

CHAPTER FOUR

METHODOLOGY

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the methodology used in this research into the social reintegration of formerly abducted children for the purpose of re-creating their citizenship in northern Uganda. It presents an approach based on the foundations and characteristics of action research, providing the guiding principles for the entire project. Furthermore, the arguments in favour of action research and how it evolved in practice in the field will be presented. The remainder of the chapter will discuss some of the practical experiences and challenges of undertaking action research in a conflict area. I will begin by describing the area in which the research was done.

4.2 RESEARCH AREA

This research was carried out between March 2006 and September 2008 in three phases. The first fieldwork was carried out between March and June 2006. The second phase followed in April through to July 2007. The shortest and last phase was in September 2008, where we conducted a workshop for validation and the collaborative formulation of strategies and suggestions to improve reintegration practices. The initial stages of the research (March–June 2006) mostly focused on listening to the life histories of the formerly abducted children, and included a few focus group discussions and some interviews with parents. These covered the then Gulu, Kitgum and Apac districts. We also conducted some group interviews with the staff of KICWA in Kitgum district and the Concerned Parents Association in Lira, whose area of operation also covered Apac district. For logistical, security and content reasons, the second phase (March–July 2007) of the fieldwork, which concentrated on community-based reintegration practices and involved interviews with some elders and focus groups in schools, was carried out in Gulu district. We felt we could restrict ourselves to Gulu district in this second phase of the fieldwork because of our previous experience, which had shown that much of the information about the experiences of war-affected children and the community-based reintegration practices were similar across the districts affected. We were therefore still able to reach saturation point in terms of data collection without having to unnecessarily put ourselves at risk by travelling to more remote areas. In any case, grounded in qualitative research, what was important was information depth rather than information

breadth. In addition, due to the legacy of the two decades of conflict, most properly functioning schools, from which we needed to collect data to understand schooling experience as reintegration, were still largely concentrated around Gulu. This made for easy reach and accessibility.

4.3 RESEARCH APPROACH: ACTION RESEARCH

In its methodological orientation, the research was conducted using action research, and was primarily exploratory. The approach was preferred because of the complex issues involved in the specific topic of citizenship re-creation as a process of reintegration of war-affected children in northern Uganda. As indicated in the previous chapters, the underlying concerns with respect to this social problem include loss of relationships, trust, dignity and confidence, and a legacy of individual and collective guilt, trauma and painful memories, both among the children and within the community. In addition to these complex issues, the need for the community to receive and accept the returnees also became apparent. The responsibility of the community to do this, its dilemma in regard to accepting these disoriented children and the approach involved justified the use of action research as a tool to gain insight into how the community dealt with social reintegration. We assumed that the use of action research would enhance the collective learning process and contribute towards possible solutions for the difficulties involved in the social reintegration of formerly abducted children in northern Uganda. Before we go on to discuss the action research design in this study, we must understand some foundational issues related to the strands of action research used here. We will do this by discussing two perspectives of action research.

4.4 TWO PERSPECTIVES OF ACTION RESEARCH: INTELLECTUAL FOUNDATIONS

There are various strands of action-oriented research approaches, which include but are not limited to participatory action research, action learning and appreciative inquiry (see for example Boog *et al.*, 2008; Reason & Bradbury, 2001; Bray *et al.*, 2000). This research, however, is based on the general characteristics of action research derived from the collaborative learning and participatory approaches. The two approaches are presented as partly complementary perspectives of action research, which differ in terms of their emphasis on certain aspects. The first is a collaborative inquiry perspective that is based on human experience (Bray *et al.*, 2000), and the second is a more intervention-oriented exemplary participatory approach

(Boog, Coenen and Keune, 2001). The experience-based approach is used in an attempt to gain knowledge of the experiences of abduction and captivity by war-affected children and the reintegration experiences of the formerly abducted children and other members of the communities to which they have returned in northern Uganda. The intervention-oriented participatory approach is used not only to generate knowledge in response to the research questions but also to foster perspectives on how to improve intervention practices used for reintegration.

4.4.1 Experience as a basis for learning and knowledge

According to Bray *et al.* (2000), action research has its roots in John Dewey's pragmatism – itself an extension of historical empiricism – and Edmund Husserl's hermeneutic phenomenology. Bray *et al.* (2000) further state that these intellectual positions converge in terms of the importance given to experience as an element of learning, knowledge and interpretation, which also give way to new meanings, change and the solving of problems. The theme of experience as an element of learning, knowledge and interpretation is important to reintegration and citizenship in a post-conflict situation because an inquiry addressing such issues can be strengthened by focusing on people's experience. An understanding of the conditions and consequences of abduction, captivity and the eventual reintegration of war children is only possible by listening and thus partaking in their experience. Again, the community's fears as well as their attempts to receive and reintegrate the children can also be understood by sharing experiences of these events. This was the approach we took with the Acholi community to co-generate knowledge and to search for options for improving interventions aimed at reintegration. Heron (1985) (quoted in Bray *et al.*, 2000: 26) posits that 'cooperative inquiry [is] a way of systematically deriving learning from individual and shared experience as people engage in a refined experiential learning cycle'. They also argue that collaborative inquiry is a way of conducting research into human experience, and we add, of conflict and conflict situations.

Bray *et al.* (2000: 30), citing Brooks and Watkins (1994), identify four characteristics of action research. First, the intended result of action research is 'the construction of new knowledge on which new action can be based'. Second, people comprising the research 'should be central to the research process'. Third, 'the data used in the research process are systematically collected and come from the experience of the participants'. Fourth there is focus on generating change in the form of 'improvements in professional practice, organizational outcomes, or social democracy'. We use these characteristics to guide our attempt to understand the war experiences of

formerly abducted children and those of the people they interacted with after their return.

4.4.2 *Participatory characteristics of action research*

According to Boog, Coenen and Keune (2001), considered as a form of social science research, action research is participatory and practice-oriented. It empowers those involved and finds solutions to social problems. Action research is a reciprocal learning process, as the researcher and the researched are partners. This reciprocal learning process requires all partners to be open, truthful and satisfied with the communication of facts – this is reciprocal adequacy. Reciprocal adequacy in action research provides the measure of validity and reliability because it allows for information to be crosschecked and answers agreed upon by the actors involved. According to Boog, Coenen and Keune (2001) this democratic ethos flows from the work of John Dewey (1910) and Kurt Lewin (1946). It is based on the notion of a shared ontology of progressive human development as social learning, emancipation and empowerment towards a socially just and sustainable world community.

Boog, Coenen and Keune (2001) discern six characteristics of action research. These are that researchers and actors in action research have a subject-subject relationship; the action research process is a continuing dialogue based on the rules of participatory democracy; it is practice-oriented research; it entails a cyclical-spiral process of researching and learning; it is exemplary, that is, research subjects and other actors can use the experience from the small-scale tests in comparable situations (exemplary value); and finally, action research uses multiple methods and techniques of social research. In practice therefore, action research means the organization of a network for research and learning, which consists of the researcher, the primary research subjects and other actors (Boog, Coenen and Keune, 2001). Additionally, action research also produces new action scripts derived from the inquiry and which flow into social action (Boog, Slagter and Zeelen, 2008).

