Perceptions of corruption in humanitarian assistance among Internally Displaced Persons in Northern Uganda

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About the authors

Sarah Bailey is a Research Officer in the Humanitarian Policy Group at the Overseas Development Institute.

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1. Introduction

Transparency International's definition of corruption, 'the abuse of entrusted power for private gain', encompasses not only fraud, embezzlement and contract kickbacks, but also a range of non-financial forms of corruption. Such corruption is particularly prevalent in emergency settings, where humanitarian interventions occur in the midst of a myriad of challenges: damaged infrastructure, weak or absent rule of law, insecurity, endemic corruption, immense needs and pressure to intervene rapidly. It can include the manipulation or diversion of humanitarian assistance to benefit non-target groups; the allocation of relief resources in exchange for sexual favours; preferential treatment for family members or friends; and the coercion and intimidation of staff or beneficiaries to turn a blind eye to or participate in corruption. These corrupt practices are difficult to track, document and control.

Despite recent pushes within the humanitarian industry for increased participation, accountability and transparency, affected populations still lack power within the assistance process and access to the agencies that assist them. This distance between aid agencies and beneficiaries, combined with the limited attention of aid agencies to non-financial forms of corruption (with the notable exception of sexual exploitation), means that the perceptions of affected populations about corruption in the assistance process are often not recognised, understood or acted upon. This report summarises a case study on perceptions of corruption in humanitarian assistance among internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Northern Uganda.

1.1 Methodology

The research used qualitative methods. Interviews (group and individual) were conducted with 324 internally displaced persons in ten displacement camps in Kitgum and Gulu Districts, as well as with aid agency staff, government officials at different levels, Camp Commanders, contractors involved in relief and the media, over a period of ten days.

Corruption is a difficult subject to discuss openly. Those that benefit from it are unlikely to want to discuss it with outsiders and may try to influence others or discourage them from participating in research. This is a particular concern with people in leadership positions. In order to lessen the influence of leaders in the research process, rather than announcing the research and forming focus groups in advance, voluntary group discussions and individual interviews took place on a spontaneous basis while walking through camps. Leaders were met at the beginning of the visits and explained that the goal of the research was to examine perceptions of problems in the assistance process.

All interviewees in the settlement sites were asked about corruption only once general questions had been posed about the organisations providing assistance, selection methodologies and problems in accessing assistance. While this technique facilitated open exchanges, it made it difficult for researchers to form focus groups based on economic status, time spent in the camp or criteria other than gender.

2. Context

2.1 Conflict and displacement

Two decades of conflict in Northern Uganda between the government and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) has resulted in the displacement of approximately 1.7 million people, soaring mortality rates and the destruction of assets and traditional livelihoods. In Gulu, Kitgum and Pader districts – the areas most affected by the conflict – 90% of the population has been uprooted from their villages (ICG, 2007). The confinement of displaced people to camps, meant to protect them, has made it difficult to pursue productive livelihoods, and has not ensured security in all cases (Petty and Savage, 2007).

Since 2005, the government has sought to move people out of the original camps ('mother camps') and into new settlements closer to their areas of origin. Motivated by (fragile) security improvements and squalid conditions in camps, some people have also begun spontaneously returning to their home villages or establishing new sites nearby. These movements have led to multiple types of settlements:

- Mother camps: long-standing camps into which people originally moved from a relatively wide area, and which are now smaller as people have moved out to go to sites closer to their original homes.
- Decongestion sites or transitional resettlement sites (TRSs): new camp-like settlements into which people have moved from the mother camps, which are closer to people's original homes and thus usually consist of people from the same parish(es).
- New settlements: sites identified by IDPs near their pre-displacement homes.
- Home sites: pre-displacement homes (Refugee Law Project, 2007).

The existing system of local governance in Uganda is organised geographically with representation through a hierarchy of Local Councillors[1] (LCs), from village up to district. Such a structure could not easily function given the complexity of people's movements into large displacement camps. The government instead established a new structure of governance in the mother camps that

follows a typical model intended to facilitate the management of camps and humanitarian assistance to them, which divides camps into blocks with 'Block Leaders' and 'Camp Commanders'. Camp Commanders (usually elected by camp residents) oversee the management of the camp and liaise with aid agencies; Block Leaders perform tasks related to sub-divisions within the camps. Additionally, committees are formed to address issues such as food and water and sanitation.

LC1s can be heavily involved in the selection and registration of beneficiaries. Clan leaders and Village Chiefs (*rwot kweri*, who carry out administrative functions at the village level) occasionally participate in the selection and registration process as well. The parallel leadership structures have in some cases caused tensions between leaders over areas of responsibility and authority (Interviews; Stites et al., 2006: 54).

Since the 'decongestion process', whether people have moved 'all the way home' or into smaller camp-like sites close to home, the Ugandan government has encouraged local leaders to take a larger role in managing humanitarian assistance and wants to see LCs become the chief interlocutors between aid actors and affected people. Rather than continuing the use of camp leadership structures, LC2s should now take the role that Camp Commanders had in camps, and LC1s should replace Block Leaders. In this report, the term Local Councillors (LC1s and 2s) refers only to those who play in a role in the assistance process through beneficiary selection, verification, liaising with aid agencies and camp leadership roles. In most mother camps, while Camp Commanders continue in their roles, Block Leaders have been replaced by LC1s since 2004; Block Leaders were therefore rarely mentioned.

