Article

Securing Insecure Livelihoods Through Group Synergies: The Case of Violent Namatala Transboundary Wetland in Rural Eastern Uganda

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Abstract

This article uses evidence from Namatala wetland in Eastern Uganda to examine the livelihood insecurity associated with wetland conflicts and highlights the implications of group synergies in securing the related insecurities affecting access and use of the violent wetlands and livelihoods. Adopting a qualitative approach, data was generated using eight focus group discussions and 12 key informant interviews in Namatala conflict area, in Eastern Uganda. The findings reveal that the unpredictable brutal conflict actions in Namatala wetland compelled people to construct groups as informal mechanisms of navigating the insecure environments to secure livelihoods. The groups acted as a pool of labour, a means of maintaining employment, buffers against attack, financial safety valves and sources of predictive information gathering and sharing. Invoking the theory of practice, the article demonstrates that people experiencing conflicts make sense of their violent environments and devise informal group synergies as adaptive mechanisms of securing and sustaining their livelihoods.

Keywords

Group synergies, livelihoods, rural, transboundary conflicts, wetlands

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Introduction

Conflicts over transboundary protected land resources have increasingly become common because of the shared nature of the resources on one hand, and the increasing scarcity of some of these resources on the other.[1] Global and regional studies demonstrate that there are numerous conflicts over transboundary protected land resources in the world such as those over transboundary mountains (Hoehne, 2014), over transboundary wildlife (De Pourcq et al., 2016) and water bodies (Matthews & Germain, 2007). These conflicts arise either due to simultaneous use of the resources or over resource allocation such as the conflicts over river Jordan between Israel and Jordan (Choudhury & Islam, 2015). However, the conflicts could as well arise due to dual and multiple ownership claims of the resources such as the conflicts over Migingo island between Kenya and Uganda (Rossi, 2016). Often times, the literature on conflicts over transboundary protected resources denotes conflicts between or among sovereign nations. Limited literature has focused on conflicts over transboundary protected resources within the same nation. This article thus takes on sub-national direction but with a focus on seasonal transboundary protected wetlands which are largely used as land during the dry season.

Transboundary protected wetlands of that nature are prone to conflicts largely because of livelihood opportunities they offer to the surrounding communities due to constant availability of water, and drying uplands as a result of effects of climate change (Sharma et al., 2019). Climate change effects have significantly reduced the quality of land, reduced the valuable resource base of the rural poor and intensified competition for wetlands. In Africa, this is compounded by dependency on rain-fed agriculture, unclear tenure in the transboundary wetlands (Nasongo et al., 2015) and poor enforcement of the laws governing use of wetlands as the case of Uganda (Namaalwa et al., 2013). These circumstances increase levels of conflicts over transboundary wetlands. In Uganda, however, the dynamics of transboundary wetland are complex and are often not fully addressed or are deliberately disregarded, which generates enduring conflicts and insecurity that inhibit local livelihood activities. Such insecurity limits access and utilisation of the wetlands and consequently constricts the livelihood opportunities of people. This is more pressing when the wetlands are located in a rural area because they support the entire or major livelihood systems of the rural communities adjacent to the wetland, significantly impacting on their livelihoods.

The immense impact of violent land conflicts on the livelihoods of rural households has been repeatedly acknowledged. Studies on land conflicts indicate that violent conflicts destroy a number of aspects that are critical for the livelihoods of rural households. They destroy the production system of rural farmers through limiting their agricultural productivity (Arias et al., 2019; CEEPA, 2011; Tumushabe & Tatwangire, 2017) and property (Opoku, 2015). For pastoral communities, land conflicts also constrict the ability of communities to manage risks associated with droughts, raids and livestock diseases (Esilaba, 2005). Other scholars have also posited that violent land conflicts fracture social bonds of rural farmers, yet these are critical in sustaining rural livelihoods through reciprocity (Ellis, 2000; Kioko &

Bolling, 2015). Those who invoke a gender lens also argue that violent land conflicts in a rural setting are more severe to women since they are the ones who engage more in agriculture and are most displaced (Asiimwe, 2014; Ayoub, 2018; Omolo, 2010; Tripp, 2004), disintegrating their livelihood systems. These different dimensions of the impact confirm that violent land conflicts shape people's decisions and patterns in livelihood attainment in varying ways.