Reflecting on both action research approaches, it should be added that using action research as a *tool* for generating knowledge and improvements in intervention practices does not imply that the main tenets of action research will always be applicable to every situation or problem studied (Zeelen, 2004). Often the reality is that due to difficulties in entering the field, logistical obstacles and time constraints, only certain elements of action research can be used (Van der Linden & Zeelen, 2008). This also occurred in our case, with the use of only some elements of action research being possible (see below) because we did not have a complete action research cycle.

4.5 ARGUMENTS FOR ACTION RESEARCH AS METHODOLOGY

This section explains the importance of action research in the social sciences generally and for understanding the reintegration practices of war children in particular. First, as a method of inquiry, action research aims to create a link between social science research and the resolution of pressing social problems (Boog, Coenen and Keune, 2001; Bray *et al.*, 2000). As indicated in earlier chapters, the disintegration of society and the effect of this on children, through conflict and abduction in particular, had become the hallmark of the conflict of northern Uganda, and therefore a huge social problem. A society that has disintegrated due to conflict is socially unstable, wounded, feels guilty and sees its way of life shattered. In other words, this society has experienced broken citizenship. Therefore, the need for reintegration in northern Uganda and the research into the phenomenon would pose enormous challenges even without involving the people themselves in one way or the other. We used various aspects of action research (Bray *et al.*, 200) as a methodology to understand formerly abducted children's own experiences of war and their reintegration into a disintegrated society. Possible suggestions for improving practices used in their reintegration would also arise from their participation in this research.

Second, a researcher cannot easily succeed in studying the experiences of conflict and abduction and the resulting need for reintegration with what Bray *et al.* (2000) refer to as an *elitist* attitude. Our understanding suggests that the phrase 'elitist attitude', as used by Bray *et al.* (2000), is similar to a positivist approach and that by avoiding such an attitude towards research it is possible to ensure the empathy of the researcher and a non-judgmental attitude towards the victims of the social issue concerned. Such an approach looks at the social problem from the position of those being researched. Often the experiences of the victims or subjects of a social crisis such as war are so personal, intricate and intimate that it is not possible for a researcher to 'control' the research process, as though it were occurring in a laboratory, as is the tendency of those who adopt an 'elitist' approach or what Eikeland calls a 'condescending ethics' (Eikeland, 2006: 37). For Bray *et al.* (2000: 35):

Participatory Action Research has been adopted ... to more clearly set it apart from the elitist assumptions of the traditional, laboratory model of experimental research.

Clearly, the rejection of the elitist approach involves a negation of positivist research. Whyte (1991b), in Bray *et al.* (2000: 35), explains:

The standard model of social science research is an elitist or top-down model. It is commonly assumed that, in order to meet the exacting standards of science, the professional researcher should exercise maximum control over the research process, from the initial design to the conclusions and recommendations emerging from the study. ... Participatory action research challenges this model.

In relation to our research, without going into the existing debates on the scientific method, we accept that we cannot control or experiment with the impact of the experience of conflict on the formerly abducted children or the community. The events have already been experienced and to understand them one can only defer to such individuals or the community and see their experiences from their perspective in attempting to research them.

Third, we could draw on the participatory nature of action research insofar as this involves the people being studied as co-researchers (Boog, Coenen and Keune, 2001). Ideally, the research would benefit from the people's courage and will to express, manage and solve their problems. A conflict-ridden community such as that of northern Uganda is a demoralized one and lives in debilitating conditions (Dolan, 2005), or even as the living dead (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois, 2004). The aim of undertaking research together with the community in relation to how they attempt to achieve reintegration was two-fold. For us it was a learning process based on an attempt to understand how the community engages in reintegration. At the same time, we hoped that sharing their experiences during the study would affirm the community to 'become more self-determining' (Bray *et al.*, 2000) in reintegrating their formerly abducted children in spite of the prevailing debilitating conditions. The study assumes that the community was aware of the adverse consequences of the conflict on the children and the need for their long-term reintegration. However, the Acholi community still lives in debilitating circumstances, such as an uncertain security situation, living in IDP camps, and a general state of social, economic and political demoralization. This makes it difficult to interact with the children. Furthermore, the community is still searching for solutions to the problems faced by their formerly abducted children. For these reasons this study put the community, the children, and their experiences of war at its core, with the aim of creating a subject-subject relationship as a means to developing an understanding of the problems involved in this process.

Fourth, as the end result of action research should be social change, this method of inquiry was also aimed at developing a set of suggestions arrived at in collaboration with the members of the community and the formerly abducted children in order to improve reintegration practices for formerly abducted children in northern Uganda. As indicated above, the suggestions for improving reintegration practices are only elements of the action research

cycle. For example, the actual implementation of the suggestions was not part of this project.

4.6 RESEARCH DESIGN AND PARTICIPANTS: DATA COLLECTION

There were different participant categories that were key to the field research. In total about 255 people formally participated in this study either by telling their life story, being involved in focus group discussions and interviews, or through feedback meetings. Our participants were also categorised according to whether they were formerly abducted children, elders and/or parents, teachers, non-formerly abducted children, institutional personnel or feedback members. In relation to the latter categorisation, our sample distribution was as follows: In all there were 97 participant formerly abducted children. 27 of these narrated their life history, the remaining 26 young adults living in the community and 44 school-going formerly abducted children participated mainly in focus group discussions.

The study also benefited from 52 elders in the community who participated in focus group discussions and (in-depth) interviews. In addition we also interviewed 8 parents of formerly abducted children. 16 institutional personnel, 25 teachers, 38 non-formerly abducted children were participants mainly in focus groups discussions and interviews. Finally, the study benefited from 4 feedback members (see appendix III). Other interactions were not exactly formal but nonetheless useful. For example, unexpected moments in which ideas concerning the project were shared and suddenly opened my mind to new ideas or ways of looking at issues, as well as the many encouragements received, also had their place in this study. The more formal participants in the context of the research design are discussed in the following section.

Although our findings in chapter 5 show some additional experiences for girls while in captivity, this study did not focus on differential experiences or even views for boys and girls. Therefore, in terms of gender, the participants were not segregated. What was of importance was the fact that an individual had been abducted. Nonetheless, we sought a balanced participation, for example, by seeking to talk with 3 boys and girls in a reception centre. In the case of focus group discussions with elders, for example, we would normally ask for more or less an equal mix of women and men. We did not do this to ascertain if women and men had different views about the reintegration of formerly abducted children but just to have a 'normal' discussion group. What mattered was that an adult was living in the community and had an experience with the children.

4.6.1 *The research assistants*

For organizational purposes and practical reasons, this study greatly benefited from the work of three research assistants, all of whom were Luo and therefore could speak the local language. The competence of the research assistants in Luo was important as my spoken Luo is hesitant and my understanding is compromised when deeper meaning expressions are used. In such cases, to maintain clear communication with the research participants, the research assistants were asked to bridge this linguistic gap.

The first research assistant, Terrence, was a teacher and social worker employed by People's Voice for Peace. A teacher who taught with him at the same school recommended him for recruitment on the basis of Terrence's involvement as a social worker with civil society. Terrence mainly contributed by making contact with participants in remote IDP camps and schools. His background as a social worker and teacher in the region had created many networks that were valuable to our research. In cases where only the two of us went into the field, Terrence would conduct the sessions we had scheduled as well as translate between the participants and the main researcher when the need arose. He also helped with logistical arrangements, especially during the workshop (see details below).