It is not clear what leadership structures 'new settlements' have, given that these sites were not planned by the authorities and assistance is still directed towards mother camps and transitional sites. In one new settlement/home site visited for the study, an election had been held and a 'Camp Commander' appointed, even though the settlement was located in the pre-displacement, home area, the LC1 and Village Chief lived at the settlement and assistance was received through the transitional resettlement site five miles away.

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[1] Local Councillors vary in levels from Local Councillor 1 (responsible for a village) to Local Councillor 5 (responsible for an entire district).

One possible explanation for recreating the Camp Commander post in this context is that people have come to see this position as essential in attracting and managing assistance. Because new settlements and home sites in areas visited for this study were not yet receiving assistance, the study only explores corruption perceptions as they relate to mother camps and transitional sites.

2.2 Humanitarian interventions

Humanitarian interventions in Northern Uganda have been criticised as insufficient given the massive displacement and high mortality rates in IDP camps.[2] Faced with unpredictable and inadequate assistance and restricted access to agriculture, many camp residents have developed alternative sources of income, such as borrowing or renting land for crops, doing casual labour, engaging in petty trading or selling charcoal (Petty and Savage, 2007).

The main interventions carried out by humanitarian agencies (international NGOs, national NGOs and UN agencies) are typical of a prolonged displacement crisis: food, water and sanitation (boreholes, latrines), non-food items (jerry cans, soap, blankets, kitchen items), education, programmes targeting orphans and vulnerable children (child sponsorship, school fee payment), livelihood interventions, protection, psychosocial support and shelter. Agencies have distributed tents in some areas, but as most huts are constructed form local materials, shelter has not been a primary focus.

Food distributions are the most important form of assistance to IDPs, and households have relied on them to meet a large part of their basic food needs (Interviews; WFP, 2006; Petty and Savage, 2007). These are also the interventions camp residents have the most interaction with: monthly distributions, annual registrations and in some cases approaching leaders, volunteers or aid agencies to attempt to rectify exclusion. All camp residents are eligible for food rations (with the exceptions of public officials and teachers, who are salaried). Vulnerable households receive larger rations than non-vulnerable ones, and also receive

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[2] In 2004, Jan Egeland referred to Northern Uganda as the 'biggest neglected humanitarian emergency in the world'. See also M. Brown and S. Nyce (2006), 'Northern Uganda: Humanitarian Response to Crisis Still a Failure', http://www.refintl.org and Refugee Law Project (2007), *Rapid Assessment of Population Movement in Gulu and Pader*.

cooking oil. Distributions take place in mother camps and transitional sites. People living outside these sites may still benefit from the distributions, but some interviewees reported not knowing when distributions were taking place.

The World Food Programme (WFP) is responsible for the food assistance programme, through many implementing partners. The process of registration for food aid in the camps has been problematic from the outset, and registrations have been carried out annually at best. The registration process for food assistance typically consists of four stages: the creation of household lists by LC1s, Village Chiefs or Block Leaders, the establishment of a master list by the Camp Commander or LC2, the transmission of the master list to the aid agency, and the physical verification of households (including the number of dependants) on the list by volunteers (local people paid a small sum of money to assist with registrations and distributions). In some registrations, volunteers have directly registered households by going from hut to hut. Households who are registered and verified receive ration cards that state the number of people in their household – critical information that determines the amount of food they receive. Food ration cards are made of thick yellow or green paper and do not carry a photo of the beneficiary. At the distribution, beneficiaries present their card when their name is read aloud by volunteers or agency staff. In some distributions, particularly in the past, no list was used; beneficiaries simply presented their cards. In all camps visited in Kitgum, camp residents reported that the last registration had been more than a year ago.

Agencies implementing non-food interventions use the WFP distribution lists, lists enumerated by LC1s, Village Chiefs or Block Leaders and compiled by Camp Commanders and LC2s (with varying degrees of verification), or directly register beneficiaries using their own staff or volunteers. For interventions targeted at only certain households (i.e. support to orphans and vulnerable children), LC1s, Village Chiefs or Block Leaders usually communicate to Camp Commanders and LC2s which households in their blocks or villages meet the selection criteria. This information is then passed on to aid agencies.

Inflation of household numbers in registration processes – a common issue in humanitarian interventions – has been a problem for aid agencies: an attempt by agencies in 2006 to enumerate a census of IDPs in Kitgum resulted in a

list 20% larger than the known population of Kitgum. After the census was done, agencies implementing food assistance in Kitgum decided to use only households whose names appeared on both the lists created by camp leaders and the inflated census (Interview with WFP Kitgum).

3. Perceptions of corruption

The most striking observation on perceptions of corruption in humanitarian assistance among IDPs is how little concrete information they have to determine if and where corruption is occurring. They are essentially passive recipients of assistance with no influence in targeting and registration processes and very limited access to aid agencies. Camp residents are keenly aware of problems, such as exclusion from beneficiary lists and the inclusion of 'fake' or 'ghost' beneficiaries, but aside from cases where they have first-hand information, they can only offer theories about why a problem occurs and who is responsible. Camp residents are most concerned with their own problems – namely unmet needs and exclusion from assistance – rather than whether corruption, inefficiency, agency strategies or incompetence is to blame.

Their limited vantage point in no way precludes camp residents from having often strong opinions about where corruption occurs in the assistance process and who is responsible, but these opinions are based on a combination of observations, theories and rumours.

