanda. In the years since, I have never had a class interrupted for news from Somalia, Zimbabwe, Liberia, the DRC, or Darfur. Yes, I have heard the indignation

at these conflicts. Yes, I have heard the sorrow at their occurrence. However, after the loudest of crashes in a field in Pennsylvania, at an office building in D.C., and at the tip of Manhattan’s southern reach, the mournful and stunned silence that gripped my class was unmatched by any memory since. Lower Manhattan is not my “field.”

And so, as I went in and out of the Ugandan “field,” the term felt accurate. I was an American. The plight I saw in Uganda’s camps was not my own, nor were the joys. I empathized deeply with the condition of our “clientele.” I was humble about the work that I did. But it is an odd testament to the barriers between our continents and worlds that Ugandan pain does not move me as much as American pain, and the term “field” seems to fit so well.

Volleyball

The barrier between “the field” and myself that was so present during work hours would remain on the weekends. Every Saturday, a group of expatriate NGO workers would gather at an ex-pat’s compound to play volleyball. The homes in which the ex-pats lived were nothing like Ugandan homes. The only mud-brick structures that existed on the property were the high walls, topped by protruding shards of glass, that ran along the property’s periphery. The houses that sat in the middle of the compound were modest by American standards, but their plumbing, electricity, shingled roofs, and refrigerators dispensing cubed and crushed ice set them apart from the local real estate.

And so, at 3 p.m. every Saturday afternoon, NGO workers would descend on one of the compounds. The four-by-fours would roll in. During the week, they were used to carry medical supplies over potholed roads; on the weekends, they carried ex-pats to volleyball. The assembled group would laugh as a wild shot brought the ball soaring into the logo of the Norwegian Refugee Council on the side of a Toyota Land Cruiser. In between sips of iced cola and glances at a pair of young, wide eyes peeking over the wall, I took solace in the knowledge that I had walked there. Walking – the local mode of transportation – was some small gesture of solidarity with my host population, those who lived outside the compounds. This smug sense of solidarity dissipated quickly; when the game was over, I jumped at the opportunity to be driven home, delighted by the thrill of riding in a vehicle with the bold letters “UN” stenciled on the side.

Outside the mud walls surrounding the compound, children from nearby villages would climb trees and peer over the wall that surrounded the property to catch a glimpse of our

The high walls surrounding the property, crowned by shards of glass, manifest cultural barriers that were in place long before the walls were erected.

game. The talent present at the game deserved little notice – but the congregation of white faces, off-road vehicles, and the luxuries of a volleyball and net, were novel enough to bring the children to the trees. The high walls surrounding the property, crowned by shards of glass, manifest cultural barriers that were in place long before the walls were erected. The separation, white people inside, black people out, left little question as to how racial assumptions are inculcated. It also suggested that for those of us on the inside of the walls, humanitarianism was not a philosophy, but rather a vocation, easily put aside for a weekend’s recreation.

These barriers are easy to criticize, and the scene is one that easily plays to cynicism. Rieff says, “The moral test of being an onlooker at other people’s tragedies is one that few of us are likely to pass reliably.”⁴ And I am left asking, did I pass? From Monday through Friday, I was in IDP camps and resettlement villages. I committed myself to walking as lightly as possible and doing everything within my power to respect local customs. However, Hippocratic oath aside, “doing no harm” is a low bar. Of his journalism, Rieff says, “I have done far less, not to mention risked far less, both physically and psychologically, than many of my colleagues in this peculiar amalgam of voyeurism and witness that we all practice.”⁵ A peculiar amalgam indeed. I may have spent my summer being a voyeur. If only what I saw might be for some good, perhaps I could be called a witness.

Humanitarianism is founded on a principle of human solidarity. To be a humanitarian is to be in solidarity with the impoverished and infirm across our world. I don’t think that one needs to embrace asceticism in order to do good work in desperate situations. But in Uganda, to do anything less was to immediately erect barriers between myself and those with whom I was ostensibly in solidarity. Cell phones and cameras erected barriers as sure as glass shards atop high walls. The luxuries of volleyball and iced glasses of cola did the same.

I suppose that life is a balancing act between one’s noblest intentions and reality. I can add humanitarianism to the long list of ideologies that, when confronted with reality, seem to lose their surety. The barriers are too thick, political economies are too intransigent, racial ideologies are too firmly set, and mud walls are too high. My summer was an exercise in chipping away at these barriers. At moments of connection and laughter they seemed to come tumbling down. But the pretense of solidarity would quickly shatter whenever I took out my cell phone, went to an ATM, or, in a final act of treason, boarded a plane and went home.

