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Broken citizenship

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SUMMARY

Among the many large-scale conflicts that have defined the African continent in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) rebellion against President Museveni's government in northern Uganda. The conflict resulted in insecurity in all forms, including the abduction and use of children in war, a continuation of the historical involvement of children in conflicts the world over.

The children's war experiences of abduction, captivity and other human rights violations while with the LRA have led to complex and difficult relationships with their community and they now need assistance to be reintegrated back into society. Consequently, the general research question guiding this study was: What are the experiences of the formerly abducted children and how can they be reintegrated into their communities?

The following specific questions guided the research:

1. What are the war experiences of formerly abducted children from the moment of abduction by the LRA, during captivity and when they return home in northern Uganda?
2. How are formal institutions (the Child Protection Unit, Non-Governmental Organizations and the Amnesty Commission) reintegrating the formerly abducted children in northern Uganda?
3. How are endogenous methods being used by the Acholi community to reintegrate the formerly abducted children?
4. How does citizenship interface with the war experiences of formerly abducted children and practices for their social reintegration in northern Uganda?
5. What best intervention practices for reintegration can be identified based on reintegration activities taking place at institutions and communities for the sake of re-creating citizenship?

The theoretical framework of this study builds on three concepts of social reintegration put into practice by different actors. Formal reintegration practices are usually executed by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and draw on the United Nations (UN) concept of Disarmament Demobilization Reintegration (DDR), where the reintegration, R phase, is usually neglected. The concept lies at the foundation of formal, institutionally based and short-term social reintegration practices which for the most part consist of psychosocial counselling, training and some kind of resettlement package. Additionally, the community-based reintegration practices of the

Acholi people in northern Uganda derive from a spiritual world-view that includes beliefs and ritual practices. These practices include traditional healing practices and schooling. Combining the two approaches, citizenship becomes normative for reintegration. Citizenship is important for reintegration because of its underlying concerns for participation, membership and agency. Its stress on acceptance and the building of relationships among members of a community emphasizes the importance of communitarian citizenship. Justified by a range of underlying concerns related to the social problem under study, the research used a participatory action research approach. It was primarily exploratory research. Qualitative methods ranging from life histories, focus group discussions and interviews were used in the tradition of qualitative research. A workshop was organized both to validate initial findings and collect data for suggesting improvements to practices.

The children were abducted from a familiar family environment, on the way to the garden, school or just running errands. Other children experienced multiple abductions, thus entailing multiple losses of family, community, school and every familiar support system. For all of them this left an indelible mark on their memory. After abduction the children were taken into the bush where they experienced different forms of violence and lived a life characterized by poor health, poor nutrition, the killing of fellow abductees and civilians, involvement in actual fighting, living in the wild, long marches and looting. The story of each formerly abducted child is different. There is a invisible personal 'inner story' that the children could not manage to put into words and perhaps will never be told or heard in words. They are the experiences that you know exist but there is as yet no way to know them. It makes each child's story and experience in captivity different and particular.

The abducted children were either taken to the LRA bases in the Sudan or roamed with the LRA in the bush of northern Uganda. The walk to the Sudan was long and arduous, but life there was more sedentary and a little more comfortable compared to captivity in the northern Uganda bush as the LRA base camps in the Sudan had a more village-like environment. However, those who stayed with their rebel units in northern Uganda were constantly on the run, fatigued and targets for the Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF).

Constant threats to life, initiation rites and forced bonding were part of the experiences of the formerly abducted children both in the Sudan and in northern Uganda. Initiation rites were aimed at intimidating and bonding them with their captors. Bonding further occurred through military training and as a coping strategy through the 'bush families' organized around the commanders and their 'wives'. This study calls this 'dependency-bonding'.

The children acquired 'value' codes which condoned violence in the form of looting, killing and the destruction of property as a right to survival.

Girls had the additional experience of being 'wives' and child mothers. Becoming a wife and mother was the end result of a specific sequence of experiences for girls, whose femininity was abused not least by being assigned commander husbands. Initially a devastating experience for the young girls, they eventually assumed privileged positions in the rebel community as the wives of the commanders. They nonetheless experienced the particular difficulties of being child mothers under stressful and insecure circumstances. For some their privileged positions did not spare them from 'domestic violence'.

The children's stories of their experience in captivity reveals the resilience of the human spirit and their individual heroism. The children had a deep wish to change their circumstances. They did this by planning and executing their escapes, which were made possible by different factors, such as individual courage, knowledge of the location, UPDF bombardments and personal life skills such as an ability to swim, or knowledge of edible wild fruits and roots which could be eaten while on the run. The different forms of violence the children have suffered resulted in trauma-related psychosocial imbalances, of which bad memories, anxiety, depression, hostility, broken relationships with the community and personal disintegration are the manifestations.