3.1 Registration

The vast majority of corruption issues described by camp residents are linked to registration processes for food and non-food items. LC1s, Village Chiefs and Block Leaders – who as leaders of the smallest administrative units are 'closest' to the people they lead – are usually involved in the registration process as enumerators of beneficiary lists and by verifying that households on lists are legitimate camp residents. LC2s and Camp Commanders compile master lists. Because LC1s have been much more heavily involved in creating recent lists as compared to Village Chiefs and Block Leaders, most of the examples concern LC1s.

Multiple registrations/adding of fictitious names by leaders involved in registrations. LC1s and other leaders tasked with registering households add names of their own dependants, friends and family, and non-beneficiaries who have paid them money to be included (camp residents were not aware of specific prices). In the case of food assistance, the initial beneficiary list is in their possession after they write down the names of their residents and before they transmit

it to the Camp Commanders or LC2s and to aid agencies, at which point there is nothing to stop them from crossing names off and adding new ones. They can purchase new notebooks and recreate the list with modifications. If Camp Commanders and LC2s are tasked with compiling lists, they also have an opportunity to add names. Camp residents reported many cases of leaders listing their dependants as separate households and registering people who did not actually live in the camp. During the verification process, leaders involved in verification can direct volunteers to huts and 'verify' that the hut belongs to the people on the list. In mother camps, the confusing layout means that leaders are able to direct volunteers to the same huts multiple times (Interview with local leaders).

One respondent described how his LC1 was open about adding fictitious names. According to the respondent, the leader's justification is that these 'extras' are compensation for people left out during the registration process. On the one hand, such a strategy makes evident sense if leaders are trying to help their people in the face of inadequate assistance. However, the respondent believes that the extra food is divided among leaders rather than given to the people who were left out.

Such adding of names by leaders is considered corruption by some camp residents (primarily those who have been left off lists), and an acceptable perk by others. Leaders are considered 'good' when they register everyone from their areas and then add a few ghost names. They are considered 'bad' and 'corrupt' when they exclude the names of eligible beneficiaries, whilst registering ghost names.

Registration fees to leaders involved in registrations. A minority of camp residents interviewed have paid fees to LC1s ranging from 100 to 2,000 shillings ($0.06–$1.23) to be included on lists for food assistance to which they are rightfully entitled. Most reported fees of 100–200 shillings. Leaders often explain that the money is to cover the cost of notebooks and pens. The practice is considered acceptable so long as the amount is not exorbitant and the individual making the payment actually gets on the list. However, one woman noted that the cost of a notebook was well below the money that they gave their leader.

Payment of these 'fees' does not necessarily result in getting on registration lists. Several people recounted cases similar to that of a woman who paid 2,000 shillings to an LC1 in 2006 but was not included on the food beneficiary list. Given what she viewed as a large number of errors in the previous registration processes, the woman felt that paying the money decreased her chances of being unjustly excluded. Even though she did not get on the list, she was reluctant to complain to the Camp Commander, for fear that the LC1 might exclude her from assistance in the future. Others unsuccessfully asked for a refund. They took issue not with the payment itself but with the fact that they did not get their money back. Most interviewees who paid fees and yet did not end up on lists reported that their leaders had not asked for money since.

In Gulu, payment for inclusion on lists is a notable problem with non-food items and tents. Households often need more than one tent, and leaders may charge 2,000–5,000 shillings ($1.23–$3.08) per household, with the option of adding additional names for a similar fee. A man explained that in his camp, leaders 'write fake names and get those tents for sale. The lowest price is 20,000 shillings. They may write over twenty fake names and profit'. Camp residents report that tents are sold to businessmen from Southern Sudan.

Exclusion from lists to leaders involved in registrations. Personal issues between camp residents and leaders involved in registrations can prompt leaders to exclude certain households from beneficiary lists. In a report by Tufts University, a young female camp resident who had previously been abducted by the LRA and bore a child in captivity believed that her LC1 deliberately excluded her from the food beneficiary list because of the stigma of being 'loose' and associated with the LRA (Stites et al., 2006: 43). IDPs stated that the possibility of creating a grudge also discourages them from taking complaints against LC1s and Village Chiefs to higher-level leaders (Camp Commanders and LC2s).

Inclusion of non-beneficiaries. People from neighbouring towns and other camps often show up at distributions and receive assistance, namely in the form of food rations. Camp residents report that businessmen from town even bring trucks with which to take the food back. They believe that the non-beneficiaries' ration cards could come from volunteers selling cards, beneficiaries or aid agencies selling cards, or townspeople bribing their way onto lists, but they seldom know the cause for certain.

Sale of ration cards. Beneficiaries have little information on the trafficking of ration cards, though many suspect that aid agency volunteers in charge of distributing cards do sell them, since they see non-beneficiaries at distributions in possession of ration cards. The cards do not have biometric data or photos.

Manipulation of household statistics. Food rations are supposed to be determined by the number of dependants in the household. Many respondents reported that the number of dependants on their ration card was substantially lower than the actual number or the number that they cited in the registration process. By the same token, they state that people who have ties to leaders or volunteers may receive cards with inflated numbers of dependants. Camp residents are unsure if the reduction of dependants is the result of manipulation by leaders and volunteers or errors by aid agencies. It is also important to note that inflating household numbers, such as by bringing relatives to the camp on registration or verification days, is a strategy sometimes used by IDPs to increase their assistance (Petty and Savage, 2007).

LC1s or volunteers can also change the village origin of the household. Because many people have the same name, someone from a different village with the same name can then receive the ration card instead of the real beneficiary (Interview with former volunteer).

