

CHAPTER TEN

CONCLUSIONS

10.1 INTRODUCTION

Over the last two decades, in the local and international media and the humanitarian industry, northern Uganda has become a byword for senseless rebellion, mutilations, displacement, squalid camps, abductions of children and Joseph Kony, whose Lord's Resistance Army ironically broke all of the Ten Commandments supposedly guiding him. The conflict has also come to signify brokenness, not only of the community but also of the citizenship of its members. This study of the social reintegration of formerly abducted children in northern Uganda was carried out using a qualitative, participatory action research methodology. Life histories of the formerly abducted children, focus group discussions with formal institutional staff, elders, teachers and non-abducted schoolchildren, interviews with parents and some key participants, feedback meetings with the feedback team and observation were used to collect data. The data were analysed by means of a continuous meaning-making process after the development of themes with the help of the ATLAS.ti data analysis package. The meaning-making process involved personal reflections, feedback and the clarification of various issues to my supervisors or other people who wanted to know about the research. The meaning-making process also benefited from what we referred to as an 'evaluation of the day session' with the research assistants, in which we recalled the day's events, asked questions or simply shared experiences.

10.2 THE CONFLICT

Focusing on the social reintegration of the formerly abducted children necessitated an understanding of the historical and social context of the subject of research (chapter 2). The conflict in northern Uganda has a number of aspects. The present-day Acholi people relate to a mythical conflict as a precursor to the colonial conflicts that their forefathers experienced in the eighteenth century. However, the present conflict, of which children have become part, is a continuation of the colonial and post-colonial political power struggle among members of the political-military class in Uganda. The political power struggle is grounded in Uganda's regional resource allocation imbalances over the decades. Unfortunately for the Acholi people, the post-colonial power struggle manifested itself in a unique way, with Joseph Kony, an Acholi himself, making the political choice to turn the

LRA against his own people. Eventually, an otherwise national and regional problem in Uganda turned into an ‘internal conflict’ where outsiders could truly say ‘the Acholi are fighting themselves’, including abducting their own children as the future of their society.

This, however, does not exonerate the present government of its responsibility to provide and ensure security for the Acholi people as citizens of the country. The choices made by Joseph Kony – complicated either by the inability or unwillingness of the government to provide and ensure security – brutalized the population. There was a massive displacement of the people, who ended up living in squalid conditions in internally displaced people’s camps, experiencing the loss of livelihoods and a general loss of property in the context of a broken society. These effects of the conflict consequently broke the citizenship status and practice of the people. The conflict has a uniquely tragic characteristic even in the wider context of the role of ethnicity in political power bases in Africa, examples of which are the 2007 elections in Kenya or the 1994 Rwandan genocide. In those conflicts, different ethnic groups, who were usually political rivals, fought each other. However, in northern Uganda, putting aside the rather negligent attitude of the government with respect to ending the conflict, it has been the Acholi people against the Acholi people to a large extent, thus leading to the brokenness of Acholi citizenship.

10.3 UNDERSTANDING THE CHILDREN

In this environment of ‘internal conflict’ and ‘internal brokenness’ our first aim was to gain an understanding of the war experiences of the thousands of abducted children who became both victims and perpetrators in the conflict (First research question). From the findings in chapter 5, we now know that the children’s experiences of war are difficult and complicated. The experiences are similar but specific for each child. In this study, while we found bad memories and immense personal suffering, as well as seeing the physical scars, erratic behaviour and sometimes emotional breakdown, the innermost experiences that we were aware existed, remained inaccessible. The knowledge of those experiences is only possible through personal experience even though the personal experience will be unique. Nevertheless, the children articulated their broken citizenship, relating events such as the killing they observed and committed, the killing of family members, the experience of an acute lack of food and water, looting, physical and emotional abuse, different kinds of threats to one’s life, long marches, living in the wild, the sexual abuse and exploitation of girls and returning home to orphanhood. Their broken citizenship was also expressed through the atrocities they committed against

their own communities and families, which in turn broke their social and spiritual relationship with the community.

10.4 THE FORMAL REINTEGRATION PRACTICES

Second, following the difficult and complicated war experiences, we wanted to understand how formal institutions are reintegrating the children, who, through their abduction, had become both victims and perpetrators of violence (Second research question). We found that there were three approaches to formal institutional reintegration in northern Uganda. Military reintegration is carried out by the UPDF's Child Protection Unit (CPU), humanitarian reintegration through NGOs, and political reintegration by the Amnesty Commission (chapter 6). In spite of the fact that the CPU and the Amnesty Commission are government institutions, we found that the role that each played in reintegration was militarily and politically motivated respectively, and did not fulfil the basic responsibility of government to provide services to citizens caught up in a humanitarian emergency. The central government did not become directly involved in providing specific social reintegration services for the formerly abducted children, whose abduction and return was of a complex humanitarian nature and would eventually need the long-term commitment of the national government. The lack of government commitment has left a gap in terms of organized and long-term planning for the social reintegration of formerly abducted children that has not yet been filled. Overall, although all three formal institutional reintegration approaches make significant contributions to the social reintegration of formerly abducted children in the short-term, their focus and motivations are not appropriate for long-term social reintegration. They need to be complemented by practices occurring outside such institutions, within the community to which the children ultimately return.

