



Community Organizing Victories:  
Two Tales from Northern Uganda



## Naked mothers: Land grab thwarted in Amuru

According to oral tradition, Acholi clans have called modern-day Amuru District their home at least since the 14<sup>th</sup> century. After staying years in IDP camps during the LRA insurgency, peasant farmers returned home to find their land under threat. Rumors of oil deposits and elusive foreign investors circulated villages from Lakang to Apaa to Omee. Strange machines were spotted hovering over Kololo. Police drove foreigners through the district at high speeds, even circumventing roadblocks erected by community members.

In 2011, Anek Keromela's son was digging in his garden. A local government leader and Uganda Wildlife Authority personnel seized him, alleging he was digging on government property. They stripped him naked, tied him to a tree, and beat him to death with his own garden hoe, ignoring the pleas of his mother.

Government agents continued carrying out acts of violence, public executions, arsons, and random arrests in the years to follow.

Enough was enough for Anek Keromela in April 2015 when Lands Minister Migereko and Internal Affairs Minister Aronda led a caravan to Apaa to redistrict it as part of Adjumani, the home district of elite political leader Moses Ali who had allegedly helped arrange a land deal with South African investor Bruce Martin.

“I wanted to be killed the way my son was killed – naked,” said Anek. She and a number of other mothers shamed the ministerial convoy by disrobing and pointing their breasts at the land grabbers. Apaa schoolchildren marched with leaves in the roadway behind the blockades local residents had erected. Thousands came out to peacefully resist the attempted redistricting.

The ministers returned to Kampala with their mark-stones, but not before being shamed to tears by their powerful female elders.

Action Alliance had been training Amuru residents in nonviolent strategies for land protection since 2012. Just before the government caravan deployed, community members were on high alert due to a UPDF encampment in Apaa village. They called upon their local trainers, including Odoch Samuel, to give them guidance as they prepared for whatever crisis might unravel.



*Anek with the son of an ActAll staff member. After disrobing and successfully chasing away government ministers, she climbed Patiko Hill with ActAll to demand an end to land grabbing.*

“Once we told the UPDF officers that we were going to resist any land grab with nonviolent means, they started leaving their guns at their camp while on patrol,” said Odoch. “Some even ran away from their duties in shame. They didn't want to help grab our land.”

Indeed, the military encampment was dispersed soon after the efforts of Migereko and Aronda were thwarted. Action Alliance and its partners then convened a meeting with Acholi leaders, who passed resolutions including the unconditional dismissal of arrested organizers in Amuru, including Apaa's LC1. Shortly thereafter, another act of stripping occurred

against another attempted government land grab in Soroti. Even one ruling party politician called upon her female constituents to strip, should anyone want to grab their land. The power of nonviolent people was contagious. Peasants, women, and those without a single shilling in their homes were now developing highly effective ways to champion their causes without the use of violence.

In June 2016, women from across northern Uganda gathered on Patiko Hill to release a charter demanding an end to corporate land grabs and a government more responsive to their rights. Among them were the brave mothers who protected Apaa from utter ruin.

“The climbing of this hill is only a beginning,” noted one of the organizers. “Later this year, women from all across Africa and beyond will caravan to the foot of Kilimanjaro to chart the way forward on their land rights.”

Action Alliance is an organization on the frontlines of social change, human rights, and environmental preservation. We trek where other organizations and individuals fear to step. Without standing up for peace and justice and getting our hands dirty at the grassroots, no worthy cause will be truly advanced.

In training and working with allies such as Anek and Odoch, we have learned a lot about community organizing. Our rationale for piloting our philosophy of strategic nonviolent action in Amuru was simple. We knew we would suffer arrests, intimidation, and possibly violence. We knew the political space was open only to an elite few. We knew the community was ready to take risks for their cause. If we could succeed in our mission in Amuru where we had no money, few contacts, and little experience, then surely our approach to social change could be adapted in other parts of Uganda that are safer and better equipped to achieve their goals.

## Arrested in Lira: How a reckless DPC was chased

On December 6, 2014, Action Alliance was invited to guide a handful of women and youth from Lira in the skills and theories of nonviolence. When government spies were sent to the dialogue, Action Alliance personnel welcomed them, fully aware of their intentions.

Some participants left the room, aware of the risks associated with staying. When DPC Ashraf Chemonges Seiko stormed the room fully armed, gassing some of those present and loading them onto a police truck, the five who were arrested were prepared for the trials they would face.

First, the group worked to secure the early release of Suzan Abong Wilmot, who was pregnant at the time and could not manage to stay in the deplorable conditions of Lira's police station. Suzan worked with her contacts to mobilize local and international media coverage, as well as meals and visitations to the male detainees, which would help ensure their safety. To circumvent the many questioning eyes of Lira, DPC Chemonges charges the suspects with unlawful assembly and transferred them to Kireka SUI, a facility known to torture those who undermine the interests of political elites.

After an illegally prolonged detention and much financial, legal, and media support snowballing, the remaining four suspects were given police bond. Meanwhile, DPC Chemonges, whose ego is far bigger than his body mass, was being reprimanded by his superiors.

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The victims of DPC's Chemonges' recklessness, including staff members of Action Alliance, decided to give the DPC an opportunity to seek forgiveness and reconciliation. Using financial support raised during their detainment, they organized an interfaith thanksgiving prayer, knowing that the Public Order Management Act had no authority over religious functions. This gave them extra legal leverage.



*ActAll trainees learning about creative nonviolence*

The organizers invited DPC Chemonges as the guest of honor, but when he arrived, he deployed heavily armed soldiers and police, as well as plain-clothes operatives. He ordered the shut down of what he alleged was another “illegal meeting.”

The organizers were prepared for his wild mannerisms. Local media had been invited, as well as neighbors and religious leaders who witnessed his rage. At the perfect time during DPC Chemonges'

rant, the DJ turned up the volume and Bob Marley wailed, “Get up, stand up. Stand up for your rights!” This pushed DPC Chemonges over the line of lunacy as the function was dispersed.

Radio announcers returned to their studios to ask the public whether Chemonges would remain their DPC. Shortly thereafter, he was transferred, and was again reprimanded in his new jurisdiction for similar reckless behaviors.

In the study of nonviolence, there is a term known as “political jiu-jitsu.” It is a theory which supposes that one's power is not found in his aggression, but in his ability to provoke his opponent to the extent that he reacts wildly, and is thus set off-balance.

While the group of women and youth that had sought the expertise and insight of Action Alliance on December 6<sup>th</sup>, 2014 may have gained something from their discussions, the real lessons were learned from the scenarios they encountered following their arrests. Since the time of the incident, the only arrest of individuals present at the December 6<sup>th</sup> meeting resulted in a quick and unconditional release of the detainees (who had been seized by Chemonges' replacement DPC Ezra Tugume while watching a movie in Action Alliance's office).



*An ActAll trainer facilitates an outdoor training game involving physical movement, debate, and organizing skills. Each ActAll training is tailor-made for the particular clients participating.*