



# **Back but not home:** supporting the reintegration of former LRA abductees into civilian life in Congo and South Sudan

**Research report**

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*Cover: Bolligihe, 11, sits outside his home in Doruma, DRC while his family prepares the evening meal. He was in the LRA for almost two years and is still disturbed by his experiences. © Tom Bradley*

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*Esperance (second from right), who was with the LRA for almost three years, with her family in a camp for displaced persons in Dungu, DRC. © Tom Bradley*

## Executive summary and recommendations

Since 2008 the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) has been abducting children and adults in the neglected border areas of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the Central African Republic (CAR) and South Sudan.<sup>1</sup> The thousands who survive this ordeal must then embark on the difficult and often painful process of reintegrating into normal civilian life. While many receive a joyous welcome, over time their families and neighbours often struggle to accept them back into their lives and community, believing them stained or altered by LRA violence and magic.

Few returnees can look forward to schooling, a good job or a balanced family life. Some suffer severe mental health problems. For some,

coping with social marginalisation and their own psychological trauma is too much and they are tempted to return to the LRA.

Communities who have suffered at the hands of the LRA are affected by their own deeply traumatic experiences and on-going hardship. Many see returnees as perpetrators rather than victims and are frightened of what they might do. Some believe abductees still adhere to the LRA's dangerous belief-system, and that intoxicating rituals have contaminated their souls and bodies. The strange antisocial behaviour of some returnees reinforces these suspicions.

For small communities trying to cope with chronic insecurity, poverty and influxes of displaced people, making time for returnees falls low on the list of priorities. But in the long-term failing to reintegrate returnees fully into civilian life creates extra psychological and economic burdens, while the consequent family and

1. In July 2011, the southern part of Sudan became an independent state, the Republic of South Sudan.

social tensions undermine community cohesion and productivity. A comprehensive range of interventions to encourage and facilitate return and reintegration are needed urgently.

A few home-grown initiatives in the DRC and South Sudan have proved helpful but have been largely ad hoc. Spontaneous welcoming ceremonies and traditional chiefs' visits to returnees send the right signals but their effect can be short-lived. Both Christian and traditional healing rituals of the local Zande tribe contribute to psychological well-being and reconciliation, but the Church's longstanding opposition to non-Christian belief-systems renders some rituals officially taboo. Group healing sessions conducted by local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have also helped. The bonds made through these activities demonstrate the importance of community participation in all reintegration work.

More formal institutional efforts to promote reintegration have so far been minimal and some clumsily inept. In both the DRC and South Sudan, LRA returnees are ineligible for national disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programmes. This makes it difficult to foster ownership of the problem among local state authorities. International actors (United Nations (UN) agencies and international NGOs) currently provide no support for adult returnees and support for children goes no further than reuniting them with their families. Underequipped transit centres for child escapees have merely delayed the longed-for reunion with and emotional support of their families. Gynaecological care and culturally sensitive psychological help for those with severe mental disturbances is almost entirely lacking.

This report examines the experiences of children and adults who have escaped from the LRA as they try to reintegrate into civilian life in the DRC and South Sudan. It analyses the community dynamics that affect reintegration positively and negatively and assesses the effectiveness of past and current initiatives to ease this process. Finally, it proposes concrete ways to enhance current efforts. It forms part of a wider research project that also seeks to address shortfalls in the understanding of and responses to the protection of civilians.<sup>2</sup>

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2. See companion report, Philip Lancaster for Conciliation Resources, *A people dispossessed: the plight of civilians in areas of the Democratic Republic of Congo affected by the Lord's Resistance Army* (July 2014).

The report argues that an approach to reintegration is needed that has the following core characteristics:

### 1. Driven by strong local leadership

The proximity of local authorities, traditional chiefs and church ministers to communities and their lines of communication to capitals and across borders give them the potential to play critical roles as community mobilisers, coordinators of reintegration strategies and influential advocates.

### 2. Community-based and culture-specific

Reintegration initiatives should involve and benefit other members of the community besides returnees, especially other vulnerable groups; successful reintegration depends on returnees earning the trust and acceptance of others in their community. Allowing returnees to demonstrate their rejection of the LRA worldview and adoption of the community's shared values and common cultural beliefs is critical to lasting reconciliation.

### 3. Long-term, holistic support

Reintegration is a long and potentially reversible process that seeks to rebuild the psychological, social and economic life of returnees within their communities. Promoting the process requires long-term commitment by donors, national and local actors in a comprehensive range of fields, including in particular the creation of educational and employment opportunities for returnees and the wider community.

Section 6 of this report offers practical and detailed ways that international, national and local stakeholders can help returnees, their families and communities. Recommended actions centre on the following:

- Comprehensive plans drawn up by local authorities for the reintegration of returnees in their area leading to an externally supported donor conference.
- Strong lines of communication between local authorities and community leaders to gather information on the number and needs of returnees.
- Policies and services for returnees extended to other vulnerable groups.

