FACULTY OF PSYCHOLOGY
AND EDUCATIONAL SCIENCES

# EVERYDAY LIFE IN THE ADJUMANI REFUGEE SETTING AS TOLD BY SOUTH SUDANESE YOUTH

## VISUAL STORIES OF PLACE IN DISPLACEMENT

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# Abstract

Title: Everyday life in the Adjumani refugee setting as told by South Sudanese youth - Visual stories of place in displacement.

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Master in Educational Sciences – Specialized in Orthopedagogy

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**Introduction** Displacement is naturally associated with many adaption challenges. The government of Uganda has come up with a strategy to help decrease these challenges, while at the same time empowering refugees to become more self-reliant within the host community, offering advantages to both people in the refugee settlements and Uganda. The policy has gained a lot of positive media attention, but are these appraisals legitimate? Using the Space and Place framework, the primary goal of this study is to illuminate the role of place and place-making practices in displacement in young refugees' everyday lives.

**Method** For this study, a group of seven young South Sudanese refugees were recruited and a phenomenological approach was applied, together with complementary visual tools (camera's and video camera's). These tools were used as prompts during in-depth interviews aiming to understand how young refugees experience everyday life in displacement, and how they search for ways to engage in place-making practices and meaning-making processes within the settlements.

**Findings** The participants engaged in meaningful place-making activities while in the settlements, but their experiences contained various paradoxical inputs. Although actively attempting to generate a sense of belonging, the youngsters were confronted by social, political and economic barriers.

**Conclusion** Feelings of anger and frustration are rooted in the adolescents' eagerness to engage in activities that contribute to a sense of belonging and becoming at home in Uganda, but constantly being thwarted by the refugee policy itself. Although being dynamic, resourceful and ambitious, the youngsters feel hindered in many ways. They feel trapped in a temporary, but undetermined, static space.

*Keywords* Displacement, IPA, visual methods, refugees, Uganda, Self-Reliance strategy

# Abstract

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Studente: Amandine Van der Aa (01101429)

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Master in de Pedagogische Wetenschappen – Afstudeerrichting Orthopedagogiek

Promotor: Prof. Dr. Wouter Vanderplasschen

**Inleiding** Displacement gaat vanzelfsprekend gepaard met een heel aantal uitdagingen op vlak van aanpassingsmogelijkheden. De Oegandese overheid heeft een strategie bedacht dat bijdraagt aan het wegwerken van deze uitdagingen, terwijl het vluchtelingen tegelijk de kracht geeft om zelfredzamer te worden binnen de gastgemeenschap. Dit biedt voordelen voor zowel de mensen die zich in de vluchtelingensettlements bevinden als voor Oeganda zelf. Het vluchtelingenbeleid genoot de voorbije maanden van heel wat positieve aandacht in de media, maar is dit wel terecht? Gebruikmakend van de Space en Place theorie, is het voornaamste doel van dit onderzoek om verduidelijking te scheppen over de rol van plaats en place-making praktijken in het dagdagelijks leven van jonge vluchtelingen in displacement.

**Methode** Voor dit onderzoek werden zeven jonge Zuid-Sudanese vluchtelingen gerekruteerd en werd een fenomenologische benadering gehanteerd, samen met aanvullende visuele tools (camera's en videocamera's). Deze tools werden gebruikt om de jongeren bij te staan tijdens het afnemen van diepgaande interviews, die als doel hadden begrip te krijgen over hoe jonge vluchtelingen het dagdagelijks leven in displacement ervaren, en hoe ze op zoek gaan naar manieren om te investeren in place-making praktijken en betekenisverlening binnen de vluchtelingensettlements.

**Resultaten** De participanten nemen deel aan betekenisvolle activiteiten in de vluchtelingensettlements, maar hun ervaringen houden toch verschillende paradoxale aspecten in. Hoewel ze zich actief inzetten om een gevoel van belonging te creëren, worden de jongeren geconfronteerd met sociale, politieke en economische barrières.

**Discussie** Jongeren willen zich engageren in activiteiten die bijdragen tot belonging en het becoming at home proces in Oeganda, maar worden belemmerd door het vluchtelingenbeleid zelf. Dit wekt heel wat boze en gefrustreerde gevoelens op. Ze worden op verschillende vlakken gehinderd, hoe dynamisch, ondernemend en ambitieus ze ook zijn. Ze vast in een tijdelijke, maar onbepaalde, onbeweeglijke tussenruimte.

*Keywords* Displacement, IPA, visuele methodes, vluchtelingen, Oeganda, Self-Reliance Strategie

## Acknowledgements

So here I am, walking towards the light at the end of the tunnel (which was, to be fair, not all that dark in the first place); the final destination. I guess this is where I hand out my acknowledgments before popping champagne with my friends, the bottle we promised each other all those years before.

I would like to thank you, mum and dad, for giving me all the opportunities I could have wished for. You raised me to be an independent, critical and life-enjoying individual; and that is everything that I have become. You gave me the chance to grow and educate myself pretty much on the other side of the country (and I'm not even exaggerating), and during all those years, I never stopped to think and say thank you for all the sacrifices you made, or remember to answer all those 'are you still alive?' messages and calls. You should know though, that I will never forget home to be the best place to come back to on a Friday night (also known as mamma's spaghetti night). It's because of all your effort that I am standing here now, with a life full of opportunities ahead; I am more grateful than words will ever say.

Thank you to the best friends in the world, who pushed me to keep going when I felt like giving up (we all know which subject we're talking about here). My university experience in Gent has been a life-altering, unforgettable period in my life and I've never been happier. Each and every one of you is the definition of true friendship; I couldn't have done it without you and I wouldn't replace you for the world. Special thanks to my girlfriend too, for putting up with my tantrums during my thesis-writing days, for sticking around and for successfully turning each frown upside down.

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Lastly, I would like to thank my supervisor, Julie Schiltz. For starters, I don't think I would've even made it out alive without her when tackling the sandy, uneven, brain-killing Ugandan roads with our twenty-year old Toyota R4 and faltering iPod-music. She helped me get to know the neighborhood and the locals, took me to the refugee settlements and showed me what a real researcher looked like. Our nights together on the compound were almost as therapeutic as they were enlightening, as we would continuously beat off thousands of mosquitos and an occasional cockroach whilst cooking the same three vegetables for two months in a row and with nothing but headlamps and gasfires.  She had my back every step of the way, through the crazy storms and the sunny days (literally and figuratively), and never failed to impress me with her helpful insights and answers to every single, and sometimes quite thoughtless, question I asked. Thank you, Julie, for making my stay in Adjumani not only useful and educative, but also very, very worthwhile.

*Maybe stories are just data with soul – Brené Brown (2010)*

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## Introduction

"Welcome, refugee! Uganda receives you with open arms", "Uganda, refugee-paradise", "Resettling refugees: what can we learn from Syria and Uganda"; these are just some examples of the praiseful, eye-catching headlines newspapers and contemporary magazines are printing on their front pages since Uganda's hospitable refugee policy and the protection and chances it offers to the South Sudanese community have become a hot topic. Marking it as a unique, groundbreaking case, those same columns preach the rest of the world what successful migration and reintegration of protracted individuals into the host society should look like. When attempting to create an overview of life in forced displacement for a broader public, articles and documentaries often centralize personal stories of conflict and arrival in the settlements. These stories however are generally limited to brief, shallow conversations due to short journalist stays, leaving no room for in-depth discussions and no time for listening to the vast majority of issues lying just beneath the surface. This thwarts opportunities to report more nuanced opinions on refugee life and settlement situations. When Tom Waes, a Flemish television host, rounded up his recent documentary for a Belgian broadcasting channel on refugees arriving in the Bidi Bidi refugee settlement (VRT, 2017), he confidently stated: "I have been here for four days now, and I can confirm the system works", clearly having no clue that just a few kilometers away, refugees were packing their belongings and moving back to South Sudan because of the unendurable settlement conditions. So how the South Sudanese people really experience transition, from being at home to living across the border in settlements, those experiences, and specifically those encountered under the innovative refugee program established by the Ugandan government, have not gained enough time or attention from the media. They could however contribute to a more nuanced and profound understanding of the Ugandan refugee settlement, as well as construct an empirical base for exploring South Sudanese refugees' place-making practices within displacement.