The other two research assistants, Lucy and George, were Master's students at the beginning of the project, but by its completion they had gone on to become an assistant lecturer at university and a parish priest respectively. Lucy is also a teacher by profession and I had known her for a long time before the study commenced. I could therefore approach her directly to see if she was willing to be involved in the research, as I considered that the project would benefit from her people and language skills. In addition, she was studying the importance of Acholi (as a mother tongue) and English (as a second language) for learners. This knowledge helped in her role as the main interviewer and in conducting focus group and life history sessions (see details below). She also transcribed all of the recordings from Luo into English. This took her a lot of time and dedication considering that she was doing this as well as her regular duties. For the workshop, Lucy had to translate our preliminary findings into Luo and present them to the workshop participants. Through all of these tasks, she has come to internalize much of this research.

As mentioned, George was a Master's student at the beginning of the project, doing his own research on the role of women in conflict resolution in northern Uganda. He could speak Lango, another Luo dialect. His interest in women and conflict resolution closely matched the focus of this research in the social reintegration of formerly abducted children in the same region. On the basis of this similarity of interest, we could start this research on an equal footing. His knowledge of the Lango dialect would also be important for our

initial decision to include the Apac district where Lango is spoken. Because of these skills, I also approached him directly to request his participation in this study. During the fieldwork in Minakulu (Apac district) he made all the initial contacts with participants and also conducted the life histories and focus group discussions, in addition to translating between the participants and the main researcher. He also undertook the ground work needed to send a participant from Minakulu for the workshop.

All of the three research assistants were helpful in informal discussions, especially after some of the field sessions, or in sharing their impressions and raising issues from the field. These are what I describe below as 'evaluation of the day' sessions. While not presuming to know what participating in this research may have meant to them, their dedication and commitment while we worked together was clear, and Lucy in particular was personally empowered. This was most apparent during the workshop in the way she could relate to the participants on the issues raised after her presentation of the preliminary findings.

4.6.2 *The feedback team and the feedback meetings*

This research was also designed to benefit from feedback meetings of a critical group of participants who I called *the feedback team*. This group, in addition to being knowledgeable, also had experiences of abduction, captivity and reintegration practices at family or community levels. The feedback team was made up of a group of people who I requested to become involved in this research. The team was composed of the three research assistants and the Gulu District Assistant Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) who doubles as the chairman of the District committee of disaster preparedness. The assistant CAO was in charge of coordinating all of the humanitarian activities in the district. He was thus vastly experienced with reintegration practices. Apart from their professional positions described above, the team members were all Luo and had a clear understanding of the cultural aspects of reintegration, which was particularly important. This study involved a process of action research, there was a need to have a team that would be available to assess and guide the research activities, affirm or reject interpretations and suggest areas which needed to be treated in more depth. Several meetings were held with all or the majority of the members but informally all of them were frequently consulted. The feedback team crosschecked that the data recorded and analysed was faithfully presented, and thus they became part of the meaning-making process. They also identified gaps and weaknesses in the research that needed to be filled and strengthened.

4.6.3 Life histories and formerly abducted children

Being the central elements in this study, formerly abducted children were the primary category of participants. Twenty-seven former abductees now aged between 12 and 32 participated by telling us their life histories from the moment of abduction. For this research, we disregarded the normal internationally acceptable 18 years as the upper limit for childhood. We talked to people who had been abducted as children even if at the time of our research they were already over 18 years of age, reasoning that despite their age when they participated in this study, they nevertheless had lost their childhood. In fact, the formerly abducted children who were now over 18 had spent a very long time with the LRA and the extent of their loss was the reason we considered them for this research. The life histories were recorded in order to understand their experiences from the moment of their abduction to the point at which we interviewed them. All of the histories were taken in private either in a room we were offered or under a tree far from earshot. This was done because of the nature of the stories that needed to be told. Privacy would protect their dignity but at the same time give them space to open up as much as possible. The life histories provided crucial information relating to the research question: What are the war experiences of formerly abducted children?

We usually introduced our research and ourselves first and asked if the participants were willing to be interviewed. At the time we already knew that they were former abductees based on information from community leaders, caregivers in the centres or teachers. We asked their permission to record the session and assured them that all of the information we received would be used exclusively for the purposes of research. All of them accepted the recording, although one participant said he would not agree to the interview if we also wanted to take pictures. Usually, the research assistant would first ask a single general question from our prepared guide. Our standard question was: Could you tell us your experiences from the moment you were abducted up to now? Usually, there was a positive response. The children would then tell their story, often beginning with 'I was abducted from ...' (or something equivalent to it). Although we had a checklist prepared to achieve the detail we required, often the children told their experiences to the point of saturation. We often found ourselves asking for details of their personal experiences rather than using our checklist, underlining the particularity and importance of personal experience. These personal experiences of the formerly abducted children are described and discussed in chapter 5.

4.6.4 Focus group discussions: school-going formerly abducted children, formerly abducted children in the community, elders, teachers, institutional staff and non-abducted school-going children

In total, 19 focus group discussions were held. Those who participated in the focus groups included formerly abducted children in the community, school-going formerly abducted and non-abducted children, elders from different internal displacement camps, teachers from different primary and secondary schools and the staff of organizations such as GUSCO, KICWA and CPA. Involving the staff from these organizations was important to this research because of the pivotal role they played at the reception centres. They were the first group of people who became involved with children who came home by way of the reception centres. They were therefore selected because of their involvement with the formerly abducted children and the social reintegration process. The data from this category of participants helped to shed light on the research question: What are the institutionally based reintegration practices?

The formerly abducted children living in the community had mainly become young adults and were engaging in different socioeconomic activities in the community having either received some skills training from the NGOs or having settled in the community. Others were married. Their participation in focus group discussions was relevant to understand the community-based social reintegration in the mid-term.

Elders in the camps were of critical importance to the research. Upon the reunification of formerly abducted children with families and into the community, the elders carried the 'burden' of maintaining social equilibrium, taking into account the disturbing traits that the children had returned with from the bush. They would have to assess the psychosocial condition of the children and recommend them for culturally appropriate interventions to allow for their reintegration. Their opinions about these children provided useful insights into the reintegration process.

Teachers were also relevant to the focus groups because of their central role in schools to which many of the younger formerly abducted children returned. The teachers had the responsibility to guide, protect and inspire these children. They were also points of contact between children who had been in captivity and those who had not. The teachers were agents of reintegration and citizenship re-creation; their participation and opinion about the formerly abducted children was therefore critical. Along with teachers, the participation of non-abducted, school-going children also offered insights into how the formerly abducted children interacted with peers, as a measure of social reintegration and a precondition for citizenship. The non-abducted school-going children interacted with the former

abductees on a daily basis during school time. Their opinions could provide ideas about the possibilities for and difficulties of the reintegration process at the school level. The data obtained from the elders, teachers and non-abducted school-going children was useful in empirically understanding the research question: What are the community-based reintegration practices of the Acholi people?