'The computer deleted my name.' In every camp visited for this research, several people reported that they were not on food beneficiary lists because '*computer owango nyinga*' (literally translated as 'the computer burned my name'). Interviewees for this study state that this is the most common reason they are given by leaders and volunteers for being left off lists. Once the computer deletion excuse is given, camp residents feel that they have little recourse. Camp Commanders say that it takes several months for some 'deleted' names to be added back onto lists and that often they are unsuccessful in lobbying the aid agency to reinstate missing names.

While uncertain if the 'deletions' are related to corruption, many camp residents believe that their ignorance about computers is being used against them to stop them from complaining about being left off lists. Those interviewed in Kitgum District stated that they did not know what computers were, so they had little choice but to accept that a computer was at fault. Most of those interviewed in Gulu and some in Kitgum asserted that the people operating the computer at the aid agency were responsible for the deletions.

Others believe that leaders involved in registrations do not submit the correct names and are using the computer problem as an excuse. They point out that the computer seems not to delete names indiscriminately and that leaders are rarely affected. This implies that leaders are eliminating certain names before transmitting the lists to aid agencies. However, there also appear to be substantial errors in the food registration process. In two of the camps visited, entire villages (80+ households) went missing from distribution lists. In one camp, the Camp Commander's household was 'deleted'.

3.2 Distributions

Camp residents can list the amount of food they are supposed to receive and do receive at distributions, even if they are not told in advance what they should be getting. They are aware that reductions in cooking oil mean that only vulnerable households are supposed to receive it. For non-food items, they are not told in advance what the items are, but they do not believe that any of them are missing.

The sharing of food by food committees/leaders after distributions ('bakaric'). At the end of distributions, some of the remaining food is distributed among people who have not benefited. In some instances, in addition to dividing food among non-beneficiaries, Food Committees and leaders involved in registrations and distributions (namely LC1s and Village Chiefs) take a portion as their wage for the work they do related to food assistance. Camp residents state that this practice, known as '*bakaric*' ('wage') would be legitimate if it did not come at the expense of some of the food designated for non-beneficiaries.

Return of surplus food to aid agency. Once some of the leftover food has been divided among people who did not benefit, the Camp Commander or LC2 signs a waybill for the remaining food to be returned to the aid agency. This creates resentment because households who divide the leftover food do not necessarily benefit from full rations; some households also claim that they leave distributions empty-handed. Some believe that not all of the food is returned to the agency. In one camp, the Camp Commander reported that residents attempted to burn down his hut because they believed that he was signing 'fake' documents. One man recounted his suspicions:

The trucks stop at ----- for a long time. This is very unusual. Some business people time the truck when they are on the way back from food distribution site and wait for them at ----- road junction. What do they do there with the trucks which have food surpluses? It occurs every food distribution day.

Other camp residents believe that the surplus food belongs to the camp, and so should not be taken from them.

Sale of food by leaders and agency staff/volunteers. Some camp residents reported that the sale of food is a problem. One man said that 'the LC1s sent children to collect the food … They take the food to someone and they sell. They cannot be traced'. In one case, a former Camp Commander had a stockpile of food at his house. Some people believe that aid agencies secretly sell food to business people, since they see the food at the market.

Payments to support aid agencies and leaders' work with aid agencies. In a few instances, camp residents were asked by their LC1 or Village Chief to contribute sums to facilitate assistance. In one case, households were asked for 100 shillings to 'support aid agencies' by providing then with food during distributions. While not against this in theory, the people who recounted this example stated that the total amount collected was well above what was needed. Another example concerned a Camp Commander who was having trouble staying in contact with aid agencies because he lacked a mobile phone. The community supported the idea of contributing money towards buying one. The leaders who bought the phone for the Camp Commander kept the remaining money for themselves and did not purchase any airtime. In both instances, the willingness of communities to facilitate assistance was manipulated by their leaders.

Destruction of beneficiary cards/crossing names off beneficiary list by volunteers. On rare occasions, a volunteer may destroy a beneficiary's card or cross the beneficiary's name off the list. One man reported this happening when he rejected a volunteer's request to unload seeds from a truck. In other instances, volunteers cross off or threaten to cross off names when beneficiaries complain about the quality of food or other problems.

3.3 Targeting

LC1s – and sometimes Block Leaders and Village Chiefs – are usually responsible for determining which households in their block or village meet the criteria for targeted distributions. They may not pass on information to certain sections of communities regarding beneficiary selection criteria. Alternatively, they may replace legitimate beneficiaries with people who do not meet the selection criteria, such as their own friends and family.

Targeted food assistance. Many camp residents state that it is common for non-vulnerable people to receive green cards (designated for vulnerable households) while vulnerable people have the normal yellow ration cards.

Assistance to orphans and vulnerable children. Programmes targeting vulnerable children, such as child sponsorship and school fee support, often do not reach the intended targets because leaders and teachers put down the names of their own children. This problem was recounted in nearly every site where child sponsorship and school fee support programmes were being implemented. An elderly woman taking care of an orphan in her household reported that she was never included in such activities:

Organisations are always looking for orphans. At the end of the day, the list changes and it is only the sons and daughters of leaders who are included. For school fees, we fill in the forms and give them to the teachers. The teachers fill in the list but they don't use the real names and instead use the names of their sons and daughters and the sons and daughters of leaders. We tell the field staff but they say that they gave the forms.

Other targeted assistance. In one instance, a Village Chief did not inform people in the ward about a livestock distribution. Of the entire ward, only he benefited from the distribution.