Ocitti Samuel

Ocitti Samuel was one of the many people I met in the field. My relationship with him was the deepest that I formed with any of the people I met there. While an ocean and wholly different experiences separate our lives, our relationship became a tunnel between my world and his.

When I first met him, we went for a walk. He winced, planted his crutch in the brown earth a few inches ahead of his leading, bare foot and took another step. When his weight shifted to his left foot, a look of relief replaced the wince, and he looked back at me, smiled, and kept talking. Another step, wince, planted crutch, smile. We walked on.

He was 28 years old when I met him on one of my first trips to the field. The introduction was made because I was supposed to profile him for an RHU publication – a story of a needy client receiving valuable services. He had lived in Owoo Resettlement Village for two years. Resettlement villages are a sort of halfway point between the displaced person camps where he had lived for so long and his original home in the bush. He was eager to return but knew that his injuries would prevent him from doing any intensive work in the fields. Owoo had become his home. For me and the workers at RHU, it was one of our many “field” locations, the site to which we would make our weekly visit each Tuesday.

Wince, planted crutch, smile. Like most Ugandans, Ocitti Samuel was shorter than I. At 28 years old, I could see that he had traces of grey that stood out amidst the black of his hair and the black of his skin. His large eyes seemed to dart back and forth as we spoke, looking at me and then at the ground, and then at my shoes, and at my bracelets, and at our surroundings. His eyes suggested a sort of eagerness that was reflected in the quick cadence of words. Speaking in chops, he would jump from thought to thought. At first I thought this was to complete a thought before the wince that would accompany weight on his right leg, but when I sat down and talked to him for the first time, the wincing subsided but the cadence endured.

When he looked at me, before his eyes wandered on, I could see that he had a ring of red that seemed to dissipate outwards from the piercing center of his black pupils. The whites of his eyes were yellowed, as if years of the dust that stung my eyes for a summer had dyed his after years. I knew that the discoloration was from years of malnutrition.

When we were first introduced, we shook hands. We made small talk – about the RHU, about Uganda, about America. I asked where he would like to do the interview and he suggested that we do it in his home, one of the grass thatch huts that made up Owoo Resettlement Village. I was excited, not for the intimacy of entering the home of someone I knew well, but rather for the novelty of entering a grass thatch hut. We walked across the village to his home. Wince, planted crutch, smile resumed.

We arrived and he showed me in. I ducked to avoid the thatch that hung down from the roof above the entrance. As my eyes adjusted after a day in the bright sun, the interior of the hut came into focus. A sheet with a floral pattern hung from a string and divided the round room into two sections. On one side rested a foam mattress and on the other were a few scattered objects – a battery powered radio, a kerosene lantern, and a metal tin that read “USAID Vegetable Oil: A Gift From the American People.” He glanced around his space with a look of satisfaction. The hut was smaller than my dorm room and its contents fewer. I thanked him for inviting me in, and I took a seat on the stool that he offered me while he sat on the dirt floor.

I asked him about his experience with the RHU. I knew that I was speaking to him because his story was dramatic – the perfect fodder for a brochure aimed at garnering publicity and funds – but quickly our relationship became collegial. Our roles were understood, but the friendship that ensued would, at least for a time, erase such formalities.

It was when we first sat down together that he told me about the events that caused his stuttered gait. He pulled up the frayed bottom of his right pant leg to show me the entrance wound from a bullet that found residence in his ankle two

years ago. It was still there, encased in scar tissue that made his ankle bulge. He had never had an X-ray, so he didn't know where the bullet rested nor what it had done to the bones of his ankle. He suspected they had been broken and had settled in new form, ill fit for bearing the weight of his step.

He was shot when rebels ambushed the car in which he was riding. It

was two years ago. The exact details are hazy for Ocitti. He remembers shots fired. He remembers trying to run away. He fell. He didn't know why. He looked down and saw that the ankle he was trying to run on had been split open. Later, it was clear it had been a bullet.

The RHU could do little for Ocitti's ankle but give him medication to ease the pain.

I had no way of relating to such a story. While I knew something of war, my knowledge was gleaned from books, images, and memorials, not the pain of a gunshot or the fear of approaching armies. As he spoke about the ambush, he never abandoned the same clip of speech that I had heard when we first met. I nodded and jotted notes. His eyes continued to dart around and his face looked the same as if what he was saying was mundane and no different than the small talk that we made upon first meeting. I sat there and tried to be as receptive as I could. He didn't remember much more from the ambush. For the purposes of the brochure, this would suffice, and I didn't want to prod any further. Our conversation turned to other matters.

