

# BRIGHT PROSPECTS OR AN OMINOUS FUTURE

## Anticipating Oil in Uganda

**Text:** *Annika Witte*

### Abstract

Analysing competing visions of Uganda's future with oil, this article offers a new perspective on the resource curse as a risk discourse. Political and civil society actors in Uganda create and negotiate visions of the future that are framed by the resource curse thesis: oil could be a blessing or a curse. Connecting this discourse to prevalent notions of uncertainty in Uganda's oil region, I argue that for the people, knowledge of the resource curse increases their uncertainty about the future.

**Keywords:** *future, oil, not-yet-ness, risk, uncertainty, resource curse, Uganda*

### Introduction

Is oil a blessing, or is it a curse? This question is repeatedly asked in Uganda and in other potential future oil states. Forecasters and prophets from politics, «civil society»<sup>1</sup> and the social sciences have posed and debated this question time and again. Rather than following this well-trodden path, this paper asks a different question: What does the blessing-or-curse-talk reveal about the significations of oil? What if these prophecies and prognoses are not objective scientific truths, but rather negotiations of power over meanings and resources? And finally, what effect does this talk have when the oil is still in the making, as it is in Uganda? This paper looks at the way oil is anticipated in Uganda. Although oil production has not yet started, its anticipation

has had social, economic and political effects. In its state of not-yet-ness, oil has gained a discursive presence in politics, civil society and the media. The oil is relevant in this «economy of expectations», where financial resources flow into the performance and management of both negative and positive expectations (Weszkalnys 2011: 349-352). By looking into how an oil future is anticipated by different actors, it is possible to understand the political and social dynamics around the production of oil. In this article, I analyse how the government and civil society produce dichotomous visions of the future with oil: whereas the government paints a picture of a bright future in which oil is a blessing to all, civil society portrays oil as a dark shadow looming over Uganda. An important realization is that these opposing visions are both framed within the resource curse concept.

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<sup>1</sup> I use «civil society» to refer to actors with a similar vision of a petro-future, namely activists from Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and Community Based Organisations (CBOs).

The resource curse thesis, a concept developed in economic and political sciences, seeks to explain how and why, despite greater revenues, resource rich countries perform worse than resource poor ones. Commonly referred to as the «paradox of plenty» (Karl 1997: 4), numerous studies have found that resource rich countries have greater inequalities of wealth, higher levels of poverty and corruption, and tend toward despotism, political instability and conflict (e.g. Ross 1999, Auty 1993). From its origin in the social sciences, the resource curse concept has been turned into a «traveling model» by civil society (Weszkalnys 2011, Reyna 2007). Despite criticism from within the social sciences (e.g. Base-dau 2005, Watts 2004), the thesis remains highly influential in academia and in public discourse. In Uganda, the resource curse thesis, especially in the form of the «governance curse» (Pegg 2006), has powerful exponents in civil society and government. According to the governance curse thesis, a country only suffers from the «curse» if it lacks proper governance, transparency and accountability. Adding to the critical literature, I argue that it is important to consider how this resource curse talk affects Ugandans imaginations of their future. Combining insights from anthropological studies on oil and research on risk and uncertainty, I show that it is a form of risk communication, in which civil society actors in Uganda draw on the governance curse theory to argue for causal linkages between oil and potential negative future outcomes.

By its very nature, the future is full of contingencies and thus remains uncertain. For Reynolds Whyte (2010: 213), uncertainty is a «state of mind and minding» that refers to an inability to predict the outcome of events. In other words, uncertainty is the realisation of a lack of knowledge on an issue of importance. Wynne (1992) distinguishes between risk, where the odds are known, and uncertainty, where the odds are unknown. Through risks, we seek to gain control over and limit the possible contingencies of the future. To transform uncertainties into risks, we require knowledge, which will then allow us to make guesses about the likelihood of future events (Wynne 1992). Knowledge of risks includes knowing who or what is at risk – and from which person, action or object. The object at risk is something to which people attach value, something they wish to protect from harm (Boholm & Corvellec 2011). In other words, a risk is understood as the relations between an object at risk, and the persons or objects which threaten

it. Risks themselves are always embedded in the social context. To understand something as a risk, actors need to draw on their knowledge and value systems, and thereby identify both potentially harmful agents and that which is likely to be harmed (Boholm 2003, Douglas & Wildavsky 1983). Risks are thus the identification of causal links that warn of potential harmful or unfortunate events and the ability to make an informed guess about how likely these undesired outcomes are.

