

# **„If Two Elephants Fight, It Is The Grass That Suffers“**

## **Perceptions on the Rehabilitation Process in Northern Uganda after the LRA Insurgency**

*Stephanie Fenkart; April, 8<sup>th</sup>, 2015*

In northern Uganda a brutal war has been raging for more than 20 years, which was barely noted by the International Community until the year 2012 when a YouTube video called KONY 2012<sup>1</sup> gained impressive public attention with more than one hundred Million views on this quite elaborated video campaign<sup>2</sup>. However, the attention has dropped as fast as it had swept into the Facebook and Google accounts of a more and more online engaged international civil society and the conflict was forgotten all over again.

After the failed peace talks in Juba, South Sudan, in 2008 and also earlier in 2006, the Ugandan People Defence Force (UPDF) has been able to push the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) into realms of Eastern Congo, Central African Republic (CAR) or South Sudan<sup>3</sup>. This marked peace in Uganda for the first time in over 20 years and left the war torn country with various challenges in the northern region.

When talking to people in Austria about Uganda in preparation to my trip there, I got the impression that Uganda is regarded either as a place of heaven, quite in line with Churchill's description of Uganda as the "pearl of Africa", packed with gorillas, crocodiles and other exotic animals, or it is seen as a very dangerous place where a young woman like me always has to pay attention. This divergence leads me to the ultimate intention of my journey – to see with my own eyes, to talk to the people myself and to analyse and reflect what people told me with regard to the relevant and accessible literature.

In order to antagonize wrong assumptions, I need to address that my report deals with the effects of the LRA insurgency in the northern part of Uganda, the region where the war took place. It is important to note that besides the affected areas in northern Uganda (as well as in

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<sup>1</sup> For further information please see <http://invisiblechildren.com/kony-2012/>

<sup>2</sup> In 2003 Jan Egeland, the then UN under-secretary general for humanitarian affairs and emergency relief coordinator even described the war in northern Uganda as "the biggest forgotten, neglected humanitarian emergency in the world today," ( Al Jazeera 2003)

<sup>3</sup> UPDF is the new name for the former National Resistance Movement led by the president Yoweri Museveni and which came to power in Uganda in 1986. Especially since 2002 the military pressure of the government forces has been intensified and led to a series of operations which have been conducted jointly with the affected neighbouring states namely South Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the Central African Republic (CAR) in order to destroy the LRA and to end the insurgencies in their countries.

South-Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo and Central African Republic) most of the people in Uganda did not suffer directly from this war between the government forces and the LRA. Quite contrarily Uganda has been doing very well economically and also politically in the last twenty years. This means that most of Uganda has been stable and prospering while in one region there raged one of the cruellest conflicts, which is not over yet for South-Sudan, DRC and CAR. Luckily the LRA is weakened heavily and they did not return to Uganda since the peace agreement in 2008, which has actually never been signed by Joseph Kony.

Shortly after arriving in Kampala me and my colleague Jens Kessler went to northern Uganda – firstly to Gulu - to talk to some people who have been directly affected by the war and to hear their stories. As I stated above, the conflict has been one of the cruellest wars which was mainly carried out on the back of children and the local civil population. One has to imagine that over 90% of the local Acholi population, which have been nearly two million people, was forced to live in camps for Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) which had tremendous effects on the different aspects of life in general and on the (traditional) community life in particular.

Gulu, the small provincial town in northern Uganda which holds the district headquarters, was transformed almost overnight into the largest camp in the region which became a centre for the IDPs from throughout Acholiland<sup>4</sup> (vgl. Branch 2012: 3155). In contrary to the camps in the more remote and rural areas, Gulu profited from the humanitarian industry and was not as dependent on aid. Most aid organisations established offices in Gulu which increased the economic possibilities and led to an increase of the population (rise from 38 000 in 1991[vgl. Uganda Bureau of Statistics 2006] to 150 000 in 2014 [National Population and Housing Census 2014:12]).

As we have been told that Gulu is a ‘special case’ due to its relative stability during the war we went to Atiak, the last town along the Gulu-Nimule road, approximately some 40 km away from the South Sudanese boarder, also cited in Acholiland. Atiak has been severely affected by the LRA insurgency as it is located at the entrance or exit between South Sudan and Uganda and has therefore been a passing point of the LRA. Atiak gained notoriety through a brutal massacre which was carried out by the LRA under the command of Vincent Otti<sup>5</sup> - “a son of Atiak” - in 1995 where an estimated 300 people have been slaughtered reportedly “to teach them a lesson” in order not to collaborate with the government forces.

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<sup>4</sup> In 1996 the government followed a new strategy in the LRA insurgency: the displacement of the entire rural population of western Acholiland in order to isolate them from the enemy with regard to food they have been looting, but also to prevent further abductions and to facilitate protection which – in the end – has failed regularly

<sup>5</sup> Vincent Otti is one of the five LRA commanders for whom the ICC launched an arrest warrant in 2005. In 2007 he was allegedly killed upon a dispute about the peace process with Kony.