The involvement of institutions in the social reintegration of formerly abducted children occurs in three ways: military reintegration, humanitarian reintegration and political reintegration. First, militarily motivated reintegration takes place at the Child Protection Unit (CPU), through which all children who had escaped or been rescued were expected to pass and stay for a few days. The official aim was to give confidence to the children and demonstrate that the UPDF was not an enemy, even if the children had fought against them as child rebels. However, we found that intelligence gathering and recruitment were other possible, unstated aims.

Second, the reintegration practices of NGOs at reception centres were humanitarian and socially motivated. In the wake of the long conflict in northern Uganda, as in similar conflicts elsewhere, large numbers of NGOs moved into the region to offer services, among them NGOs that have either specifically focused on the formerly abducted children or now assist them among other activities. On the children's arrival at the reception centre, the staff assess their physical, emotional and psychological condition. While at the centre, learning activities, skills training, social activities and the provision of basic needs are elements of social reintegration.

Third, the political reintegration of the children is based on the Amnesty Act of 2000, which provides a legal framework within which reintegration is

approached. The Amnesty Commission did not directly receive returning children but was involved in advocacy for the return of the children at the height of the conflict, for example, through radio programmes such as *dwogo pacho*, which means 'come back home'. It further gave out amnesty certificates in addition to resettlement packages. In partnership with the private sector, the Commission was providing skills training for returnees such as child mothers who were not able to go back to school. Unfortunately, due to inadequate funding, community-based follow-up of formerly abducted children was not possible.

The Acholi people have also looked to aspects of their spiritual world-view to deal with the effects of the massive scale of abduction of their children and their atrocious misuse in war, which destroyed the social harmony of the community. The use of the values of the Acholi spiritual world-view helps to avert attacks of *cen* and thereby re-create social harmony. To re-create harmony and social order between the formerly abducted children, the community and the spiritual world, the Acholi use different rituals such as *nyono tong gweno*, *moyo tipu*, *mat oput* and *kwero merok*. These rituals are not always acceptable to all members of the community. In some cases there are tensions between Christianity, modernity and the traditional healing rituals. Going back to school was also viewed as being important within the wider community and thus a part of the reintegration process. Following this cue, we undertook to understand the experiences of formerly abducted children within the school setting. We found that formerly abducted children who were in school had a positive attitude towards schooling, identifying it as creating opportunities for them. Most formerly abducted children preferred life at school to that in the communities. Generally, formerly abducted children experienced a positive attitude towards them from teachers and fellow pupils, although sometimes they still experienced stigmatization. Non-abducted children, however, expressed their fear of the formerly abducted children because they were sometimes still aggressive and rough.

The analysis of the children's experiences of war and reintegration practices in the light of the concept of citizenship reveals a loss of citizenship or even a practice of negative citizenship. Reintegration practices, in contrast, represent citizenship recreation.

Overall, we found that the concepts and practices of institutional reintegration, community-based approaches and citizenship leave some important issues unaddressed. These are related to the continued difficulties faced by the children, the availability of resources and the potential of the children themselves, which should also be taken more seriously. We used these factors to develop a meaningful framework that we refer to as the needs-competences-problems-opportunities (NCPO) analysis. The NCPO analysis

provided an insight into the persisting reintegration problems and also established a useful framework and grounding for discussing strategies to improve reintegration practices in northern Uganda, including government policies. Using the NCPO analysis, a set of suggestions to improve reintegration practices were put forward and discussed, which in itself enhanced citizenship participation. The action research approach we used aimed not only at collaborative research and knowledge production but also the possibility for change. A workshop was held with all stakeholders involved in the research. The working document for the workshop was derived from the main findings of the research and the NCPO. The suggestions developed in the workshop include an all-inclusive support system that not only looks at formerly abducted children but the whole community, with an emphasis on agriculture, sustained help for the maimed and enhanced formal and informal education opportunities, in addition to the reinforcement of reconciliation processes and cultural activities. They reflect the possibility for change and it is our hope that elements of the suggestions can be of exemplary value to assist those in similar circumstances elsewhere.

Our major conclusions are:

- The social reintegration of children who have been involved in conflict is not a short-term project. It takes a very long time, involving multifaceted formal institutional and community-based activities that complement each other.
- In designing programmes for the long-term reintegration of war-affected children, their needs, competences, problems and opportunities need to be taken into account.
- Such a long-term programme for the social reintegration of children returning home cannot be left to NGOs and communities alone. The government needs to be involved to guarantee long-term sustainability.