This study is primarily aimed to be descriptive and exploratory, since there are not many studies focusing on the specific experiences of place and place-making practices among South Sudanese refugees within the present-day settlement context. There are however general theories on space and place specifically aimed towards refugees and frameworks on how people give meaning to dwelling in contexts of forced displacement. On a side note: South Sudanese refugees have come to Uganda for mixed purposes; some came unplanned, violently and unwillingly torn away from everything they knew and often having to leave behind valuable belongings and loved ones, others came in their own time, seeking to make use of the provided facilities like schools and health care due to the failing economy in South Sudan. In this aspect, it is only logical that each individual experiences their displacement differently. I will be focusing on refugee youth in particular, presuming that they are increasingly vulnerable to psychological trauma in the context of ongoing conflicts (Abu-Zaid, 2017) and that place-making practices among youths are an

important factor to establish a sense of 'becoming at home', protecting their general wellbeing during a critical phase in life, not only transitioning from one place to the other, but also transitioning from adolescence to adulthood (Correa-Velez, Gifford & Barnett, 2010). This makes it not only an essential target group to examine, but also an extremely interesting one. In what follows I will first shortly delineate the current situation of conflict in South Sudan as well as Uganda's refugee policy the South Sudanese people have become part of. After that, I will map out how space and place, and consequently refugees, are depicted in literature, and how this is a compelling and relevant approach to examining life experiences within displacement, ending with the importance of place-making practices in refugee studies and how the combination of all these contribute to forming my research question.

## 1.1 Context

South Sudan, December 2013. What started off as a political power struggle quickly escalated into a dangerous military conflict between forces under command of Salva Kiir, an ethnic Dinka representing the government of Southern Sudan, and those allied with the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-In Opposition (SPLM-IO) under leadership of the former Vice President, Riek Machar, a Nuer. This resulted in mass killings and keeps people in continuous fear up until today (Abu-Zaid, 2017). The international human rights of more than a million people have been violated in numerous ways purely because of their ethnicity, forcing them to flee from their homes, which in many cases had been burned down or severely damaged, and seek refuge in neighboring countries, Uganda being one of the main destinations (Abu-Zaid, 2017). Since the two parties have already attempted to sign a Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2005 but failed to comply with an internal power-sharing arrangement, resulting in the current conflicts (Johnson, 2014[a]; Johnson, 2014[b]), there are still no prospects for peace in the near future. Recent counts have concluded that more than 900.000 South-Sudanese refugees sought safety in North-Uganda, with thousands more continuing to cross the border every day (Amnesty International, 2017). Youth have been particularly heavily affected by the conflicts; approximately 3,2 million children suffer the consequences of the ongoing turmoil, among which an estimated 13000 are missing, separated from family members or residing in the settlements unaccompanied (Abu-Zaid, 2017). Currently, there are eleven settlements, all situated within or very close to the Adjumani district in the far North of Uganda, directly under the South Sudanese border. Among these settlements lies Bidi Bidi, which has recently grown out to be the largest refugee settlement in the world, hosting more than 270,000 refugees by itself (The Washington Post, 2017).

## 1.2 Uganda's refugee policy

What makes Uganda's refugee policy so exceptional, is its Self-Reliance Strategy (SRS), which is considered to be the most compassionate approach towards displaced people in the whole world, as it attempts to empower refugees to become more self-sufficient within the host country. The strategy was first applied in the late 1990s as an answer to Sudanese refugees living in protracted

exile in northern parts of Uganda (Ahimbisibwe, 2014). With a steadily growing influx of other refugee nationalities over the years, the country extended its strategy to all the Ugandan settlements hosting refugees (Dryden-Peterson & Hovil, 2003). As the name itself quite clearly suggests, the SRS advocates refugees to become more autonomous during displacement, primarily by granting them a piece of agricultural land on which they can grow crops and offering chances to engage in other economic activities, hereby facilitating the start of a new life in Uganda independent of humanitarian aid, whilst making profitable contributions to the Ugandan economy at the same time (Ahimbisibwe, 2014). Uganda has also revised the concept of conventional refugee camps as we know it, and has moved towards the implementation of the more durable refugee 'settlements', considering South Sudanese refugees will be in the country for quite some time.

Because my aim is to shine light on how South Sudanese refugees experience being subjected to this strategy within settlements, and how they encounter placement within displacement in general, it is important to frame this in existing literature focusing on the refugee experience. Although not a lot is written on micro-level refugee experiences within the specific context of settlements (Kaiser, 2008), how refugees encounter life in refugee camps has been given some attention.

Although camps have been argued to violate human rights by treating its 'imprisoned' residents as passive, dependent victims (Porter et al., 2008), international agencies and governments all over the world often still tend to favor them over other kinds of refugee containment due to several practical and administrative advantages (Turner, 2016); they offer greater transparency, both on individual as well as on organizational level, and increase control and confinement measures, on the one hand attempting to lower security threats and provide adequate services, but on the other hand also creating an overview on cost effectiveness of the relief operations and reducing the chances of refugees integrating into the host society and not returning to their country of origin when the situation improves (UNHCR, 2014; Kaiser, 2006; Black, 1998). Displaced people in camps are restricted to the boundaries of the demarcated area provided by the host government. By condemning refugees to a small space, cramped together with thousands more, camps fail to provide autonomy or adequate spaces for social interactions to the refugee community (Arega, 2017). Furthermore, these perimeters disable refugees to build social relations with the local population, increasing social isolation and limiting access to regular employment, in turn negatively affecting their economic welfare (Porter et al., 2008). Considering the permanent temporariness of refugee camps, planning ahead on life projects and thinking about the future also becomes seriously challenged (Turner, 2015). To conclude: being deprived not only from social and legal rights, but also excluded from economic life, camps have often been experienced as 'safe imprisonments', while its inhabitants dwelling there live a 'naked' or 'bare' life.

On the other hand, and different to camps, settlements have no physical boundaries or restrictions and refugees are free to move out of the area and settle elsewhere in the country whenever they want, opening doors to an easier integration into the local society and easier access to economic life. Because they have permission to disperse, settlements are more spread out across the country and are consequently a lot less crowded than camps. Instead of placing socio-economic, political and cultural restrictions on refugees, preserving their dependency on humanitarian aid, agencies in settlements merely adopt facilitating and supportive roles, designating refugees to agricultural land upon arrival on which they are encouraged to build their own houses and where they can fence off fertile land for farming purposes, creating a community of semi-permanent residences which makes it look a lot like an ordinary village (Schmidt, 2003).

When comparing these structural differences, some critics have come to terms with the fact that conditions in the settlements generally appear to be 'better' than in camps across the rest of the globe (Kaiser, 2006). Though however open and progressive settlements might seem, these critics have opponents who contradict their rosy, flawless representation and claim settlements to be just as constrictive as camps, subsequently violating the human rights of both refugees and their hosts (Black, 1998; Crisp, 2001; Meyer, 2006; Hovil, 2007). The oppositions were mainly aimed at the prohibition of permanently leaving the settlement without a permit obtained from the Settlement Commandant, which was known to be a long process with an unpredictable outcome (Dryden-Peterson & Hovil, 2003), discarding people's right to freedom of movement, but also their right to choose how they want to support themselves and blocking the gateway to other human privileges (Hovil, 2007). This constraint, however, has been uplifted in the recent modification of Uganda's refugee policy, now permitting refugees to relocate and integrate all over the country, but emplacing another difficulty; living in the most remote areas of Uganda, a mere ten hours away from the capital by bus, refugees may have the right to move, but don't have the means of transport to actually 'do' the moving. Furthermore, by assigning refugees to a small plot of land and providing structural facilities like primary schools and health care services within the confines of such an isolated, geographical area, indirectly condemns them to stay put, but also narrows the attainment of self-reliance down to the exclusivity of the settlement (Hovil, 2007). Additionally, the underpinning idea of 'self-reliance' within Uganda has been submitted to a lot of criticism, as it may paradoxically be in tension with refugee empowerment, instead of actively enforcing it (Meyer, 2006). For example, after spending a period of time in the settlements and when assumed to be self-reliant enough to sustain themselves, access to humanitarian aid and food distribution is gradually cut down, forcing refugees to live from the sparse cultivation of their own land and the, in the meanwhile, quartered food rations supplied, which is barely enough to survive, let alone enables them to pay for external, but very essential resources (Hovil, 2007). Lastly, based on own observations made in the period between April and June 2017 and keeping up to date with current events, Uganda seems to be staggering under the enormous weight of refugees rushing into the country. Food shortages, health service implications and lack of farming land among others are some of the most stubborn issues the

country is facing today and this puts serious pressure on the self-reliance strategy Uganda had so royally promoted to begin with, but also on the people who are doomed to manage it; the South Sudanese refugees (Amnesty International, 2017; The Guardian, 2017; De Redactie, 2017).