Beck (2008) calls risks the anticipation of catastrophe. Coming from the Latin *anticipat*, which means acted in advance, anticipate means to guess or be aware, and to take action in preparation for an event. Anticipation can therefore go beyond merely expecting or predicting something, it may also incorporate taking action based on an expectation. According to Weszkalnys (2014), anticipation brings the uncertain future into the present as discourses, practices, technologies and material devices. Risks are modes of anticipating the future and containing its' uncertainty, thereby creating the opportunity to influence the future through present actions. Risks are thus a means to manage the uncertainty of the future, to wrestle agency from chance. Thus, to control uncertainty, risks need to be identified, which in turn requires knowledge. Yet accumulating knowledge does not necessarily reduce uncertainty; rather, greater knowledge may also introduce further unknowns, and thereby increase actors' feelings of uncertainty (Callon et al. 2011).

Uganda's oil future remains close and distant at the same time – no one knows when it will start; it hovers above the people, an immanence that can always be postponed. Since oil was discovered in 2006, people have been waiting for it to materialise. This period has been filled with experiences or threats of displacement, and with talk of what future oil may bring. Following Hilgartner (1992), I argue that the talk about the resource curse in Uganda is effectively an «emplacement of risks» in the evolving oil assemblage<sup>2</sup>. Through successful risk emplacement, actors gain political and economic agency and power. However, the resource curse risk has repercussions beyond the immediately evident. While the resource curse claims to address grievances of the communities, I argue that it actually intensifies them; for those in the oil region, knowledge of the resource curse as a risk has increased their feelings of uncertainty around what an oil future will bring.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The oil assemblage presents a mix of forces such as the petro-state, the transnational oil industry, the military, civil society, and local political forces (Watts 2012).

<sup>3</sup> The article is based on risk as an analytical concept and not a 'local' description. In my analysis, I use the concept to reveal relations of cultural or social values. Furthermore, the resource curse is a new risk originating from 'Western' notions of good governance and sound economics that is promoted by civil society and accepted by fellow Ugandans.

My research in Uganda is concerned with the developments and negotiations that take place in a prospective oil state. The ethnographic approach is particularly well suited to understand these processes in new or future oil states because looking at the practices of «resource-making» (Ferry & Limbert 2008) allows the researcher to explore how various actors negotiate the significations of oil (Behrends & Reyna 2011, Behrends and Schareika 2010). Anthropological works on the temporality of resources offer insights in how to methodologically approach oil in a state of not-yet-ness. The concept of not-yet-ness (based on Adam, 2009) highlights how temporality and (im)materiality are deeply intertwined. Similarly, the concepts of «resource materialities» (Richardson & Weszkalnys 2014) and resource-making emphasize that resources do not exist by and of themselves, but rather are brought into being through knowledge, as well as infrastructures and processes of social and political negotiation.

I decided a broad, multi-sited ethnography was best suited to study oil-in-the-making which takes place in various sites and involves a variety of actors. During the more than 15 months of fieldwork I conducted in Uganda between 2012 and 2015, I was based in the oil city Hoima, and made several trips to villages in the exploration areas. I established relationships and conducted interviews with, among others, activists from civil society and donor agencies, representatives of oil companies, the Ministry of Energy and other government agencies involved in oil, as well as oil workers, residents and politicians. I participated in conferences, workshops and other events held by civil society and oil companies. For my analysis, I draw on interviews, informal conversations and observations, as well as published materials from the state and civil society organisations.

In the paper, I first describe the state of oil in Uganda, and the uncertainty of people in the oil region. I highlight how this uncertainty was fuelled both by people's experiences with oil, and talk about oil. I describe the ways civil society activists anticipated oil bringing a bleak future, while state officials anticipated a brighter tomorrow. This polarization between blessing and curse points to a successful risk emplacement: civil society activists had established the resource curse as a risk in the public perception. I then outline how, for the people in the oil region, the future did not become something more palpable and manageable through the new risk, but rather even more uncertain.

