

CHAPTER SIX

FORMAL INSTITUTIONAL APPROACHES TO REINTEGRATION

6.1 INTRODUCTION

In chapter 3, we traced and identified two approaches to reintegration – a community-based approach and an institutional approach. In this chapter we discuss the latter, which has its origins in the UN. Many non-UN organizations have taken to using the model for reintegrating ex-combatants generally and children who have been involved in combat in particular. While the conflict in northern Uganda did not attract a formal UN peace-keeping operation, as occurred elsewhere, numerous UN agencies, international agencies and a host of local NGOs became commonplace in the region during the conflict (chapters 1 and 2). These agencies largely institutionalized not only reintegration practices but the whole humanitarian ‘industry’ in northern Uganda.

In the context of the proliferation of NGOs, considered as typifying the institutions involved in humanitarian assistance in northern Uganda, and in relation to the children’s war experiences (chapter 5), the second research question of this study sought to understand how these formal organizations/institutions reintegrate the formerly abducted children. We focused on the UPDF’s Child Protection Unit (CPU), the Amnesty Commission and three local NGOs that created reception centres for the returning children. The CPU and the Amnesty Commission cannot strictly be considered NGOs, although they more or less function in tandem with the NGOs dealing with returned children. The CPU is a part of the national army and the Amnesty Commission was created by an act of parliament. These differences thus justify this study’s preference to refer to these organizations collectively as formal institutions assisting formerly abducted children.

The data we used to arrive at the findings in this chapter were collected through interviews with officials at the CPU and the Amnesty Commission, focus group discussions with the staff at GUSCO and CPA, and the life histories of some of the formerly abducted children, as well as secondary data from the Amnesty Commission (see chapter 4). The chapter presents the various reintegration initiatives, distinguishing them in terms of military, humanitarian and political institutions. Finally, to provide a general picture of formal institutional reintegration, we end with a section on institutional reintegration in perspective.

6.2 FORMAL INSTITUTIONAL REINTEGRATION INITIATIVES

The reintegration initiatives identified from the various institutions are the basis of this chapter – the formal institutional approaches to reintegration. We define humanitarian reintegration as the activities carried out by non-governmental organizations to help the formerly abducted children to fit back into society. We postulate that their main concern in helping the children is the enhancement of the children's human rights and wellbeing. Military reintegration, however, relates to the activities of the CPU on behalf of the army. Our understanding is that its activities are militarily motivated. Finally, political reintegration consists of the activities carried out by the Amnesty Commission on behalf of the government of Uganda. Due to the nature of the process leading to the creation of the Amnesty Act and the Amnesty Commission, we consider the activities of the Commission relating to the formerly abducted children to be politically motivated. In this study, all three types represent the formal institutional approaches to reintegration.

In chapter 3 we saw that institutional reintegration is mainly based on the UN definition of reintegration (UN Resource Centre, <http://unddr.org/whatisddr.php>). Based on this we also saw that there were UNICEF initiatives for the reintegration of children involved in war in African countries such as Burundi, Liberia, Somalia and the Democratic Republic of Congo (UNICEF, 2004). What was not clear was whether there were different types of initiatives involved in institutional reintegration. Goodhand (2006) and Specker (2008) respectively, revealed the involvement of NGOs in conflict areas in general and in reintegration, covering the equivalent of what we refer to as humanitarian initiatives. Our identification of military and political efforts as part of reintegration initiatives attempts to contribute to an understanding of the reintegration of formerly abducted children from the military and political perspectives. With their different initiatives and orientations, it becomes obvious that the components of reintegration within these classifications would also vary. We will distinguish and discuss these various components in relation to the time that the children were ideally expected to benefit from them.

6.3 MILITARY REINTEGRATION

Military initiatives to reintegrate children who had been involved in the conflict in northern Uganda started because of the experiences of the army in battle. According to the commander in charge of the UPDF's Child Protection Unit, whom we interviewed, the interaction of the UPDF with the

children involved in warfare in northern Uganda goes back to 1994 – thus, more than a decade. According to this commander, this was initially the result of the battles of Palotaka and Parajong in the Sudan, when children abducted by the rebels were first captured by the army. During this initial period the children were interviewed and their name, age, sex, parents' name, in addition to date of abduction and rescue/reception, were registered. The handover of the children to their parents involved them being 'displayed' and paraded with their details in a market and/or town square for parents and/or relatives to identify. For our interviewee, this was a less than desirable and a disrespectful method of dealing with abducted children.

Later in 1997, UPDF officers were trained by GUSCO and Save the Children Denmark in the areas of children's rights and child protection. This culminated in the creation of the army child desk in Gulu and the transfer of responsibility for handing over children to their parents to GUSCO. By 1999 the child desk had been upgraded to the Child Protection Unit. It became operational on 22 May 2000 and has offices in Kitgum, Pader and Lira. It has been supported by Save the Children Denmark with non-food items.

According to our interviewee, today all children who escape or are rescued are expected to first present themselves to the CPU. They have been reported to arrive at the unit in different and varying states of health. After their registration, they are given some basic health care. Those with minor illnesses are treated at the centre on arrival, while major health cases are referred either to the military hospital or to Lacor hospital – mainly after their handover to the humanitarian organizations. During their time at the centre, normally a few days, the children are accommodated and fed by the army. They are encouraged to interact freely with the army, share their experiences and are not treated as prisoners of war. They are referred to as 'rescuees' and formerly abducted persons but not captives. They are also not charged with any offence, despite the awareness that most of them fought on the frontline with the LRA.