The change in actions and trajectories in livelihood attainment result from uncertainty among rural farmers about their livelihoods and their safety. This creates changes in the farming behaviour and strategies, which, in turn, lead to limited utilisation of the land resources (Arias et al., 2019). The impact of violent land conflicts on access and utilisation of land in wetland contexts is exacerbated by the existence of the dense vegetation in wetlands, on the one hand, and the availability of water, on the other hand. The constant dense vegetation is used by conflicting communities to cause more havoc (Eck, 2014), intensifying the insecurity in the area; yet the availability of water makes it challenging to easily navigate the wetland to escape the attacks. These scenarios create a lot of fear among rural farmers who depend on the wetland, resulting in the alteration of their strategies in pursuit of livelihoods. However, how people alter their livelihood trajectories in response to the violent environments they live in, differ from context to context depending on the resource endowments rural farmers have at their disposal, the nature of violent conflicts, the extrinsic and intrinsic values attached to the land in context and the social dynamics within the conflicting communities.

A context of a seasonal transboundary wetland such as Namatala, where the surrounding uplands are dry and unproductive, local farmers whose livelihoods are wetland dependent and often threatened have had to devise and adapt to informal social group mechanisms to maintain rights of access to and use of the wetland. For farmers in such situations, the only readily available and reliable defence capital is their own mutual social support which is manifested in social group formation and actualisation. These informal social groups together form group synergies that enable the farmers to secure and sustain their livelihoods in a hostile working and neighbourhood environment. Group synergies in this article refer to groups of people working in collaboration to sustain their livelihoods. Group synergies are well known to be instrumental in providing viable livelihoods for the well-being of smallholder farmers (Agarwal & Dorin, 2019), although in conflict context, they have also been documented as a means through which conflicting groups cause heinous conflict actions (Adams, 2017; Ahmadu & Ayuba, 2018). This article examines how farmers in Namatala wetland in Eastern Uganda use their informal social dynamics to galvanise collective efforts in accessing and utilising the wetland to secure and sustain their livelihoods amidst violence. This article has four sections: in the first section, we present the theoretical underpinning guiding the article, followed by study area and methods, and findings and discussion sections. In the final section of the article we give our conclusions.

The Theory of Practice

In this article, the theory of practice proposed by Bourdieu (1977) is used, and it postulates that the well-being of people is determined by both the structure and the agency. The structure refers to organised arrangements that influence people's choices, opportunities and actions, while agency refers to the ability of an individual to act independently (Walther, 2014). Three elements of the theory are used in this article, namely, the field, the habitus and the capitals. The field denotes situations, contexts and places of interaction. These interactions could be compromises, discussions and even disagreements between people (Bourdieu, 1977; Walther, 2014). The interaction process is guided by unwritten tenets known by the interacting individuals so that they employ strategies and actions that are suitable in a given context. The interaction is a web of people fighting for statuses in order to utilise their capitals.

Capitals refer to resources needed by the agent in a given context. These capitals could be economic, social, cultural or symbolic in nature (Sakdapolrak, 2014). The habitus (social norms) then shape their behaviour, perceptions, thoughts and actions which help in making correct choices during unexpected circumstances (Walther, 2014). Understanding livelihood trajectories of people cannot be done in isolation of the broader social and formal institutions (Sakdapolrak, 2014). The existence, absence or fluidity of these institutions has implications on the livelihood opportunities people have. Therefore, human reality is a blend of the structure and individual actions (Aguilar, 2013) and this determines livelihood trajectories of people in different contexts.

In this article, this theory is used to analyse how the strategies of securing livelihoods by communities around Namatala were shaped by the structure and the agency. The theory analysed how the environment, people's experiences and the capital endowment of their social networks and wetland influenced the livelihood strategies undertaken by individuals/households and how this shaped the livelihood outcomes of agents in Namatala. The theory unfolds livelihood strategies in the arena of struggles and how they are facilitated by the larger social forces of social and contextual dynamics.

