

Which children count?

The politics of children's rights in northern Uganda

Chris Dolan

Chris Dolan was the International Research Officer for the Agency for Cooperation and Research in Development (ACORD) working with their Gulu programme. He is presently completing his doctorate at the London School of Economics.

In international eyes the forcible abduction of children and adults by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) is probably the defining characteristic of the war in northern Uganda, and there is little doubt that it has done much to draw international attention and intervention to the area. According to the Abducted Child Registration and Information System (ACRIS) set up by UNICEF and the government of Uganda, some 9,818 children under the age of 18 have been abducted since the LRA war began, or about one third of the total of 28,217 recorded abductionsⁱ. Of these 9,818 about one third, or 3,300, were under the age of 12 when abducted. Although these figures do not reflect the differing duration of the abductions (which range considerably from a few days to several years), they nonetheless point to an average abduction rate of just over 800 children per year over a twelve-year period. While women account for 12% of those abducted overall, amongst the under-18s the proportion rises to about 24%. Until very recently UNICEF estimated an overall return rate of 50% (ACRIS), with a lower rate of return amongst girls than boys, while the US State Department Human Rights Report 2000 talked of 75%ⁱⁱ.

For those immediately affected, whether the abductees themselves or family and peers, abduction has been a deeply disturbing experience. Oral testimonies collected from returnees indicate that many have been directly involved in traumatic and brutalising activities: forced to kill, participate in or experience rape, acute hunger and thirst, forced marches, separation and displacement. Those not captured live in extreme fear that it could happen to them, resulting in thousands of people seeking shelter either in the larger towns or sleeping in hideouts in the bush. During one of the peaks of LRA attacks in 1996, for example, around 9000 people took shelter in the compound of Lacor hospital outside Gulu town every night. The trauma of abduction does not end with return; some are kept in the UPDF barracks for weeks at a time for questioning. Others are incorporated directly into the UPDF. The Kitgum Justice & Peace Committee for example, reported in early 2000 the case of one 16 year



old boy who 'after escaping from rebel captivity in January has spent so far three months in Gulu barracks and is under a lot of pressure to join the Army'.

At the heart of this very real suffering the most recent figures give some grounds for cautious optimism. In contrast to earlier estimates of a 50-75% return rate (which would suggest that between 4,909 and 7,363 children would have returned by now), the most recent figures indicate that some 7860 children have already returned and been reintegrated by World Vision and Gulu Support the Children Organisation (GUSCO). Indeed, allowing that some 10% of those abducted would have become adults in the years following their abduction, these figures would suggest that less than 1000 children remain to be returned and reintegrated.

Total Number of children abducted, 1989 – 2001	9818
Number that grew from children into adults (approx 10%)	982
Number of children yet to be reintegrated	8836

Number reintegrated by World Vision 1995-2001	5560 ⁱⁱⁱ
Number reintegrated by GUSCO 1995-2000	2300 ^{iv}
Total number of children reintegrated to date	7860

This indicates a reintegration rate of at least 88% - and a return rate which is even higher, given that not all returnees pass through the World Vision or GUSCO centres. Assuming that some children have undoubtedly returned without passing through any process of reintegration it also suggests that the number remaining to be returned as of early 2002 is at the very most around 900.

Unfortunately, if all the accounts of children dying or being killed on forced marches or when seeking to escape are true, then several hundred must have died during their captivity. Hundreds more are thought to have been killed in skirmishes with the UPDF and SPLA, and it is alleged that hundreds have been sold into slavery by the LRA in Sudan. It is therefore unlikely that many of these 900 or so children still survive. Although there is an additional unknown number of children born in LRA camps, the figures raise a huge question mark over the widely publicised claim that children make up 90% of the LRA.

Consideration is overdue to the fact that the focus on LRA abductees and returnees has, for some time, diverted attention from the extreme needs of the children who live in the affected districts of northern Uganda as a

whole. The 99.8% of the child population left behind experience a daily catalogue of major forms of abuse. Most are in constant fear of abduction due to a lack of adequate protection from the government. A majority of them live in 'protected villages' where parenting and socialisation practices are severely disrupted. From there some are forcibly recruited into the government's own Home Guard - the Local Defence Units (LDUs) deployed to other conflict zones such as the DRC. Some lose life and limb stepping on landmines and picking up unexploded grenades, while others suffer severe malnutrition necessitating the interventions of World Vision and Action Contre la Faim supplementary feeding schemes. Universal Primary Education is by no means universal, and secondary schooling is almost wholly unavailable. The phenomena of child prostitution and of parents marrying their under-age daughters to soldiers, in the hope of increased protection and security, are well documented. Although no figures for this are available, it is probable, given the degree of militarization in the north, that at least as many young girls are married off to UPDF soldiers as those abducted annually by the LRA.

In terms of the position of children and youth in society in general, there is evidence of a backlash against youth as adults seek to recapture the power and status accorded them under more traditional age hierarchies which the war has weakened, effectively blocking many youth initiatives. This and other long-term effects of growing up in a war-affected society are potentially disastrous. A USAID report recently commented that while 'the physical risks are obvious: children can be killed or injured... The psychosocial impacts are harder to see but can be persistent and even more debilitating than physical trauma'⁵.