6.3.1 The objective of military reintegration

Our respondent at the CPU explained that the main objective of this period at the facility is to give the children confidence upon their return to society and to demystify the UPDF. This confidence-building is important against the backdrop of their indoctrination while in captivity, where they were told that the UPDF was the enemy and that those who escaped would be killed by the UPDF. It was also realized that children who came home but did not pass through the CPU are not confident about their security and feared the army, according to the respondent. Children and their families or communities are thus encouraged to allow them to pass through the CPU in order to gain confidence. What the CPU does is to always announce the presence of

children at their premises upon their arrival and reception. They do not trace families because after a very few days at the CPU, a referral letter is sent to a reception centre such as World Vision, GUSCO or the CPA asking them to take the children in for further psychosocial support, as discussed above.

As it was a military facility, we did not have access to the children within the CPU. However, from the children's narratives some of them acknowledge passing through or having contact with the army on arrival, although they did not dwell on the details of their experiences within the unit. For instance:

“They were instructed to bring me to the LC. The LC then took me to the barracks of the UPDF. I spent the night with the UPDF in Ongako. The next day at 8 o'clock they rang to Gulu. They came and picked me ...”
(*Child mother at GUSCO*)

“In the morning we started walking towards Anaka camp and the soldiers saw and asked us to go to them. We started going to the soldiers. The other girl asked me if they would not kill us because from the bush we were told that if we escaped the government soldiers would get us and kill us. We all the same walked towards the soldiers. The soldiers took us, they took us to the barracks. It was Anaka barracks. While there they gave us food; we ate. We even listened to the radio. We heard our fellow returnees talking over the radio.” (*Formerly abducted girl at Lacor camp*)

As we can see, the main aim of the activities at the CPU as stated by our respondent is building confidence in the returning children. As mentioned, the CPU does not trace family but refers the children to the humanitarian NGOs.

6.3.2 *Prospects of military reintegration*

From the components of the CPU-based activities mentioned we can see that the official objective of the activities is to build confidence in the returning children. However, we believe that being a military facility and knowing that the children were militarily trained, one of the possible unstated objectives might be to debrief the children in relation to their military activities. We would like to suggest that the CPU activities were a way of demilitarizing the children since some of them did escape with their weapons – perhaps to provide a measure of security during their escape – and surrendered them to the army on arrival. It is also true that many of the children were ‘rescued’, although some would say captured, during UPDF bombardments of LRA positions and as the children fought for the LRA. This makes it hard to believe that they were only brought to the CPU for ‘confidence building’, and this was sometimes reflected in the language used by the army after battles with the LRA. Normally, those who were killed (including children, since up to 80 percent of the LRA were children) would be referred to as rebels but

those who survived the battles and surrendered would be referred to as rescued children and mothers. For example:

Some children are 'rescued' by the UPDF during military operations. These are often children who surrender or who are wounded in battle and left behind. Local NGOs are critical of the UPDF for the way it reports on military operations during Operation Iron Fist. Those killed are called terrorists or rebels, and those who survive are 'rescued children'. (Human Rights Watch, 2003: 16)

Our findings further show that returned children were used by the UPDF as sources of intelligence concerning LRA activities. In an interview, a key person at the Amnesty Commission revealed that the UPDF first knew that the rebel leader Kony had relocated to the Democratic Republic of the Congo from the revelations of children. This was also evident from the account of one of our respondents:

"They then took me to the barracks. They took me to the barracks. From the barracks they started questioning me. They said are you returning from the bush?" (*Male, formerly abducted child, Alokolum IDP camp*)

And another response quoted in a Human Rights Watch report (2003: 21) shows how children were used for intelligence:

I spent two weeks at the UPDF detachment at Amuru in Gulu District. The soldiers there asked me lots of questions about the LRA, just like you. They asked if I could take them to where the LRA was located ...

Additionally, we found that the children's contact with the army provided the latter with the opportunity to target them as a source of recruits for the UPDF and other government military functionaries, such as local defence personnel (Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, 2004; Human Rights Watch, 2003). The media regularly reported the actual or attempted recruitment of returned children into the UPDF. For instance, in December 2004, the *Daily Monitor* reported the 'recruitment of former rebels into the UPDF under a special battalion; the 105th Battalion, created recently' (Olara, 2004). The Human Rights Watch report cited (2003) details of how children who had passed through reception centres were later seen in UPDF uniform. The report also talks of the harassment of the formerly abducted children by the army and how the UPDF sought 'help' from the children for their operations in the Sudan in exchange for money. For instance, one formerly abducted boy explained that:

When I arrived at the barracks ... [w]e were asked to join the UPDF. Five of the boys accepted but I refused. The youngest was a fifteen-year-old ... Soldiers would tempt and taunt us ... 'Be a real man, fight with a real army now like the UPDF. You will get money for your work, a gun and a uniform'. (Human Rights Watch, 2003: 21)

The recruitment of returned children into the UPDF was also testified to in some of the responses from the fieldwork for this study:

"My child came; I talked to him and performed the traditional treatment. Now he is okay and has joined the UPDF ... it was his choice [to join]; no one forced him. He said his presence at home would cause problem and so he is going to join the army." (*Focus group discussion, Lacor IDP camp*)

The quote above suggests that some joined the army willingly, though the reasons for doing so are not made very clear. However, it could be that the child's age no longer permitted a return to school or that there were no other opportunities available to improve their livelihood. Joining the army then became the best viable alternative for survival purposes, tapping into and using the military skills they had already acquired from the LRA.

These findings demonstrate that although the CPU helped with the confidence-building agenda it set for itself, its involvement in the reintegration of the formerly abducted children continued the militarization of the mind and body of those children who 'accepted' recruitment into the army. Thus, in a way, militarization became another form of reintegration. How well these children were integrated into the army and reintegrated as persons into the army is not known to this study. Whether this military reintegration was a success or whether there were difficulties encountered in this process are also not known and are beyond the scope of this research. In summary, we can say that the CPU can be considered as a branch of the UPDF whose other important but unstated aims were to recruit and obtain intelligence information from the children. At the time that they were escaping in large numbers, this seems to have been the easiest way for the UPDF to access information about the LRA. The children had nothing to lose and would tell the army what they knew.