Study Area and Methods

Namatala wetland is located in Eastern Uganda, approximately 250 kilometres from Uganda's capital city Kampala, and is shared by the three districts of Mbale, Budaka and Butaleja. This cluster of districts has a combined population of 940,710 (UBOS, 2014) and a total land area of 2,136.8 square kilometres. Mbale is the biggest of the three in terms of land size and population and is centrally located, making it an attractive business centre in the region. The three districts have similar geographical characteristics such as climate and flat topography, although Mbale is slightly different because some parts are mountainous and have

higher altitude. All three districts are predominantly rural, although Mbale has a bigger urban percentage of population. The main economic activity in all three districts is agriculture, a lot of which is in rice growing because of numerous wetlands in the area. Other crops grown include coffee, beans, plantain, maize, onions, potatoes, carrots and sweet potatoes. All three district populations have a diverse mix of ethnic groups, although Mbale is dominated by the Bagisu, Budaka by the Bagwere and Butaleja by the Banyole.

The three districts are joined by four sub-counties at their boundaries, which are also partly home to Namatala wetland. These districts are Lyama and Kamonkoli in Budaka district, Bukasakya in Mbale district and Butaleja town council in Butaleja. Lyama sub-county shares the wetland with Butaleja town council, while Kamonkoli sub-county shares the wetland with Bukasakya sub-county. These districts and sub-counties were purposely chosen for the study in order to understand the transboundary dimension of the wetland, and also, this area has over the years experienced waves of conflicts that have persisted for more than two decades. Alongside that, it was selected because of its proximity to an urbanising centre, and having different groups with competing claims of ownership yet in Uganda wetlands are protected resources owned and managed by the government. Such features shaped the nature of the conflicts, how people accessed and utilised the wetland, and ultimately people's livelihoods. See Figure 1 for the geographical location of the study area.

The study adopted a qualitative approach with a case study research design. The data was collected through focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews. The case study research design was deemed most suitable for understanding the depths of how people's farming practices were shaped by the

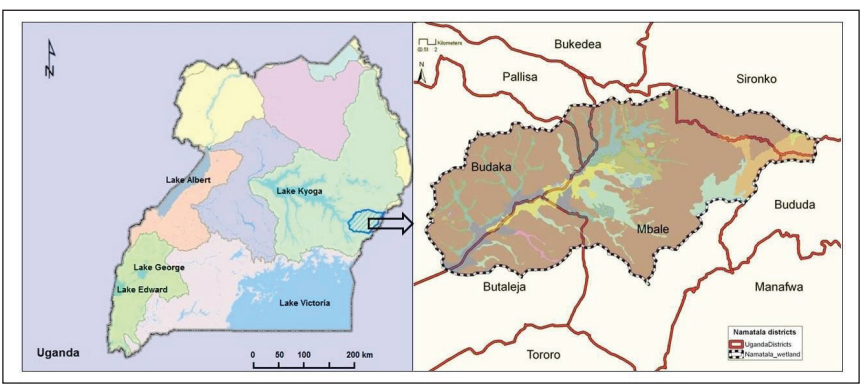

Figure 1. Geographical Location of Namatala Wetland in Eastern Uganda

Source: Namaalwa et al. (2013, p. 46).

conflict. The focus group discussions and key informant interviews were used to permit free narration of people's experiences on strategies adopted to cope with the conflict. There were eight FGDs conducted in total; in each sub-county, there was one FGD for men and one for women to capture the gender dimensions of the conflict. The eight FGDs were reached based on information saturation. Participants in the FGDs included different people who were engaging in different livelihood activities in the wetland. These included rice farmers, maize farmers, casual labourers and wetland owners. The different categories were involved to capture how different farmers were affected and how they navigated the conflict environment to access and utilise the wetland.