- The involvement of community members and LRA returnees in the development of culturally appropriate reintegration initiatives.
- Holistic support for returnees, including medical and psychological care, family reunification and educational and employment opportunities.
- Support for community-specific livelihoods that benefit the whole community based on a local market analysis.

- Vocational training for returnees and others in professions tailored to market needs.

Research informing this report was conducted between January and May 2014 in Haut-Uélé district, DRC and Western Equatoria State, South Sudan. Research methods consisted mainly of semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with key stakeholders involved in reintegration, including 133 returnees and their families.



Children dance outside the building of a local organisation in Dungu, DRC that looks after vulnerable children including those abducted and orphaned by the LRA. © Tom Bradley

## 1. Introduction

This report examines the experiences of children and adults who have escaped from the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) as they try to reintegrate into civilian life in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and South Sudan. It analyses the community dynamics that affect reintegration positively and negatively and assesses the effectiveness of past and current initiatives to ease this process. Finally, it proposes concrete ways to enhance current efforts.

### Background to the conflict

The LRA emerged in the late 1980s as an armed uprising in Northern Uganda that sought to overthrow the government of President Yoweri Museveni. Joseph Kony had taken control of a resistance movement consisting mainly of his own Acholi people. But the group's brutal terror tactics lost it popular support and Kony increasingly relied on rule by force and by promulgating the belief that he could channel the power of the spirits. Following the loss of its major sponsor, the Sudanese government

in Khartoum, the LRA entered into talks with Museveni's government. During the Juba Talks, 2006 - 2008, Kony maintained a camp in Garamba National Park in the DRC. After two years of drawn-out talks, Kony failed to sign a final agreement, the talks collapsed and Museveni reverted to military action.

In December 2008, the Ugandan army with support from the DRC, South Sudan and the United States (US) launched an air and ground assault on the LRA's camps in Garamba Park. It was supposed to be the final blow. Yet Kony survived, and the LRA launched a set of coordinated attacks against civilians in Haut-Uélé and Bas-Uélé districts of Orientale Province that set a new standard of savagery. Over a period of two weeks, the LRA killed more than 865 people and abducted at least 160 children, as well as a number of adults.<sup>3</sup> 'The Christmas Massacres', as they came to be known, signalled the beginning of a wave of terror attacks against the civilian population of north eastern DRC, South Sudan and southern

3. Human Rights Watch, *The Christmas Massacres: LRA attacks on Civilians in Northern Congo*, February 2009, p.4.

CAR that have so far resulted in over 2,300 deaths and approximately 4,900 abductions. Nearly half of those abducted are still missing.<sup>4</sup>

The Ugandan army, with logistical and intelligence support from the US, has kept up military pressure on LRA groups and used various methods including radio programmes and flyer drops to persuade fighters and abductees to surrender. In late 2011 the African Union (AU) launched a Regional Cooperation Initiative for the Elimination of the Lord's Resistance Army (RCI-LRA) with the endorsement and participation of Uganda, the DRC, the CAR and South Sudan. The Regional Task Force (RTF), composed of troops from all four countries, was meant to increase coordination and unity of effort. In reality, the AU has provided greater legitimacy and diplomatic cover for a still predominantly Ugandan military operation with strong US backing.

### Protection and reintegration: shortfalls in understanding and delivery

Though the LRA's core of Ugandan commanders has been whittled down and Kony's ability to control his scattered troops diminished, LRA fighters continue to attack civilians in their homes, in the forest and on roads between villages. National governments, armies and international security forces have consistently failed to provide sufficient protection for inhabitants of all three affected countries. In addition to the fear of attack, local communities face the legacy of the LRA's past atrocities. While fighters and abductees who have managed to escape try to return to normal life, their communities must also adapt to living with those who may have committed atrocities.

Manifest shortfalls in the efforts of local, national and international actors to protect civilians and reintegrate former LRA members into their communities prompted Conciliation Resources to commission a two-stranded research project with the support of UNICEF. The result is two complimentary reports. The first seeks to understand the protection challenges in LRA-affected areas of the DRC and proposes ways to enhance current

measures.<sup>5</sup> This second report analyses the factors that favour and inhibit the return and reintegration of former LRA in the DRC and South Sudan and proposes concrete ways communities, support organisations and governmental bodies can facilitate the process.