6.4 HUMANITARIAN REINTEGRATION

As stated above, northern Uganda during the war years generally became a region that was completely 'NGOnized', with the provision of social services dominated and supported by these organizations. In the 20 years that saw the conflict unfold and devastate the region, government services either became

defunct or could not address the changing needs of the devastated and displaced population (see chapter 2). Among the activities of the NGOs are those that have specifically focused on the formerly abducted children's needs due to their overwhelming experiences, as were revealed in chapter 5.

This study looked at the activities of three NGOs, GUSCO, KICWA and CPA, especially focusing on GUSCO. These three NGOs were selected because they were all locally founded organizations that specifically aimed to address the problems of formerly abducted children. All three provided reception centres for the formerly abducted children who were returning home from captivity; however, CPA's history, meant it was initially focused more on advocacy.⁶ Because of our interest in the local context of the conflict, it was important to examine the reintegration practices developed for the children in these reception centres to understand what they went through, as well as to identify the reintegration methodologies used.

6.4.1 *The component of humanitarian reintegration*

For many of the children a reception centre was the first point of contact after captivity. This would also normally be the case for those who escaped and went home but whose parents or community leaders wanted them to have specialized attention. This was the case for two boys from Lacor and Alokolum camps:

"They said: 'Are you returning from the bush'? I said 'oo' they then said, 'You, if you have come back from the bush, then it is okay. Now nothing is going to be done to you. You stay here, a phone will be rung, a vehicle brought and you will be taken to your colleagues who are in town'."
(GUSCO) (Male, formerly abducted child, Lacor IDP Camp).

"My grandmother told me that if I was feeling insecure, I should come back to Gulu. The next day – I had stayed with her for three days – I boarded a vehicle and came here (Gulu) straight. I stayed for some time, I was taken to the LC. The LC said I should be taken to GUSCO." (Male, formerly abducted child, Alokolum IDP Camp).

Those who were rescued by the UPDF during bombardments or those who local leaders put in contact with the army were also brought to a reception centre after passing through the UPDF's Child Protection Unit. For instance, when asked how they reached the reception centre, the following children explained:

⁶ CPA was founded as an advocacy group by the parents of the St Mary's Aboke girls who were abducted in 1998. It followed the girls and pushed for their unconditional release. It eventually grew into an NGO.

“The rebels are the ones who brought me. We were staying in Purongo. They selected three soldiers (rebels) who brought me up to Ongako. From Ongako they captured civilians to whom I was handed over. They were instructed to bring me to the LC. The LC then took me to the barracks of the UPDF. I spent the night with the UPDF in Ongako. The next day at 8 o'clock they rang to Gulu. They came and picked me and took me to 'tee got' (the traditional chiefs residence). From 'tee got' I then came here.” (Child mother, GUSCO)

“There was a boy who helped me to escape. [the boy was also a rebel]. He left me in a place called Awich ... it was already in Uganda. The locals of that village took me to LC then he took me to an Army Barracks, then I was brought here.” (Female, blind formerly abducted child, GUSCO)

These two are examples of the better treatment of child mothers, who were mentioned in the previous chapter, and a kind boy who showed pity for a blind girl. Otherwise most children had to risk escape. The rebels would not allow them to escape let alone escort them into the community.

6.4.2 Assessment by staff

Thus, the children who attended reception centres reached the centres in different ways, either through family or various community leaders or the army. Here they met social workers who, as a starting point, had to make an assessment of their condition on arrival in order to give them the right treatment. In our focus group discussion with the staff at GUSCO, we gained some knowledge of the assessments they made of the children on arrival in the centre:

“When they have just come back it is really very difficult to find them socializing with others, they are always isolated, withdrawn and quiet. But with time as we keep on counselling them and guiding them they keep on changing and at the end of it when we are re-uniting them you find that the child is freely interacting with others, community, staff and other formerly abducted children.” (Focus group discussion with staff, GUSCO)

“The psychological aspects are not very different from the social aspects. Like when a child has just come, he is more traumatized compared to when a child has taken quite some time and has been counselled. You find when a child has just come he has nightmares, military kind of behaviour, he is withdrawn, he forgets very fast. He is aggressive even to the staff.” (Focus group discussion with staff, GUSCO)

“Physically, when they have just come, some of them are so starved since they have not been eating well; they are so weak, malnourished. Yah, we have grown ups that are malnourished. You find that some of them have

protruding stomachs but with time it disappears. Some of them come with ill health, with physical disability which among other children come with broken limbs, physically some come with wounds all over the body which takes long to heal and heals with time.” (*Focus group discussion with staff, GUSCO*)

Despite these kinds of assessments the opinion of the staff about the children is both positive and sympathetic:

R1: “When you talk about these war affected children like from Kitgum, Lira, Pader and Gulu, the formerly abducted, both these categories lack basic facilities like clothes, they don’t go to school.”

R2: “Yah, when you look at these children they are part and parcel of us. They look like people who can still do something in future.”

R3: “They look like people who are innocent but they have been forced to do things against their will.”

R4: “Personally, I look at these children as disadvantaged children because when you compare them with children elsewhere in the country. Here the experiences which these children go through are beyond compare to these other ones.” (*Focus group discussion with staff, GUSCO*)

6.4.3 Activities at the centre

From a general point of view, while at the centre both the children and the staff talk about the availability of learning activities and skills training, social activities and the provision of basic needs to help reorient and reintegrate the children. Explaining these, the staff at the centre had the following to say:

“Yes, in the centre here we have decided to cater for their recovery. We have counselling of which it is done individually and also the group counselling which is conducted by the social workers of which we talk to the children from under the tree. We discuss with them, I mean we guide them to become aware of what the world is all about and we prepare them for going back home.