Considering all of the above leads me to question if settlements are indeed experienced 'better' than camps or not, and if the South Sudanese refugees in this study experience everyday life within the renewed settlement approach differently to refugees in previous studies allocated in camps. As settlements are a man-made construction, I think it is interesting to see how these artificial and temporary, but at the same time prolonged places of residence are experienced by its inhabitants using the space and place framework. Furthermore, to examine the relationships between place and the refugees' experiences, it is important to analyze specific and individual place-making practices in detail (Turton, 2005). Lems (2016) emphasizes how putting individual actions in the spotlights, refines people's understanding of displacement in general, but will also show us how place and displacement are intertwined. However, the anthropological dispute within the space and place framework on the conceptualization of these terms unintentionally bypasses the value of place-making and partly neglects the lived and felt 'refugee experience' within the entire discourse (Lems, 2016). Thus, to fully understand daily life in a host society settlement, there is a need to wield a more comprehensive, holistic model, where the refugee experience and place-making practices are given an honorable amount of attention too.

### 1.3 Space and Place
The relationship between people and place has been broadly researched and documented in many ways (Sampson & Gifford, 2010). When looking at the refugee situation specifically, it is obvious we need to take into account the context in which they reside, which is one not only of protracted exile, but also one with a history of life-threatening danger and insecurity. Furthermore, it is important to analyze how space and place are conceptualized within literature in order to understand how refugees are represented. Passive or active, static or dynamic, place-makers or place-mourners; these representations of refugees are all dependent on the character of space and place definitions, which are laid out in the following paragraph.

People being forced to flee their country are not only being forced to leave behind their social and cultural connections, but also most of their belongings and connections to place. The association between people and their attachment to place has often been seen as of fundamental importance (Den Boer, 2015), yet in line with what David Turton (2005) pointed out, little is known when looking at refugees and their connectedness to place in a refugee settlement. Since the 1990's, there has been great disagreement between two main approaches and a radical shift in terms of defining the concepts space, place and identity towards refugees. The first approach, an essentialist conceptualization, suggests that the world is divided into static, fixed places and that people all belong to one singular, unchanging location (Appadurai, 1988; Löfving & Jansen, 2007),

whereas space is considered a flat and unmovable surface (Brun, 2001). When using this framework, refugees are seen as being torn apart from the place they belong to and thus destabilizing their identity and sense of culture (Malkki, 1992; Turton, 2005), stripping people bare of anything other than their identity as a refugee up until the day they are reunited with their homeland. This approach underestimates the creativity of human beings when attempting to restart a new life, further marginalizing them as passive and deprived from their 'natural place' (Sampson & Gifford, 2010), thus considering only two possible solutions: either ending the refugee status by integrating into the local community, or repatriation (Brun, 2001). The second approach challenges this perception by acknowledging fluidity and movement as major effects of globalization, and so can be referred to as a non-essentialist understanding of space and place (Sampson & Gifford, 2010). The enhancement of modern technology and current transportation methods has decreased boundaries created by distance and led to the facilitation of mass movements, blurring cultural distinctions in the strict sense, emphasizing the un-determinedness of place and questioning the static framework essentialists apply (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992). In this sense, space is interpreted as the realization of the integrated social relations across all spaces one has connections to and place is a particular set of networks and understandings within this global system (Brun, 2001). Thus, marking refugees as flexible, adaptable beings with no strictly defined attachments to one certain place.

Although this turn towards an open-ended and flexible interpretation of space and place is crucial for the de- and reconstruction of identity and belonging, overstretching the people-place-identity-belonging relations is equally toxic, as displacement naturally creates very real feelings of loss in social, economic and political status (Kibreab, 1999). Likewise, but starting from a different direction, when examining the experience of forced displacement, Turton (2005) suggests it is important to keep in mind that this not only includes abandoning a former place and the pain of loss it is accompanied by, but that it is also about the efforts made and possibilities in creating connections to a new place in the world when not being able to return to the former one; an act of place-making. This imputes a need for more balanced perspectives on place and movement, a position centered between the two propositioned extremes above: between an essentialist and a post-modernist approach (Lems, 2016); one which recognizes the significance of attachment to a place and the impact of being involuntarily uprooted, while also accentuating the opportunities of recreating connections to place within settlement contexts.

This extensive anthropological dispute has succeeded very well in putting space, place and belonging into words and theories. Their focus on metaphors however has become so narrow that it has had no room to look at the real world and real people's actual, lived experiences within it (Lems, 2016). When looking at refugees in particular, it tends to neglect the importance refugees still attach to a particular place or the manner in which refugees' experience displacement in real life and based on real encounters.

## 1.4 Place-making

Simply depicting 'home' and 'exile' as two separate concepts, is insufficient to fully understand the dynamics of displacement and the positioning of refugees inside it (Kaiser, 2010). Transition, as Vogler et al. (2008) define it, is the realization of a change process during specific life events or time periods within the life course. In the most literal sense of the word, refugees experience transition through a shift from familiar territory to a strange, foreign area, marking 'place' as a crucial analytic and explanatory factor in relation to forced migration experiences (Kaiser, 2008). Even in the face of violence and disruption, displacement and reconstruction, the presence of place continues to shape people, as we also shape place through our daily routines and habits (Lems, 2016). Within the complex process of being uprooted and emplaced elsewhere, it is clear that place-making plays a key role in how refugees experience their new, whether or not temporary, context and in what way they attach to certain places within this setting. People's attachment to place is revealed and preserved by how they generate social relations there and enact practices in them, but also by the level of engagement with the 'outside' world, economically and culturally (Kaiser, 2008). Giving meaning to places through these practices can partly relieve some of the adaption challenges forced displacement is accompanied by (Kaiser, 2008), and also plays an important role in the coping process (Ungar et al., 2008). For instance, place-making appears to affect youth's ability to feel at home, but can also go together with negative feelings of exclusion, insecurity and danger among others. Up until now, these findings have been limited to mere observations and theoretical frameworks, while actual experiences and lively accounts have barely gained the attention from researchers (Sampson & Gifford, 2010). The few studies that do emphasize its importance and tend to discuss it, have only focused on resettled youth: youth that have settled down permanently in western countries, and not on displaced youth: youth trapped in transition, not being able to turn back to their country of origin, but not being helped with any durable solutions either (Kaiser, 2008).

To conclude, spotting this huge void between what is written and what is truly being experienced and the great contradictions in the media concerning Uganda's generous refugee policy has pinpointed my focus on South Sudanese refugees' accounts of everyday life experiences, those of youth in particular, within a context of placement in displacement. How do they experience everyday life in displacement? And how do they actively search for ways to engage in place-making practices and meaning-making processes within the settlements?