Generally, we moved to the camps or the schools for these discussions. The discussions usually took place in the open – under the trees. In a few cases, especially with the staff of organizations and some teachers, the discussions would take place in a hall or a classroom. We had prepared a focus group discussion guide to direct the discussions with the different categories of participants just described. The discussions were normally led by a research assistant while I recorded the proceedings. We would both probe further on issues we felt needed to be clarified. Unlike the life histories, it took some time before we felt that the information on community involvement in the reintegration process was saturated. This could have been the result of the fact that, initially, the community felt at a loss about what to do with the returning children. It was their first experience of such a widespread social problem. Eventually, in the second phase of the fieldwork (March–June/July 2007), it became clearer what the community was doing with the formerly abducted children. It was also a more ‘peaceful’ period of the conflict, described in chapter 2 as the recent international dimension of the conflict, with the Juba peace talks just beginning.

4.6.5 In-depth interviews: parents and elders

The research design also included the use of interviews which were intended to be held with the parents of formerly abducted children and some elders. In the field it was not always possible to find parents at home. Therefore, we did not talk to all of the parents of the children who had told us their life histories. The participation of parents and/or guardians in this research is an obvious requirement as they bear primary responsibility for their returned children. It was therefore important to understand how they considered their children and how they related to them or what they felt they could do for the children. Interviews were also held with some elders who could not attend focus groups. They provided valuable information on the relationships between the community and the children and cultural reintegration practices. In-depth interviews were preferred to questionnaires because they allowed a deeper level of understanding of their views and insights. The in-depth interviews also provided the opportunity to question the participants in more depth. Data collected from the in-depth interviews were also used to answer questions relating to community-based reintegration practices. This data was also used specifically to answer the following: How do the Acholi use their

endogenous systems to reintegrate the formerly abducted children? To answer this question, participant observation would also have been useful. However, we did not have an opportunity to witness any of the traditional rituals, which are either performed on the child's arrival back from the bush or much later, after their return into the community (see chapter 7). Therefore, due to a problem of timing we did not have an opportunity for participant observation in relation to this issue.

4.6.6 The workshop: all participant categories

After the preliminary analysis of the data collected using the above techniques, there was a need to validate our findings. In addition, our fourth research question was about how to strategize for deeper level reintegration, to extend the existing community-based and institutional-based practices. Thus, the need to validate findings and the search for improved reintegration practices led to the organization of a workshop where strategies for reintegration were discussed with several stakeholders. In addition to validation, the workshop was our strategy for collecting data that could be used as a basis for improvements to reintegration practices related to formerly abducted children becoming citizens of their community. The proceedings were therefore used as data.

An earlier version of my field report revealed that there was a need to make improvements to the validation process and to arrive at suggestions for improving social reintegration practices in a collaborative manner with the stakeholders involved in northern Uganda. This would further be essential to the action research methodology. On this basis, I then prepared a script on the NCPO analysis (see later in Chapter 8) to be presented to the stakeholders, which would in turn be the basis for suggestions for the improvement of social reintegration practices.

4.6.7 Preparation for the workshop

Organizing a workshop takes a lot of time and good imagination for it to be a success. Logistically, it requires a great deal of coordination. I had planned the content of the workshop sessions on the basis of the findings of the research. Lucy, who had transcribed all of the previous interviews and group discussions, translating them into English, this time had to translate the findings into Acholi for the presentation. In addition, she would also present our preliminary findings from the NCPO analysis to the participants in the workshop due to my very hesitant and accented Luo. Moreover, she would take notes when discussions were in Acholi. Lucy's deep level of involvement in the research was once again helpful in the workshop. After the presentation, she could comfortably relate to the questions and comments made by the participants without having to refer to me.

Looking at this in retrospect, this was a demonstration of the collaborative search for knowledge and its empowering capacity, not only in the case of Lucy but in fact for everyone involved this research process. Charles, the other member of the feedback team, aptly summarized the collaborative and empowering character of this research. At the end of our last feedback meeting, in what was an attempt to evaluate the research method and process, we had asked the team members about the relevance of the exercise:

“... the way issues are raised, we benefit a lot. It may look ordinary but on the other side very technical, highly academic; me I just enjoy. I feel I am acquiring new knowledge that I can use either now or tomorrow because of an idea from you, idea from him, ideas from what I read. I am refreshed. From the old discussions we did I am going through like I am also a student and I am not. I get the insight of what PhD issues are and I feel encouraged. I feel like writing this thing myself ... but I only don't have the opportunity.”

In fact, Charles had to chair the workshop sessions because he could easily switch between English and Acholi – a useful skill considering the mixture of participants.

A week before the scheduled day of the workshop, Terrence, the main person involved in the mobilization of the expected participants in the workshop, was busy. He travelled to Anaka and Coo-pe IDP camps on his motorbike to invite the groups we had previously met during the major fieldwork phases. Each group had a leader who would make travel arrangements on the day of the workshop; their transport costs would be refunded.

Anaka was about 30 km from Gulu town, the location of the workshop, and transport to and from the camp is very difficult. Therefore, the group from Anaka was to arrive the evening before – spending the night in a local hotel. Lodging near the venue of the workshop would allow us to begin on time and end early enough for everybody to travel home. While public transport was available to Coo-pe until late in the evening, the last vehicles to Anaka left at around 4.30 p.m.

Terrence's organizational and people skills paid off! On the day of the workshop, we were able to start and finish on time. Meanwhile, I had organized the transportation of the much smaller group from Minakulu and around Gulu town, mostly by phone, although George still had to do the groundwork in Minakulu.

On the eve of the workshop, we (the supervisors, the feedback team, including research assistants, and I) scheduled a feedback team discussion for the evening. The meeting was intended to discuss the findings of the research

thus far and to prepare for the workshop the next day. I received valuable comments from the feedback group helping to clarify my ideas for the workshop. Later these ideas also assisted in my writing. The meeting also helped to bring all members on board, ensuring they were part of the facilitation during the workshop. The workshop would bring together the feedback group and the other participants in the research for the first time.

4.6.8 The validation process

As mentioned above, the participants in the workshop included representatives of the participant categories in the main fieldwork, i.e., the formerly abducted children (now youth), elders, teachers and NGO workers, the feedback team and my supervisors. In the first session of the workshop, the findings of the research were presented. This session was purposely designed for validation of the research findings. As mentioned above, the presentation was in Luo so that all of the participants who had come from the camps would understand what was being said. After the presentation, there was a 'reactions' session. The responses were the core of the validation exercise (see chapter 8).

After the presentation of the findings, four work groups, of teachers, the formerly abducted children, NGO representatives and the elders were formed. The feedback team members assigned themselves to the various groups to animate the discussion. Note that the workshop participants and work groups not only reflect some of the actors involved in the various social reintegration processes but also the arenas of reintegration in northern Uganda. For example, the NGO representatives reflect actors involved in institutionally-based reintegration, while the teachers and the elders are actors in community-based reintegration practices. A set of questions (see Table 4, chapter 9) were given to the work groups for discussion. We derived the questions from our NCPO analysis (see chapter 8), our reflections on existing practices and the social fluidity of the problem under study. The questions aimed to determine how the existing practices of reintegration could be improved, what additional problems would need to be addressed, and how and who would take responsibility for such action. The main ideas discussed by the various work groups are presented in Table 4 in particular and in chapter 9 generally.