We also take the individual counselling depending on the kinds of problems somebody has which is normally conducted by the social worker. Apart from that we also have what we call life therapy for them. We have teachers who always go with them to class just to have normal lessons like we have in primary schools. That is to restore their faith in education because as soon as they come back they feel they can no longer go back to school and more so the children are used to the up and down movement; they cannot sit for like 30 minutes or even 20 minutes in class. So the class therapists are to make them get used to the normal situation of sitting in class and also have to cope like when they are reunited they can go back and re-join school and also get used to the situation in class.”

“To add to class therapy we have something like drawing which helps us to assess them on what stages of recovery they are in. Looking at the pictures these children draw most of them who have just come back draw may be soldiers holding guns and when they spend some period with us you find them shifting from that kind of drawing to may be drawing things like schools, people or different pictures that doesn't depict what was happening from the bush so we also have that programme of drawing, that is under class therapy.”

“We also have like debate which is also done on relevant topics that also helps in widening their knowledge always give them the opportunity to choose what they want to discuss and we give them full opportunity to chair everything while we sit and just guide them like in leadership skills and to help them learn how to speak in the society that is just to prepare them in future life at home and to widen their knowledge. We also provide them with health education. We have two nurses at the centre and they give them health education like in the reproductive parts, on HIV/AIDS and other health related issues. Also we have health education being brought from outside the centre. The health workers come for the immunization of children.”

“When we engage them in activities like when we take them for football outside, we expect children from the community to come out and play with them. This helps them to get used to the outside community. When they go back home such activities make them get used to the community. Then the dances here we have traditional dances and modern dances. So this helps the children to discover their talents. These things also help to restore such works on the children because when they come back they feel helpless so this helps to restore their faith.”

(Focus group discussions with staff, GUSCO)

6.4.4 Children's experiences at reception centres

The children's accounts of their own experience of their time at the reception centres complemented those of the staff. The following excerpts were taken from the histories narrated to us by the formerly abducted children. All of these respondents were at GUSCO reception centre. When asked what kind of help they had been given while at the centre they responded:

“When I arrived here, there were no beddings and clothes. They gave me from here. Even shoes I was given. For medical care we are taken to Lacor Hospital. I was taken to Lacor Hospital for blood screening. Even my legs were paining. We are given food. The main work here is sweeping the compound, mopping the rooms. We have larakaraka (traditional dance), netball and the boys play football. We are being taught writing, drawing and painting pictures. They also teach us health education; things about

HIV/AIDS, on how we should take care of ourselves, how it is transmitted. Here I stay well; there is no one who forces us into doing anything. There is nothing that I am thinking of because they give us everything.” (*Female, formerly abducted child, GUSCO*)

“They are really good, because on your arrival you are given clothes, sandals and even taken to the hospital until you improve. They even provided nappies and bed sheets for my baby.” (*Child mother, GUSCO*)

From these findings we understand that the components of reintegration at the reception centres included the provision of everything that concerned the immediate needs of the returning children. They also received group therapy, learning acceptable group dynamics for living together. They were clothed, fed and introduced to learning, undertaking community work such as cleaning and cooking, attending Christian prayers, receiving medical care and playing. The centres also offered families the opportunity to visit the children through their retracing programme aimed at family reunification.

Another child at the reception centre talked about the kinds of services they received and did not receive, thus giving us an insight into what was done and what was not:

“[I have received] everything like bed, clothes; we were given many things. Yes [I am satisfied] all is fine. [Performance of Acholi traditional ritual] that was not done here. There were prayers. There is somebody who comes from Holy Rosary parish. No one has come [from home to visit me here since I returned]. They don’t know [I am back]. Yes [I am going home to surprise them]. Yes, I am [longing to go back home]. We are always taken to Lacor hospital. Yes, [we have enough to eat from here]. The only work is sweeping the compound and also we cook once a week. We do play games like netball, football or even dance. [We do draw some pictures] – any that you want to draw. [I don’t know why we have not learnt some craft]. Yes, [I am free here] because there is a big difference between being here and being in the bush. We are taught good things and we are not beaten.” (*Female, formerly abducted child, GUSCO*)

In addition to emphasizing the provisions at the reception centre, this quotation shows that there were no traditional rituals performed. Also for this particular individual, there had been no contact with the family, which could have made her return home problematic. Overall, however, this girl felt that there was a positive difference between being in the reception centre as opposed to the bush.

6.4.5 Prospects of humanitarian reintegration

In chapter 3 we saw that according to Human Rights Watch (2003), children who had been caught up in the Angolan war had been neglected or ignored because their specific needs were not included in the memorandum of understanding between UNITA and the government of Angola. Human Rights Watch (2003) further indicated that the children were sent home with just a worn pair of trousers and a t-shirt. To us this represented a haphazard or problematic form of reintegration. In our study we did not ask the children to assess whether the services they received at the centres were adequate or not. However, their acknowledgement of the kind of assistance received reveals the kind of activities occurring at the reception centres. Given that most of their experiences at the reception centres were positive, they also show an implicit appreciation of the programmes. This is in contrast to the view of Human Rights Watch in Angola, and also in contrast to experiences in Mozambique, where Maslen (1997) shows that ex-combatants felt that reintegration programmes only targeted a few people, and especially men. Our findings show that the humanitarian activities at the GUSCO reception centre in northern Uganda make a positive contribution towards reintegration and that reintegration activities in northern Uganda also include girls. However, the activities only form the initial steps in the reintegration of these children, a process which will take a long time to complete. As we will see in chapter 7, the absence of traditional rituals at the centre emphasizes the need to perform the rituals as part of the Acholi culture when the children return home, as part of the medium to long-term reintegration process.