## Uncertain Outlooks in the Oil Region

The first major oil discoveries in Uganda were made in 2006 in the Hoima district. Today, Uganda has estimated oil resources of 6.5 billion barrels, of which 1.8 billion barrels are deemed recoverable.<sup>4</sup> Now with Uganda preparing for the oil development phase, and production expected to start in 2018, momentous changes seem just around the corner. However, oil has been «just around the corner» for a decade now, with the government delaying development time and again. However, Uganda has taken time to set up a legislative framework and to build-up a trained and professional workforce for the petroleum department<sup>5</sup>. In delaying, the government has thus been acting contrary to the general assumption that leaders of financially poor, resource rich countries will act quickly to start production and claim the financial revenues.

This slowness in moving from exploration to production was disappointing to the oil companies but also to Ugandans I spoke to in the oil region. Rather than enjoying the new wealth they had presumed would come with oil, new risks and uncertainties had started to cloud their outlooks. Indeed, a sense of uncertainty appeared to pervade life in the exploration areas, with politicians, fishermen, farmers and entrepreneurs stressing they were unsure how oil would affect their lives. They told me they lacked knowledge about the oil, and felt generally left out of its development: they had heard about it, but they had not seen it; they had seen oil company men, but they did not (fully) understand what they were doing. Locals often only learnt about activities when the companies actually started working, and even then, they did not know or understand what the companies were doing. Many interlocutors' statements reflected uneasiness about the future, an uncertainty about whether their way of life could resist the changes oil would bring. Even those lucky to work as casual labour in the oil industry found their future somewhat uncertain, as they could lose their jobs overnight.

The discovery of oil has evoked both hopes for a better future, and discomfort and doubts. People in the region hoped for employment and improved infrastructure, while fearing an influx of foreign men, a rise in «immorality» and sexually transmitted infection rates, and a loss of «local culture». Often sounding frustrated or resigned, fishermen

<sup>4</sup> For more information on the history of oil exploration in Uganda, see Patey (2015), Vokes (2012), Kiiza et al. (2011).

<sup>5</sup> With its technical expertise and political will, Uganda has been praised for having secured some of the best oil contracts in Sub-Saharan Africa (Hickey et al. 2015).

feared losing their right to fish, farmers feared losing their land. In an interview in 2012, a politician<sup>6</sup> from Kyehoro, a village in an exploration area, related the people's fears about resettlement and land grabbing to me.

*Since oil was discovered here in 2006 by Hardman, now the deepest worry even up to [to]day is eviction. Because eviction, what I mean by eviction, that people may be chased away from here minus compensation, or people, the superior people in the government, may come and even chase people away forcefully and retain the what, the land. That's the people's fear. [...] That's the most important thing, what everybody is fearing. Even though we are living here, but we are not living in peace after the oil discovery.*

Statements such as this highlight how important land, and access to it, is for communities that rely primarily on agriculture, herding, and fishing for their livelihoods. These fears were at least partially based on experience as, during seismic exploration activities, people had had their homes and fields destroyed, and there was a temporary ban on fishing. Others had received unsatisfactory compensation for land taken in the construction of a road from Hoima to Kaiso, a fishing village on the shores of Lake Albert, where oil wells had been drilled.<sup>7</sup> Having seen so much activity, for many it was hard to believe that there was (still) no oil. People said they felt deceived or cheated, that they had waited in vain, especially as, during my fieldwork period, oil activities had been reduced. In villages that had initially seen a lot of activity, the first excitement had subsided, and the benefits of the corporate social responsibility campaign, like the hospital the oil company Tullow had built in Kyehoro, had literally started to crumble.

People felt alienated by the government (located in the remote capital), by the companies, and even by the NGOs. Many criticised NGOs for focusing on their own business and financial gain, rather than helping or representing local communities. They were also sceptical of the government and the oil companies, and the information they were providing. While people wanted information, there seemed to be no steady and reliable information flow (Van Alstine

et al. 2014). The NGOs, the government officials and the oil companies that visited the communities to apparently address their fears and worries brought with them their own visions of the future, visions which clearly coincided with their own agendas. In the following, I describe these visions and the actors propagating them.