When we talked to **Mr William Odong**, the community development officer of Atiak, a very committed and sophisticated young man, he explained that there are four major factors which are severely affecting the rehabilitation process in the community of Atiak.



Mr. William Odong, Community Development Officer in Atiak/Amuru District

Firstly there is the issue of weak cultural institutions: The Acholi people used to have very strong connections to the elders and the religious and traditional leaders. Due to the war and the forced displacement of the people into camps for years, they lost respect and forgot about their common moral values in society and about the role-model function of the elders, traditional leaders and parents. People would turn into drinking due to the devastating life in the camp and the lack of work in the fields which ultimately led to the loss of their status in society – this applies also to some of the religious and traditional leaders. With no financial and less moral support from the society the elders and traditional leaders became generally more vulnerable which hindered their functions as mediators.

Another crucial point is the frequently reported moral degeneration of the youth who lost respect towards their parents because they are not their bread winners anymore. This function has been essentially adopted by the NGOS.

*“Many elders complained of “wild” children who roamed the IDP camps and surrounding towns, showing no respect for their parents and leaders. Some of these children were former abductees but others were non-abductees who, the elders claimed, lacked moral and cultural guidance because their elders had been killed, incapacitated during the conflict, or in the case of male adults, deprived of their traditional role as bread-winner within the family”, (UNOHCHR 2007: 6).*

Immorality, adultery, sex before marriage, violations but also increasing infections with diseases like cholera and HIV/Aids are just some of the negative effects life in the camps had on the constitution of society.

*“The conflict has caused families to break up because people were confined into camps where there was a lot of immorality.”(A relative of a deceased - Amuria District, Teso in UNOHCHR 2007: 13).*

*“There are so many cases of defilement in the camps. Children are involved in sex before getting married and this is so common here.” (A former abductee - Pader District, Acholiland in UNOHCHR 2007:14).*

Odong also addresses feelings of cultural disparities between traditional Ugandan forms of social behaviour and the western perception of human rights, which especially has been brought in due to the many western NGOs. There is a feeling of many Ugandans that the western based international children’s rights are not properly translated in order to adapt to their very own culture. It is very common to cane children as a measure of discipline in Uganda, but nowadays they would run to an official person and complain about the caning which ultimately affects the whole family policy and the discipline of the youth. Without a strong family, without the possibility to study properly and without the perspective of a better future, the youth gets more and more big-headed and lapse into alcohol, which is a great problem in the whole area affected by the war. The problem evolved not just because of the international rights of the children *per se* but mainly because of the lacking sensitization of the people and the therefore *a priori* exclusion of their opinions and voices. However, domestic violence is a great issue in whole Uganda and is addressed more explicit below.

Besides the weak cultural institutions, there is a major question regarding land rights which is also not a genuine northern Ugandan problem. Still, in northern Uganda the recognition of land rights e.g. also raises the question of who is a landowner. Specifically, IDPs returning “home” often face difficulties (re)accessing land, (re)establishing rights over land and natural resources, gaining compensation, retaining land and property rights, and moving land rights into instruments for economic growth (vgl. USAID 2007: 1).

*“I feel very bad because I lost my home and land and now I am displaced to another person’s land. I have no access to my farmland. Poverty has become our friend. In addition to that, there is much congestion in the camp and we now are very vulnerable to diseases, especially HIV/AIDS. Illiteracy is also a problem. My daughter and I have a life which is not good at all.” (A victim of violence - Pader District, Acholiland in UNOHCHR 2007:15).*

Thirdly and complimentary to the issue of land rights is the link between human rights and economic empowerment. Odong explains that the livelihood of an estimated 40000 farmers in Atiak/Amuru District is in great danger because of the practised subsistence farming. The outcome is often not enough to sustain the own family and if there is no food security (especially in the summer), then the people are not able to pursue and to defend their basic

rights. Odong also describes that the government has failed in supporting the formerly displaced persons in this regard because they did not supply them with ox-ploughs or other tools which would facilitate the economic life and because they failed in sensitising the people to leave subsistence economy. But then, the confidence into governmental and police work is very low in the community because the police staff is not provided with the logistics they would need in order to fulfil their job which means that they are dependent on the money of the people which in turn means that corruption is quite common.

The next point William Odong addresses as an obstacle to the rehabilitation process is the destroyed infrastructure. The level of infrastructure is very low because many important bridges have been destroyed, hospitals are unequipped and schools are lacking. The rebuilding, especially of the bridges, was not conducted yet. This means that people are unable to transport the goods they produce to markets which exclude them from economic prosperity.