10.5 REINTEGRATION INTO THE COMMUNITY

Third, we aimed to understand how endogenous methods are being used by the Acholi community to reintegrate the formerly abducted children (Third research question). The study found that not only traditional rituals such as *nyono tong gweno* (stepping on the egg) and *ryemo anyenya* (chasing away the evil spirit) but also other general community initiatives such as a positive attitude, acceptance, accepted marriages involving returnees and returning to school, were important for social reintegration into the community. We further found that community-based reintegration is occurring in the changed

and broken community (see chapter 7), and due to this situation, as well as the ensuing disharmony, community-based reintegration practices in the form of the traditional aspects of reintegration must address several levels, such as the reintegration of the self, reintegration with the immediate community, reintegration through reconciliation with the direct victims of the formerly abducted children, with the neighbouring clan and finally with the spirit world.

Drawing on the community and the traditions for social reintegration is important because the community is usually the final permanent place to which formerly abducted children return. The community also offers the elements that are constantly needed for successful, long-term reintegration, such as resources to support various livelihoods and social relationships that support a harmonious coexistence. Furthermore, the community offers values and norms to guide and safeguard life. Therefore, ideally, successful reintegration should provide access to and use of community resources without prejudice, and in turn involve the successful contribution to and replenishment of the resources of the community by all of its citizens. However, a society that has been broken by conflict has lost some of its pre-war resources, such as social cohesion, communal integration and traditional knowledge and social values. Therefore, new conflict and post-conflict challenges such as difficulties in psychosocial adjustment for the children, displacement, the continued social stigmatization of the children, the receding role of elders and tradition, and on-going trauma continue to affect the social reintegration of formerly abducted children. At the same time, however, new resources such as those provided by international and national NGOs have become part of the conflict and post-conflict society and the Acholi community can take advantage of these to assist with the social reintegration of the children. NGOs, however, should not be used to the extent that people and the community become NGOised and completely dependent on them. We therefore caution against an over-reliance on NGOs in the post-conflict environment for the purposes of reintegration to the point that they overshadow the people's agency and ownership.

10.6 REINTEGRATION AS CITIZENSHIP REBUILDING

Fourth, this study set out to understand the interface between citizenship and the war experiences of formerly abducted children and practices for their social reintegration (Fourth research question). The findings in chapter 8 showed that the children's war experiences, such as killing, looting and committing other atrocities –in which they became perpetrators of violence – are practices of negative citizenship. Similarly, abductions, child motherhood

and other difficulties faced in captivity where the children become victims are cases of lost citizenship. However, we also found that both formal institutional and community-based reintegration practices offer ways of re-creating the children's citizenship status and positive citizenship practice. For example, formal institutional reintegration practices such as the provision of basic necessities such as food, clothing, shelter and medical care are practices that improve citizenship status, while community-based reintegration practices such as rituals, accepted marriages, involvement in performing groups and farming are activities that enhance citizenship practice. Most reintegration studies have seen this situation as a humanitarian issue. We find that viewing reintegration in the light of citizenship is a strong way of pointing to it as a rather complex long-term process, even recognizing the politically related nature of reintegration. In this way people's agency (Lister, 1997) is evoked in an understanding of reintegration as a community issue which also demands government participation.

We also found that re-creating citizenship through current reintegration practices is not sufficient due to the challenges that both formal and informal approaches to reintegration face. For example, the formal institutional reintegration practices are short term, mainly targeting the individual, formerly abducted children and some of their basic needs. Furthermore, the motives behind some of the formal institutional practices, such as political considerations, the recruitment of former abductees into the military and intelligence gathering, do not put the reintegration of the formerly abducted children at the centre of their activities. At the same time, the informal community-based reintegration practices also have their limitations due to the adverse effects of the conflict on the community, such as the receding role of the elders, living in camps, the disappearance or inadequate knowledge of rituals, poverty and a general breakdown of society. Because of these challenges and limitations, the NCPO analysis helped to further look into the needs, competences, problems and opportunities related to reintegration. The NCPO analysis did not see the needs and problems as obstacles to reintegration but as challenges that need to be addressed through the use of the opportunities available in the environment and the children's own resourcefulness. On the basis of the NCPO analysis, this study concludes that citizenship re-creation based on personal resources such as competences is more sustainable than other means. Competences such as life skills are personal resources that can be drawn upon both in times of adversity and for personal and communal development generally. Because of the participatory nature of the NCPO analysis, this study further concludes that participation is an important aspect in reintegration. For example, the participation of the formerly abducted children in the analysis of their problems, needs,

opportunities and competences, grounded reintegration in real-life experiences and prevailing circumstances, rather than it becoming an abstract concept.