## Civil Society's Vision: An Ominous Future

In Uganda, civil society is usually juxtaposed to the government and the oil companies. Such a representation of civil society as the counterforce to the state and the private sector has been criticized by social anthropologists as misleading because it obscures the linkages between actors across these sectors (Ferguson 2007, Mitchell 1999). While I take these criticisms into account, I use the term civil society because it is widely used in Uganda. The actors who describe themselves as civil society share a similar vision of a petro-future, in which they painted a gloomy picture of a Uganda with oil. Civil society organisations (CSOs)<sup>8</sup> in Uganda are mainly funded by international donors, especially NGOs, and also by Ugandan government agencies in some cases. As this section shows, the donor money plays an important role in shaping Uganda's oil complex.<sup>9</sup> In Uganda, most CSOs have a broad spectrum approach rather than a single focus. With more donor money for oil issues in recent years, the number of organisations involved in oil has increased. Indeed, CSOs have formed networks concerned with the governance of oil, such as Publish What You Pay (PWYP) Uganda Chapter.

National NGOs mainly operate from the capital Kampala or in collaboration with organisations in the oil region, whereas many Community Based Organisations (CBOs) are in the district capital, and therefore closer to the affected communities. Organisations within civil society are not typically grass-root organisations, but rather enterprises run by individuals who depend on them for their livelihood. The support the civil society entrepreneurs or «development brokers» (Bierschenk et al. 2002) enjoy from the communities is directly related to their ability to create patron-client relations through the «acquisition, control and redistribution of

<sup>6</sup> To protect them, I provide details about my sources according to their status, the context in which the statements were made, and according to how controversial they are.

<sup>7</sup> Due to population fluctuations and shifting exploration sites, it is difficult to estimate how many people will be affected by the oil operations. In the refinery area alone, around 7000 people have been identified for resettlement and/or compensation.

<sup>8</sup> I use CSO to refer to all organizations, while I reserve NGO for bigger organizations in Kampala, and CBO for smaller district level organizations.

<sup>9</sup> Weszkalnys (2011) points out how the resource curse is mobilized through donor money and initiatives.

development «revenue» (Mosse & Lewis 2006: 12). According to Ugandan civil society narratives, the communities in the oil region lacked basic knowledge and therefore did not know how to protect their interests. Donor money should be invested in educating the communities, and CSOs presented themselves to donors as the major source of information on and linkage to the communities. In doing so, they have successfully created their own brokerage space (Murphy 1981). Importantly, the donor money was not only essential for the CSOs to operate, it was also an important income source for the activists.

For the locally operating NGOs, the most common form of providing information to the communities were workshops and community meetings. The workshops, for example, were held in expensive hotels in Kampala or the district capitals of the oil region. Usually a representative of the oil companies and another from the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Development (MEMD), as well as representatives of the communities in the oil region, were invited. As an incentive to attend, everyone was paid allowances. The workshops were presented as a platform for dialogue between the different parties, and were also considered important in disseminating information to the communities through the multiplier effect of the representatives. Other workshops, as part of «sensitization» campaigns, were held in the villages of the exploration areas. A CBO based in the district capital «mobilized» community members who listened to the presentations, watched the documentaries, enjoyed free sodas and food, and then provided feedback for the NGO to take back to Kampala.

In 2012, I participated in a series of community consultation meetings organised by two Kampala based NGOs. However, mobilization had failed to bring many community members to the meetings. Due to a lack of attendants in one village, the NGOs drove to the neighbouring village Nyahaira where around 30 men and a few women were gathered in a school building for a meeting held by another NGO from Kampala. After that meeting, the two NGOs I was with took over. One of the directors set out to convince people of the necessity of the new monitoring tool he had come to promote.

*It is your responsibility to make government listen to you. Government doesn't care about you, but government is there to do things on our behalf. If these people do not listen to what the people say, nothing will be done. You need to talk. Government [the] world over only listens to numbers, the voters. [...] And remember, we are dealing with people that are super rich. People that have access to power, but you must know what you are fighting for and [have] resolution. Don't fight your wars alone!*

In the speech, the director alternated between you and we forms, positioning the «we» against «them», the people with power and money. His fellow activist left no doubt about the legitimacy of that wealth, accusing the government and oil companies of stealing from the people: «We are dealing with people that are very rich, the thieves we are hunting are very rich». And it was these thieves who needed to be monitored. Several other organisations employed a similarly antagonistic approach in the affected communities, using sensational language such as describing oil as a «time bomb», and underlining how they were standing together with the communities to fight for a common cause. From the perspective of risk communication, the NGO's strategy was clear. Broadly speaking, risk communication intends to guide the actions of others, and an important part of this is laying blame should something negative eventuate (Douglas 1992). In these statements, and indeed throughout their events, civil society actors clearly pointed the finger at government (and oil companies) as risk agents.