4.6.9 The unplanned elements of the study: experience, seeing and perception of the environment

Apart from these carefully planned activities there was also unplanned observation and perception of the social conditions. It was particularly interesting to observe the children in the settings and environment in which we encountered them. Various traits such as depression, alertness and withdrawal were observed. Other non-verbal communication was also

observed. Apart from the explicit data collection methods, the perception of the researcher was more sensitive to the environment due to her having been in the situation and experiencing first-hand a number of events in the conflict. This perception was thus an important tool, assisting in the interpretation of unspoken communication, especially in situations where the children explained their experience indirectly. For example, most children would not say that they were soldiers but would talk of being given a 'gun and a gumboot'. From other interviews it is known that only those who had been formally trained and qualified were given guns. Newly abducted children, commonly referred to as recruits among the LRA, were not given guns, nor did they qualify to put on gumboots, even for the purpose of protecting their feet from the overgrown grass through which they walked eternally.

The researcher both guided and led the research in order to systematize the knowledge gained from the largely qualitative data collected. The systematization of knowledge was based on the themes that emerged during the discussions and the researcher's experience and knowledge of the research area and issues. To qualify this knowledge of the research area and issues, it should be mentioned that prior to the research, I lived and worked in Gulu from 1987 to 1993 and afterwards intermittently, up to the beginning of the research project in 2006. I experienced some of the worst moments of this long conflict, as described in chapter 2. Although this could be an asset in the process of doing this research, sometimes I have had to struggle to be objective, especially in discussing the impact of the conflict on the local population. Sometimes in the writing process, I could feel the tension between the collective social knowledge and memory of the conflict, of which I am part, and my attempt to be scientific. Fortunately, to mitigate this subjectivity, other studies have validated some of the social knowledge and memory.

4.7 EMPIRICAL APPLICATION OF ACTION RESEARCH (COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY) IN A COMPLEX CONFLICT SITUATION

This subsection explains how some of the key concepts in action research were applied and used to guide the data collection and the overall design of the research process. The section presents the key practical processes that we undertook in the field. The key tenets of action research that were applied and are consequently discussed below are borrowed from Van der Meer and Polstra (2001).

4.7.1 *Subject-subject relationship*

The idea of a subject-subject relationship in action research touches on the issue of power relations, control and ethics in the research process (Bray *et al.*, 2000). Ideally, each participant is a co-inquirer, shapes the question, makes and communicates meaning (Bray *et al.*, 2000). The topic of reintegration touches on the day-to-day activities of the war-affected children and their interactions with their caregivers, family members and members of their communities. Clearly, the children, their family members, caregivers and other community members are subjects for the researcher. However, the researcher also became a subject of these different categories. The researcher can speak and understand some Luo, and led the research, yet she had to be a subject to the research subjects. She was aware of her need to gain knowledge from the formerly abducted children, their family members, caregivers and other community members about their experiences of war and what reintegration practices were being used in their society. As Tromp (2008) puts it, they were 'experts' on the conditions of their life. Mutual dependence was therefore necessary for the success of the 'mutual learning' (Tromp, 2008) process.

This kind of scenario demanded a relationship of trust, openness and mutual agreement, in both the procedure and content of the research. This relationship entailed more than the usual building of 'rapport' in qualitative research. It was more a mix of empathy, sympathy and an expression of 'being' with and among the participants. Thus, the other participants in this research were consulted on times for appointments, if they were comfortable or uncomfortable with the questions they were being asked and if they wanted to remain anonymous. In much qualitative research, anonymity is key to research ethics. However, for some of the participants in this research, openly speaking about their experience and mentioning their contribution to this research appeared to give them some satisfaction. It could be said that to them this represented a sense of agency – a way of contributing to resolving their problems. This was to ensure that the participants had control and power over the research process in this subject-subject framework.

4.7.2 *Continuous dialogue*

Park (2001: 81) asserts that dialogue is an important methodological link in participatory research and that 'it is an expression of the human condition that impels people to come together as thinking and feeling beings'. To realize the importance of this dialogue, the researcher engaged various social actors, such as formerly abducted children, parents and NGO workers, as well as government institutions such as the Amnesty Commission and the UPDF's Child Protection Unit and community leaders, to contribute to this collective research. The feedback team was the link in this chain of dialogues in the meaning-making processes. While the dialogue between the researcher and the

participants was clear in relation to all of the different data collection methods, an inter-participant dialogue, which had been difficult to set up, was made possible in the workshop at the end of the fieldwork. The mix of participants has ensured a web of dialogues to crosscheck information acquired during the research, which in turn ensured that the information gathered was valid and reliable. Thus, the participatory action research has helped to generate exclusive knowledge and understanding of the experiences of formerly abducted children, as well as the practice of using existing traditional methods for social reintegration within Acholi society. The sharing of the opinions and insights of various social actors has ultimately led to a critical look at the reintegration processes. Our analysis could only be built on the opinions of these different actors in a dialogue that led to suggestions for alternative reintegration practices and change. This is what Tromp (2008) refers to as 'double hermeneutics'. The objectives of participatory research, as outlined by Park (2001: 81), 'gathering and analyzing necessary information, strengthening community ties and sharpening the ability to think and act critically', are realized in continuous dialogue alongside this double hermeneutics.

4.7.3 Practice (action-) oriented research

All participatory research practices develop knowledge from the field as a catalyst for change. Such change might be personal, organizational or large-scale social change (Bray *et al.*, 2000). For Wadsworth, all research in itself acts on an existing situation and is therefore an intervention and always has consequences. Some things will change as a result of particular research – for example, the involvement of participants who answer questions on a particular research problem is a form of intervention that is considered to bring about changes in those involved in the research (Wadsworth, 1998).

In the case of research on the reintegration of formerly abducted children in northern Uganda, personal change was observed in terms of the expression of relief on the faces of former abductees after they had told their story. For many it was an opportunity to express their grief, pain, frustration and loss – it was a healing process. At an institutional level, teachers from some schools (such as in Lokome) were able to see that there was a need for them to do more for the formerly abducted children in terms of follow-up and counselling. Elders could point out that the community needed to raise its profile in the reintegration of the war children, as NGOs would not be with them forever. This was as a result of a realization that most reintegration activities, including the facilitation of the traditional ceremonies, were instituted by the NGOs.

However, it has to be noted that the opportunity to implement these suggested improvements to community-wide action was beyond the scope of

this research. We aimed to understand the war experiences of formerly abducted children and their social reintegration. Furthermore, we aimed to make a set of suggestions which were arrived at collaboratively to re-create the children's citizenship (chapters 8, 9). It is our hope that the suggestions are of exemplary value to practitioners both in northern Uganda and elsewhere. While this discussion tends to focus on the existing debate on theory and practice, it can be argued that academic research of this nature already entails involvement in the community, which is in itself a form of intervention, and that good academic research is also action of a kind, as stated by Wadsworth (1998) above. The involvement of the formerly abducted children, the institutional actors and community-based participants in the research was at once inviting them to reflect on existing reintegration practices, which in itself was a form of action.

4.7.4 *Exemplary generalization*

The phenomenon of war-affected children is widespread in Africa in general and in the Great Lakes Region in particular (see chapter 3). The findings and lessons learnt from this study, for example the role of the community in reintegrating the formerly abducted children, could be informative with respect to many similar situations, such as in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, Burundi and the Sudan, and elsewhere. However, our lessons and findings do not have the status of generalizations, statistical or otherwise. According to Tromp (2008: 12), generalizations can be made, but:

... general statements can only be put forward with certain modesty and only with roughly formulated implications since the starting points are always the more or less reflexive actions of human beings in their own specific environment. Every generalization outside the specific context necessarily will have a tentative character.