3.4 Other

Non-payment of training participants or workers. Leaders and camp residents who have participated in construction and training activities state that aid agencies do not necessarily verify that participants and workers have been paid their per diems or salaries by contractors. In two cases,

this was left to the contractor, who failed to make payment.

Sexual exploitation. Some women resorted to prostituting themselves to soldiers in 2003/2004, when assistance was lacking and needs were dire (Interview), but no respondents brought up sexual exploitation in the assistance process. While there is not enough evidence to conclude that sexual exploitation is not an issue, research on sexual exploitation and violence in Northern Uganda has focused on domestic violence in camps and acts perpetrated by soldiers and the LRA, rather than sexual exploitation in the assistance process (Stites et al., 2006; Okot et al., 2005).

3.5 Complaint mechanisms

Complaint mechanisms, to the extent they exist, have been both inadequate and inappropriate. Camp residents report three main avenues for registering their complaints: bringing the complaint to their LC1, registering the complaint at a complaints desk and approaching agency staff and volunteers.

The most common practice is to take the complaint to the LC1, who passes it on to the Camp Commander or LC2. The complaint is then transmitted to the aid agency. As most of the corruption examples cited by camp residents concern LC1s, there is an evident conflict of interest here.

The second option, specific to food assistance, is the 'complaints desk' present at food distributions. People who have attempted to use this process are discouraged by the lack of results. A man whose name 'disappeared' six months into distributions recounted a prevalent opinion of the system: 'They say at the complaints desk every time that it will be the next month, but it never is. It's just a story. They write the complaints but nothing comes from it'. People lodging complaints often receive partial rations at the end of the distribution, but are then told either to take the complaint to their LC1, or that they will be included in the next distribution – which camp residents report is never the case.

The abject failure of complaints desks to address problems of exclusion has led some camp residents to view the mechanism itself as linked to corruption:

Box 3: Aid agency volunteers

Several aid agencies use volunteers, who are paid a small amount of money ($4–$7/day) to carry out registrations, verifications and distributions. They usually have little or no training in agency practices and no job security. Camp residents often described volunteers as rude and unhelpful. Many volunteers see using their position to earn money as a justifiable perk (Interview). While obviously not all volunteers are corrupt, they do appear to be a significant source of corruption. A former volunteer explained the various ways that volunteers can manipulate the assistance process:

- Registration of friends, family and ghost beneficiaries (either on their own or collaborating with local leaders) by adding names during the registration or verification process.

- Selling ration cards: This is done by marking them as being distributed, but pocketing them and selling them to businessmen or people living outside camps.

- Manipulation of household data (number of dependants, village of origin) to either increase or decrease a ration or have a person with the same name in a different area benefit instead.

- Distribution of food to non-beneficiaries. This practice was much easier when beneficiaries simply presented ration cards, because there was no record of which households actually received food and therefore how much food should be left. Reading names aloud from beneficiary lists makes this practice much more difficult.

Food ration cards can be sold for 5,000–50,000 shillings ($3–$30) (Interview). Volunteers may be given up to 500 cards to distribute in a single registration. Agencies would be highly disinclined to give individual staff members $1,000 to distribute to beneficiaries, yet they give poorly paid, under-trained volunteers several times this amount in highly portable and easily convertible ration cards.

The [aid agency] has a strategy called a complaints desk, which is a strategy for excluding you. They tell you to sit at the complaints desk when your name is missing, but at the end, they just dismiss you and throw the food in the truck. The volunteers must be selling it, because this same food reaches the market. This is why they don't want to attend to people at the complaints desk.

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The final option for camp residents is to approach agencies, either through their field staff and volunteers or at their office. Those interviewed state that approaching volunteers yields few results, and the demeanour of volunteers discourages camp residents from lodging complaints with them. Approaching agency staff, in the field or at their office, requires various amounts of initiative and produces mixed results:

- A woman who had been left out of soap distributions complained to her LC1. When he did not resolve the problem, she approached a staff member at one of the distributions, who put her back on the list.

- After raising the issue with her LC1, a Camp Commander wrote a letter on behalf of a woman stating that she had been left off the list. She took this letter to the agency's office and gave it to an employee, who told her to spend the night and that it would be dealt with in the morning. The next day, this same employee denied having received the letter. Eventually a lower-level member of staff, whom she perceived as more sympathetic, assisted her and took care of the problem. She feels that the source of assistance problems lies with agency heads, not with volunteers or LC1s.

- A woman walked into town to complain to an agency that her name had been deleted from the food beneficiary list by the computer. A staff person found her name and showed it to her on the computer. She left, believing that she would be included in the next distribution. Her name was not read out.

- At a non-food distribution, leaders approached agency staff on behalf of households that had been left out of the registration process. The leaders attested that the households were legitimate. They were included in the distribution.

Camp residents clearly distinguish – and can identify by name – aid agencies that address their complaints (primarily exclusion from beneficiary lists) and ones that do not. Whether or not these agencies have official complaints mechanisms appears to be of little consequence in their ability to address complaints. In the areas visited, the one agency that actually *has* a complaints desk is considered the least responsive. Agencies that resolve issues on the spot, particularly concerning one-time distributions like non-food items or seeds, received particular praise.