NGOs also promoted their vision of the future through booklets, leaflets and documentaries. While some materials showcased the NGO's work to donor agencies, others, especially the documentaries, were used to interact with the communities. In the meetings and publications, NGOs cautioned people to start considering the imminent risk posed by oil activities and oil revenues. Using Nigeria as a case study of the resource curse made real, they distributed pamphlets and posters, and repeatedly showed images of environmental destruction left behind in the extractive communities. Indeed, activists often equated Nigeria with corruption, bad governance, oil pollution, greedy oil companies and poverty in general. Taken together, the meetings and materials painted a sombre picture of Uganda's oil future.

At several of the community interventions I attended, the resource curse perspective was presented in the PWYP Uganda documentary «Blessing or Curse? Oil and Uganda's Future». In the film, Nigeria is contrasted to Botswana, and the audience is asked which vision they would endorse for Uganda. After the screenings, some audience members would reiterate the film's plea and demanded that Uganda should not become another Nigeria and should rather go the «Botswana way». CSOs offered the «Botswana way» as one solution to the curse: in applying the «internationally recognised mechanisms for managing such impacts» developed by international experts, Uganda could «harness» its potential and oil could indeed become a blessing according to a 2011 booklet of International Alert.

The panaceas for the resource curse included accountability, transparency, capacity building, and general good governance and management. At a conference in Arua in

Northern Uganda in 2013, the director of the CBO RICE explained how the resource curse could be avoided through the right economic management. The director of WGI also points to the importance of good resource management in one of their leaflets:

*Oil is a blessing to Uganda. It is a curse only when it is badly managed. [...] In order for oil to continue being a blessing, it requires a robust legislative and institutional framework that provides transparency and accountability in the management of the sector.*

In this assessment, the NGO's view converged with that of the government: Oil was actually a blessing, but only if the government stayed on the right track. However, they also reiterated that it was the role of Ugandans, represented by civil society, to ensure the government did just that. Emphasizing the importance of swift action, civil society actors usually tasked the audience with joining them to manage the resource curse risk. However, the solutions proposed by the CSOs were rather general, and offered no concrete guidelines for community members to follow, leaving them feeling uncertain and without any real sense of agency. During workshop discussions, the audience reacted by merely reproducing the main messages. As one participant of the Arua conference said: «If we manage it wrong, the oil will become a curse. If we manage it well, it will be a blessing». Such statements can also be read as a strategic positioning of the actors to gain or maintain a stake in the economy of expectation (Weszkalnys 2011: 349).

Through these events, publications and media appearances, CSOs have managed to make the resource curse a public issue which frequently appears in the media, parliamentary debates, and in conversations on oil in the oil region. In doing so, civil society activists have therefore managed to build and maintain a brokerage space for themselves. Indeed, even the government's discourse on oil was framed by the resource curse, as I discuss in greater detail below.

## The State's Vision: A Blessed Future

*With our oil, matters will be easier. We shall be able to fund the roads, the railway and the power stations easily using our own money* (President Museveni, State of the Nation Address June 7, 2012).

The main propagators of the government's enthusiastic vision are President Museveni and the Petroleum Department at the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Development. The president has been in office since 1986, making him one of Africa's longest-ruling presidents. In 2016, he retained his post in elections that appeared ridden with irregularities (Gibb 2016). Meanwhile, the Petroleum Department of MEMD has been at the forefront of negotiations with the oil industry. With its headquarters in Entebbe, the seat of the state house, the department enjoys close proximity to the president. Parliamentarians and district level politicians from the oil region are the other important state actors.

In his 2015 state of the nation address, President Museveni stressed that the government had long made major accomplishments with limited financial resources, and suggested that with oil and gas revenues, they could achieve even more, including the «Uganda Vision 2040». This project envisages «a transformed Ugandan society from a peasant and low income to a modern and prosperous, upper middle income country within 30 years» (National Planning Authority 2013). Oil revenues are central to the government's «vision» as they would be invested in the development of the country's infrastructure and human resources, thereby creating employment and fostering technology transfer. According to the government narrative, to «effectively harness the opportunity» (op. cit.: 48) that oil and gas would provide in stimulating economic growth, good governance would be essential, or these opportunities would be missed, and the resource curse would ensue. Based on the assumption that it would add value to the oil by creating forward linkages to other industries, the government successfully demanded the construction of a refinery from the oil companies. To support these developments, the government plans to offer capacity building programmes and local area development funds for local businesses. To ensure transparency, environmental protection and good governance, the «vision» also postulates that the government will strengthen the legal and institutional framework of the sector (op. cit.).<sup>10</sup>