Following this discussion, and drawing on Boog, Coenen and Keune (2001), generalizations, therefore, have rather an *exemplary* value, due to the necessity to always be open to the characteristics of a local situation. Moreover, the value of certain practices found in this research, such as the community-based approach to reintegration, could influence policymakers, such that they create policies for reintegration that are compatible with people's immediate realities. Policies could also be influenced by adopting best practices from the northern Ugandan experiences, as well as trajectories of reintegration as a way of learning from each other.

4.7.5 *Multiple methods and techniques of social research*

As in any other social science research, various qualitative data collection methods were used in this inquiry as described in the section on design and

participants above. The use of several methods and techniques (this chapter) helped to corroborate findings and reveal the gaps to be covered by further research. The multiple methods also complimented each other. Multiple methods led to method triangulation as a way of validating the information and knowledge obtained in the theory and practice of social reintegration.

4.7.6 Reflection (meaning-making) and creation of knowledge – Analysis

As a branch of qualitative research, the data collected during this action research was usually recorded on tape. The researcher had an open attitude towards the data transcribed, that is, meaning-making was approached inductively based on the grounded theory through the development of codes and abstract themes from the transcribed data. This was done with the help of the computer data analysis package, ATLAS.ti. Codes were developed from the transcribed empirical text material. Flick (1998: 179) describes coding as a process by which 'concepts or codes are attached to the empirical material'. It is to be noted that coding is normally a difficult, tedious and slow exercise. Our case was helped by the fact that we had been close to the transcribed data for a long time, having read the transcripts over and over before embarking on the coding process. In addition, we had used some of the transcripts for an initial analysis of data collected at specific moments of the research process to produce drafts in preparation for further data collection. This initial analysis based on themes further helped us to familiarize ourselves with the text.

At a more abstract level, families were developed on the basis of the codes. In total, 115 codes and 14 families were developed. At a further level, the families became the themes upon which the final write-up was based. Field notes, field experience and reflection, however, enriched the writing. Themes were then networked to look for patterns and develop mid-level theories of experiences of war and reintegration practices in northern Uganda. The practical coding skills were learnt through the online ATLAS.ti5-Quick Tour for Beginners and we had some additional guidance from a colleague who had previously used the package.

4.7.7 Analysis as continuous meaning-making

As is apparent from the research process described above, meaning-making and knowledge-creation were continuous throughout this project. Meaning and knowledge did not come only after the recorded data had been transcribed and subjected to the qualitative data analysis package, ATLAS.ti. Rather, the data collection process, through the use of focus group discussions and the telling of personal experiences of war, abduction and reintegration by the children, with additional probing in between by the researcher, was already part of the meaning-making and knowledge-creation

process. There were also 'evaluation of the day' sessions with the research assistants, which was really a way of trying to make sense of the events and especially the field discussions of the day. The 'evaluation of the day' sessions did not have any particular formula. They could occur while travelling back from the field or in the evening over a drink or even the next morning while on the way to another field destination. They sometimes entailed the recall of an intense emotion witnessed during field interactions. At other times I needed the help of research assistants to understand the meaning of a particular Luo expression, or we evaluated the degree of participation of the respondents. In the latter case, sometimes we might have a mutual feeling that a participant had not been honest or was exaggerating certain events. We found some of these discussions to be key moments in understanding some of the expressions used and attitudes observed as well as offering a deeper reflection on some of the content of the stories told. The 'evaluation of the day' sessions were actually the beginning of deeper reflection on and analysis of the data collected.

Further to this, a draft of the initial analysis of the data collected was discussed with and probed by supervisors and the feedback team. This probing was an important part of the meaning-making process because the more explanation that was required for some of the ideas in the draft the clearer the meanings became to us. Thus probing on the part of others (including supervisors, feedback team members and 'strangers') and the sharing and explanation on my part was an important aspect of the meaning-making and knowledge-creation process. Thus, the analysis was continuous, multifaceted and embedded in the whole research process. I can therefore not lay any individual claim to the knowledge created here although I will take responsibility for any errors in the information, meaning or knowledge presented.

4.8 ISSUES OF PARTICIPATION, POWER, ETHICS AND VALIDITY: A SUMMARY OF EXPERIENCES OF ACTION RESEARCH IN A COMPLEX CONFLICT SITUATION

In this section, as indicated by the subheading, we summarize our experiences of action research in view of issues pertaining to participation, power, ethics and validity, which are central to all research. These issues, if clearly articulated and addressed, validate the research design and process chosen. Here I have recounted our field experiences with action research both to bring out and explain the issues under discussion and to validate the research. I will begin by explaining the entry into the field as a negotiation of several power centres, in other words, the initial contacts.

4.8.1 *Initial contacts*

The first contacts were made through the Chief Administrative Officers (CAO) to whom I presented an introductory letter from my supervisors. The CAO in turn identified the organizations working with the formerly abducted children in the districts, and the internally displaced people's camps that could be reached without major security hurdles. They also wrote an introductory letter to be presented to the organizations approached and at the IDP camps to be visited. In the camps we were to look for the Local Council chairpersons who would then identify the formerly abducted children. Furthermore, the local council chairpersons helped to organize and select the participants for the focus group discussions.

In the reception centres, we first approached those in charge to whom we showed the introductory letter from the CAO. These then connected us to the rest of the staff who were in direct contact with the children on a day-to-day basis. This category of staff in their turn made the children available for discussion. A similar process was followed for focus group discussions in the schools. These processes were tedious and very time-consuming but following them was important for ethical reasons – we did not wish to impose ourselves on the community. The process was also democratic, recognizing all the important power centres before finally reaching the intended respondents.

4.8.2 *Creating conversational space*

The discussion of the experiences of abduction, captivity and return were quite delicate, at least between a former captive and a stranger such as the researcher who had not been in captivity. Because of this delicacy, apart from the focus group discussions, the interviews with parents and the account of life histories during captivity were done in private. This allowed a fairly high degree of honesty in the telling of a story. Nevertheless, it might be asked how we could recognize honesty in such circumstances. Perhaps we cannot answer this 'objectively' but we could tell when a child was 'pouring their heart out' as they recounted their experiences. Again, these were their personal experiences and how could we doubt that what they were telling us was their experience? Even if there might have been some exaggeration here and there, there was a similarity between all the stories, although they were all different in their own way. Thus, a degree of honesty could be gauged from the body language exhibited, the fact that these were personal experiences and we could not dispute them and the generic similarities that characterized the stories. In fact, there were no stories that were considered to be outliers.

To further create conversational space (Zeelen, 2004), it was necessary to have an understanding attitude – we could not afford to be judgmental about and recriminatory towards the children on the basis of their horrific stories.

This helped them feel at ease, gain some trust in us and thus to entrust us with some of their extremely overburdening experiences in captivity.

The involvement of the research assistants who spoke Luo, the local language, also created conversational space. It was difficult to imagine the formerly abducted children telling their stories entirely in English, and most experiences seem to need to be recounted in one's mother tongue to feel that one is giving an adequate account. In particular, the most painful and intense experiences are best communicated in one's mother tongue. Some of the formerly abducted children who are now in secondary school attempted to tell their stories in English, but always reverted to Luo at the most sensitive moments.