With regard to the handling of former child soldiers and formerly abducted people Odong explains that the government and its local partners have been wise in the sense that they tried to include and reintegrate them into society not in isolation but jointly together with the affected families and clans and the formerly abductees - in order to avoid stigmatisation which worked quite well in Atiak. The local cleansing ritual of the Acholi is called Mato Oput<sup>6</sup> and is carried out between the offender and the offended parties. Its main aim is to restore relationships and to foster reconciliation. The drinking of the bitter herb of the Oput tree means that the two conflicting parties accept the bitterness of the past and promise never to taste such bitterness again. The payment of compensation follows the ceremony. It is believed by many Acholi that Mato Oput "can bring true healing in a way that formal justice system cannot." It doesn't aim at establishing whether an individual is guilty or not, rather it seeks to restore marred social harmony in the affected community (vgl. Katshung 2006). The issue of traditional cleansing rituals versus juridical accountability – for example through the International Criminal Court ICC - is a very controversial topic in Uganda which is discussed more explicit on page eleven.

Odong also explains that the status of the formerly abductees always depend on the individuals themselves. Some of them are suffering from extreme trauma and depression and some of them abuse alcohol which sometimes leads to violent outbursts or the threatening of violence against other community members. But there are also hard working formerly

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<sup>6</sup> Mato Oput means literally translated: "to drink a bitter potion made from the leaves of the 'oput' tree."

abducted people in Atiak who are struggling to regain some economic stability and to go on with their lives. However, the family system is the most important factor for the rehabilitation of formerly abducted people, which makes it extremely difficult for returnees who have lost their parents. Odong also illuminates that the system of the LRA has been very authoritarian and strict which sometimes also resulted in the search for a frugal life. Many returnees had no interest in extravagance or in spending money for unnecessary goods which enabled them to care quite well for their own households. Preconditions are of course the support of the family and psychosocial support to overcome the severe trauma those people have been or still are suffering from due to what they saw and what they have been forced to do in the bush.

A very special case is the case of formerly abducted girls which have been given as wives to LRA commanders and therefore have been forced into sex slavery. Those girls regularly gave birth to children during their captivity in the bush. As this topic is very sensitive and not yet well documented we were happy that we could meet *Mrs. Angela Lakor Atim*, the project coordinator of WATYE KI GEN (English: WE HAVE HOPE) located at the World Vision Children of War Rehabilitation Compound in Gulu. Her organisation started to document the returned mothers and their children by recording their names, their age, their bush names as well as the (bush) names of their fathers, their time in captivity and their current place of resident. One of the biggest challenges was that, especially in the beginning, a lot of women did not want their children and themselves to be registered because they feared additional stigmatisation. After sensitizing and talking to the mothers about truth-seeking and about memorialization as a part of transitional justice, it was easier to register them. Unfortunately – as a result of the ending of the war and the withdrawal of donors - the organisation ran out of funds, which is the reason why there is no final report available on this issue.

However, Mrs. Atim told us a lot about the challenges of these women and the perceptions of themselves and their children in the communities after returning. Many children born in the bush have not been accepted by their community or their family which led to tensions between the community and the mother but also between the mother and her child, which is often seen as the reason for suffering in the eyes of the already overburdened mother. This often results in heavy language and in physical punishments for relatively small offenses. There also evolve great problems with the husbands who indeed are accepting the mother with her child, but who treat these children differently – often repellently - from his own.

Interestingly, in 1993/1994 Kony regularly allowed pregnant women to return to their homes, while it seems that he changed his tactics the longer the war lasted. Actually it got quite

obvious that Kony was successively trying to breed a new and pure Acholi generation within his Lord's Resistance Army. This can be explained by the fact that the LRA lost the backing of the Acholi due to its attacks against civilians and the increasing and omnipresent fear of being abducted or being maimed. Besides, the LRA accused many Acholi to support the government forces which was apparently the reason for excessive use of violence against the civil population, including mutilations like cutting off legs to stop them from riding their bicycle and to stop them from communicating with each other (especially during the heat of the insurgency there has not yet been persistent telecommunication available making the bicycle an important tool for communication).

The 'new generation of pure Acholi people' – the children born in captivity - have been treated quite gently in the camps which e.g. means that they have not been forced to serve as sex slaves or soldiers – although they had to learn the handling of weapons for security and self-defence. As Mrs. Atim told us, they have been treated better than their mothers or the other soldiers and they enjoyed some protection. To rape a child born in captivity a 'son or a daughter of the LRA' would even result in the execution of the perpetrator. Therefore, those children have been raised with relative self-confidence which did not cope at all with the life they were thrown in after their liberation. Obviously, this led to tensions in the family, especially between the stepfather and the stepson or stepdaughter who would not pay tribute to the head of the family. They sometimes would even argue in favour of their real father who – in their opinion – did never harm anybody and who had been a good Acholi.

Another dilemma for formerly abducted women concerns money to raise their children born in captivity. As many (new) husbands do not want to pay for this 'child from the bush' it is difficult for the women to raise them properly. The real fathers would not have the capacity to look after them because they might not have enough space on their land or because they might have very many children from different women which makes it financially impossible to pay for them all.