3.6 Differences between mother camps and transitional sites

The experiences and perceptions of camp residents vary considerably within and between camps. In mother camps, interviews with ten different groups of people revealed a variety of views about whether people had paid to get on lists, whether ghost beneficiaries were an issue, and whether or not corruption was a problem in the assistance process. Some residents may have paid to get on lists, while others living 100 meters away with a different LC1 report that such payments have never been a problem. Some blame aid agencies and their staff and volunteers, while others blame LC1s, LC2s and Camp Commanders for manipulating beneficiary lists. This diversity of views is probably explained by the role that lower-level leaders – namely LC1s – play as 'gatekeepers' of assistance, by registering beneficiaries and dealing with complaints; the experience of camp residents depends greatly on the perceived honesty of their local leader and his effectiveness in facilitating their inclusion in assistance.

People living in transitional sites have a different experience from the mother camp context. Mother camps consisted of people from all over a district or even beyond, with little relationship to each other. By contrast, transitional sites are located much closer to people's original homes, and therefore populations have much more in common. In the words of one woman, 'leaders cannot get away with as much' in the transitional sites because of their ties to communities and because the communities are more cohesive than in mother camps. Nonetheless, all of the types of corruption heard in the mother camps were also cited in the transitional sites. Because the new settlements and home sites visited for this study have yet to undergo registrations or distributions in these settlements, no conclusions can be drawn about the assistance dynamics in these areas. It is possible that increased social cohesion in these sites might discourage leaders from manipulating the process.

3.7 Attitudes about corruption

Camp residents tolerate forms of corruption that they consider do not lead to their exclusion from assistance; they are intolerant of forms of corruption that do. Some people accessing assistance see no problem with leaders adding names to lists (as one man said, 'let them eat if they want to eat while they are still there'). Paying

a small fees to get on lists, while not desirable, is acceptable so long as it actually results in the household getting on the beneficiary list (which as we have seen is not always the case). Attitudes about corruption are linked to broader notions of fairness: anything that prevents people from accessing assistance while others are receiving it is unfair and should be rectified.

Suggestions from camp residents on how aid agencies can minimise corruption varied depending on whom they felt was responsible. Much of the blame was directed at lower-level leaders, in particular LC1s. LC2s, Camp Commanders and volunteers were also thought by many to be notable sources of corruption. A minority placed the blame on aid agencies. While leaders were perceived to be linked to corruption, some respondents had substantial faith in their leadership. In general, camp residents suggest that:

- Aid agencies should avoid using volunteers and relying heavily on local leaders for registration.

- Aid agencies should have direct contact with beneficiaries.

- Food registrations should be done more than once a year to take into account people who have been left out and to deal with changing circumstances (i.e. population movement, marriages or errors).

- In order to minimise *tic wat* (favouring of friends and family) aid agencies should not allow people to work in their home areas.

- Leaders perpetuating serious corruption (i.e. stocking up and selling of relief items, replacing real beneficiaries with fictitious ones) should be punished.

While many consider corruption to be a problem in the assistance process, it is not high on their list of concerns, for two primary reasons. First, people rarely have evidence that corruption is the cause of exclusion from or a reduction in assistance. Being left off beneficiary lists could simply be a result of mistakes or incompetence: for example, the aid agency not using the correct name as written down by the leader, 'the computer deleting the name', or the volunteer not checking the name as 'verified'. Second, they have more pressing concerns related to the return process: accessing water, rebuilding their homes, support for livelihoods, overcrowding, schooling and uncertainties about security.

Box 4: A view from contractors

Aid agencies have long known that the use of contractors for construction of boreholes, schools, latrines and other structures poses multiple corruption risks. Contractors must also navigate corruption risks, such as demands for kickbacks from agency staff, workers who skim off materials and leaders who ask for money to approve projects.

While kickbacks are the accepted norm in bidding for government contracts, contractors state that corruption in bidding for NGO contracts is much less of a problem (Interviews with contractors). One reason is that contractors and aid agency staff cannot be certain that the other party will accept the corruption, even if both would benefit. This creates mutual suspicion, making offering bribes or proposing kickbacks a risky proposition. Another reason is that corruption is perceived as an unacceptable practice by aid agencies, who dismiss staff involved in it.

One contractor recounted another contractor's experience in 2006. An NGO employee approached a contractor who had submitted a bid for a significant construction project and asked for 10,000,000 shillings ($6,100) to ensure that the contractor was chosen. The contractor offered to pay half. The employee refused, and they settled on the higher amount. The contractor contacted the police, who arrested the employee when the transaction took place. The NGO fired the staff members implicated in the scam. While noting that favouritism in awarding contracts is still an issue, the contractor believes that the arrest and dismissal of the employee sent a clear and welcome signal to NGO employees in that town that such acts of blatant corruption were not tolerated in bidding for aid agency contracts.

3.8 Leaders' views on corruption

Most leaders believe that corruption is not a notable problem in the assistance process, though as discussed above, they are seen as a prime source of corruption, and obviously are not likely to acknowledge forms of corruption that would implicate them (list inflation, soliciting fees from beneficiaries, favouritism in targeting and distribution of extra food among leaders). Two notable exceptions were cases where leaders were implicated in stockpiling rations – and met with disgrace when they were caught. A Camp Commander described how his predecessor was

voted out of office because of alleged corruption (revealed by stocks of food at his house). In another case, when a village chief was revealed to have been stockpiling food at his home, clan members claimed that he was besmirching the name of their clan.