One of the government's initial plans related to oil was the National Oil and Gas Policy in 2008, which aimed to use oil revenues to eradicate poverty, create value for society and avoid the oil curse (MEMD 2008). The 2008 policy functioned as the industry guidelines until the creation of dedicated oil legislation in 2013. Subscribing to the resource curse hypothesis, many state and government offi-

<sup>10</sup> In effect, work on the legislative framework for oil and gas was already under way at the time of the publication of the «vision» and the government had already instituted programs and institutions to train Ugandans for the oil and gas industry.

cials positioned their arguments within the dichotomous curse-blessing framework, nevertheless portraying Uganda as in a prime position to enjoy the blessings of oil. At a civil society workshop, the head of the local government in Bulisa, the Chairman LC 5<sup>11</sup> remarked that the oil curse would only occur if there was bad governance, something which was not an issue in Uganda. During the civil society workshop in Arua, the District Community Development Officer from Arua district also reiterated this vision.

*With industrialization and urbanization we will see big business come to our country. How do we achieve this? Definitely these things will come, as the country grows, as the country realizes its own revenues. And the revenues will come from the oil. The oil revenues shall be invested in infrastructure and social services and then everyone will benefit. So oil is not a curse. You have heard yesterday that if it is a blessing or a curse, I am saying it is a blessing.*

Countering the gloomy projections from the CSOs, the officer suggested that wealth and development would easily, almost naturally, flow from oil.<sup>12</sup> Rather than refuting the curse / blessing dichotomy established by civil society, government officials stressed what they had achieved for Uganda, and their commitment to continuing their dedicated service to the country. Using the resource curse frame in their public speeches, the government officials accepted the risk narrative of civil society. This is a major achievement for civil society because once a risk has been accepted, it can be used to influence future developments. Hilgartner (1992) argues that the successful emplacement of a risk considerably shapes the future of any socio-technical network. Indeed, in Uganda, the emplacement of the risk shaped the development of the oil assemblage; certain actors (especially from civil society) and institutions became necessary to manage the risk and prevent the resource curse. Moreover, the risk influenced the significations given to oil, and how people perceived their future with oil production close to their homes. In the following section, I show how the prevalence of the resource curse risk narrative contributed to the uncertainty pervasive amongst people in the oil region.

## Presence of Ignorance is Uncertainty

According to the English proverb, ignorance is bliss. Complete ignorance may be bliss, but on realizing one lacks vital knowledge to make an informed decision, any feelings of blissfulness evaporate. For, as I described at the beginning of the article, uncertainty is the realization of the limits of one's knowledge. In other words, uncertainty can be described as the presence of absent knowledge.<sup>13</sup>

As I have illustrated above, new tensions have arisen with the discovery of oil, with local people, farmers and fishermen in particular fearing their land and livelihoods were at risk. This situation left many unsure who to trust. Indeed, local people had little means of negotiating fair compensation, being essentially forced to take whatever the government offered them. They were not only distressed that compensation was unfair, but that it could also take years to arrive, as in the case of the construction of the refinery, where some villagers had to wait over three years for resettlement.

The gloomy future envisaged by CSOs added a solemn note to the experiences people had already had. During my first interview with the chairman LC 1<sup>14</sup> of Kaiso in 2012, I noticed a poster from a national NGO on his wall with a flaring well on it. In looking at the poster, he said, people feared that Kaiso could look like that in the future. Another Kaiso resident also mentioned to me that people were anxious that the Nigerian experience would be repeated there, and that they could be resettled and excluded from the benefits of oil. His resigned conclusion was that maybe they would be better off without oil, for while not producing the oil would mean not reaping the benefits, it would also mean avoiding the dreaded curse.

Boholm argues that risk communication does not mitigate conflicts, as encouraging dialogue and sharing perspectives does not engender a sense of agency to everyone involved. Rather, those affected by others' risk decisions continue to perceive themselves as the «patient», as lacking agency (Boholm 2015: 111). CSOs in Uganda communicated what

<sup>11</sup> Chairman LC 5 is the highest elected political representative at the district level. Here I discuss both high level district politicians and central government officials as their positions on oil were remarkably similar.

