Assessing Impacts of Women’s Dispossession from Land and Home

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SUPPORTED BY: HLRN - HIC

Introduction and Background

Shelter and Settlements Alternatives: Uganda Human Settlement Network (SSA: UHSNET) is partnering with Housing and Land Rights Network of Habitat International Coalition (HIC-HLRN) to implement a project titled “Assessing Impacts of Women’s Dispossession from Land and Home.” In Uganda, theoretical and practical trainings have been conducted with the VIA tool set to be applied in the case of the Kigungu – Makusa eviction in Entebbe, Uganda. In this case, a fishing community that has resettled at Mayanzi, a landing site adjacent to Kigungu is contesting an eviction notice issued to them by Uganda Peoples Defence Air Forces (UPDAF). The site the community has been ordered to vacate is located along the waterfront of Lake Victoria in Entebbe Municipality. This is where fishing community has found refuge after already having been evicted from Makusa and Lwamunyu landing sites, located on one of several islands in Lake Victoria within the jurisdiction of Entebbe Municipality. In preparation for the field work where the VIA tool would be applied, a team from SSA: UHSNET...
carried out a preliminary field visit to the site on the 26 August, 2019. During the visit, the team held meetings with the community and its leaders, as well as key officials including the deputy mayor from Entebbe Municipality. Subsequently, on 3 September 2019, the VIA tool was pre-tested and validated.

**Key Findings**

**Preliminary Field Visit: Meeting with Municipality Leadership**

The initial step was a meeting with the office of the mayor and town clerk of Entebbe municipality. The team was warmly welcomed by the deputy mayor and the community development officer who expressed their appreciation for the partnership which they believe will play an important role in championing the rights of the fishing community at Mayanzi, Kigungu.

Figure 1: the settlement on Mayanzi lake shores

The deputy mayor informed the team that he had personally been involved in the stand-off between the community and the military, which had intended to evict them from where they are currently settled. The deputy mayor informed the SSA: UHSNET team that initially the residents were residing on the two islands of Makusa and Lwamunyu; however, there are contradicting versions of the exact reasons as to why they were initially evicted from the two islands. One version was that they posed a security threat since the island was located close to Entebbe International Airport runway. To minimize such a threat, the only option explored by the military was to evict them to nullify any potential terror threats posed by their occupation of the said islands. The second version was that the area was identified as an important breeding ground for fish stocks so the National Environment Management Authority had recommended their eviction from the islands to protect the site given its economic and ecological value.

The deputy mayor mentioned that he had confronted the military on several occasions as captured by various media to help the residents avoid another eviction from their current location. According to him, the military had initially proposed to split the community and then distribute them to landing sites on other islands. However, this was opposed by the community partly because most of those who are still able to engage in fishing had fishing licenses fixed to specific areas. Relocation would then be an extremely expensive undertaking given their meagre resources. They would need to rebuild their livelihoods by acquiring new licenses, a very cumbersome process, while at the same time be forced to deal with other accompanying social disruptions.

In spite of the difficulties faced by the community, the deputy mayor highlighted a few positives from the case. He admitted that the community had previously been isolated on the island, but the threat of the second eviction had engendered greater social cohesion. Leaders within the community helped to galvanize the community solidarity through mobilization, organizing meetings and raise awareness toward improving
collective responsibility and cooperation. Some groups within the community had started savings groups, a progressive development given the non-saving culture of most fishing communities.

From the above meeting with the deputy mayor, the following key points emerged:

i. The local government (duty-bearers, i.e. Entebbe Municipal Council) appears to be well-informed of the community’s plight and is actively engaged in seeking alternative solutions to address the eviction threat;

ii. Subsequent to the above, there appears to be significant good will and commitment from the highest level of Entebbe Municipal Council’s political leadership (the Mayor, the deputy and the rest of council) to seek workable solutions to the eviction threat facing the Makusa fishing community;

iii. In relation to the same, the local leadership has explicitly expressed the willingness to extend vital social services such as solid waste management and sanitation to improve the settlement welfare;

iv. There is a discernible disconnect amongst key actors (Wakiso District, Entebbe Municipal Council, Fisheries Department – Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Industry and Fisheries, National Environment Management Authority – NEMA and Uganda Peoples Defense Airforce), and this has stifled the opportunity to seek a workable solution that satisfies each parties’ demands while at the same time minimizing the disruptions on the lives of Makusa fishing community given that the challenge at hand appears to transcend the boundaries of a single administrative entity;

v. Entebbe Municipal Council appears to be under – resourced, more particularly lacking a detailed waterfront plan which would act as a framework for addressing challenges such as the one presented by the Makusa fishing community presents.

vi. Vested interests by invisible and powerful actors are deeply implicated in the threatened eviction of the Makusa fishing community from Mayanzi, thus the VIA survey engagement will need to be undertaken with great utmost care to minimize escalating the latent/potential conflict underpinning the case.

Meeting with the Makusa local leaders and fishing community

After the meeting at the Entebbe Municipal Council with the deputy mayor, the team proceeded to Mayanzi to interact with the Makusa fishing community. More than 30 members representative of the community’s diversity (women, men, youth and elderly) were mobilized for the meeting with the SSA: UHSNET team. While the meeting with the residents and their leaders served to validate some of the information provided by the deputy mayor, it also yielded additional valuable insights. The locals confirmed that no clear reason was given for the eviction from Makusa and Lwamunyu islands.

To further complicate their predicament, they were not given prior notice regarding the eviction. The military descended on their settlements and ordered them out. According to them, 700 adult men and women were affected by the eviction. This number did not include the children who when included, the total number rose to 1,093 residents. Women made up the largest percentage of the group, most as single parents supporting their children through school from primary to university levels.