10.7 PARTICIPATORY SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVING REINTEGRATION PRACTICES

Finally, based on reintegration activities taking place at formal institutions and communities, research question 5 aimed at identifying intervention practices that would improve reintegration. Suggestions such as an inclusive support system, emphasis on agriculture, knowledge and practice of norms, values and rules, sustained help for the maimed and reinforcement of reconciliation processes and cultural activities were made to improve reintegration practices (see chapter 9). These suggestions for reintegration have a deeper significance and can, for example, entail societal and personal reconciliation, or commitment to the wellbeing of society through marriage and procreation to ensure continuity, among other things. The suggestions can also be seen as the building blocks of society, as they are concerned with livelihoods, societal relationships, social networks and the rules guiding society. In this way, successful reintegration entails an eventual sense of being in and belonging to the community. This cannot be achieved in the short-term because of the initial experiences of brokenness due to conflict and war.

In spite of these submissions, however, suggesting activities for reintegration is not enough. Activities and reintegration practices need people; in other words, stakeholders of various kinds, such as the government, the community and its different leaders, community-based organizations, the formerly abducted children themselves and NGOs, all of whom will actualize programmes by planning and implementing them. This multifaceted programme for reintegration will take a long time, we conclude, but would recreate the citizenship of the formerly abducted children and complete their reintegration into their community. In summary, successful reintegration entails the ability of formerly abducted children to ultimately experience a positive sense of being in the community, through access to and the use of community resources without prejudice and in turn their successful contribution to and replenishment of the resources of the community.

10.8 WAY FORWARD AND FURTHER RESEARCH

In line with our action research methodology, we plan to bring our results, especially the suggestions for improving reintegration practices for formerly abducted children in chapter 9, to a stakeholders' conference in Gulu. In

addition, on the basis of our findings it is apparent that much needs to be done and can be done. For example, NGOs (especially those studied here) could take on some of our suggestions to improve existing reintegration programmes. On the basis of the programmes suggested, new projects might also be started, in agriculture, for example, or a post-conflict peace-building project and a culture project that addresses the persisting problems of reintegration.

Our findings also show that people consider it vital for children to go back to school and yet there are major problems affecting schooling. For example, a project to equip teachers or improve their skills in the field of professional counselling, which will benefit the children and improve study conditions in the post-conflict situation, is still needed. Along the same lines, there is a huge need for further support for the children in schooling in terms of the provision of schooling needs and scholastic materials, particularly in rural areas. An education sponsorship project for needy children is another project that should be initiated.

Our study also revealed the unpredictable and constantly changing nature of social problems in conflict and post-conflict situations, yet we found that at the same time NGOs seem to be static, not only in terms of their location (mainly urban) but also in terms of the kind of projects that they initiate for the population. This calls for a partnership with universities or research institutions that can investigate emerging social problems and thereby feed the NGO agenda so that it remains relevant to the needs of the community. This kind of research can be done using participatory approaches that also involve the community in articulating their problems and their ideas about how to solve them. This study has shown that this is possible.

We found that a successful reintegration programme depends on a number of stakeholders, and also that not all of the relevant stakeholders, especially the government, have taken an active part in assuming their responsibilities with respect to the reintegration of the formerly abducted children. This situation calls for the creation of a programme that can advocate on behalf of the children in order to call upon the government to take up its responsibilities in relation to its child population in general. To be relevant, such a project would also need to have a research component in order to investigate not only issues pertaining to social reintegration but also the different issues surrounding children's rights, welfare and safety in the post-conflict situation.

In addition to these examples of possible activities as a way forward, there remains the need for further research. We have listed these below:

- I. A longitudinal study of formerly abducted children is required to assess the long-term impact of their involvement in armed

conflict. Most contemporary studies on children in war seem to focus on the conflict or immediate post-conflict conditions, yet a deeper understanding of the impact of conflict on children in the long term is important in determining what is required for their reintegration.

2. A longitudinal study of formerly abducted children to understand the factors that make long-term reintegration successful is also needed. Such a study will help to mainstream those success factors into reintegration programmes early enough to have the appropriate results.
3. The question of how to develop a hybrid form of reintegration practice using institutional and community-based practices also needs to be addressed. A collaborative research project, relying primarily on a participatory approach that can draw from both the formal institution-based approaches and community-based practices is important for the development of such a hybrid practice as best practice. This kind of research will need partnerships between the community and practitioners from both the formal and informal settings.
4. Finally, it would be of interest to know what the deeper meanings of the traditional rituals used for reintegration are. For example, the Acholi traditional rituals use a lot of symbolism. What do the specific symbols mean? Can they be explained and therefore used to promote sustainable peace?