**Method**

In the past, children and youth have been largely overlooked as active participants in scientific research (Johnson, Pfister & Vindrola-Padros, 2012), but since studies have begun to highlight the importance of their contributions, youth's life experiences and narratives revealing how they understand and give meaning to certain aspects of their lives have gained much more attention (Christensen & James, 2000; Greene & Hogan, 2005; Mayall, 2002). This resulted in a visible shift from perceiving children and young people as passive study objects towards a more empowering approach, encouraging them to take on active roles as co-researchers and 'experts' on their own lives (Bluebond-Langner & Korbin, 2007; James, Jenks & Prout, 1998). This focus contributes to exploring data in a richer, more dynamic way, refining the content of research, broadening its scope and rewarding us with unique and valuable insights; insights which had previously been marginalized or even completely ignored (Lomax, 2012). Considering all of the above, this study aims to observe and interpret everyday life experiences as shown and told by young South Sudanese refugees using participatory techniques and visual research methods. To fully understand and unravel the often very complex lives of youngsters living in exile, a qualitative, interpretative and phenomenological approach was utilized, supported by the appliance of creative tools (camera's and video-camera's). As Lewandowski (2008) confirms in his research, visual images are anamnestic, meaning that they help against forgetting. Baring this in mind, the equipment was offered to each participant and after capturing 'a day in the life', served as prompts whilst the youngsters recounted stories of lived experiences within the refugee settlements. The idea behind the use of these additional devices, hereby creating a richer, multi-layered method, was to provide a more holistic understanding of what is really going on in the lives of juvenile refugees. It has regularly been stated in previous studies how interpretative phenomenological research remains somewhat limited due to the one-dimensionality of participants' accounts (Didkowsky et al., 2009; Khawaja et al., 2008; Plunkett et al., 2013), and how visual assistance has been known to enrich this data as it captures important personal and cultural meanings, provides colorful, contextual details and gives the researcher an impression of everyday events which might otherwise have been overlooked (Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994; Plunkett et al., 2013).

*2.1 Participants*

For this research, I travelled to both Maaji and Ayilo, two refugee settlements situated within the Adjumani district in north-western Uganda and about 50km south from the South Sudanese border, to look for participants. Maaji, having reached its full capacity since 2015, now holds approximately 15,000 refugees, primarily people from the Madi culture, while Ayilo has established itself to be more of a Dinka community. Seven young South-Sudanese refugees aged 16 to 20 years old and living in either one of these two settlements, were recruited through snowball sampling and randomized selection. This process consisted of me roaming the

settlements together with my acquired research assistant, whom I contacted and employed due to mouth-to-mouth recommendations, in search for youngsters with different hobbies, occupations and talents and who had the time and dedication to participate in the project. We approached adolescents on the road in an accessible manner, visited homes and families my assistant knew and made appointments to meet with possible candidates. After explaining the research project to each individual separately, and after a randomized selection of six candidates (with one additional voluntary participant who was asked to play the role of mediator by her friend), I came to a total of seven participants who all willingly agreed to take part. Three participants (one male, two females) were selected in Maaji, and four in Ayilo (two males, two females). The names of the participants have been replaced by pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. In what follows, a brief description of each participant is given to offer the reader a chance to create a better understanding of their contexts that will be described in more detail in the results section.

Anna

Anna is 17 and lives together with her uncle, his wife, and five of his children in Maaji. She never knew her father and her mother sent her away at an early age. She has been in the settlement for two years and takes tailoring classes to pass the time. Although she would like to go to school, her financial status doesn't allow her to pay for the education. She maintains the family by cooking meals every day.

Brenda

Brenda is 16 years old and has lived in Maaji for the past two years together with her 21-year old sister and her baby. She goes to primary school and has recently reached level six. In her free time, Brenda plays football on the girls' football team, works in her sister's garden and helps ferment cassava to make alcohol.

Isabel and Nancy

Isabel and Nancy are best friends and felt more comfortable doing this project together. Both of the girls are 18 and are neighbors in Ayilo. They go to primary school together. When they come home, they help with cooking and cleaning, but have no further occupations. Nancy lives with her brothers, Isabel with her mother.

Simon

Simon is 20 and lives together with his mother and two of his brothers in Maaji, his father is a soldier in the war. He doesn't go to school, but has a lot of occupations. With the help of DRC he opened up a salon, he leads youth meetings and represents his block leader on several occasions throughout the month. He also plays football and is referee in all the official matches. Additionally, he helps his mother with digging in the field and selling vegetables on the market.

<u>Martin</u>

Martin is an 18-year old boy who has lived in Ayilo for over four years at the time the interviews were conducted. He lives with his sister; his mother died due to an illness, his father is a soldier in the war. He doesn't go to school. When he isn't playing football, he usually hangs out around the center with his friends.

<u>Gabriel</u>

Gabriel is also 18 and lives in Ayilo with his aunt and two cousins. He used to go to school in Kampala (the capital city of Uganda), but had to move back to the settlement because of financial difficulties. He has been moving back and forth to South Sudan since 2003. He spends his days roaming around the settlement with friends, playing football and dealing cards.

## 2.2 Data-collection

The participants were asked to take part in a filmmaking and photography project. The aim of the project was to urge the youngsters to take as many pictures as they wanted of specific things, people, actions or events within the settlement as long as they could explain the essence or the reasoning behind it afterwards. The assignment was purposely left vague and they were not given examples, as they were asked to be creative and independent in their search for what they would like to take pictures of and talk about. This was all extensively explained during an introduction day, where they were also handed out camera's and given an initiation class on how to take pictures and videos; a few exercises were carried out to ensure that everyone understood the functioning of both devices. At this point all questions were answered and the written informed consents were obtained. They had approximately ten days to complete the picture taking task. During this period, each participant was also given the chance to take videos, filming anything they wanted for two days. Subsequently, two interviews per participant were conducted; one discussing the video's and another handling the pictures. The images produced were used to offer the participants visual aids whilst encouraging them to recount life experiences and other relevant subjects connected to the images in a free and thorough manner. Interviews with minimal interviewer intervention were conducted, only asking for clarifications and stimulating participants to describe and reflect on life experiences profoundly. By allowing the participants to narrate and reflect on their life experiences in such an extensive manner, they came to a point where they could fabricate their own meaning to certain experiences (Van Manen, 1990). This meaning-making process was then interpreted by me, the researcher. The interviews were translated on the spot with the aid of two local translators; one in Maaji, where the Madi language was mainly spoken, and one in Ayilo, where Dinka or Arabic was eminently used. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed, each lasting approximately two to three hours. After the elaboration, the participants were given the camera's which they had used as a gift and a token of gratitude. Some other small and personal presents were also handed out.

## 2.3 Analysis

The project resulted in a broad range of data, including photographs and video's, lengthy in-depth interviews and verbal reflections on life experiences. A thematic analysis was conducted using guidelines to an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as pointed out by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009). During the initial phase, all interview transcriptions were thoroughly read through in an iterative process and exploratory comments were noted in the sidelines describing the content, clarifying behavior and later reflecting on the data in a more conceptual, interrogative manner. These comments were then evaluated to develop emergent themes and connections between them. When moving to new cases, similarities and differences were categorized and coded, showing patterns and leading to super-ordinate themes across multiple interviews. Finally, these findings were interpreted and then linked to theoretical frameworks. The results of this analysis will be outlined in the following section.

# A paradigm of paradoxes

When trying to reconstruct everyday life as refugees experience it within the settlements, and by attempting to keep the portrayal of these experiences as authentic as possible, first impressions were openly discussed and evaluated together with the participants while simultaneously watching the video's. Before I proceed to laying out the results, I would like to point out how a lot of themes were discussed in sheer contrast to one another, creating a large web of intricately connected, yet paradoxical accounts. This is why I have proposed to recount these South Sudanese youngsters' experiences through the paradoxes they live by and have subconsciously notified. While describing the findings, I will systematically link them to available literature, creating an interpretative story and facilitating the reader's comprehension of the whole refugee experience all at once.

## 3.1 I want to, but I can't

The most prominent and conspicuous focus in the filming material was put on what the youngsters do throughout the day; the occupational component. Conversing with these youngsters about daily activities and interests made it very clear that one of the main struggles they face day to day is keeping busy.

*"There are so many things I could do, but that I can't do. .. now I can't do anything. But there are so many things I could do. It's just that the opportunity of, I don't know like, maybe just certain help that I need, is not happening." – Martin*

As Martin explains in the quote mentioned above, he talks about how much he could do, emphasizing just how capable he is to be doing any kind of labor, business or schooling, yet not being given those chances. He wants to, but he can't. This urge to 'do something' stems from the fear of 'wasting time'. As indicated by a few participants below, staying occupied suppresses that feeling and takes their mind off the current situation they reside in and the distress it causes:

*"When I am busy doing things, it does not allow me to stress. When I stay idle, I am stressful when I look ahead of my life." – Gabriel*

*"Sometimes when I'm at home, I find that I'm idle and think about a lot of problems. All these problems are set in my brain. But when I come out and when I'm with friends and doing things, then at least I can forget about these problems." – Anna*

Although refugees are offered physical stability within the host country, displacement often creates conditions of occupational deprivation (Whiteford, 2000) as they are involuntarily snatched away from their own culture and people and brought to a foreign country, not speaking the language and unknown to their customs. Being able to engage in meaningful activities

however is essential for people to sustain their common health and well-being in everyday life, while failing to do so within a displaced context is known to negatively affect that health (Roley et al., 2008; Whiteford, 2000).