*“Our daughters were abducted and raped in the bush. They gave birth to children who have no clan and when they return without the father of these children, they lack financial support and become destitute.” (A former male abductee - Lira District, Lango in UNOHCHR 2007: 15).*

As there are various existing conflicts on the family and community level in the relation between children born in captivity and their communities, many children are sent to their grandparents or distant relatives what also afflicts monetary costs on them. Therefore those

children seem to be pushed back and forth between all parties, they do not have a sense of belonging to this quite hostile environment they have been pushed in and they are rejected from the community activities because they are possessed by “evil spirits<sup>7</sup>”. Similar experiences are also occurring to their mothers. It is important, therefore to support the disadvantaged and vulnerable groups, to empower them with regard to participation in society and to sensitize the people and communities in terms of non-discrimination. All children are subjects to the UN Convention for the Rights of the Child (CRC 1989) where the best interest of the child has to be put into the centre of all considerations.

In order to get a deeper insight into the lives and thoughts of those formerly abducted children; some of them who are now grown up, some of them are still in their late teens or early 20ies, we talked to ten formerly abductees – five girls and five boys – in the districts of Gulu, Amuru (Atiak) and Pader. The persons we met did have very similar stories in the beginning, starting from the point where they have been abducted, but then their stories got more and more distinct from each other. We talked to a woman and a man – both in their mid-thirties, who spent more than 12 years within the LRA. She got two children; he became a safeguard of different commanders, including Joseph Kony. She tells us that she never saw Joseph Kony killing anybody and that he actually was quite nice if he would not have changed his mood so often and radically. He tells us that Kony and Vincent Otti should be hold responsible for the war but not Dominic Ongwen, who himself has been abducted as a child and whom he befriended in the bush. Dominic Ongwen is facing trial in The Hague in August 2015 after he surrendered in January 2015 in the Central African Republic. It was very obvious that he also feared of being tried at the ICC. If Ongwen is tried – a formerly abductee himself – so why not him as he was also forced to fight and to commit atrocities?

Generally, we have not been interested in the atrocities the formerly abductees had been forced to commit<sup>8</sup> or atrocities they had been forced to endure but in how they cope with their life nowadays within their societies. The main differences herein lie in the sex of the victims, if they have families who are supporting them after returning and in physical and mental health. At the *Gulu War Affected Training Centre* we talked to two young girls who did lose their parents in the war and who suffered greatly from the lack of psychosocial support after returning and of the stigmatisation of those relatives who had to take care of them. They often

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<sup>7</sup> A lot of the formerly abducted people suffer from bad dreams and other forms of stress disorder which influences their behaviour. This is often interpreted as “possession” of evil spirits.

<sup>8</sup> There are many reports available which deal with the atrocities and inhuman practices those children have been forced to commit. I recommend the documentary from the year 2005 produced by Ali Samadi Ahadi and Oliver Stoltz called “Lost Children”

cannot bear the situation and flee into violent relationships with men, or they choose to live on the street. Other young women and girls told us that they still suffer physically because they had to carry very heavy things in the bush on their heads and on their backs and that they are not able to work at the field, which limits their income possibilities. Another boy, age 21, who completed the rehabilitation program of the organisation Friends of Orphans – is now working in construction and is taking care of his 6 younger siblings, because his parents died during the war. With his work he is able to pay school fees for 4 of his siblings; the others stay at home with his only elder brother who is drinking.

A very tragic story is this of an 18 year old boy who returned last year from South Sudan after a jet fighter shot at them in the bush where he later was captured by army soldiers. He told us that he had a very tough life in the bush – abducted at about age 8 - where he suffered a lot from torture, where he was forced to carry heavy luggage and to kill people. He never went to school and does not know how to read or write. However, the greatest challenge for him is that he is all alone and that he does not even have a clan he belongs to, which makes his prospects for the future very dark.

Although I would not recommend treating the stories of these people generally – everyone has his own individual story – one might say that there are different tendencies towards perceptions between males and females on rehabilitation, forgiveness and accountability. Especially the males tend to favour the traditional reconciliation process (Mato Oput) because they have been rather forced to commit crimes than female abductees. Women, in turn, suffered especially from material problems, because they had children to feed with no father. Other aspects like physical and mental health as well as education and vocational training are also crucial for a rehabilitation process of the formerly abductees.

But, it was shown quite clearly that the most important factor is the reintegration into the family and community system in order to proceed with their lives. If the psychosocial support, as well as medical provision is guaranteed when needed, these approximately 40 000 children might have a chance to successfully reintegrate into their families and communities, get educated and provide for their own future.