Given these factors, the emphasis on the LRA's child soldiers can at times seem disproportionate to the other interventions which are required if cycles of violence are to be broken, raising the question of why northern Uganda's 'other youth' (i.e. those not abducted by the LRA) should not have been given more attention. Without questioning the good intentions of those who have been involved in those dynamics, it is possible to highlight some of the interests which have been served in the process.

Firstly, the lack of any kind of reception and formalised reintegration process for returnees until 1995 was a distinct gap which has since become something of a niche for certain humanitarian agencies. It is relatively easy to raise money internationally for children's issues, especially when they are in synergy with multiple and global rights agendas. The case of abducted children of northern Uganda has become something of a *cause célèbre* in the movement for the rights of the child, as well as in campaigns to ban child-soldiers and the anti-slavery

campaigns, and it has been a key shaper of international perceptions of the war in the north. The abduction of 139 teenage girls from Aboke Secondary School in the neighbouring district of Apac on 10 October 1996, and the exceptional campaigning work done by the Ugandan Concerned Parents Association, along with the UN's 1996 report on the 'Impact of Armed Conflict on Children' which featured the returned LRA abductees as a case study, were major drivers of this process. The degree to which institutional agendas have diminished external agencies' potential role(s) in protecting all children in northern Uganda remains an open question.

Secondly, as argued earlier, one of the principal psychosocial dynamics set in motion or exacerbated by conflict of this nature is the problem of inter-generational conflict in which adults feel that they have lost control over and respect from the younger generations, with a backlash against youth as a result. Most child-rights based interventions, while exhorting adults to respect children's rights, are not working with adults to overcome deeply entrenched belief systems regarding age hierarchies. Indeed, the presentation of the war as being principally waged around children who need to be reintegrated or brought back under control 'for their own good and the good of society' plays directly into the hands of adults who are seeking to restore their diminished authority. Principal mechanisms of this which have been evident in northern Uganda and have gained much government and NGO support are cleansing and reconciliation ceremonies and the re-establishment or reinvention of 'traditional leadership' structures (male elders).

Thirdly, the presentation of the war as child-centred has undoubtedly enabled demonisation of the LRA by the government of Uganda – despite the NRM's own notorious use of *kadogos* (child soldiers) in its struggle for power in the mid 1980s, and its more recent involvement in the training of child soldiers in the DRC. The irony of this is not lost on people in the north; as the then co-ordinator of GUSCO stated in his acceptance speech of the Anti-Slavery Award 2000, 'the first time I saw a child holding a gun was in 1986 in Uganda when the National Resistance Army, which brought the current government in Uganda to power, took over power in Kampala' (7 December 2000). Nevertheless, the image of the LRA as being led by individuals who are indifferent to children's rights has in some circles justified a non-negotiation stance by the Ugandan government. It has also enabled people to turn a blind eye to the government's current abuses of children, such as the forcible recruitment into LDUs to be sent to the DRC, and the marriage of young girls to UPDF soldiers, as outlined above.

In short, the furtherance of the interests of these three groups (NGOs and human rights campaigners, local adults, Ugandan government) through the issue of



Women marching at the Gulu Peace Prayers, 31 Dec 2001

Source: Father Carlos Rodriguez

abducted children has done little either to help resolve the conflict or to create a climate conducive to longer-term peace and stability. Not only have the abducted children themselves not been properly counted, but children as a whole in northern Uganda appear not to count.

In terms of solving the conflict, the abducted children have become a further pawn in international power brokerage, a point of leverage with which to gain the support of international public opinion at the cost of analysis of the overall dynamics. As a result a set of beliefs concerning the nature and dynamics of the war have been entrenched in the minds of both local and international audiences, despite the fact that they do not stand up to close scrutiny. In terms of creating conditions conducive to long term stability this has been compromised by disproportionate focus on a relatively small group of children at the expense of concern for children as a whole and the future they may or may not be able to build.

As mentioned earlier, 88% of all abducted children have already been reintegrated. Humanitarian and human rights interventions in the northern Uganda conflict now need to make *all* children count, both literally and figuratively. This means a switch of emphasis from the existing reception centres to following up the returnees and the realities of their reintegration within the community, and doing this hand in hand with interventions in support of relatives and peers. In terms of the numbers affected, improving the context of a lack of adequate economic and educational opportunities, which currently pushes children into early marriages and

prostitution, may be more of a priority than increasing military protection from abduction. Most importantly, rights-based and psycho-social interventions must address the tensions of inter-generational conflict if some of the internal dynamics which help to sustain the wider conflict are to be broken.

There needs to be more careful analysis of the issues resulting from child abduction by armed groups and forcible recruitment by government forces – just what do they mean for the longer term dynamics of northern Uganda and stability in the country as a whole? There may be no better starting place for this than a re-assessment of the experiences of the government's own *kadogos* and their subsequent involvement in building what is still widely regarded as one of the success stories of Africa.

-
- i See UNICEF 'Abductions in Northern and South-western Uganda: 1986-2001'
 - ii US Department of State Human Rights Report 2000
 - iii <http://www.wvi.org/wvi/old%20files/childsoldiers.htm>: 'Girl returns Home After Three Years in Captivity' by Simon Peter Esaku
 - iv Radda Barnen Save The Children, Sweden: Children of War. No3-4/00, December 2000, p3
 - v USAID: The Displaced Children and Orphans Fund's Report on Northern Uganda Children Affected by Violence, September 1998, p3