It was remarkable to affirm how all participants explicitly or inexplicitly contrasted their contemporary situation to a previous life; one without war, displacement or adversities. When comparing a day in the life in South Sudan to one in Uganda, most of the participants recounted going to school in their country of origin and/or being employed, doing some kind of labor and ensuring an income and financial stability. Because of the high unemployment rates in Uganda and by being situated within the settlement, hardly able to pay for transport to places outside it, finding a job as a refugee becomes extremely difficult, in turn denying chances to attend to high school, as the institutions are mostly far away from the settlements and school fees are too expensive; they are stuck in a never-ending negative spiral. In many cases this is accompanied by feelings of restriction and frustration. One participant explains:

*"The life here is not going very well, everything is difficult. .. being here as a young person in Ayilo, we are lacking like one of the best things, most of us are not at school. Some have completed primary school and started high school, but have now been affected by the crisis and the war. .. what about us? The people who are in high school? We can't go because there is no money. .. So now I stay at home here and I'm not doing anything." – Gabriel*

Quite like in the present study, loss of everyday activities of employment and education has previously been reported to significantly impact Sudanese refugees who had resettled in Australia, yet up until now, this has not been given any attention in empirical literature on psychological health of refugees (Khawaja et al., 2008). Because going to school and finding a job is practically impossible, or merely predestined for the lucky few, the youths declare how the majority of the people residing in refugee settlements and whom they have direct contact with, including themselves, are obliged to search for alternative ways to sustain their sense of worth and integrity within the community. The summed up efforts made to tackle these constrictions ranged from gardening, volunteering work and immersing oneself into political affairs to ambling aimlessly around the settlement center, playing games and helping family members with domestic work. Simon is a perfect example of the first; not only does he help his mother dig in their garden, but he also sells vegetables at the local market, represents his block leader during numerous meetings held every two weeks, works at the salon that he opened together with his friend and with the help of his aunt and DRC (Danish Refugee Council), plays referee in official football matches between different settlements, sings in the choir group and does volunteering work with Save the Children by organizing sports classes and supervising play times. He carries out all these activities with a specific purpose: to obtain a sense of achievement and usefulness in his everyday life, but especially to wake up with certain goals, responsibility and contentment.

*Simon discussing safety issues within the camp in the Youth Group meeting.*

It should be noted however that, as far as I could witness, this young man is rather an exception than normality; it is only natural that not everyone has the same capacities or willingness to dedicate themselves to this overwhelming amount of work. Consequently, most of my participants could be associated with the latter; their days primarily consisting of playing games and sports, hanging around with friends and doing chores (e.g. digging in the garden, fetching firewood) to help their elders.



*".. these are people with nothing to do, so they just end up wasting their time playing games, like cards, chess, domino's, stuff like that. I fear that that is not good for me. I also want others not to be doing those same things. I just want something good to do, something that could help us. .. There are so many things I could do, but that I can't do." – Martin*

As Martin describes showing me this video-fragment, a lot of people spend their time in the settlements playing games and hanging around. Staying idle is something that should be avoided at all times; being bored and doing nothing is associated with laziness and is considered a waste of talent and young energy. Another video shows us how Gabriel walks up to a younger child

sitting on a water tank and tries to convince the boy to get up and do something as to which the child replies there is nothing for him to do. The camera then shows us how Gabriel shakes his head disdainfully. During one of our interviews, he describes how such passivity makes him feel ashamed.

A good example of a respectable occupation, and one that every participant mentioned as something of great importance at one point or another, is the act of helping others. Aiding others could take on different forms; the youngsters specified assisting neighbors, relatives or other community members financially, but also physically and emotionally. They clarified that helping others morally felt like the right thing to do, because they wanted to be doing something useful with their time and because it genuinely made them feel better. They further stated it to be something inherent to their culture and made them feel like 'somebody'; a person of value. When Simon was talking about helping others, he mentioned the following:

*"Yes, when I do this work, I feel togetherness between everyone. Also when I am helping others. It makes me feel happy" – Simon*

Simon's motives to helping others are based on the rewarding feeling he earns from the deed afterwards, and because supporting others is often done in groups, it is considered to be a social activity, a gathering between people, recreating a sense of familiar collectivity in an unfamiliar place. Furthermore, and comparable to what was discussed earlier about the positive outcomes of keeping occupied in general, the participants told anecdotes, describing how helping others temporarily shifted their focus from their own problems to those of others, helping to avoid troublesome thoughts. These findings can be linked to literature that indicates how altruistic affairs tend to meet cultural, but also personal needs (Heigl et al., 2011; Batson, 1991). A study conducted by Staub & Vollhardt (2008) has demonstrated how altruism can indeed result in good feelings for the person who aids another individual, but that one of the main motivators to helping is one's belief in moral duty and social responsibility, also expressed by the participants, and is accompanied by the identification with others' difficulties. Logically, people living in the settlements are aware like no other of other inhabitants' suffering, regarding the fact that they fled the country due to similar incentives. It is however not only pure empathy that drives refugees to helping others in relatable situations; when experiencing inner distress, acts of altruism can soothe personal negative feelings and thoughts and lessens their own distress (Batson, 1991), something the youngsters also pointed out to me. The following quotes are some more examples of altruistic behavior as illustrated by a few of the participants:

*"I normally help people who are vulnerable, who have no power to do things themselves. I can go and dig in their garden. I can also cook for that person, or fetch water, or wash clothes." – Brenda*

*"Sometimes we come together as a group and look for vulnerable people among the community here. And then like, somebodies hut needs to be made for him/her and the youths come together and tie the grasses, and make a house for these vulnerable people." – Simon*

*".. it's a group of the same family together with another family. One family's food is finished, they don't have more, so the other family cooked more to share together." – Isabel*



*A picture Anna took at her house, showing how a couple of neighbors were helping her uncle fix the roof*

Furthermore, a few participants also expressed feelings of guilt and worthlessness towards their elders and family members for not being in school or assisting their relatives financially, augmenting a sense of disloyalty towards their own kinship and intensifying their desire to return to their country of origin; a place where they could at least help their families and feel valuable instead of being in the settlement where they can do nothing but wait. Martin expresses his wish to return to his home in South Sudan and how this is driven by family obligations:

*"My father is the only one doing all the work, taking care of the family and other relatives. My brother got married recently, so that meant my father also had to spend a lot of money, and the things are a bit hard. If I could go back, I could work and assist my father." – Martin*

Thus, to conclude, according to these youngsters, engaging in various activities has several motives; it prevents them from worrying too much, helps them feel meaningful again, restructures their recently ravaged lives with purpose and generally just makes them feel better by also being close to others. By constantly searching for ways to give meaning to their actions, they are actively trying to place themselves back into the world, paving a way to 'becoming at home' in the settlement.

### 3.1.1 Open barriers

Although Ugandan settlements are well-known and praised for opening their doors to the South Sudanese community, the youngsters couldn't help but feel like they were standing in front of intangible, but very real closed doors at the same time. As a minority group in the host society, the participants mainly discussed being limited by a lack of choices, opportunities and not having a say in their own lives. Addressing the issue of having a lack of choices implied not being able to do what they want, when they want and how they want, claiming they are mostly forced to do things simply to survive. During filming days, many of the participants captured elderly people working in the field, young children fetching water obviously too heavy for them to carry and disabled persons struggling at home without assistance; all of these being vulnerable people who wouldn't be doing this kind of work back in South Sudan, but are necessitated to do so since it is the only way they are able to endure the primitiveness of life in the settlements. More than one participant expressed feelings of outrage and defined this as disgraceful and unfair.