6.5 POLITICAL REINTEGRATION

The politically motivated institutional initiative for reintegration was the result of the people's search for stability at more formal levels. They used the opportunities available within the national institutional framework to create the Amnesty Commission in conjunction with the government. The Amnesty Commission was created by an act of parliament and provides for the implementation of the Amnesty Act, 2000, which was the result of a search for peace by Ugandans after many years of conflict since President Museveni's ascendance to power. According to the Amnesty Commission (2005), as many as twenty-two small and large conflicts and rebel groups have been identified in Museveni's twenty years of rule. These many conflicts, especially the LRA rebellion in the north, led civil society, together with religious leaders – most prominently the Acholi Religious Leaders' Peace Initiative – to push for a law that would encourage fighters, especially children caught up in armed conflict, to surrender and seek reconciliation without fear of punitive

action from either the government or the community. This, it was envisaged, would be a harbinger of peace and stability in the country. Thus, article 2 of the Act defines amnesty as:

... a pardon, forgiveness, exemption or discharge from criminal prosecution or any other form of punishment by the state.

And article 3 sub-sections 1 and 2 list the conditions for amnesty:

- I. An Amnesty is declared in respect of any Ugandan who has at any time since the 26th day of January, 1986 engaged in or is engaging in war or armed rebellion against the government of the Republic of Uganda by:
 - actual participation in combat;
 - collaborating with the perpetrators of the war or armed rebellion;
 - committing any other crime in the furtherance of the war or armed rebellion; or
 - assisting or aiding the conduct or prosecution of the war or armed rebellion.
2. A person referred to under subsection (1) shall not be prosecuted or subjected to any form of punishment for the participation in the war or rebellion for any crime committed in the cause of the war or armed rebellion.

Among other things, those who receive amnesty must renounce and abandon their involvement in war or armed rebellion and must surrender the weapons in their possession before receiving a certificate (article 4).

The functions of the Amnesty Commission include the monitoring of demobilization programmes, reintegration and the resettlement of those who surrender, otherwise referred to as reporters (Amnesty Act, 2000, 9 (a) (i)–(iii)). To effectively monitor these programmes the Commission has a demobilization and resettlement team (DRT) who are charged with the responsibility of drawing up the programmes for the decommissioning of arms, demobilization, resettlement and reintegration of reporters (Amnesty Act, 2000, 13 (a)–(d)).

The Amnesty Commission has regional offices throughout the country to cater for the different conflicts spread across the country, and their specific functions or mode of operation may differ according to the nature of the conflict in the specific region. For example, the regional office in the West Nile region would generally deal with adult reporters of a relatively old rebellion of the West Nile Bank Front. The reporters there would not be reporting to the office after having been sent from psychosocial support centres. This is contrary to the northern region, where most who report are children who the Commission normally accesses via the rehabilitation centres.

Because of this disparity in the mode of operation, we refer only to the activities of the Commission in the northern region, specifically the Gulu office, which directly concerns itself with the children returning to Acholi land.

6.5.1 The component of political reintegration

The political component of reintegration lies in the basic services that a formerly abducted child might expect from the Amnesty Commission. In an interview with the DRT officer in Gulu, we learnt that the Amnesty office there did not receive returning children directly. This was because procedurally the children first report to (or were expected to report to) the CPU which then directed them to the reception centres, according to the officer. The officer continued that it is from the reception centres that the Amnesty Commission commences its activities of registering the children. We, however, found that some of the activities of the Commission are ongoing, targeting the wider community, even though the activities are aimed at benefiting the children.

In this interview we also learnt that when the abduction of children was at its height during Operation Iron Fist (see Chapter 2), the Amnesty Commission was involved in advocacy, preparing radio programmes code named *dwog paco* (meaning 'come back home') which appealed to the children to leave the bush. We were further informed through the interview that the Commission also concerned itself with the training of teachers to give them skills that they could use to help the children cope when they returned to school. Furthermore, in collaboration with NGOs, the Commission also helped to organize children's rights clubs. The clubs help both the formerly abducted children and other non-abducted children to share experiences, to cope and to accept the other group in schools. In addition, the Commission also worked hand in hand with cultural and religious leaders to effect reconciliation and build the confidence of both the children and the community (Amnesty Commission Report, 2004–2005).

The DRT officer added that the Commission provided amnesty cards to all those who had spent at least four months in captivity and/or committed atrocities in the community and were at least 12 years old. The general meaning of the card (including for reporters from other conflicts) is that the government has forgiven the holder and they cannot be prosecuted. The DRT officer also explained that receiving the amnesty card also means that atrocities committed or involvement in rebellion are not considered treasonable unless the actions are repeated after amnesty is granted. In the case of children in northern Uganda, where there were sometimes multiple abductions, one uses the first amnesty card given. According to the Amnesty Commission Report, 2004–2005 (2005), as of the end of 2005, amnesty

had been granted to 4,579 people in the northern region. In our understanding, the amnesty cards are important for the management of the social and legal aspects of reintegration. The recipients can use the cards to ensure, if the need arises, their immunity from prosecution for any atrocities they might have committed. Socially, it also means that communities are expected to forgive them.

Apart from these 'soft' activities aimed at reintegration, the DRT officer in the Commission's office in Gulu explained in an interview that in order to ensure socioeconomic reintegration, the returnees were each given a mattress, a blanket, 2 saucepans, 3 hoes, 5 kg of maize seeds, 1 jerry can, 1 wash basin, 2 plates and 1 cup. In addition, they received UGX 263,000 (Ugandan shillings; about USD 146 at the time of the fieldwork). The similarities between this resettlement package and the one provided by the humanitarian institutions could lead one to ask whether there is a difference between humanitarian and political reintegration. However, ultimately each type of institutional reintegration is understood in terms of its origins and subsequent intentions. Since the activities of the Amnesty Commission originated from the political debates within the country, it has the distinction of being a political institution engaging in political reintegration.

From the two interviews we conducted at the Commission we found that another focus of the Commission was to provide skills training. According to the DRT officer, at the time of the fieldwork the Commission had also contracted the Acholi Private Sector Development Company Limited to provide skills training for the returnees who were not able to go back to formal schooling, such as child mothers and those above school-going age. The returnees were asked to identify projects they could manage; they were then given skills in the fields they had chosen, such as motor vehicle repair, carpentry and tailoring.