There were 12 key informant interviews with the commuter farmers, local leaders, conflict survivors and community opinion leaders. These interviews were also designed to have men and women in order to capture the gender dimensions. All interviews were recorded by a digital recorder after seeking consent from the respondents. Data was analysed following thematic content analysis procedures of identifying codes, categorising them and then forming themes out of the categories (Bryman, 2012). The ethical considerations of voluntary participation, consent, anonymity and safety of participants were adhered to during the research process. Letters of clearance from Makerere Research Ethics Committee and Uganda National Council of Science and Technology were obtained before the collection of data.

Findings and Discussion

The study set out to illustrate the implications of group synergies on the livelihoods of people in the violent transboundary wetland of Namatala. However, understanding the strategies people adopted to secure livelihoods in a violent environment requires understanding the nature of conflicts. Therefore, the first section presents the nature of conflicts in Namatala wetland while the second section presents the role of group synergies in securing livelihoods.

Nature of Conflicts in Namatala Wetland

The findings indicate that the level of intensity of the conflicts in Namatala was largely violent, but with some mild episodes, however, most of the violent acts were unpredictable. These violent conflict actions caused a lot of insecurity and fear in the community. Discussions with participants indicated that many people were injured and some were killed in the conflicts; access roads were blocked and people were captured and tortured. The participants reported that the nature of physical attacks were extremely gruesome as one conflict survivor narrated his ordeal: 'The killings were very brutal. They could cut off your legs, hands, the head and then they open your heart while singing songs of jubilation. ... When they cut off my hand, it was taken and they went back holding it in the air while

singing' (Male key informant from Bukasakya, aged 46 Mbale, a discussion held in June 2018). To supplement that, another key informant described a particular gruesome murder as the most brutalised body he had seen in his life. He recounted:

> When they captured the two boys, they pierced one boy with a spear and it went through the body. Then one person held one side of the spear, and another held the other side, and they started swinging him in the air as he was crying. When they reached somewhere, they put him down; they started cutting him into pieces like a goat. After that, they brought sulfuric acid and poured on the pieces. It was terrible!! (As he goes silent). (Male local leader aged 67 from Lyama, Budaka, interview held in June 2018)

Another person who witnessed a particular fight in the wetland recounted in tears:

> There were many people who died that day. Many people passed here carrying dead bodies, others were from Kadimukoli, Kerekerene (neighboring villages) and some were being buried in the mud in the swamp. For Bagisu, there was a bridge in the swamp where dead bodies were being pushed. I am talking from the bottom of my heart (as tears roll down). It was a sad moment for me which I will never forget. At one point they picked a polythene paper and spread it down to collect the pieces of a dead person who left home alive. (Male opinion leader aged 75 from Kamonkoli Budaka, interview held in June 2018)

These interview excerpts highlight that the murders were very brutal and some were premediated. Such acts cause a lot of insecurity and fear and generate behavioural responses in livelihood attainment such as limiting access and utilisation of the wetland. Besides that, participants also reported that conflicting actors often used a strategy called the 'tiger hunt strategy' to capture people. This was a strategy used largely in the dry season; where people would hide in the dense vegetation in the wetland and attack individuals who had gone to till their gardens. This was in the dry season because there are more people who use the wetland during that season and navigation of the wetland is easier during that season for those who want to cause havoc. Some of the captured would be killed while others would be brutally tortured. The women would be humiliated by undressing or raping them. To emphasise this strategy, a participant said, 'sometimes you would go to the garden without any challenges, but on your way back, you find when they have blocked the path you used. Before you even think of what to do next, you will just see the Bagwere attacking you' (Participant 6, female FGD in Hisega, Butaleja, a discussion held in July 2018). This implies that the attacks were unpredictable and the motive of blocking the path in the statement was to trap and attack enemies.

This demonstrates that the nature of conflicts in Namatala destabilised the social environment within which people were meant to engage in productive work. The violent behaviour took on different dynamics of group fights and unpredictable attacks. The unpredictability and the gruesomeness of the physical attacks created uncertainty about personal security while working in the wetland. One of the outcomes associated with insecurity is fear. However, fear is equally

accompanied by behavioural responses (Bar-Tal, 2001), and in Namatala one of the responses was devising informal mechanisms of navigating the wetland using the social dynamics within the community. This was an adaptive response to help them negotiate the insecure environment in an attempt to secure their livelihoods. Therefore, from a theoretical stand point, the environment in Namatala wetland was a field of struggles, fear, uncertainty and insecurity. Such fields produce social norms that regulate how people behave, how people interact with each other (Bourdieu, 1977; Chudzikowski & Mayrhofer, 2011) and how people use capital endowments. In the circumstances, the group synergies were their main social capital endowment. The farmers had to use the available social capital to access and utilise the wetland, and to secure their livelihoods.