*"This was a video shot of old women selling in a small market and kids at the pump. It's not right that vulnerable people are at the market trying to sell things. The work is supposed to be done by the youth, but because of the situation, they have no choice. And again, the kids fetching water, they are not supposed to be doing that. A child of two or three years, it's not their time to carry a heavy jerry can."*
*– Isabel*

Secondly, talking about a lack of opportunities, the participants argued that authorities are not investing (enough) in positive progress but are promoting self-reliance, integration and independency nevertheless. According to most of the youngsters who took part in this project not enough chances are being granted to refugees for taking courses in vocational schools; a place where they could learn and master certain practical skills and which would help them find employment within the settlement as well as outside it. Alongside this, people who already have specific knowledge and experience can't get started because they have insufficient funds to pay for their tools and even if so, wouldn't be able to keep their business running without an income.

Lastly, participants mention feeling powerless, having no control over their own lives. It was stated more than once that they felt like even if they were to criticize the Ugandan refugee policy and the meager services provided, no one would listen and nothing would be done; their cries for humanitarian justice and need for support remain unheard. To give an example: Simon hoped the images he produced for this project would reach Europe, because he felt that if Europeans saw the current living situations and would protest against it, action would be undertaken much sooner than if he were to go to the settlement leader himself; he believes European citizens hold more power and authority and political stakeholders would respond to them without delay. One of the girls also pointed out:

*"It's difficult for us to change things that we criticize, or things we don't like, because from the way they speak in meetings, or the way they act, it doesn't really give any sign of a better situation coming." – Isabel*

These main three barriers were encountered by most of the participants since they entered Uganda; their basic human rights seemingly violated, again provoking anger and a lot of frustration, but because they remain 'voiceless', having no power to fight back against the characterization of refugees as dispossessed, displaced and choiceless humanitarian aid recipients.

## 3.1.2 Aspirations of futureless hope

Looking forward to and setting goals in postwar-life appeared to be theme that the youngsters had most difficulty with talking about. Although they all cherished an intrinsic hope for things to get better, it is noteworthy that no one had clear or optimistic prospects regarding a positive change of conditions in the near future. The majority of the adolescents wanted to attend high school and find employment once repatriated to their own country, but planning ahead and shaping concrete ideas for the life they want after returning to South Sudan seemed to be very difficult when this could not be properly anticipated and was seen as a rather unrealistic event. Of paramount importance at this point is surviving in the 'here and now'. The youngsters have goals and dreams, but the uncertainty caused by a lack of educational opportunities and unemployment have significantly affected their ability to keep those aspirations alive; something that has been noted in this report earlier on and has already been linked to previous literature on specific experiences encountered by Sudanese refugees (Khawaja et al., 2008). Some participants recount:

*"If I need to keep struggling on my own, then I won't (go back to school). Then I don't have hope for going back. But that is something I am not knowing now." – Anna*

*"I cannot say that I don't have the hope. Gods plan for me is something that no one knows. Though the situation, crisis and problems that I face sometimes, can make me lose my hope." – Martin*

Again paradoxical; intrinsically holding on to a whim of hope, or maybe it is better to say a 'burning desire' to get their lives back on track, but being realistic, not really seeing themselves going anywhere anytime soon. It was also interesting to note how all the participants had regularly filmed children, either playing, walking around or just laughing at the camera, and how everyone associated this with hope for a better future, not for themselves, but for the infants who had not experienced conflicts and violence first line, suggesting yet again that their hope on having a chance at a good future remained fairly low.

### 3.2 Belonging and place-making in a place where we don't belong

With the exception of Gabriel, all youngsters hope to return to South Sudan once the conflicts subside. Martin says the following:

*"I hope to get back, because I'm just here and I'm not doing any work. If things get good, I can get back to South Sudan and do some work that can keep me busy and at least I will earn something." – Martin*

Gabriel, although he too struggles to adapt and integrate, is not so keen on turning back to his country. He has been living in Uganda for the longest period of time (he started attending school in Uganda in 2003 and has been moving in and out of the country ever since) and all his family and friends now live in Uganda; for him, his family is all he would go back for. Being safe and having friends and relatives around him are priority. The others however cannot wait to get back. Although a lot of factors impede refugees' well-being whilst living in exile, social support from family members is known to beneficially influence the mental health outcomes of people, even after being forcefully removed from their country of origin (Kawachi & Berkman, 2001). These findings partially justify Gabriel's unwillingness to return, and the others' eagerness to leave the host country. Unlike Gabriel, most of the other youngsters came to Uganda with only a few of their closest relatives, if any at all, and although very grateful to be alive and well, all shared remaining feelings of a 'lost home'. The following statements can confirm:

*"I'm also not happy; I'm living at home with my sister, but it doesn't feel good there. We should at least be around our parents, have moments together sometimes…" – Martin*

*"The days in South Sudan, we were living together with my brothers and other relatives. But here in Uganda we are all divided. Some brothers are in different camps, so that makes me feel sad here because I am missing them." – Brenda*

Because not everyone has family to rely on, most of the youngsters turn to other social support networks as an endeavor to establish social continuity, which is consistent with Khawaja et al.'s (2008) findings on how refugees make use of alternative networks to decrease psychological distress, sadness and homesickness. This call for support and the need to feel like being part of something is mainly answered by a vast network of like-ethnic community members and friends.

When talking about friendships, it is apparent that all the youngsters have a lot of contact with peers during various activities like football matches, playing card games, having dinner together, hanging out around the center to talk, …



*"Being together makes me happy. We laugh and do things together. We just have fun and sometimes discuss important things" – Simon*

Being around friends helps to pass the time and fights feelings of loneliness, but Nancy explains how it has other positive effects as well; spending time with her friends lightens her mood on a daily basis and keeps her entertained. She further mentions how talking to others who are struggling in the same situation helps her to bring things into perspective. As illustrated in the Social Identity Theory (Islam, 2014), being able to identify oneself to a group of others increases commitment to its members, stimulates collectivist behavior and implants a general sense of belonging. Having contact with a network of friends has also been proven to play an advantageous role in refugees' health and has congruent effects to family support (Kawachi & Berkman, 2001). Thus, without intrinsically thinking about it in this way, my participants try to place themselves within the displaced context by making themselves meaningful to others in different kinds of social networks, as well as giving meaning to relations with others, enhancing their belongingness and actively 'becoming at home'.

This national collectivity or sense of 'togetherness' as they often put it, is further reinforced through church practices. When talking about church and religious beliefs, all the participants seemed to cheer up a little. Going to church in the settlements is more than just praying to God. As the reader can see in the picture on the next page, people sing, dance and rejoice; it is an occasion of short-lived celebration. The following quotes are fragments taken from some of the interviews where the youngsters discuss how being in church is not a place for grief, but rather a safe haven where people can temporarily unburden themselves from worries and sadness:

*"When you are happy, you forget your stress. But when you go back to your day, you will still remember that stress, because you are alone inside. But when you are out (in church), among people, at that time you forget what is behind you and what is ahead of you." – Gabriel*

*"I feel emotional inside. Everyone comes to church to give thanks to God and prays for things to get better in South Sudan. I feel really good in a big crowd at the church. It doesn't matter where you're from, if you're from Uganda, or South Sudanese, you go to the same church and it feels good." – Martin*



Most of the youngsters in this study emphasized the significance of feeling connectedness between people during Sunday morning prayers and portrayed it to be something they look forward to during the week. Participants further reported using prayer to wish for improvements of their own situation and the cessation of the present-day conflicts, but also to thank God for still being alive, feeling closer to Him and therefore also closer to hope itself. Committing to religion and religious practice is a common, but also dominant means of coping used by African refugees (Halcon et al., 2004). Schweitzer et al. (2007) have pointed out a similar case of resettled Sudanese refugees using their belief in God and spending time in church as an important resource for social and emotional support.

Although the participants possess strong feelings of unity towards fellow countrymen, none seemed to have made any connections with local Ugandans. This can be logically clarified by the unfriendly welcome they received as will be framed in the following section. Martin explains:

*"Ugandans don't come in, so they don't interact with us. .. The togetherness with South Sudanese people is really good. .. If that was there between the Ugandans and the South Sudanese, I would have loved it so much better. It would also be part of a life experience for me, to see how Ugandans do their stuff, what they do." – Martin*

Martin admits not having a good relationship with Ugandan citizens is something he misses in the settlement. He claims to be open for learning new things about the foreign culture and is eager

to see and understand the Ugandan people's traditions and ways of work. Yet he feels that this eagerness to learn from one another is one-sided, and that it is definitely not coming from the Ugandan community.