Each week, when I visited Owoo again, I would seek out Ocitti. Our relationship evolved beyond an interviewer and his subject. We became friends and we looked forward to seeing one another every Tuesday. Our greeting evolved from platitudes to notes of genuine interest and concern. War and injuries drifted into our conversations, but they were not the focus. Instead, we spoke about our families and our lives. When I came back the second time, I brought with me a black-and-white copy of a photo of him that I had taken and printed on a grainy inkjet printer in town. I presented it to him, and as I did, his eyes froze on the image for longer than I had seen him look at anything. After a moment, his eyes moved from the photo to me, and his grin turned into a wide smile. I had wanted to give some small token of gratitude to the subject of my questions, and I was glad that my gift was well received. In the weeks that followed, I often returned to his hut. The picture rested on top of the vegetable oil tin.

And so, what began as a documentation of a “success story” for the RHU concluded with a friendship. But the RHU's success was a limited one. The RHU could do little for Ocitti's ankle but give him medication to ease the pain. He was deeply appreciative of it, but the care was strictly palliative. Like so much of the humanitarian aid that descended on Uganda, it eased pain but did not foster any lasting solution. For Ocitti Samuel, it was fourteen ibuprofen tablets for the week, then fourteen again the next, and the next. He needed an X-ray, and he needed surgery. But these were unavailable. Instead, he got a weekly dose of painkillers followed by another.

Once, we arrived at Owoo to a line longer than we could possibly see in our short visit. Ocitti Samuel was waiting towards the back, but he quickly stepped out of line to come greet me. I told him it was my last time in the village. For only the second time, his eyes seemed to freeze. He looked at me and pointed to a hut about 200 meters away and said, “Let's go there.”

We walked. He winced, planted his crutch, and smiled. By now, I was accustomed to walking slowly to match his pace. We entered the hut, and there were a few boxes of soda, snacks, and candies on one side. I didn't know that such a convenience shop existed in the village. He bought us both sodas on credit. I knew that this was more than he typically indulged in, and I accepted the warm drink, knowing that to do otherwise would be rude. The act was selfless and I appreciated it deeply. We sat on stools in the hut and talked about my time in Uganda. After we had finished our drink, we returned back to find that the clinicians had run out of most of the medications and were packing up for the day. Many people had to be turned away.

I looked at Ocitti and saw the resigned look on his face. He was used to not getting his medication if the lines were long. He always let children, women, and the more infirm go first. "Wait here," I told him. I ran to the clinicians and asked if they had any more ibuprofen. They pointed to the bottle, so I grabbed fourteen tablets, put it in a makeshift envelope of folded notebook paper, and ran back to Ocitti.

He took the pills and smiled at me. The gesture was appreciated. I felt good – I had given him medication that would be helpful. But I know, and knew then, that it was little more than a Band-Aid where a scalpel was required. I smiled back and then we said our goodbyes. He told me to return; I told him I wanted to. We hugged. His crutch fell on the ground and I picked it up for him. He looked at me and then his eyes darted on. I walked away to help the clinicians pack. He walked back towards his home where we first sat together. Wince, planted crutch, smile.

Band-Aids

Ocitti's story provides a touchstone for the broader issues facing the humanitarian enterprise. The RHU provided Occitti with palliative care. The broader humanitarian enterprise, whose presence is so pervasive in northern Uganda, is, in many ways, doing the same. The United Nations provides food assistance while fertile soil, far away from the IDP camps, lies fallow, waiting for the war to end before people can return home to these fields. The RHU provides ibuprofen where a nurse, a surgeon, and a physical therapist are necessary.

Sadaka Ogata, the former United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, captured this well when she said, "There are no humanitarian solutions to humanitarian problems."⁶ The problems in northern Uganda are not a result of too few humanitarians or too few aid workers. They are a product of a government and a rebel group: a rebel

group that has horrifically uprooted so many while under the sway of a charismatic, and by all accounts, delusional leader and a government with only the most tenuous division between civilian and military leadership, which is too eager to consolidate its rule and profit from the war.

But before regimes change, wars end, and economies develop, there is great and immediate need. Providing assistance without fostering dependence is a tension that is not easily navigated. The process of extricating the humanitarian organizations that currently do so much work in northern Uganda will be a painful and delicate process. Returning to a culture in which people must provide for themselves must be done expediently, but doing so too quickly could well be disastrous. This tension between providing assistance and remembering that the ultimate goal is that such assistance will no longer be necessary is a profound tension that is not easily operationalized. However, it is clear that a lifetime supply of Band-Aids is not the answer.

Family

My trip back to the US was made via Germany, where my father is from and where my brother and grandfather live. In Germany, like America, my complexion is not novel. My cell phone is not a marker of distinction. My name is neither odd nor a mouthful.