The Role of Group Synergies in Securing Livelihoods Amidst Conflicts

Groups as Pool of Labour

The findings in this study indicate that group synergies played a significant role in navigating the wetland and survival of people operating in the violent wetland. The majority of the participants in Namatala reported that due to the violent conflicts; they made changes in the farming practices and patterns from individual farming to group farming. This was because the insecure environment required the strength of numbers to threaten their enemies. Discussions with participants and key informants suggest that due to necessity, they had to engage in livelihood activities in the wetland in groups. One key informant narrated this:

> When the wetland became insecure, we had to devise means of accessing and digging the wetland. We formed groups and these would be groups of families; these groups would go and dig for one family for something like two days, then they move to another until all the members in the group are catered for. These groups helped us to spend less time in the wetland but also helped us to scare our enemies because they could fear to attack when we are many. (Female key informant aged 47 from Lyama, Budaka, interview held in June 2018)

Another participant also said, 'Due to the conflict, it is not safe to go to the garden alone. Since the violence is on and off, we have formed groups of 5 to 6 families… Normally these are neighbouring families that have a good relationship. We now dig as a group' (Participant 8, male FGD Hisega, Butaleja district; discussion held in July 2018). These statements highlight the social ingenuity of local wetland users on how to navigate violent environments, but it also highlights how the groups acted as a pool of labour during violent conflict. Groups are perceived as alternative models that enhance smallholder farmer's productivity (Agarwal, 2018) and are critical in obtaining market for smallholder farmers (Andersson & Gabrielsson, 2012). But often these operate within non-violent situations. The study demonstrates that when people face certain harsh conditions such as violent

conflicts, they develop a collective agency on how to survive amidst harsh conditions through group farming. The heightened insecurity creates a unified response in the community that allows people to meet their immediate needs. The synergies between different families in Namatala formed collective human capital that facilitated the quick and safe accomplishment of tasks. Such locally instituted groups are instrumental in responding to stressors such as climate change, soil degradation, limited land, poor markets and climate change (Andersson & Gabrielsson, 2012). However, the findings in this study also show that they facilitate cultivation of land amidst insecurity. The groups give people the confidence and certainty about their lives while working in the insecure environments. Since livelihoods are determined by the engagement in a livelihood activity, the ability to access and till their land helped people secure some livelihood outcome amidst the insecurity.

The people's responses to the Namatala conflicts manifest the influence of structure and agency in making critical livelihood decisions. Bourdieu, in his theory of practice, postulates that the well-being of individuals is shaped by the structure and the agency which involves the field, the capitals and then the habitus (Bourdieu, 1977). Thus, the decision by individuals/families in Namatala to pool labour together through group farming was a result of the social forces of the violent environment, but was also based on their experiences of the benefits of groups during harsh circumstances. The field was perceived as riskier and more insecure for people to utilise their capitals as individuals than as groups. The members of the group knew each other, trusted each other, were going through the same experience, were available and had the same goal of securing livelihoods. Such social dynamics were instrumental in supporting livelihoods of families but also helped to maintain employment of some people.