One of the women narrated her ordeal during the eviction from Makusa in which she lost many of her livelihood assets. She did not have the means to get to the main land and was only helped out by a friend who sent a boat to help her. When she eventually made it to the mainland late in the night at about 11 PM, there was a heavy
down pour which destroyed the few belongings she had managed to salvage. Several boats that she owned as her main source of livelihood were destroyed by the military and she cannot go back to her home district in Katakwi since she has nothing left there. Her story is no different from others many of whom suffered psychological torture, loss of identity, helplessness and despondency as a result of the eviction. Alcohol, drug abuse and prostitution were reportedly some of the coping mechanisms adopted by many within the community to deal with the psychological impacts of the eviction from Makusa and Lwamunyu islands. Other women who owned small restaurants, bars and lodges also lost most of their assets in the eviction from Makusa and Lwamunyu.

According to sources from within the community, they mobilized themselves and sought out the landowner of the site at Mayanzi. They negotiated an agreement with him to allow them user rights settle on his land for a period of two years. Under the agreement, it was decided that each individual household would pay a monthly rental fee of UGX 30,000 (8 USD). The community has been settling on the current site for a little over a year now, having moved in on 1 May 2018.

There is a lot of uncertainty about their future as the two-year agreement winds down. Other claims that emerged from the meeting with the community were that the landlord himself received threats from certain sources for having accepted to settle the displaced community. With all the uncertainty, they are yet to renegotiate with the landlord while the eviction threat looms. Several community members had leveraged their social networks with other military officials to seek higher level intervention to halt the eviction. No formal documentation, however, had been saved by the community to substantiate especially the latter.

The settlement is currently composed of 210 households. Some of the larger households with as many as 15 (fifteen) members own more than one structure to adequately accommodate themselves. The structures are largely temporary, with timber walls and galvanized iron sheets for roofing. All 210 households in the settlement share a four-stance communal toilet facility nearby.

In addition to the monthly rent, each household is required to pay an additional monthly fee of UGX 14,000 for using the sanitation facility. With a toilet stance and user ratio of about 1:250, the pressure on the sanitation facility is extremely high, requiring almost weekly emptying. Until recently, they had no access to piped water. Households depended on untreated water collected directly from the lake. A week after the preliminary field visit, however, the NWSC extended piped water to the community with the commissioning of several stand pipes. A smaller proportion of those who were too poor to afford the agreed monthly rent of USD 8 per month to the landlord sleep out by the waterfront in the open, using plastic polythene to cover themselves, while others use their boats as shelter during the night. They light a large fire every evening as a coping mechanism to stave off the cold, especially during the wet season.
From observation and information provided by the community, they are living a very precarious life, with limited opportunities for gainful employment since the military destroyed most of their boats. To exacerbate the situation, the new fishing guidelines require a minimum investment of between UGX 20,000,000 to 30,000,000 (USD 5,260 to 7,890). The cost breakdown includes securing an acceptable operational boat, the required licensing and other formal documentation to be permitted to fish. Many of them lack the above capital to engage an apparently highly bureaucratic and time – consuming process. Young girls were especially vulnerable to early pregnancies, HIV infection and drug addiction in their community.

Currently, some women in the settlement operate small shops, selling basic household goods, while others run restaurants and bars to earn a living. A handful of boats remain as the source of livelihood for some men. Others without the means to fish have sought informal employment in Entebbe town.

In summary, the following key points emerged the meeting and interaction with the Makusa fishing community:

i. The threat of eviction remains a critical issue that pervades almost every socio-economic facet of life for the Makusa fishing community, with the convergence of extreme poverty and vulnerability exacerbating the situation;

ii. Women and girls have especially been most affected by the perturbations wrought by the previous eviction and are thus equally more likely to be affected in the event of another eviction, with the omnipresent specter of psychological impacts, sexual violence and exploitation;

iii. Many households within the Makusa fishing community lost a significant proportion of their personal and household assets during the first eviction;

iv. Internally driven organization and mobilization within the Makusa fishing community has emerged as an important non-tangible asset which is playing a vital role in mediating ongoing processes toward addressing the existential threat of eviction;

v. Informal mechanisms and networks dominated by key individuals appear to have overridden the formal structures that are meant to provide the Makusa fishing community the right to remedy or judicial recourse regarding the impending eviction.

**Pre-testing the survey tool**

After the preliminary field visit, the survey tool was then pre-tested on 3 September 2019 and subsequently reviewed by the research team supported by ten (10) field assistants. A validation meeting was conducted to discuss and review the tool prior to the actual data collection activity. The following are some of the key issues that were raised during the tool validation:

“Hyenas [men] were waiting for our daughters when we moved from the island to the mainland...our sons became addicts...my boats and lodges were destroyed, from which I could get fees for my children...aren’t we Ugandans to be displaced without due consideration for our problems? I cannot uproot my family of 7 children and 8 grandchildren just like that!”

Testimony from a woman, a single parent:
Community meeting: Makusa fishing community, Mayanzi, Entebbe Municipality, Wakiso.
Date: 27.08.2019.
1. Respondents reported that though all the sections contained in the tool were relevant, the survey was quite demanding, since it took up a lot of their time, yet the respondents had to tend to their businesses and family, which affected their overall concentration;

2. Respondents also reported that some of the questions that were asked brought back painful memories of the first eviction, and some would break down emotionally in the middle of the interviews while narrating their stories. This required the field assistants to be both empathetic and sensitive, and that were necessary the interviews could be terminated, if need be;

3. Generally the men in the community felt left out, since the survey targeted women, so they kept interrupting the interviews. This prompted the survey team to allocate a 20% proportion of the total research sample to capture the views and perspectives of the men.

4. Some adjustments were made to phrase certain questions, in order to better capture the data required in the tool, though generally the tool was unchanged.