### 3.2.1 Welcome, but not really

Uganda generously welcomes all those who have escaped from the hands of vicious conflict and seek refuge in its country. Or this is how it should be. In reality, however, the participants state different experiences:

*"At the pump, when it's my turn, so I'm next in line and a Ugandan comes and wants to fetch water, he will go before me. And if I would then ask why he did this while I have been waiting the whole day, he will say 'this is not your home, you can fetch it later'. .. I feel discriminated. If there were not such things happening, there would be no reason why we wouldn't feel at home. But because it's happening, that's what makes me feel like that." – Nancy*

*"They (Ugandan citizens) hate to see you do the work. They want to be doing everything. They're like 'you're refugees, you shouldn't be touching our things'. So whenever you try things that could help you, they have bows and arrows and they will try to hurt you with it. .. I feel really bad. I don't feel at home, or someone who is in peace. It still feels like the same situation as in South Sudan." – Martin*

During their time spent in Uganda up to now, almost all the youngsters claimed to have experienced different forms of discrimination and violence rooted in racism and invoked by Ugandan citizens, leading to feelings of physical insecurity and unbelonging. Simon, for example, describes how he always has to move in groups of four or five individuals when fetching firewood some distance away from the settlement, which is, by the way, a basic resource needed to enable cooking. They move in groups to lower the chances of being attacked by Ugandans, who will do anything to keep the South Sudanese people away from 'their' firewood, from throwing stones to even using bow and arrow, declaring it is on Ugandan land and therefore not the refugees' to take.

If one thing is for sure, people are driven by the innate need to feel close with others, whereas social isolation and reduced psychological well-being are known to be connected to one another (Kawachi & Berkman, 2001). When forced to leave their initial home base to construct new residential spaces in an unfamiliar environment and call it 'home', displaced persons often struggle to maintain, or reobtain a sense of belonging. However, the feeling of being part of a specific community and being attached to certain places and people is an essential resource for well-being among youth (Caxaj & Berman, 2010). Likewise, in the current study context, family and social network support have been noted to help bear the circumstances to some degree, but unable to construct quality relations with the local community greatly obstructs the South

Sudanese youngsters' 'becoming at home' process, which in turn only further intensifies their longing to return to the hospitality of their own country.

### 3.2.2 Sustaining unsustainability

In all aspects, South Sudan is considered to be a 'better' place; not only feelings of belonging to a different tribe in another place and unbelonging in the current host society contribute to the desire of returning, but also current economic and unendurable life conditions play an essential part and were very prominent motives amidst the narratives. It was already noted earlier that this study's participants recounted how most of the settlement's inhabitants suffer under the difficult circumstances of unemployment and the hardships it induces. Additionally, a lot of angry feelings towards authorities were expressed during our conversations, particularly towards UNHCR's (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) monthly food distributions and the poor quality of health care services provided within the settlements:

*"When they first came here (food distribution), it was good. But right now a cart for seven people in a family, they could be given like a quarter of a sack; that takes like a week. The distribution comes every month or two months, so it's a problem." – Martin*

*".. so these are Sudanese people, they have been in hospital, but medication is hard for them. Some of them haven't received drugs and some of them want to go home because they are fed up with the line of all the waiting people who then get drugs which aren't the ones they want, because there is only Panadol and malaria pills." – Gabriel*

Yet another paradox, because how can the Ugandan refugee policy promote health and well-being when implementing inadequate health services in the settlements where malnourishment, malaria and sickness are more a norm than they are an irregularity? A lack of basic necessities is a common difficulty people face during the pre-migration and transit phase of the resettlement process (Steel et al., 2002), causing a negative impact on refugees' psychological health. Once they reside in the post-migration context and are no longer subject to direct life-threatening situations, stress should reduce in time, yet several studies have indicated that refugees continue to experience difficulties while adapting to life in exile; these difficulties including a lack of adequate financial stability to meet basic needs and poor health treatment among others (Miller et al., 2002). Malnourishment and poor physical health are also salient stress factors among refugees and have been emphasized in numerous studies (Miller et al., 2002; Khawaja et al., 2008; Porter & Haslam, 2005), and this is exactly what the youngsters are experiencing every day.

Previous research has categorized three aspects of unsuccessful integration into the host society that fortify refugees' intentions on returning to their homeland (Zhao, 2002; De Vroome & Van Tubergen, 2014). These are: failing to participate in the economic life of the hosting country, cultural maladaptation to customs and values and exclusion to the social life of the host

community (Di Saint Pierre et al., 2015). Difficulties within each category have been broadly experienced by the participants and have been thoroughly documented throughout the results section of this study. Thus, although attempting to make a place in displacement, give meaning and sense to actions undertaken in this place, connecting to others and repositioning themselves as a person of value in the world and actively trying to belong and 'become at home' in the specific context of the settlements, they are being held back, or even pushed back, unintentionally or not, by the paradoxical cracks in the Ugandan system.

## Discussion

The aim of this research was to develop a greater understanding of how young South Sudanese refugees experience everyday life within two North-Ugandan settlements, Maaji and Ayilo. By encouraging the youth to speak out their thoughts using video material, photography and a phenomenological approach, it enabled them to guide me through meaningful place-making practices and daily events, but also to open up on how they personally experience and interpret place in displacement. Despite of the Ugandan government and settlement stakeholders who are undoubtedly doing everything in their power to ensure refugees' well-being in their country, the youngsters in this study revealed a different side to the story; one with a lot of unsealed and unbridgeable cracks in the system.

Although being displaced is generally associated with a loss of meaning and structure in everyday life and displaced people have gained growing acknowledgment of experiencing occupational difficulties (Smith, 2015), the youngsters in this study were ceaselessly in search of meaningful activities to engage in; to give meaning and structure to their daily life again and to actively contribute to their 'becoming at home' process and sense of belonging in displacement. Making sense to these engagements as well as to themselves by positioning themselves as purposeful towards others, added value to their general place-making endeavors. The adolescents in this study primarily mentioned the following activities as significant in their everyday lives: a constant search for employment, attending to church, being around friends and family and helping others. Firstly, helping others was prioritized above all else, not only forming a gateway to reestablish purpose in their own lives, but also to immerse in mutually advantageous relationships with others, strengthen collectivity within the community and actively invest in 'becoming at home' in the settlements. Previous studies on migrant occupation in the United Kingdom and specific helping behavior amongst Sierra Leonean and Burundian refugees in South Australia have identified similar outcomes, demonstrating how altruistic occupations can enhance life satisfaction, generate purposefulness and channel refugees' otherwise unused energy in displacement (Puvimanasinghe et al., 2014; Smith, 2015).

Secondly, the importance of having friends and family and spending time together day to day was recognized to be a valuable support system. Having these social networks increased the youngsters' sense of belonging and helped them to temporarily shift their focus from their current situation to moments of pleasure and togetherness. These findings are consistent with a broad base of prior research suggesting that social support from family, friends and the broader community plays a key role in refugees' coping mechanisms (Farwell, 2001; Schweitzer et al., 2007; Khawaja et al., 2008; Kawachi & Berkman, 2001; McMichael & Manderson, 2004). Furthermore, participants felt like they could identify themselves with significant others when discussing previous experiences of conflict and suffering, enhancing collectivity and intensifying the 'at home' feeling even further (Islam, 2014; Puvimanasinghe et al., 2014).

Religion was another major activity all the participants engaged in, not necessarily because of their religious obligations, but because they felt that the togetherness between people was the strongest during mass when everyone was praying for the same thing; for the situation in South Sudan to stabilize. This made them feel 'unburdened' and safe, even if just for a few brief moments. Compatible with Schweitzer et al.'s (2007) research, this study upholds and repeats the affirmation that religion is an important resource for both social and emotional support.