We also had to be patient and empathetic, especially when participants broke down as they recalled and recounted their experiences. This was the most difficult. We were tempted to stop the conversation at these moments but knew that it was better to allow them to finish their story, both for the purpose of the research and for 'the healing' process to take place – it was better to speak out than bottle up. Moreover, there was always some visible relief and a smile at the end of the conversation – an unintended result of the action research process.

4.8.3 Participation

As already discussed above, the methodology for this research is based on the action research tradition but emphasizes what Bray *et al.* (2000: 3) refer to as 'an evolving paradigm of enquiry that celebrates participation and democracy in the research process' for the sake of knowledge creation. As action research, the methodology evolved throughout the research process. Apart from the very general decisions we made at the very beginning of the fieldwork which were necessary to gain entry into the field, most of the field decisions thereafter were either influenced by suggestions generated by the information obtained or suggested outright by the research assistants and feedback team members. Thus, the nature of participation in this study was both 'practical' and 'indirect'. Practical participation was realized by the actual involvement of individual war children who told their stories of abduction and related their experiences of captivity and return home and of reintegration. Active participation in knowledge creation was also fostered through the focus group discussions that were held in schools with various groups, including elders, school teachers, formerly abducted children who are now attending school and non-abducted children. The research assistants and the feedback team participated in a number of ways. In addition to helping with the facilitation and practical, sometimes logistical organization of the research, they critically participated in the meaning-making processes. This was a multi-faceted participatory process. All of these different participation groups contributed

knowledge and experience about abduction, captivity and reintegration practices, either through first-hand or second-hand experience.

The various participants described above also engaged in what we call 'indirect' participation. Through their practical participation, revelations and sharing, the participants directed the research process and the process took on a life of its own. The researcher made decisions on the direction the research should take on the basis of the comments and information obtained. For example, originally the research had not conceived of the participation and recording of the experiences of formerly abducted children in the school setting, nor of the participation of teachers and non-abducted children who could also relate their experiences with formerly abducted children. However, initial contact with the elders, the formerly abducted children and institutions pointed towards education and the school as part of the reintegration system. Consequently, the participants virtually determined the direction of the research process along that line.

This indirect participation also introduced the twin ideas of democracy and power into the research process. This meant that decisions relating to the process of knowledge creation were not made arbitrarily by the researcher but were influenced by the ideas of the majority of participants. It also demonstrates the power of participants in the research process. The issue of the importance of power-sharing and relationships in this research was a practical one. Apart from the broad decisions about who would be a participant at the meso or institutional level most decisions at the micro or particular level, for example which schools to visit, which elders to meet and who should organize individual elders for the meetings, were made by the research assistants, who had better knowledge of these issues. In becoming part of the feedback team, the research assistants were also able to scrutinize the knowledge created and presented as well as give a critique of the methodology and research process.

For their part, the research assistants left the selection of individuals who would participate in the actual focus group discussions to the community leaders, who had better knowledge of their community. The positive acknowledgement of these power relations, where each 'significant actor' was left to utilize their status and knowledge to the full, made the research process smooth and also democratic and participant-based. The participants were not only objects but also the subjects of the research. Under this arrangement, the researcher, as an outsider, took responsibility for considering and implementing the implicit and explicit suggestions that were made, feeding them into the design of the research when appropriate. The researcher also had the responsibility for critical reflection on the research issues and process, enough to own the research and direct it at an intellectual level. This includes being accountable in relation to the academic community's expectation of

rigorous research. We also hope to be accountable to the participants by giving back to them, in particular, the suggestions for improving reintegration practices in northern Uganda.

4.8.4 *Issues of validity*

As this research process and methodology evolved, issues of validity were built in. Our triangulation of data collection methods such as focus group discussions and in-depth interviews were one way of ensuring validity. Focus group discussions, for example, allowed for on the spot crosschecking of information. With the possibility for further investigation in the in-depth interviews, the likelihood of obtaining valid information was fairly high. Furthermore, what is described above as a continuous dialogue (a web of dialogues or triangulation) ensured validity. The cycles of reflection and action in the research process had the ability to purge information that was either weak or stood out as an outlier. It is important to note that there was triangulation at various levels. At one level there was methodological triangulation, where life histories, focus group discussions, in-depth interviews and the feedback group discussions were used to collect and verify data. At another level there was participant triangulation, where, as already indicated, various participants were part of the study, and finally there was institutional triangulation, where different institutions were used to gather information on the reintegration practices found in northern Uganda.

A third way in which the concerns about validity were addressed involved the meaning-making process. Again, the researcher's reflections were always subject to the scrutiny of the feedback team. This was also supported by other literature that has highlighted similar concerns. Of importance here was also the final fieldwork in the form of the workshop that involved all categories of participants. Its whole purpose was to validate the research findings thus far and to collaboratively reflect on intervention strategies. According to Tromp (2008), this transparency about the functions of the various research participants and the transparency of the research methods used and processes undertaken is a criteria for *internal validity*. The relevance and importance of the subject of our research – the reintegration of the formerly abducted children – to the people of northern Uganda cannot be overstated. The practicability of our strategies for intervention, being a result of the consultative stakeholder workshop, again speaks for itself. Moreover, the involvement of knowledgeable elders and teachers, NGO staff and the district official in charge of humanitarian assistance gives a high level of reliability to our research processes and results. According to Tromp (2008), these issues are criteria for *external validity*.

4.8.5 *The involvement of institutions as a means for action research*

The involvement of institutions as major actors in this research was invaluable. The social and political setting in which the fieldwork was done was very fluid. The whole population in the region was mobile. For example, one could meet a child in a reception centre, after which the centre would reunite the child with their family, but from that point onwards keeping track of the whereabouts of the child would be difficult. The family could move to another camp, the child might go and live with another relative or, in the later stages, when the government introduced the idea of satellite camps, people would try to move to the camps nearest to their original village. Thus, it was not always possible to maintain the involvement of the formerly abducted children who were interviewed and their parents/family if they were no longer part of the community to which we returned for verification of the data. Given this fluid social situation, the institutions became embodied as the constant actors who had accumulated experience of reintegration practices. These actors had in some way stored the collective experience of the community and would be there for further consultation if the need arose. Such institutions included the NGOs, the Amnesty Commission, the UPDF's Child Protection Unit, schools and the '*Ker Kal Kwaro*'.⁵

In addition, institutions had almost completely taken over the lives of the Acholi people. There were different NGOs dealing with different aspects of life. For example, provision of food was the preserve of the World Food Programme, others such as AVSI concentrated on health issues, the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative focused on education and War Child Holland specialized in children's play. Thus, in a situation where conflict had made a once vibrant society dysfunctional, the community became highly 'NGOnized'. The needs of an individual's life were segmented according to what NGOs could offer. This in itself is a phenomenon which needs to be reflected upon, especially regarding the power that institutions have over individuals and communities in humanitarian emergencies.

Then there was the creation of our own 'institution' – the feedback team. The experiences and knowledge of the members of this team cut across the formal institutions just enumerated. While people in the formal institutions were only able to be critical of their own particular practices, the feedback team had the ability, independence and objectivity to take a critical stance towards the reintegration practices of the various institutions and the entire research process.