6.5.2 Prospects of political reintegration

We have already seen that in discharging its duties of demobilization, reintegration and resettlement, the Amnesty Commission, as the organ of political reintegration, engaged in advocacy programmes, the training of teachers and working with cultural and religious leaders who stood for reconciliation, among other activities. During the interview, the DRT officer in Gulu further reported that one of the goals of the Commission had been to follow the returnees into the community to ascertain if they had settled and were following the spirit of the amnesty. However, this had not been possible due to inadequate funding, which also contributed to the fact that of the 4,579 who registered at the northern region Commission offices (by 2005), only 3,218 had been resettled (Amnesty Commission Report, 2004–2005). However, in what we interpret as trading on cooperation and

complementarity, the DRT officer mentioned that their partner organizations were involved in community follow-up. In this case, partnership in the reintegration 'business' made up for lack of funds. In relation to other factors affecting reintegration, the DRT officer also noted that on-going war made resettlement difficult and achieving targets a big challenge. Difficulty with reintegration was also related to the lack of control of parents over their children because families had relocated to camps.

The security concerns of the Commission are manifest in its responsibilities – the decommissioning of arms, demilitarization, demobilization, resettlement and reintegration (Amnesty Act, 2000, 13(a)-(d)). Moreover, while the DRT might be engaged in militarization in reverse for the purpose of ensuring security, its roots really lie in the fears concerning the military training that the targeted group received – in the case of northern Uganda, the formerly abducted children. This also makes for a close relationship with military reintegration.

Politically, the amnesty is valid for those who engaged in subversive activities, rebellion or atrocities after 26 January 1986. This date is important as the day that Museveni's National Resistance guerrilla movement took over the government in Uganda. Setting this date in the Amnesty Act could be seen as providing protection for the National Resistance Movement government in relation to its previous record and activities as a guerrilla organization. Without this date one could argue that all armed groups that once engaged in subversive activities against the government need to be amnestied. In the present, the date could also protect the government from people who for one reason or another might take up arms against it – as all who do so after this date are liable to prosecution.

At another level, although the tendency of the NRM government generally was to resolve conflict using the military option, the government has sometimes opportunistically used the Amnesty Act to serve its own political purposes. For example, for a time, the government oscillated between total amnesty for the LRA leaders versus support for the prosecution of the rebel leaders by the International Criminal Court (The Wilson Woodrow School, 2006). The government's ambiguous position occurred against the backdrop of an insistent push by civil society and religious leaders over the years to seek amnesty for the rebels and the formulation of an amnesty law. However, sometimes there is an impression that the amnesty law is being used as a means of intimidation. In the local press there are sometimes reports of people who are alleged to have committed subversive activities and are then pressured to apply for amnesty to avoid prosecution (cf. Afedraru and Muyita, 2007). By forcing what appears to be an admission of guilt, the amnesty law acts as a political tool to control and sometimes harass opponents.

6.5.3 The Amnesty Commission, the future and government involvement in reintegration

It was difficult to gauge the extent to which the children of northern Uganda understood the amnesty. It was rarely mentioned in their life histories, though it was mentioned in passing during some informal conversations. In the life histories, we had asked the children to tell us about their experiences from the moment of abduction up until our interview (see chapters 4 and 5), and it is not clear why most of the children did not refer to the services of the Commission. This could be interpreted to mean that the humanitarian reintegration activities were judged by the children to be more important, since most of them talked about their experiences at the reception centres or about not having the opportunity to go to the centres.

For one of the children we talked to in Minakulu camp, however, the first thing we were shown was his amnesty card as if to make a statement that 'despite everything, I have been forgiven, I am not dangerous anymore'. The certificate was also taken seriously by his widowed mother, who kept the card among important family documents such as medical records and baptism cards, which in Uganda sometimes act as birth certificates. According to the DRT officer, other parents fear the certificate, seeing it as a record and constant reminder, as well as labelling their children as rebels. They fear that this might be to the child's disadvantage in the future. For example, based on these records the children could at any time be called for military service.

Generally there was a greater awareness of the activities in the reception centres than those of the Amnesty Commission. Also, the compounds of the reception centres appeared to be more lively than the Commission compound when we visited. In my view this points to a greater degree of involvement by NGOs in comparison to the government in the reintegration of the formerly abducted children. It reinforces the idea that there has been very little deliberate government initiative taken in relation to the reintegration of these children.

In chapter 3 we saw that Mozambique, South Africa and Rwanda had previously introduced amnesties (Coban, 2006; Woodrow Wilson School of International and Public Affairs, 2006). Although the Ugandan Amnesty Act is rooted in the restorative justice system (The Wilson Woodrow School, 2006), we found that its systemic value for the children of northern Uganda was mainly limited to its distribution of the resettlement packages and the amnesty certificate. The continuing war at the time of our fieldwork and inadequate funding were the explanations for this limited involvement. However, we feel that if these were addressed, political reintegration through the Amnesty Commission could go a long way.

An additional limitation to political reintegration is related to the nationwide scope of the Amnesty Commission's programme – to address all

the rebellions that have besieged Museveni's government since he came to power. As shown above, other rebellions did not involve the use of children on the massive scale seen in northern Uganda. Due to the extent of the involvement of children in the northern conflict, one would expect a programme specifically targeting the problems that children face after being forced to join the LRA. There is no specific programme by the government to reintegrate the war children of northern Uganda, and the activities of the Amnesty Commission have simply been modified to address the children's needs.

Ethical questions also arise with respect to the fact that children, who were forcefully abducted and mostly participated in rebel activities as a means of survival, receive amnesty in the same manner as adults who took up arms against the government for mainly political reasons. Already facing much social stigmatization, the amnesty cards will further and forever stigmatize the children as one-time rebels, even if they received the amnesty certificate at the age of twelve.