These practices appeared to be the most crucial in influencing the refugees' capacities to effectively handle the many challenges of adapting to life in exile. However, the leading issue connecting participants' stories to each other was how these place-making attempts were continually impeded; all the youngsters encountered constraining boundaries in the settlements, not in the tangible sense, albeit they were thoroughly 'felt' in both economic, social as well as political terms. Economically, main worries were addressed to the lack of available employment. Each participant claimed to be willing to work, but not being able to find any within or close to the settlement. This almost automatically leads to chronic poverty and exclusion from access to basic needs and facilities, in turn creating perpetual waves of anxiety, uncertainty and dissatisfaction with life. Socially and culturally, the adolescents discussed feeling isolated from the local community, as they are unable to integrate because they are not familiar with the culture, but cannot learn to understand it either as the local citizens often appear to display a great deal of hostility and discrimination towards them, increasing a sense of alienation, unbelonging and insecurity. Political boundaries were felt in the prominent absence of having a choice, voice and opportunities. The youngsters feel powerless and greatly limited, unable to break through the imposed barrier of being a helpless outsider and only being permitted access to the bare necessities of life, while even those are on the verge of insufficient.

Throughout our conversations, a lot of frustration and anger were expressed. The participants laid out how, by attempting to engage in place-making practices, their eagerness to work towards being at home in Uganda was continuously being thwarted by the refugee policy itself, which had promised a great deal of opportunities and improvements in all these domains. In addition, the accounts of experiences within this study are immensely paradoxical to what the Ugandan government actually promotes with its self-reliance strategy. The cornerstone of this strategy is an appeal for refugee empowerment, but the youngsters feel more vulnerable than ever, lacking advocacy and control over their own lives. Another objective of the strategy is freedom of choice, but again, how many choices do refugees really have if everything they do, is forced upon them in order to survive? Lastly, the self-reliance strategy advocates an 'easy' integration into the local society and the economic system, but this is greatly contradictory with the youngsters' experiences of integration difficulties, like being repeatedly blocked and discriminated by the Ugandan locals and although making many efforts to engage in employment, being turned down nevertheless. These findings support Meyer's (2006) critiques on the empowering effect of the self-reliance strategy, but also reveal truth to some reported warning signs directed towards

UNHCR operations on the Policy on Alternatives to Camps (UNHCR, 2014). The Policy on Alternatives to Camps searches for ways to offer refugees more durable solutions than the classic refugee camps, for example by integrating more of their human rights into the host society. These warning signs called for a level of realism when pursuing 'sustainable settlements' and refugee independency in an environment where social, economic and political boundaries had established itself. These restrictions in turn were predicted to impact refugees' access to economic integration, as well as social and political involvement in the host community.

By introducing their aim to create 'sustainable settlements' and moving away from the implementation of camps, UNHCR proposed several action points to be undertaken (UNHCR, 2014). As I discuss some of these aspects by means of summarizing, I will point out how, three years after this article was written, promises are yet to be fulfilled. Starting off with the main objective: enabling refugees to build sustainable livelihoods. UNHCR had aimed to ensure food security and access to arable land alongside supporting integration into the local economy. Thus far, and as I have previously discussed in detail, the youngsters in this study consider food supplies to be nowhere near sufficient, nor is the 'cultivable' land fertile or large enough to sustain themselves, let alone allowing them to engage in the market-based economy. But this is not the only factor tampering with their continuous efforts to integrate into economic life; the adolescents also pointed out being deliberately pushed aside when looking for employment, and encounter a whole lot of discrimination and racism-oriented violence. Moreover, being located in the remotest part of Uganda, chances to find employment are minimal, as there are no shops, markets, or other working spaces in the neighborhood.

A second objective states that UNHCR attempts to maximize mobility to enable attending to school and granting greater access to employment. If by maximizing mobility, the author means to say that refugees have the right to 'move', that is correct. But if UNHCR defines it as granting opportunities and transport assistance to actually do the 'moving', that is definitely incorrect.

A last action point that caught my eye, was the guarantee to immerse in direct interaction with refugees and the host communities, to help understand aspirations, circumstances and needs. If anything, needs are not being adequately met. And if (emphasizing the 'if') stakeholders have been conversing with anyone, I wonder with whom they spoke; settlement leaders, or the actual people living underneath them.

To these youngsters, the most important aspects of feeling at home and belonging to a place are economic and political stability and a sense of togetherness between people. All but one participant still refers to their hometown in South Sudan as the place where they belong, primarily because of the issues mentioned above. Furthermore, the participants admitted cherishing profound hope for their situation to improve, but indirectly assumed their future to be temporarily unreachable as long as they reside in the settlement, not being able to think ahead of life and their return to their country if this could not be confirmed with great certainty. This is quite like being in a state of limbo; being somewhere, but not really being anywhere. Life is just

within reach, both by looking forward to integrating into Uganda, as well as by looking back to building new lives in South Sudan. But being in the settlements is like being permanently stuck in indecision, apart from the fact that you would then actually have a decision to make. Unable to turn back to conflict as this would be a perilous, life-risking journey, but also unable to integrate into the local community as they are constantly being withheld from economic and social life, the youngsters' life projects, aspirations and goals are put on hold for an undetermined amount of time.

Refugees are in their core just ordinary, dignified human beings like anyone else. And just like most of the teenagers all over the world, the adolescents who participated in this study showed me how they were dynamic, resourceful and ambitious. Their particularly fervent urge to engage in the community, to make place in displacement, led me to believe that they were indeed actively trying to create a home within the area of the settlements; leaning towards a post-modernist approach of refugees and emphasizing their flexibility to attach to more than one place (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992; Brun, 2001). Yet this only contributes to place-making to some extent, as settlement boundaries cause the youngsters to slow down to a halt. Temporarily, yet for an undetermined amount of time, the youngsters are trapped in a static, unmoving, unevolving and hostile space. These experiences are the main causes for their sense of unbelonging and longing to return home to South Sudan. This central attachment and belonging to one specific home-base and a deep yearning to return to their country of origin, now connects more to an essentialist perception of refugees, as their identity and sense of culture are destabilized (Malkki, 1991; Löfving & Jansen, 2007). Thus, as Lems (2016) quite rightly suggests, it is not one or the other approach that should be used when looking at refugees in particular, but an integration, a balanced approach between both the essentialist as the post-modernist point of view.

So how praiseworthy is Uganda's refugee policy in practice when looking beyond the superficial façade the media helped it to create? And turning to the successful self-reliance strategy in particular; are people really that self-reliant, or given the opportunities to be so, in contexts of constant deprivation? I think these findings suggest a serious reconsideration at the least, and an overall nuanced approach to claiming radical differences between refugee settlements and refugee camps. As much as agencies have tried to break down the physical barriers to human rights confronted in camps, they have just merely been replaced by invisible ones in the so called sustainable, durable settlements.

## Limitations

The findings of this study are limited to a small number of participants introduced in this project; future studies that could implement a larger range of young settlement inhabitants may be able to explore encountered experiences and specific meaning-making processes more closely.

Although the results are not generalizable to a broader population, it does give some interesting and multi-dimensional insights on how young refugees experience life in the settlements.

The in-depth interviews and the time given for taking pictures and filming were restricted to a period of six weeks. Being granted more time to conduct a larger amount of interviews with the different participants would have possibly generated more profound knowledge on particular experiences and might have given the youngsters more space to think about and create 'better' images.

Not all participants were able to express themselves very well verbally, which made it quite difficult to apply a phenomenological approach, where study objects are encouraged to talk about life events in great detail. This forced me to negotiate and mediate the interviews more than once, hampering with the main idea of phenomenological research with youth as a means of breaking down the unbalanced power relationships between them and the researcher. This raises questions towards other phenomenological research focusing on juveniles; does it really contribute to fundamental differences with other research, or are we being slightly too enthusiastic?

As is always an issue when doing fieldwork in a country where the researcher doesn't speak the language, the answers translated by the interpreter might have been somewhat constricted in detail and correctness. Due to lack of financial capabilities and time limitations however it was not possible to double check interview translations with another interpreter. This control should definitely be undertaken in the future to guarantee transcriptions to be as close to the authentic narrations as possible.

Some participants were familiar with the translator which might have hindered their ability to talk about certain issues in enough broadness. At times, we had no other options but to conduct the interviews at home, where the presence of family members or friends could not always be prevented. Again, this may have caused participants to withdraw or repress certain sensitive topics.

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