*Mr. Charles Komakech, Program Manager CARE in Gulu*

*Mr. Charles Komakech*, Programme Manager of CARE International in Uganda whom we met later on in Gulu addressed similar issues like Charles Odong from Atiak with regard to the rehabilitation process in northern Uganda. After returning from the IDP camps people have been put in some form of a ‘transition state’ between the life in the camps and the beginning of a new life, as Mr. Komakech puts it. Because life in the camps was about survival, education did not play an important role which has to be taken into account. The two things northern Uganda has are, on the one hand land, and on the other hand cattle. People should therefore be engaged in implementing farming as a business in order to regain livelihood as there are markets available in Sudan, in the Democratic Republic of Congo but also internally in Gulu or Kampala. As the situation in northern Uganda is quite calm the perception prevails that all Ugandans live under similar conditions, which is not correct. Although there have been efforts in physical rehabilitation -rebuilding the infrastructure, building hospitals and roads - the poverty level in northern Uganda is still high which affects the education process because people cannot pay even the smallest fees for their children to attend school. However, it is the difference in people’s mind which differs significantly from each other. Mr. Komakech points out that it is impossible to compare people who lived in peace with people who have been facing a war for more than 20 years. There have been problems in the communities with the formerly abducted children, especially if they have not been to reception or rehabilitation centres. They have been lacking psychosocial support but also life skills trainings which would have enabled them to cope with the traumas and to provide for themselves. They often reacted quite aggressively. Small things would trigger a fight, which is actually a signal of trauma. Similar experiences have been made by parents who have not been prepared to receive their children who lived in the bush. Besides, therapy and rehabilitation are long processes which can often take months or even years. Additionally, the level of domestic violence in northern Uganda is still very high and the HIV/Aids rate is higher than in other parts of the country<sup>9</sup>. The gap between the rich and the poor is widening resulting in the lack of access to basic services for the poor. Even if there might be public hospitals and schools, they often run out of drugs, do not dispose of an x-ray, do not pay the

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<sup>9</sup> According to the 2006 Uganda Law Reform Commission study, domestic violence is most common in northern Uganda, where it is reported to have occurred in 78 percent of homes (CEDOVIP 2007 cited after Immigration and Refugee Board Canada 2008: 2).

teachers or do not pay them properly and so on. The rich can always draw aside to private providers. If this gap is not managed it could lead to a 'silent epidemic' of social movements which can easily cause problems and enables future uprisings and in the worst case even a new war.

In order to hinder those things from happen CARE is running a women's empowerment program which focuses on three domains of change. The first aspect is the issue of socioeconomic strengthening which mainly means food security and gaining appropriate levels of livelihood. This should be facilitated through the business component rather than subsistence economy. Secondly, social protection shall be strengthened and thirdly CARE focuses on the advocacy components. In this regard they work together with the religious, cultural and local leaders as well as with the male population in order to sensitize them for female issues. Traditionally land is owned by men in Uganda which makes it very important for women at least to have access to land whereas the next step would be ownership of land. Some male groups serve as a kind of role models in their communities what should ultimately lead to a gender transformation. When working to support the most marginalised, namely women and children, it is crucial not to do this in isolation because the affected group lives within their own community and therefore forms a part of it themselves.

Since the insurgency in northern Uganda has officially ended the reception and rehabilitation centres face closure due to lack of funds. Just a handful of new returnees are being received. The reception centres have always been facilitating the first contact between returnees and their communities. In order to get a wider view on the actual work of the rehabilitation centres we travelled to Pader, some 100 km east of Gulu also located in Acholiland to visit an organisation called Friends of Orphans (FrO)<sup>10</sup> founded by Ricky Richard Anywar – himself a former abductee who was forced to serve as a child soldier. Originally founded to serve as a rehabilitation centre for war affected children, namely child soldiers and former abductees, it now also includes child mothers, orphans, adolescents which are HIV/Aids positive or chronically ill and very poor. At Friends of Orphans the students profit from a six months program which includes full residence and contains all meals and which is free of fees for the students in order to reach the most vulnerable children and adolescents. The organisation tries to supply them with a whole package consisting of a) livelihood skills like carpentry, catering and cookery, hair dressing, computer repair, computer maintenance, tailoring, motor vehicle maintenance and driving, construction of houses and metal fabrication, exposure with ox-

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<sup>10</sup> For more information see <http://frouganda.org/>

ploughs and environmental protection which also includes the care of public water pipes b) education and literacy– many returnees are not able to read or write or to speak English – and c) peace building capacities including conflict resolution, sensitization of the communities and reconciliation, individual counselling as well as group counselling and psychosocial support. Another component which is crucial especially for girls is d) reproductive health training. A lot of girls have been abducted at a very young age when they did not have the possibility to learn about family planning, contraception, protection against diseases as well as basic hygiene principles like clean water and sanitation. After the training has ended the students are counselled outside of the compound of FrO like e.g. at home, at work or in finding a job. So Friends of Orphans still tries to give them psychosocial support and they are visited also at their homes.