Groups as a Means of Maintaining Employment in the Wetland

The findings further indicate that even some casual labourers had to come together and form groups. Discussions with some participants particularly from Budaka district indicate that in order to earn some income, those who were hiring out labour combined their efforts by forming groups. They would then hire out their labour as groups not as individuals. Explaining the group innovation by casual labourers, one key informant narrated:

> Some people who normally do casual labour organized themselves into groups. These were largely women but could have about three men in the group. During the conflict, these groups would hire out their labour. They did this because it was risky to dig alone in the wetland, but also to easily identify an enemy in the wetland. I also hired one group to weed my beans. (Commuter farmer aged 65 from Budaka, interviewed in July 2018)

Another participant also explained, 'The groups helped us to know each other and if there is any stranger, it was easy to notice' (Participant 4, female FGD from Irabi, Budaka, interviewed in 2018). When land conflicts occur, even those who offer

labour in the gardens lose out because they are not able to hire out their labour. The casual labourers in Namatala were able to galvanise the combined effort and earn some income in a risky environment. The fact that these were groups dominated by women also signifies the agency of women experiencing crises. To the labourers, the groups maintained the existence of their employment in the wetland. This is a demonstration of the interplay between structure and agency in determining the action to take when faced with conflicts. While individuals had their human capital, this was not sufficient given the conflict environment. They had to exploit their social capital in order to use their human capital. This demonstrates how people facing conflict crises can transform one capital to another in order to meet their livelihoods. The conflict situation in Namatala wetland compelled the labourers to devise group formation as the most appropriate strategy to use in order to survive, which symbolises habitus (Chudzikowski & Mayrhofer, 2011). While what they earned was arguably not equivalent to what they used to earn individually before the conflict, it denotes the instrumental role of 'group labour' in earning income and supporting livelihoods in conflict crises. Espousing the theory of practice, these alterations in labour arrangement by casual labourers highlight how the capitals and habitus overlap in some fields. While labour is human capital, merging it with the social capital was a habitus.

Groups as Buffer Against Attacks

Besides offering labour and maintaining employment, the findings show that groups were used to protect members while moving to the wetland and while in the gardens. Discussion with some FGD participants indicates that some people used groups to move up to the wetland, but when they would reach the wetland, each family would go to their gardens. This was possible because most of their gardens in the wetland were close to each other. They reported that they had central places of assembling while going and leaving the wetland. Accentuating the role of groups, a participant expressed:

> We used to assemble at the centre in the morning, then we would leave for the wetland together. At the time of departing the wetland, the timekeeper and leader of the group would bang the metal at the bridge to alert everyone in the wetland that it is time to leave the wetland. We went together and left together. (Participant 1, female FGD in Lyama, Budaka, discussion held in July 2018)

Another participant also stated:

> We started going to the wetland when we were at least five or six. It was difficult to inform people all the time to escort you when for example you are going to bring food. But in situations where there are six or more people in the household, they would move together. (Participant 6, female FGD in Hisega, Butaleja, discussion in July 2018)

In line with the same argument, another participant reported:

> If you are going to dig in the wetland, you have to be in groups of about 30–50 people so that the opponents also get scared. From the time the conflict started, people try to move in groups. You inform each other the time of leaving the wetland because once they leave you, you may be killed. (Key informant, aged 67, from Budaka. Interview held in September 2018)

These statements show how people used group synergies to prevent attacks on their lives while securing livelihoods in insecure circumstances. The numbers in the groups acted as buffers against attacks and fear because they threatened the enemy. The collective resource of moving to the garden depicts a situation of desperation they were operating under due to the conflict, but it is also a characteristic of social networks, where members care for their well-being and the well-being of others (Johnson, 2008). Thus, people's farming patterns, especially in the wetland, were structured by the groups. The groups structured the time of going and leaving the garden. Groups were a social resource that provided protection and refuge that was absent in the larger society (Adams, 2017), and these groups became part of people's social networks that supported their social and psychological well-being. People pursuing livelihoods in insecure environments create networks that are not necessarily based on strong ties but are rather purposeful linkages between individuals to achieve a particular goal, and in the Namatala case, the goal was accessing and utilising the wetland and securing livelihoods. The challenge with groups is that there can be a likelihood of intensifying the conflict in case they meet with their adversaries.