6.6 AN OVERVIEW OF FORMAL INSTITUTIONAL REINTEGRATION PRACTICES

Our findings thus far reveal that the components of humanitarian reintegration are concerned with the basic needs and comfort of the returned children, while military reintegration addresses the children's relationship with the army. Political reintegration is multifaceted, but ultimately aimed at the acceptance of the children by the communities to which they return. The dominant features of formal institutional reintegration in northern Uganda can be drawn from these three approaches.

6.6.1 Immediate needs: food, shelter, clothing and health care

Initially the child's needs are mainly provided for by the reception centres or the CPU, depending on where the children first arrive. On the arrival of the children at any of the centres or the CPU, they first attend to the children's appalling physical condition as well as medical concerns. These immediate needs normally include food and provision of shelter, health care and medical attention. Minor ailments are usually treated by centre nurses and severe problems are referred to the major hospital nearest to the particular centre. If the children first arrive at the CPU facility, major problems are referred to the army hospital in the barracks. As the returnees recover from their initial adverse conditions, other activities are introduced into their new lives. By this time, most would be at the reception centres. They assume daily duties and responsibilities such as keeping their surroundings clean and cooking.

6.6.2 Leisure and social activities

These activities primarily take place in the reception centres, as the Amnesty Commission does not provide boarding facilities and the children spend as few days as possible at the CPU. At the reception centres they engage in leisure and social activities such as traditional dances, drama, debates and sport. The idea is to encourage them to engage in more regulated and socially acceptable behaviour appropriate to children living within a society, something that they were not accustomed to in their recent past in the bush. These kinds of social engagements can also be therapeutic, allowing them to release the pent up negative emotions which might have developed as they watched numerous atrocities. The venting of these emotions while in captivity meant either becoming a victim or being forced further into this brutal lifestyle, resulting in more negative emotions. Thus, the reception centres become the first place in a long time where the children can freely express the bottled-up emotions. According to Harlacher and Aloyo (2005), these activities also encourage the returnees to build relationships among themselves and their carers at the reception centre. Learning to build relationships is vital because this life skill will be taken with them when they return to the community, where they must build other relationships and adjust to new life conditions.

6.6.3 Counselling

In relation to the components of reintegration we have discussed above, counselling only takes place at the reception centres. According to the social workers, counselling takes two forms, individual counselling and group counselling. Generally, individual counselling is concerned with individual and personal emotional, psychological and social problems. We understand this to mean that individual counselling focuses on addressing the particular problems experienced as a result of specific war experiences, as discussed above. According to the social workers, group counselling is done with a group of 8 to 10 people and deals with more general problems that are experienced more or less by or affect the whole group. Perhaps it is also an easy way of 'surveying' the returned children vis-a-vis their new environment, its challenges and their expectations. In our view, counselling complements the social and leisure activities mentioned and in general can also be said to assist in the venting of complicated emotions. At the same time, it is also a channel through which to receive support through the listening ear of the social worker, who can acknowledge the suffering expressed and provide advice. Harlacher and Aloyo (2005) reveal that counselling in these circumstances also recognizes the importance of exploring a client's strengths, personal and social resources and possible opportunities for effective

reintegration. They argue that people who survive rebel captivity under the specific conditions of captivity by the LRA must be strong and gifted people and that these strengths need to be cultivated, used and built on as resources for reintegration.

6.6.4 Training

There are a wide range of activities that the formerly abducted children engage in to either learn skills or unlearn questionable behaviour. Training in this context mostly takes place at the reception centres, but the Amnesty Commission also offers opportunities for learning, especially skills in collaboration with other partners such as the Acholi Private Sector Development Company Limited. At the centres, returnees watch educational videos, attend classes where they are taught basic literacy and numeracy skills – which also act as therapy to instil better levels of concentration and discipline – and draw pictures to heal their traumatized memories. Education also involves sensitization to relevant social issues such as child rights and HIV/AIDS. Sometimes such social issues are addressed through debates among the returnees, moderated by their carers. The centres further offer practical skills, especially for child mothers and young adults who may not have the courage or opportunity to go back to formal schooling when they return home on account of their age or responsibilities. This scenario could be summarized as ‘learning to learn’ in order to develop opportunities for life-long learning, whereby the returnees first unlearn the bush habits and try to learn new skills to cope with their return, all of which help the process of their eventual reintegration into society. For example, for those who look forward to returning to formal schooling, unlearning the chaotic lifestyle of the bush is helped by regulated ‘classroom-like’ lessons in numeracy and writing skills which instil a structured way of life.

Thus far we have discussed a number of very short-term reintegration activities which are usually carried out when the children are still based at the institutions. However, as we shall see in chapter 7, there are reintegration activities that are focused on the children but also involve the communities and are aimed at having an impact within the community in the medium to long-term.

6.6.5 Family tracing

Above we saw that initially the army carried out family tracing by parading children captured in war in market places for families to identify. However, since the creation of the CPU, family tracing for children who pass through the CPU has been handed over to the NGOs. Here we also note that the Amnesty Commission does not trace families, meaning that the activity of family tracing is only done by the NGOs. Family tracing could be said to be

an activity that steps from the formal institutional-based setting into the community. It involves obtaining information from the returnees about their family, the names of their parents and the location of their home. On the basis of this information, the centre staff will then investigate whether the children's families are still intact, whether they have moved and also inform the family about the return of their child and perhaps their status, especially if they have become mothers, or were wounded or crippled. The status of the children's family is an important initial component of their eventual long-term reintegration. The earlier they get in touch with their family the better the foundation for reintegration because the family is the long-term support and primary unit for reintegration. It is also important for them to know if their parents are alive or not so that they can begin to adjust to the reality they must face. Notwithstanding the importance of the family to reintegration, children who were abducted young often do not remember where their home is or, for those who know, the families themselves are often displaced and the returnees do not know to which camp they have moved. Displacement actually makes family tracing difficult but more urgent, considering that the children only spend a few weeks at the centres.