<sup>12</sup> The state demanded that it was represented at all workshops and conferences.

<sup>13</sup> This is based on the concept of «presence of absence» (Bille et al 2010: 4) but could also be described as «nonknowledge» (Gross & Bleicher 2013: 319). Nonknowledge is considered to be a kind of ignorance where the borders of knowledge are either known or wilfully ignored. In this article, I am concerned with the creation of nonknowledge, rather than the question of how people deal with it.

<sup>14</sup> Chairman LC 1 is the first elected official at the lowest level of the local government structure.

they saw as the risks of oil, and made recommendations on how these risks could be managed. Civil society sought to emplace the resource curse risk into the oil assemblage by creating or aggravating uncertainty about oil and a future with it.<sup>15</sup> Alongside past experiences of state neglect, unfair compensation, and life in a region the state considered 'hard to reach and hard to stay', the resource curse talk fuelled uncertainty in the communities.<sup>16</sup> In this context, the agency the resource curse risk narrative offered to people in the oil region was hollow; important decisions about the oil were not theirs to make. In Boholm's sense, the people in the oil exploration areas remained patients of the resource curse risk.

Based on my research, I argue that the transformation of uncertainty into risk is only complete if the risk narrative provides guidelines for action. As stated above, I understand risks as a way of anticipating the future in discourse and practice. In Uganda's oil region, knowledge of the resource curse risk failed to constrain the uncertainty people felt or expressed because the risk itself, or at least how it was communicated, provided insufficient knowledge for them to act. The visions of the future that civil society and the government brought to these communities neither answered immediate needs, nor extended agency to them. In other words, the information provided by the government and civil society did not make the future more manageable to members of the local communities. As such, their uncertainty became even more acute.

The financial resources channelled into this economy of expectation by various international organisations and donor agencies to raise awareness of the resource curse had a profound influence on Uganda's oil assemblage. Rather than opening agency to the extractive communities, the resource curse risk offered a space to CSOs to engage in managing the risk, enabling them to work for what they believed to be a better future, but also allowing them to accrue financial and political resources.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have traced early negotiations of oil in Uganda. Civil society activists and politicians have, despite the fact oil is still in the process of becoming, turned it into a powerful discursive force. It was mainly present in an economy of expect-

tation. Civil society successfully framed the debate about oil around the resource curse concept. The possible future meanings of oil were thereby dichotomised, with the government portraying oil as a blessing, and civil society portraying it as a curse. While government saw all the mechanisms in place to avoid the curse, civil society activists argued that their knowledge and guidance was essential in managing the risks of oil, and to ensure it became a blessing. In establishing the resource curse as a risk, civil society had opened a brokerage space for itself to shape the future of the oil assemblage and to reap financial benefits and political power from it.

Finally, I demonstrated how the success of the resource curse narrative has had a negative effect on local communities, with the communication of the risk making them uncertain about their future in an oil state. This uncertainty had also been fuelled by local experiences with government and other actors in the preparation for oil. Although risks generally make the uncertainty of the future more manageable, civil society's promotion of the resource curse risk has failed to provide feasible management solutions that are within the reach of the fishermen, farmers, small-scale entrepreneurs and even active politicians in the oil region. The oil talk has left local actors feeling powerless and uncertain.

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<sup>15</sup> In her ethnography on environmental waste sites in the United States, Dahlberg (2016) shows how creating uncertainty is an essential part of getting one's risk perception acknowledged.

<sup>16</sup> In the decades before the oil, Ugandans went through volatile and insecure periods: including two civil wars, the latest ending around the time of the oil discovery; structural adjustment programs in the 1990s; and the ongoing AIDS crisis.



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## AUTHOR

**Annika Witte** holds a M.A. from the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz. Her doctoral research project on the social meanings of oil in Uganda is associated with the project «Oil and Social Change in Niger and Chad», led by Prof. Nikolaus Schareika. Witte is a Ph.D. student and research assistant at the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Goettingen. Her areas of interest include oil, risk, uncertainty, state, police, and political and economic anthropology. She has conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Benin and Uganda.

*awitte1@uni-goettingen.de*

*Institute for Social and Cultural Anthropology  
Georg-August-Universität Göttingen  
Theaterplatz 15  
D-37073 Göttingen*