Groups as a Means of Sharing Information

The groups in Namatala helped communities to share information, facilitated especially by the use of technology. A participant accentuating the role of mobile technology in the group said, 'Members of the group would use mobile phones to communicate any information about the conflict and about our stay in the wetland… We used mobile phones to communicate what time we should leave the wetland or when there is any conflict event' (Participant 3, male FGD in Lyama, Budaka district, discussion held in July 2018). Thus, the effectiveness of groups in securing livelihoods was facilitated by mobile technology. In recent years, mobile phones have become very important in communicating key information to farmers. Notably, they are used to share agricultural formation that relates to climate change, diseases, markets, agricultural inputs, training and pesticides (Obong et al., 2018). The findings show that in a conflict situation, mobile phones can also be instrumental in coordinating and communicating the activities of groups operating in insecure environments. In Namatala wetland, they communicated information about the time to spend on their farms, time to depart the farms and the safety situation in their gardens. All this was intended to reduce risks for group members and to protect their crops in the garden. Thus, the conflict context shaped the nature of communication and the coordination of group activities. The findings illuminate how people operating in conflict contexts create

different dimensions of capitals in order to pursue their livelihoods. From the theory of practice categorisation, mobile phones belong to what Bourdieu called the cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977). The effectiveness of the groups in facilitating livelihood attainment was largely dependent on cultural capital. Thus, the conflict environment structured for the groups the capitals which were most effective in achieving the goal of securing livelihoods.

Groups as a Financial Safety Valve

The findings also show that some women were able to use groups to take on good investment ventures. Discussion with female participants indicated that due to the conflicts, they decided to form groups within the community where they would save some income on a weekly basis. When this money accumulated, they were able to lend to members who wanted to start up small businesses or who had financial challenges. Emphasising the role of the group in sustaining their livelihoods, a female participant from Butaleja said, 'Some women have started some small businesses like selling Bagiya (pancakes) because of groups' (Participant 3, female FGD, Hisega Butaleja, discussion conducted in July 2018). Livelihoods of rural households are dependent on both farm and non-farm activities (Pandey, 2015). These findings demonstrate that groups were instrumental in meeting the financial needs of women through non-farm livelihood activities. This reflects the use of social dynamics in supporting the non-farm based livelihoods of people living in insecure environments. While the women were not able to save before the conflict, the conflict stresses produced socio-economic ingenuity. Conflicts increase non-agricultural activities that are less sensitive to conflicts and engender better investment choices (Arias et al., 2019; Deininger, 2003). This practice was largely facilitated by the social capital endowment of the women. The ability for women to borrow from these groups enabled them not only to settle some household financial challenges but also build more socio-economic networks.

Thus, groups are instrumental in improving the financial independence and incomes of women (d'Cruz & Mudimu, 2013), which reflects the role of gender in shaping critical livelihood decisions after the emergency of a conflict. The critical undertone in this is that not all alterations in livelihood trajectories due to conflicts are necessarily negative. In fact, Arias et al. (2019) augment that some of the behaviours and strategies adopted during conflicts can remain entrenched in individuals and households even after the conflicts. This again underscores the role of larger structures of gender in shaping critical livelihood decisions after the emergence of a conflict. However, this has an implication on the theory of practice. The major assumption in the theory is that the field and capitals determine the decisions actors make in a given context, but it lumps all the actors together. These findings show that on top of the field, capitals and habitus, the gender of actors significantly influences the livelihood decisions of actors.

Conclusion

This article aimed at illuminating the implications of group synergies in securing livelihoods in violent wetlands in rural Uganda. The article demonstrates that communities facing violent conflicts do not necessarily abandon the contested wetland, but some create a unified response based on their informal social institutions. The use of such informal institutions is based on their knowledge of the associated benefits, the availability of the social networks in the community, relations of trust that exist among the community members and similar distressing experience. These factors facilitate people facing livelihood stressors to organise themselves to mitigate their insecurities over access and use of the wetland and livelihood attainment. The group synergies act as their social and financial safety valves, formidable labour force, sites of psychological refuge and sources of necessary information in securing livelihoods. However, the choice of strategy is occasioned by the social environment of insecurity. Thus, this article demonstrates that people facing conflicts make sense of their environment and devise means of securing livelihoods through their group synergies. The group synergies can build the agency of local people in the community and can help in coping with life-threatening stressors.

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1. Transboundary protected resources are preserved land resources that go beyond one sovereign land (Sandwith et al., 2001). The sovereign land may be a country, region or community within a country.

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