Some Camp Commanders and LC2s have suspected corruption in sub-standard construction (i.e. buildings, latrines), by the contractors as opposed to the aid agencies. They cannot know with certainty if the problem is a product of corruption, lack of technical expertise or under-budgeting. Just like the other camp residents, leaders do not have access to enough information

to determine if problems like sub-standard construction or exclusion of camp residents from beneficiary lists are caused by corruption They base their opinions on complaints they receive from camp residents (primarily related to exclusion from food beneficiary lists) and their own interactions with aid agencies.

Camp Commanders in two of the sites visited recounted that some aid agencies reported at coordination meetings that they were working in their camps even though they were not. They believed that the agencies do this in order to increase their profile, and other aid agencies consequently refrain from engaging in their camps.

4. Links between aid agency practices and perceptions of corruption

There are clear links between the practices of aid agencies and beneficiary perceptions of corruption. These practices include giving significant discretion to leaders and volunteers in targeting and registrations, using flawed complaints mechanisms, not compensating leaders and food committees for assisting with distributions and reclaiming surplus food after distributions.

Registration and targeting – the most problematic areas – are complex activities in any emergency. Efforts by aid agencies to reach the 'right' people are challenged by attempts by people with power in the process to inflate numbers and direct assistance to certain groups. As one aid agency staff member stated, 'when you announce that you are doing a registration, the whole town is empty because everyone goes to the camps'. Whereas aid agencies are most concerned about inclusion errors because this diverts their resources, camp residents are most concerned about exclusion error because they do not benefit. To address beneficiary inflation concerns, aid agencies often use caps based on known population figures. These efforts to 'keep numbers where they should be' do not take care of inclusion errors; they simply bump real beneficiaries off the list, through direct removal by leaders and volunteers or the transfer of dependants. This leaves agencies with three choices: allow inclusion errors that inflate lists, continue to allow inclusion and exclusion errors, or focus more attention (and perhaps more resources) on getting the numbers right.

Aid agencies are limited in the time and resources they can invest in registration and targeting. However, the discretion given to leaders and volunteers in registration and targeting has clearly made a significant contribution to corruption in the assistance process. The involvement of multiple actors in registration – leaders, volunteers and aid agency staff – has also provided all parties involved with the opportunity to shift the blame for registration errors elsewhere. This lack of accountability is exemplified by the 'computer excuse'. 'Verification' – in the manner it is currently done – adds questionable value to the process, since volunteers conducting the verification have full discretion to include and exclude households and manipulate household statistics.

Agencies should not focus on excluding the likely sources of corruption (i.e. leaders) from the assistance process, but should rather limit their power and discretion. Participatory registration and targeting processes, such as using elected committees, is one way of involving camp residents in the process, but these committees will probably perpetuate the same abuses if they have the same levels of discretion.

In Liberia and Afghanistan, the context of camps in which 'Camp Commanders' and 'Block Leaders' are either appointed or elected to a system of representation that is new and unfamiliar to their constituency created unique corruption risks (Savage 2007a and 2007b). Risks are also present in settlements where elected and appointed leaders from pre-existing local governance structures take on new responsibilities related to humanitarian assistance. Such camp representation systems, while serving as a useful interlocutor between aid agencies and camp residents for rapid input of assistance, clearly lack adequate accountability mechanisms.

There are various steps that agencies can take to decrease discretion and increase transparency in registration and targeting. One is holding public meetings to explain that camp residents are not required to pay to be put on lists, that list inflation always comes at the cost of 'real' beneficiaries, and that such abuses endanger their access to assistance, as well as communicating the registration process and targeting criteria. Agencies should provide leaders or committees with registration books that are unique, with the agency stamp on the cover, for instance. Finally, targeting for high-value programmes – like support for vulnerable children and the provision of tents – needs to be closely monitored. Certain practices might still continue, particularly if the affected population is tolerant of them (such as paying leaders a small amount of money for inclusion on lists).

Problems have been exacerbated by the failure of some agencies to provide appropriate and effective complaints mechanisms. The system of vetting complaints through LC1s prevents camp residents from lodging complaints against them, and complaints desks at food distributions do not resolve problems or provide feedback. Agencies need to examine the effectiveness of their complaints mechanisms and ensure that staff