*Mr. John Bosco, Guiding Councillor at Friends of Orphans in Pader District*

**John Bosco**, one of the two guiding councillors at FrO, explains that besides the 350 young people, who are going through the program at FrO at the moment, there are about 600 students which are still supervised after finishing the program. John Bosco explains that when they want to recruit beneficiaries for the next term, they firstly go to the radio. The information about the program at FrO reaches the communities through media which are mainly local radio stations. Additionally, also local leaders in the sub counties and parishes are informed in order to reach the people on a grassroots level and even in remote villages. According to John Bosco the number of the last applications was overwhelming. They were looking for 600 beneficiaries and got 3750 applications, which clearly shows the great need for such programs. In order to select who is to benefit and who is to leave out they use various categories of vulnerability. Furthermore, John Bosco tells us that it is very difficult to make this selection because all the applicants actually do need this kind of training.

When asked about the main challenges in his work John Bosco expresses the obvious. Firstly, it is difficult to handle the diversity of needs and support which is demanded by the students. They have very different initial positions and very different needs. Someone who is chronically ill has different needs than someone from a child headed household and child mothers have different needs than formerly abducted children. Secondly, the time available is limited with regard to the great number of trainees who he has to care for. This means that he

cannot always help immediately because e.g. he is still in a group session when others are already waiting. Thirdly, although he and his colleagues are trying their best to meet the needs of the students at expected time, it is not always possible and they take their thoughts and undone work to their homes, which is sometimes very exhausting also on a personal level.

John Bosco also tells us about the specific challenges with the formerly abducted children. They often still stick to the mentality of the life they have been living in the bush, a carefree life where they value almost nothing – even life –, where they are not interested in people giving their opinions, where they are always in command, where they do not care for others. These feelings lead to conflicts within themselves; they get short tempered and quickly change into a bad mood. John Bosco and his counselling-colleagues therefore have to put a lot of effort to fix those features, to support them to adapt.

When we asked him about his motivation for his work, he tells us, that his own life has been challenging. He also grew up in the war and he tells us that when he sees someone succeeding, he gets excited and motivated: “Regardless of anything, if you put the youth, who was feeling hopeless to something hopeful, if someone smiles tomorrow, the better it is.”

Overwhelmed with the program of Friends of Orphans and the complex work they are trying to do for the most vulnerable in Pader district we went back to Kampala to talk to a young human rights advocate, **Victor Ochen**, who is running an NGO which is called the African



*Jens Kessler, Stephanie Fenkart, Victor Ochen and Hannes Swoboda*

Youth Initiative Network (AYINET). AYINET is based in Lira, northern Uganda, in the Lango sub region and focuses its work on the following areas: health and psychosocial rehabilitation for those who have suffered from grave injuries and crimes, engaging people and communities in the transitional justice process, and empowering and training youth in leadership skills<sup>11</sup>. Victor Ochen explains that with regard to transitional justice, an

approach to achieve justice in times of transition from a violent conflict (or state repression); it is the victims who have to be put into the centre and not the perpetrators. He refers especially to the case of Dominic Ongwen, one of the five LRA commanders who has been wanted by the ICC since 2005<sup>12</sup> and who has surrendered in Central African Republic in

<sup>11</sup> For a more detailed information see [www.africanyouthinitiative.org/](http://www.africanyouthinitiative.org/)

<sup>12</sup> In July 2005 the International Criminal Court issued arrest warrants against Joseph Kony, Vincent Otti, Okot Odhiambo, Raska Lukwiya and Dominic Ongwen. Alleged crimes are: enslavement, sexual slavery, rape, murder, intentionally directing

January 2015 and who has been extradited to The Hague. The case of Ongwen, who has allegedly been abducted at the age of 14, is controversially discussed in Uganda. However, it is the first time that someone is accused of crimes which have also (allegedly) been committed against him.

Especially in northern Uganda, many people want him to be tried not just in Uganda<sup>13</sup>, but in their traditional way like e.g. Mato Oput which mainly focuses on reconciliation and lacks the dimensions of truth seeking and penalization. This might not be comprehensible for us ‘Westerners’ but in northern Uganda and especially in Acholiland, the people think of Ongwen as of one of their own; one of those children who faced the same fate as thousands of others whom the UPDF has not been able to protect.

*“It does not make sense for the government to forward him to The Hague when it failed to protect him,” Betty Aol Ocan, the Woman MP for Gulu tells the weekly Ugandan news Independent (Independent February 8<sup>th</sup> 2015 Ronald Musoke).*

So they might differentiate between responsibility and accountability.