After a summer of traipsing in and out of IDP camps – always the outsider – I was enveloped in the comforts of family for a week. For the first few days, I stayed with my grandfather in his large estate in the Bavarian countryside. I rose not with the sun, but with the chime of the stately grandfather clock that stood outside my room. A typical day at my grandfather's might begin with a cheese platter, end with a glass of wine, and be filled with visits to art museums or comments on the state of contemporary opera: cultural whiplash after a summer of rice and beans.

But the whiplash dissipated quickly. After a day, my surroundings felt vernacular. I had spent two months slowly learning about the forces that structured Ugandan society. And although Germany is thousands of miles from my home, after years of being raised in the West and by a German father, the cultural milieu was not so foreign. Thanks to the rearing of my father, I could offer incisive comments as my grandfather bemoaned a recent production of a Puccini opera. Thanks to the political acumen of my mother, I could offer commentary about the U.S. presidential election that extended beyond discussions of whether or not Barack Obama was in fact from Uganda.

After three days with my grandfather, I went to my brother's house in Salzburg, Austria, just across the German border. The train that carried me there hummed the entire way as villages passed by, flowerbeds neatly lining the windows of climate-controlled homes. The train left and arrived on time, an impossible feat in Uganda, even for those modes of transit that attempt to set arrival and departure hours.

My days in Salzburg would begin each morning at 8 a.m., when my nieces Julia and Andreea, nine and twelve years old, would come to wake me up. After a few courtesy pounds, the door would swing open, and they would run in, shouting "aufwachen, aufwachen" (wake up, wake up). I would open my eyes to see my nieces hovering over me, waiting for my next move. They are tall. Their faces are flush. And their stomachs are flat, not rounded by kwashiorkor.

On the first morning of this ritual, I got out of bed and reached into my bag to pull out the gifts that I had brought them – small wood carvings of a giraffe and elephant, hand-made in Uganda. I told them where they came from,

I didn't tell them about the thousands of children their age who had been abducted by rebels.

and with the help of a nearby atlas we located Uganda on a map. Their eyes grew wide when I told them about seeing real giraffes and real elephants while on safari. I left out stories of IDP camps and wars. I didn't tell them about the thousands of children their age who had been abducted by rebels. I told Julia that no, ice cream was not a popular dessert in Uganda.

Andreea looked at me a bit puzzled for a moment, as if recalling some memory that didn't fit with what she was experiencing. "Sie sind Armen?" (They are poor?) she asked. I smiled

and replied, yes, they are poor. She looked down at the map then back up at me. My sister-in-law called from downstairs that breakfast was ready. Andreea perked up, looked at me, and said, "Frühstück!" (breakfast) before Julia grabbed my hand and we went downstairs to eat.

I was not in the "field." I was not there to "help." I was in Germany and Salzburg because that is where my family lives. Humanitarian solidarity and cosmopolitanism are worthy aspirations, but they are just one side of a tension. On the other side is my own background, inborn and ingrained, carrying its privileges, as much a part of me as anything else. I do not know whether to be comforted or unsettled by the sense that I, myself, may never be in such great need of assistance as what I saw in the "humanitarian emergency" of northern Uganda, or that Julia and Andreea have little need for concern about where their next meal will come from.

Going from rice and beans to cheese platters and wine seems treasonous. But while I need not indulge in every excess available to me, there is little that gives me as much pleasure as sitting across from my grandfather in his family room, its shelves sagging with books about history and art and its oak floor glowing from the reflected light of brass fixtures. As we sit there, he often tells me, between sips of white wine, about being a child during the war. He recalls seeing Munich, his city, and a city I have come to love, slowly fall to pieces as block by block, night by night, bombs would chip away at its core. For me, World War Two is distant – an inherited and fogged memory, not my own. The city of Munich was rebuilt before I was born, its scars unseen to me.

While the form might be different, I am left hoping that those in Uganda, who have seen their lives uprooted by instruments of war far more primitive than those which ignited Munich, may one day sit across a table from their grandchildren, conversing about rebels and conflicts to which their grandchildren cannot relate. It is a perennial call; Isaiah spoke of swords being beaten into plowshares, and it has been echoed ever since, seemingly beaten into cliché.

I don't know if it will ever happen, but I see no other option but to think and act as if it may.

Notes

1. "War in northern Uganda world's worst forgotten crisis: UN," Agence France-Presse, 11 Nov 2003, <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/AllDocsByUNID/e1f176894430fdeec1256ddb0056ea4c>, Accessed 11 Nov 2008.
2. David Rieff, *A Bed for the Night*, (New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 2002), 3.
3. "The Story of Reproductive Health Uganda," Reproductive Health Uganda, <http://www.rhu.or.ug/>, Accessed 20 September 2008.
4. Rieff, *A Bed for the Night*, 2.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid. 86.