Apart from the challenges of an on-going war, there may also be a non-response from families, especially if children have lost their parents while in captivity. This non-response from family members was the case for one of the children who was still at GUSCO. It is captured in the following conversation:

"Nobody has ever come. They said that I am to be taken to the hospital first [before I can go home], but they are saying that they will not take me unless my relatives come to see me. If I am to wait for my relatives to come, then they take me to the hospital for my eye problem, then it's useless because I know nobody will ever come to see me from here. I come from Alero, but I even have relatives living here in town and even my grandmother sells from here in the main market but I don't know what wrong thing that I did to my relatives that they don't like me. Yes she is aware [of my being in the centre], even the people here (from the centre) went up to home and talked to her, and she even accepted that she will come and see me, but no one has ever come." (*Blind female, formerly abducted child, GUSCO*)

Non-response or outright rejection by family members evokes feelings of rejection and guilt from the children and it casts a dark cloud over their future.

6.6.6 *Community sensitization*

Community sensitization particularly targets the wider community. It is aimed at making it receptive to the formerly abducted children when they

return home. The following quotation gives us an insight into why this is important:

“We often talk to the parents or the guardian; you know such children mainly stay with guardians not their real parents. It’s our responsibility normally to talk to them. So a child is not supposed to stay here for good. Its just temporary, the best place for the child to stay is the community. And there are many of them ... one ... was being disturbed by the community members and above all the local leaders, so that called for me to train the local leaders so that they know their role in supporting the children, because his first reaction was to go back to the bush, get a gun, come back kill the local leaders and continue with normal life. But he chooses instead to run back to us, which was so good. So we had to take it upon ourselves to train the local leaders. Yah and it has worked.” (*Focus group discussion with staff, GUSCO*)

As this quotation shows, this is an activity that is carried out by the reception centres. We also found that the Amnesty Commission engages in community sensitization through radio programmes, the establishment of children’s peace clubs in schools and by training teachers to help children who return to school. Harlacher and Aloyo (2005) explain that the community in present-day northern Uganda knows well what the children have been through at the hands of the LRA because the war has been experienced by the whole community. Because of this, in our view, the nature of community sensitization should not dwell on the plight of the children but rather play a mediating role, as expressed in the quotation above, to enhance the commitment of all parties to support each other in living together in a war-torn society.

6.6.7 Support for income-generating activities

This form of support is mainly provided by the NGOs, usually assisting older children or child mothers who cannot go back to school. We consider support for income-generating activities to be a stepping stone to the long-term creation of economic and social conditions that will reinforce reintegration. Income-generating activities are important resources and provide the environment vital for proper and long-term reintegration:

In an extremely impoverished community, our support for the reintegration of returnees also includes the facilitation of vocational trainings, income generating activities and schooling. (Harlacher and Aloyo, 2005: 8)

“Then what the micro-finance is doing in the community level is to train people in the community especially in groups and give them some funds to train them in income generating activity and give them what will even

empower the community then in turn they will be able to support these children in their needs.” (*Focus group discussion with staff, GUSCO*)

From the above, it is apparent that such support for income-generating activities should not target the formerly abducted children alone because it could easily bring about disquiet in the community, since the entire community is needy. At another level, the question of whether it is right to support perpetrators of atrocities to the exclusion of the community that bore the brunt of the atrocities could also be raised (Wanican, 2006).

6.6.8 Resettlement packages

Resettlement packages are provided by both the NGOs and the Amnesty Commission. It appears that those children who are ‘discharged’ from the reception centres receive two packages, one from the centre and one from the Commission. However, both might not be received on the same day, as the processing of resettlement packages by the Commission seems to take longer than those given by the NGOs when the children leave the centre. There are pros and cons concerning the resettlement package vis-a-vis the community that may have borne the brunt of the atrocities committed by the same children. Notwithstanding such concerns, the resettlement package announces the child’s arrival back into the community.

Generally, what these findings tell us is that there is more done at the humanitarian level of reintegration than at the other two levels of formal reintegration, both of which are related to government-created institutions (the army and the Commission). This finding also further reveals that there was little overall government involvement in the reintegration of formerly abducted children. Finally, the findings show that the institutional approaches to reintegration in northern Uganda are similar to most reintegration activities for war children and/or ex-combatants in other war-torn countries such as Angola (Parsons, 2005), Liberia (Sendabo, 2004) and Sierra Leone (Van Gog, 2008; Peters, 2007). This might be the result of the difficulties that NGOs and other institutions involved in conflict areas have in distancing themselves from the dominant UN DDR framework as leaders in building peace and post-conflict reconstruction. As Goodhand (2006) points out, all NGOs working in conflict areas are conditioned by organizational mandates, past practices and politics.

6.7 CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this chapter, we have explained the formal institutional reintegration practices as they pertain to northern Uganda. We have shown that military reintegration, although officially aimed at building the confidence of the

formerly abducted children, also aims to gather intelligence and recruit the formerly abducted children into the armed forces. For its part, rooted in the UN DDR framework, humanitarian reintegration is concerned with the wellbeing of the children, mostly taking care of their immediate basic needs. Finally, political reintegration closely relates to humanitarian reintegration in terms of its components but we found it to be ultimately politically motivated. The three paths of reintegration all contribute to the social reintegration of the formerly abducted children in the short-term, but their focus and motivations do not seem appropriate for long-term reintegration.

“A girl who was abducted stayed in the bush for four days; we commended her to prayer. She came back and we also performed the ritual and reported to the LC. From there her name was recorded. She came home, stayed for some time and went to her place of marriage. Up to now she is living well with her husband.



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Even if you fear, the child is yours where do you take the child and where do you run? Sometimes you have the fear” (*Focus group discussion*)



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Stepping on an egg (*Nyono tong gweno*): a ritual to welcome back formerly abducted children.



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Drinking from the same calabash during the ceremony of *Mato Oput* (*reconciliation*)