*“[Name withdrawn] killed one of her friends by battering the person to death. The community excused her because she was responsible but not accountable for the crime”, (Female victim of economic loss, Amuria district in UNOCHR 2007: 27)*

Another reason for this quite mild approach against perpetrators is that after such a long conflict, people just want peace. However, one has to consider that not everybody in northern Uganda favours this traditional approach. There might be different views between formerly abductees and their families and direct victims of LRA attacks. Victor Ochen is one of those favouring Ongwen being tried at the ICC. He committed various serious crimes against the Dinka in South Sudan and against the civil population in Eastern Congo and in CAR as well as against the population in northern Uganda – so his crimes do have an international component which favours an international court rather than a local one. Furthermore, as a commander he would have had the possibility to escape more than once. Many abductees who have not been in such a high position in the ranks of the LRA managed to escape while he did not. In 2005 the ICC issued five arrest warrants against top commanders of the LRA including Joseph Kony, Vincent Otti, Okot Odhiambo, Dominic Ongwen and Raska Lukwiya<sup>14</sup> for

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an attack against the civilian population, enlisting children and pillaging. The remaining warrants are outstanding (see ICC Homepage [http://www.icc-cpi.int/en\\_menus/icc/structure%20of%20the%20court/office%20of%20the%20prosecutor/prosecutions/Pages/prosecutions.aspx](http://www.icc-cpi.int/en_menus/icc/structure%20of%20the%20court/office%20of%20the%20prosecutor/prosecutions/Pages/prosecutions.aspx))

<sup>13</sup> The most common argument is that he should be tried in Uganda because he is an Ugandan

<sup>14</sup> The proceedings against Vincent Otti as well as against Raska Lukwiya have been terminated due to their death

crimes against humanity and war crimes. Those arrest warrants have been the first warrants of the ICC and according to Victor Ochen resulted in the withdrawal of monetary funding for the LRA from outside Uganda. Now that the ICC has been focusing on the atrocities the LRA is committing against children and the civil population in the regions concerned on an international stage, many devotees thought it wise to stop their financial support. To support alleged war criminals was not that attractive anymore for exile Ugandans.

Victor Ochen also argues that since 2000 there exists an Amnesty Law<sup>15</sup> which would have been applicable also for Ongwen, at least until 2005 when the ICC issued its arrest warrant against him. In any case Dominic Ongwen is now in his late 30ies and is capable of differentiating between right and wrong; the assumption stands to reason that he also knew that he was committing crimes and atrocities. Nonetheless, the most important argumentation of Victor Ochen is that this whole discussion about the case of Dominic Ongwen – a moral dilemma or not - is undermining the position of the victims who should be put into the centre of all considerations.

*“Above all, it is very important to realise that Ongwen, like any other LRA commander, has achieved enough prominence for all the wrong reasons. Attention now needs to be focused on those victims whose lives he destroyed and whose days are still defined by severe physical and emotional pain”, (Independent February 15<sup>th</sup> 2015 Victor Ochen).*

Uganda has one of the youngest populations and is one of the fastest growing countries. Especially engaging the youth is therefore essential in order to establish a peaceful and safe community. Victor Ochen and AYINET already recognized the potential of the youth. Through specific youth programs they try to engage the youth in peace building activities. For example they involve the youth in understanding law as a tool for the implementation of human rights, they act dramas in their communities on relevant topics and they are prepared with skills like effective communication, addressing injustices properly and to resolve conflicts peacefully.

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(1) An Amnesty is declared in respect of any Ugandan who has at any time since the 26<sup>th</sup> Day of January, 1986 engaged in or is engaging in war or armed rebellion against the government of the Republic of Uganda by–

(a) actual participation in combat;

(b) collaborating with the perpetrators of the war or armed rebellion;

(c) committing any other crime in the furtherance of the war or armed rebellion; or

(d) Assisting or aiding the conduct or prosecution of the war or armed rebellion. (see Part II Amnesty Act 2000 §3 N 1)

*“We want to equip them with skills to be leaders who are able to identify and mitigate conflict in a way that allows them to promote peace in their own lives, within their community, and possibly for their country,” (AYINET Homepage).*

Just a few days before we met Victor Ochen, he and his organisation have been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize by the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC)<sup>16</sup>, who won the prize in 1947. Victor Ochen is the youngest African nominee and the first Ugandan citizen to be considered for this prestigious price. His nomination shows that African youth leaders and their impact as well as their efforts in peaceful activities, justice and reconciliation are gaining international attention. It would be a positive sign for all those in Africa committed to peace if he would be rewarded with this prize.



*Mr. Michael Otim, Head of Office, International centre for Transitional Justice, Kampala*

Quite as impressive in person and in his argumentation was **Mr. Michael Otim**, head of office of the International Centre for Transitional Justice (ICTJ) in Uganda. Prior to the work at ICTJ he worked as director for the Gulu NGO Forum responsible for communication and coordination of over 100 NGO's working in northern Uganda affected by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) conflict. Otim also co-founded the Justice and Reconciliation Project (JRP) that seeks to reintegrate ex-combatants in justice and reconciliation activities in northern Uganda. He was also an accredited observer during the two-year Juba peace negotiations between the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and Government of Uganda in South Sudan.

In understanding the complexities of the conflict and its results Otim explains that there is no single approach which would be sufficient in dealing with the tragedy that hit northern Uganda. When the Juba peace talks in 2006 concluded without a final peace agreement signed<sup>17</sup>, the government nonetheless committed itself to implement the different protocols which have been agreed on during the negotiations with the LRA. There has been an ultimate understanding between the stakeholders that the goal is to assure peace, followed by justice and reconciliation – which are problematic terms, because they have different meanings for different people. As a result it has been agreed that those who bear greater responsibility, e.g.