⁵ *Ker Kal Kwaro* is the traditional Acholi institution headed by the Acholi Paramount Chief. This is a fairly 'modern' institution, although founded on the known traditions and the culture of the Acholi.

4.9 CHALLENGES AND CONTRADICTIONS OF ACTION RESEARCH IN A COMPLEX CONFLICT SITUATION

4.9.1 *Field hiccups*

Problems were envisaged at three levels. The first concerned the difficulties of organizing and actually meeting the respondents, which usually took a long time. Having gone through the district authorities, the next step was to go and make appointments with the Local Council officials to also ask their permission to do research in their community. The appointments with the Local Council officials also aimed at requesting them to make appointments with the respondents on our behalf. This time-consuming process was also exacerbated by the fact that sometimes the appointments were not honoured.

The second field hiccup was related to children in focus group discussions. Although focus group discussions were originally planned with formerly abducted children and non-abducted children in schools, the reality was that we could not sustain a group discussion with the children. Our discussions with them ended up being more or less group interviews because the children could not express themselves well enough to engage at a group level. It was, however, easier for children to express themselves while telling their episodic histories, as these were conducted in private.

Another hiccup was the 'loss of data'. Some of the recorded case histories of formerly abducted children, in-depth interviews with the parents and the focus group discussions with the different groups could not be replayed. In some cases the circumstances might not have been conducive for recording and we ended up with blank or croaky tapes. Thus, while in total 27 histories were narrated, we could only successfully transcribe 16. Thus among the text data that was subjected to the ATLAS.ti for analysis, there were only 16 sets in the category of episodic histories. This, however, does not mean that all of the focus group discussions, interviews and histories that were 'lost' did not influence the knowledge generated.

4.9.2 *The reality and existence of power relations and power centres*

The field experience exposed the helplessness of action research in complex emergency situations where people know what they want but are hampered by human insecurity and a disabling environment. At the time of the research, the power to change living conditions in northern Uganda and therefore reintegration was in the hands of three groups: the government, who created the IDP camps; international and local NGOs, who provided basic necessities; and the rebels, who were a source of constant fear. For example, while parents wanted to have control over their children and teach them traditional community values such as being responsive and responsible (issues of

community citizenship), this was practically impossible in a displaced peoples' camp, where each family was almost anonymous and institutions had begun to take over the roles of the parents:

“Many of the parents would wish to receive their children with lots of feasting but there is fear that there may be the agents of the rebels here who may report that we are rejoicing over the return of a child from the bush. Later on they may come back and cause havoc. There is fear, otherwise what can stop us from feasting when we have got our child back alive.” (*From a focus group discussion*)

4.9.3 *Ethics in action research in a complex emergency*

According to Pålshaugen (2008), questions such as what is the right thing to do in a particular situation and how to behave towards others express ethical concerns. He argues that, in practice, real behaviour will go beyond what is expressed or contained in some ethical rule or theory. In research of this nature, there are a number of ethical issues: Is it right to ask formerly abducted children to talk about their experiences of abduction and war? When they re-live their war experiences by telling the story, what should the researcher do? How anonymous and confidential can a life history told to a researcher be? These are somehow standard issues that science would require a researcher to relate to. However, in doing research with people in sensitive situations, as is the case for our research, Pålshaugen's (2008) argument about real behaviour going beyond the ethical rules seems to make sense. For example, in our situation, where people were willing to share their story and perhaps re-live their experience in a context where there was no 'culture of counselling', what should a researcher do? In the first place, one cannot refer the interviewed children to a non-existent counsellor. In the circumstances, we believed in the social support networks to which the children belonged (chapter 7). In line with this, we had access to the children either through their parents, caregivers, teachers or community leaders (this chapter). In this way, we did not isolate the children and their war experiences from the community that cushioned them.

Our research experience also questions the concept of research ethics in relation to 'buying information'. Is it more ethical to abide by 'research rules' or to promote human coexistence? In practical terms, is one 'allowed' to give a token to a visibly hungry child who has narrated their harrowing experience in captivity? Or in the name of research ethics should we just walk away from the child who during the interview said they had been sent away from school for lack of school uniform or did not go to school at all because they did not have exercise books to write in? How removed should one be in the name of being objective from a 15-year-old who amidst wailing has just retold the story of how she was forced to kill her own father? Having no answers to

these questions, it felt more ethically correct to follow one's heart and give some token to the participants where needed; not to 'buy' information (the tokens were always given after the discussions) but to share what we could with them in their moment of need. It felt more ethical to share in the participant's condition, buying the exercise books they needed or providing a little money to a mother to be able to buy some food for her hungry family. Thus, to the researcher, ethics was about sharing or celebrating our common humanity in a conflict situation.

In summary, from these examples, our experience in undertaking this research showed us that it is overly ambitious to follow generalized ethical rules concerning acting dispassionately when doing social research in sensitive circumstances. Different societies might have different notions of 'acceptable' behaviour expected from the researcher in this regard. Societies might even have differing societal resources to deal with such ethical problems arising in the course of research. Therefore, knowledge of the society might be a starting point for an appropriate ethical point of view. We propose that it is important to have an ethical attitude towards the people who are the subjects of research, such that no intentional harm is caused in relation to those being studied and the issues being researched. Importantly, this ethical attitude cannot be determined by others; the researcher has to make her own judgment. To us this might be a higher 'ethical rule' than any provided by an ethical theory.

4.9.4 The need for a dependable physical space

I use the term dependable physical space to describe the personal, social and economic stability of the environment, which should enable people to make social changes in their life situations. A dependable physical space is the positive sum total of the personal, social and economic conditions of an individual or group of people. In a conflict-ridden society like that of northern Uganda, the people's personal, social and economic environment is shattered and cannot sustain their aspirations. If action research is to be effective in practice, there is a need for a dependable physical space, i.e., a stable environment that enables people to predict the future and have knowledge about and trust in their social system. Life-changing acts are only possible if actors have dependable physical space, unlike in emergency situations where nobody can predict what will happen next. In this study, small structures such as the feedback team, networks and several field trips made a dependable physical space possible to a certain extent.

4.9.5 Action research as a contribution to political change

In essence, fully fledged action research contributes to empowerment and encourages communities to either organize or demand changes to address

their social problem. When this problem concerns reintegration of war children as a result of a political conflict as is the case in northern Uganda, then action research becomes a political tool for transformation. For example, our findings can be used to demand reintegration services from the government. If this occurs, the research findings would have played a part in the political empowerment of the people.



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“I was abducted from our home in Awach, then we traveled to Kitgum and Palabek. It took us only two weeks to reach Sudan. They started training us in military skills. Afterwards we attacked a certain village in Sudan and killed people. We took off to a village, Jebelen where we settled and started farming for a short time. We moved to another place called Rubanga-tek 7 miles from Juba town and settled there. In Rubanga-tek there were very few battles that took place. It is where we stayed peaceful and started farming again. Then in the year 2001, the UPDF army came and attacked us. We moved to another area near the hill. At times we would enter into their ambush and they fire at us and that is how we survived. We went back to Sudan where we stayed for about a year. Then in the year 2003, we came back to Uganda, we were taken to Koch and by then I had two children already. We stayed there and in 2004 my children were stolen.”

(Child mother, GUSCO)



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