Table 1: Programming area, perceived corruption and recommendations

Programming areas	Perceived corruption	Recommendations
Reliance on leaders in registration and targeting	Multiple registrations and inclusion of non-beneficiaries Registration fees Exclusion from beneficiary lists Manipulation of household statistics	Design registration and targeting systems that are more transparent and participative, for example clearly communicating targeting criteria and registration processes in a public meeting. Explain that people should not make any payments to be included and that adding fake names comes at the expense of real beneficiaries Photocopy lists written by leaders or committees and attach a typed version produced by the agency. List any reason why a household was excluded by the agency (in the local language). Make the documents publicly available in camps; verify that camp residents have access them Use unique books for registration that cannot be bought in local stationery stores Closely monitor targeting and registration for high-value items and programmes (child sponsorship, non-food items, tents, etc). Do not rely on lists from leaders; verify the names in a public meeting
Reliance on volunteers for registration (verification), distribution of ration cards and distributions	Sale of ration cards Inclusion of non-beneficiaries Manipulation of household statistics Destruction of beneficiary cards/crossing names off beneficiary list	Only use paid, trained staff working in pairs to distribute beneficiary cards. If this is not possible, use volunteers in alternating pairs and maintain a record of the ration cards they were in charge of distributing Clearly explain to volunteers the consequences of manipulating statistics, selling ration cards and adding false beneficiaries Develop a core group of well-paid and trained volunteers or avoid using volunteers entirely
Absent or dysfunctional complaint mechanisms	Camp residents discouraged from complaining about corruption and other problems	Examine the effectiveness of existing complaint mechanisms Ensure that staff who address complaints are senior enough to act on them Complaints in camps should not go through local leaders Instruct staff and volunteers on how to deal with complaints in a respectful, non-dismissive manner (and not blame the computer) Provide Camp Commanders with feedback on complaints Use multiple alternative feedback mechanisms to 'triangulate' within the overall monitoring system, for example hold regular public meetings to discuss targeting and carry out focus group discussions
Using food committees and leaders to assist with distributions	The sharing of food by food committees/ leaders after distributions as a wage Payments to support aid agencies' and leaders' work with aid agencies	Consider providing payment (bar of soap, portion of ration) for this work to replace such diversions. Discuss and agree to this publicly so that everyone knows exactly how much and for what work they are being paid, and make sure that this is felt by everyone to be adequate Explain in public meeting that no resident is required to make payments related to registrations or distributions
Return of surplus food to aid agency	Return of food to aid agency when non-registered camp residents have benefited from partial rations or not at all Sale of food by agency staff or volunteers	Clearly explain to camp residents how the process of transportation and distribution of food works: that it is quite usual to have some left-over food on trucks but that there are no surpluses of food overall; that the official process is that it must go back to the warehouse because it is needed for distribution to other affected people (i.e. the next camp) Investigate complaints of sale of food

dealing with complaints are senior enough to resolve them.

Agencies who use volunteers clearly need to re-evaluate this practice because it currently amounts to using poorly paid and under-trained staff in activities where they have substantial control over who receives assistance commodities. Many treat camp residents in a manner that undermines their dignity. One possibility is developing a core group of volunteers trained in agency policies, with opportunities for promotion. Having volunteers work in alternating pairs would reduce individual discretion, though the two volunteers obviously could decide to collude in the sale of cards or the registration of family members. Volunteers should be encouraged and rewarded for forwarding corruption issues to agency staff and recommending solutions, and they should be dismissed if they are found to be selling cards, colluding with leaders or adding names.

Using food committees and leaders to assist with food distributions is a common practice to increase manpower, promote staff safety and generally ensure that distributions are as orderly as possible. As they are usually not paid, this practice also may result in these people seeking compensation for their services in the form of relief commodities designated for beneficiaries. Agencies should consider providing a small amount of compensation, or clearly agreeing with leaders and committees that they are not to pass on 'wage' costs to beneficiaries (which may or may not be effective).

Aid agencies normally have food leftover at distributions because some households do not claim their rations. After distributing some of the food to non-beneficiaries, leaders and staff/volunteers count the items remaining and record this amount on a waybill, at which point it is returned to the agency to be used in subsequent distributions. Camp residents have difficulty accepting explanations as to why food is being returned when legitimate households have not benefited from full rations; some also believe that food is being sold on the way back to the town. Agencies should investigate any complaints that food is being sold through this system and clearly explain to camp residents what happens to the food that is returned to agencies.

5. Conclusion

Humanitarian operations affect pre-existing power dynamics in the areas they operate in in various ways: creating parallel leadership structures as liaisons between aid agencies and beneficiaries, empowering existing leaders to influence and direct the assistance process and employing staff and volunteers who can determine eligibility for assistance and have control over assistance commodities. They also inject significant amounts of valuable resources into areas with widespread needs. IDPs in Northern Uganda – short on power and long on needs – have limited capacity to assess the extent to which abuses of power and corruption prevent them from receiving assistance. However, it is obvious that the most common corruption issues – the directing of assistance commodities to non-beneficiaries by leaders and volunteers – directly and indirectly reduces their access to assistance. The significant potential profits to be made go a long way in explaining why payment to get on lists involved only a minority of camp residents and usually only token amounts of money (with the exception of highly valued tents): adding fake names to lists and selling ration cards is easier and more profitable than asking for bribes from camp residents or demanding sexual favours. It is also apparent that there are checks on certain 'unacceptable' forms of corruption.

The power and discretion afforded to leaders and volunteers, combined with the failure of many aid agencies to provide assistance in an accountable manner, are the main causes of the corruption perceived by camp residents. A significant first step for agencies would be implementing basic downward accountability measures, such as informing beneficiaries about assistance processes and providing a means by which they can register feedback and make complaints safely and anonymously – and not with a token complaints desk that does not provide feedback or results. While a certain tolerance for inclusion errors means that agencies cannot necessarily rely on camp residents to report on ghost beneficiaries added by their leaders, effective complaints mechanisms would still provide an avenue for camp residents affected by corruption to signal their exclusion.

As people in Northern Uganda return home – and assuming they continue to do so if the peace process is successful – aid agencies are being encouraged by the government to focus their efforts on the parish-level planning system, involving Local Councils and parish development committees. This process is leaving the previous system of camp leadership behind. Whether leaders were installed through new camp leadership systems or as part of the Ugandan government structure appears to have had little bearing on corruption in the assistance process, but the power afforded to leaders indisputably has had a major impact. The movement of people into smaller camps and back to their homes provides aid agencies with an opportunity to make a concerted effort in working with affected people and systems of representation to ensure that aid is delivered with greater transparency and accountability.

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Overseas Development Institute
111 Westminster Bridge Road
London SE1 7JD
UK

Tel: +44 (0)20 7922 0300
Fax: +44 (0)20 7922 0399
Email: publications@odi.org.uk
Website: www.odi.org.uk