<sup>16</sup> AFSC is an organisation of Quakers. They got rewarded with the Nobel Peace Prize representative for all Quakers

<sup>17</sup> One of the main conditions of the LRA leaders has been that the ICC arrest warrants against Kony and four of his commanders must be dropped

those who might have committed atrocities and murder, will be tried in the formal courts. There have also been proposals of the government in putting up a truth-seeking initiative or how they called it “a body to inquire the past”. However, Otim is not too sure if there is a political appetite to integrate a truth and reconciliation process in dealing with the aftermath of the war in northern Uganda.

Nevertheless, the government also recognised the role of other actors like religious and cultural leaders as well as civil society. So they did support traditional approaches and other reconciliation initiatives of the grassroots including offering reparations to victims as one of the many ways to deal with the situation.

Especially the traditional and religious leaders played a crucial role, overall, when people felt that there is no leadership because the government was not supporting them enough in their quest for peace. The religious and traditional leaders made contact with the rebels, trying to find a peaceful solution (even before Juba 2006). They did also have a great impact in putting the Amnesty Act from the year 2000 into force and they facilitated the return processes of the formerly abducted persons by a) receiving them in the communities, b) sensitizing the community members about what happened to them and c) organising rituals to reintegrate the formerly abductees. During the war they played an important role in mediating conflicts. Of course - like other groups - they equally suffered. Right now they try to reconstruct the social fabric that was destroyed. There are still gaps and challenges, but they continue to play a modest role in the reconciliation process in Uganda according to Michael Otim.

When looking at the peace talks of Juba in 2008 one can ask to what extent has the government achieved or fulfilled these commitments to which it committed itself in 2006? Michael Otims says that in his regard there happened very little - if even something - from the part of the government.

Especially with regard to truth seeking not much has been done on this politically sensitive issue. In a conflict there are always at least two parties and each one has a level of involvement and of responsibility – which might make the government a bit nervous. There is a Transition Justice Policy put in place in 2013 which has not yet been approved by the cabinet. This lack of progress shows quite clearly what the political leadership thinks about transitional justice. There has not been a formal acknowledgement of the victims concerning reparations which resulted in a high level of frustration down on the ground, especially on the community level.

Nonetheless, the government tried to do some recovery programs for the region. There has been the Peace and Recovery Development Plan I and II or the northern Uganda Social Action Fund. However, when you look on the focus of these programs you can see that it mostly consists of infrastructural measures. The challenge with this regard is that building health facilities does not automatically transfer into something meaningful for the people, especially when medicine or medical personnel is lacking.

Similar gaps can be observed when looking at how the economic programs are conceived and implemented. They do tend to elude certain categories of victims, especially those who are voiceless groups like e.g. abducted mothers and their children, stigmatized persons, persons with disabilities who also became burdens for their families because they have been maimed and cannot work anymore. The programs therefore benefit the ones who are already better off says Michael Otim, which raises the level of frustration of many people. Furthermore, the political rhetoric of the president also emphasized that all victims of the LRA are compensated by the government - but nothing happened.

Yet, there is no complete consensus on issues like peace, justice and reconciliation. This always depends on to whom you speak to. Traditional and cultural as well as political leaders focus more on reconciliation than looking at accountability. Others, especially from the civil society do say that besides peace there should at least be some element of accountability and redress. On the peak of the insurgency in 2002/03 - together with the failure of the government to protect the people - peace has definitely been the number one priority. Subsequently when peace came victim's needs and demands changed, they never remain static and they are now looking for accountability and redress.

The government seems to send mixed signals, as Michael Otim puts it. Some statements are positive while another governmental official is issuing outrageous statements, which is very unhelpful for reconciliation. The government, therefore, has not been consistent in messaging about reconciliation. Part of the reason might be that in Uganda everything revolves around the presidency; the level of governance has deteriorated, so has the level of democracy, the government is less accountable to its citizens and one can observe an increasing level of intolerance which does also impact reconciliation. The priority of the government seems to be the survival and consolidation of the Museveni regime.

However, there are also some positive developments within the government and its dealing with northern Uganda. In 1995/1996 the Ugandan Human Rights Commission has been constitutionally created in order to document the human rights abuses of the conflicting

parties – including the UPDF which is also accused of committing serious human rights abuses against the civil population - in the years 1986-2008. This would be the first official documentation project by a government body (noting the Human Rights Commission is independent from the government). In absence of a clear political will to establish a truth and reconciliation process, like it was the case in South Africa after the Apartheid, this could contribute to get to know the truth about what exactly happened, it could contribute to the victims advocacy and lobbying for redress because this will be an official document from which the government cannot run away. Furthermore it would contribute to the memorialization and give a voice to the victims.

However, the struggle continues because the quest for justice is still high on the agenda and so are the need for reconciliation and the need for redress and accountability.

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