## 2. Methodology

The aim of the research was to develop a regional analysis of reintegration experiences of LRA abductees, in the DRC and South Sudan.<sup>6</sup> The research understands reintegration<sup>7</sup> as the process by which individuals involved in armed groups shift their identity from armed group member to civilian.<sup>8</sup> The process aims to enable a shift in a person's behaviour and psychological make-up away from violence and towards peaceful social, economic and political activities. The success of reintegration is thus measured against the degree to which a returnee's activities in these multiple spheres of life are endorsed by the mainstream community to which they have returned. Reintegration is understood as:

1. a complex process that remains misunderstood;
2. specific to national, regional and community context;
3. varying largely among individuals from the same group;
4. not a fixed process; it is bound to evolve over time, to be incomplete and is reversible.

This report focuses on three aspects:

1. returnees' pathways upon escape and longer-term reintegration into their communities;
2. the dynamics affecting reintegration; and
3. an analysis of local and international initiatives to promote reintegration.

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5. See Philip Lancaster for Conciliation Resources, *A people dispossessed: the plight of civilians in areas of the Democratic Republic of Congo affected by the Lord's Resistance Army* (July 2014).

6. Research in the CAR was not possible due to security and logistical constraints.

7. This understanding is based on the following sources: Torjesen, 2013; *Paris Principles*, 2007; *Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards* (IDDRS), 2006; Muggah, 2005; Medeiros, 2013.

8. Reintegration is understood in this context as a process that may or may not require rehabilitation, in the sense of repairing an area of an individual's life that is damaged.

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4. See the LRA Crisis Tracker ([www.lracrisistracker.com/#analysis](http://www.lracrisistracker.com/#analysis)), accessed on 10 June 2014. It remains difficult to obtain even approximate figures or collate data since there is no systematic recording of those killed or abducted.

Research was conducted in Faradje, Djabir, Duru and Dungu, Haut-Uélé district, Orientale Province, DRC in January and February 2014 and in Yambio, Ezo, Asanza, Nzara, Gangura and Naybimo, Western Equatoria State, South Sudan in April and May 2014. The analysis is based on focus group discussions, in-depth individual and semi-structured family interviews with 70 returnees in the DRC and 63 returnees in South Sudan.

Just under two thirds of the returnees interviewed were children under the age of 18 when they were abducted. The remainder were adults from 19 to 50 years old at the time of their abduction. Interviewees' time with the LRA varied from a few days to seven years. On average the Congolese returnees had spent less time with the LRA than the South Sudanese. Sixty per cent were female. Interviewees occupied various positions in the LRA including carrier, fighter, sex slave and chief of unit. They had left the LRA between five years and five months prior to the field research. The researcher also met other victims whom the LRA had mistreated (tortured, raped, injured), or who had lost close family members and/or whose children were still missing.

Interviews were conducted with key stakeholders including Local Peace Committees, Local Protection Committees, religious leaders, customary chiefs, traditional healers, administrative authorities, schoolteachers and women's associations (including associations of foster care families). The researcher also met with agencies involved directly or indirectly in reintegration work. They included local initiatives,<sup>9</sup> international organisations<sup>10</sup> and UN agencies.<sup>11</sup> Former staff members of organisations that were no

longer operating were also interviewed.<sup>12</sup> Participant-observation methods were occasionally used to understand informal social coping mechanisms. A workshop and dialogue sessions provided supplementary data for this report. The former was conducted in Kampala on 27-29 January 2014 with representatives of civil society, international NGOs, UNICEF, the AU and governments of the DRC, South Sudan and the CAR. Dialogue sessions were subsequently organised in Dungu, DRC to triangulate the key findings and in Yambio, South Sudan in May 2014 to deepen the analysis and the formulation of recommendations.

Time and logistical constraints and the size of the LRA affected area limited access to certain communities. Additional research, such as a comparative sample of people who did not engage with the LRA, would complement these findings. Further documentation of the number of people who have disappeared or were killed on their return from the LRA would also be crucial to a fuller understanding of reintegration dynamics.

### 3. Multiple pathways back to civilian life

Figure 1 depicts the pathways available to child and adult returnees from their departure from the LRA through to civilian life. It captures the immediate and long-term options available to them. Stages supported by national or international actors are framed in rectangles while informal community spaces are circled.

#### Escape

At the top of the diagram, a, b, c and d indicate four possible ways in which abductees escape from the LRA:

- a. they escape by themselves and first arrive in an unfamiliar community;
- b. they surrender at specified defection points in the DRC;
- c. local self-defence groups (e.g. Arrow Boys<sup>13</sup>) free them during an attack;

9. In the DRC: Solidarité et Assistance Intégrale aux Personnes Démunies (SAIPED), Commission Diocésaine pour la Justice et la Paix (CDJP), Réseau des Organisations Féminines des Uelés (ROFU), National Red Cross and the Association des Jeunes pour le Développement Communautaire (AJEDEC). In South Sudan: Inter-Church Committee (ICC), Self Help Women's Development Association (SHWDA) and the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC).

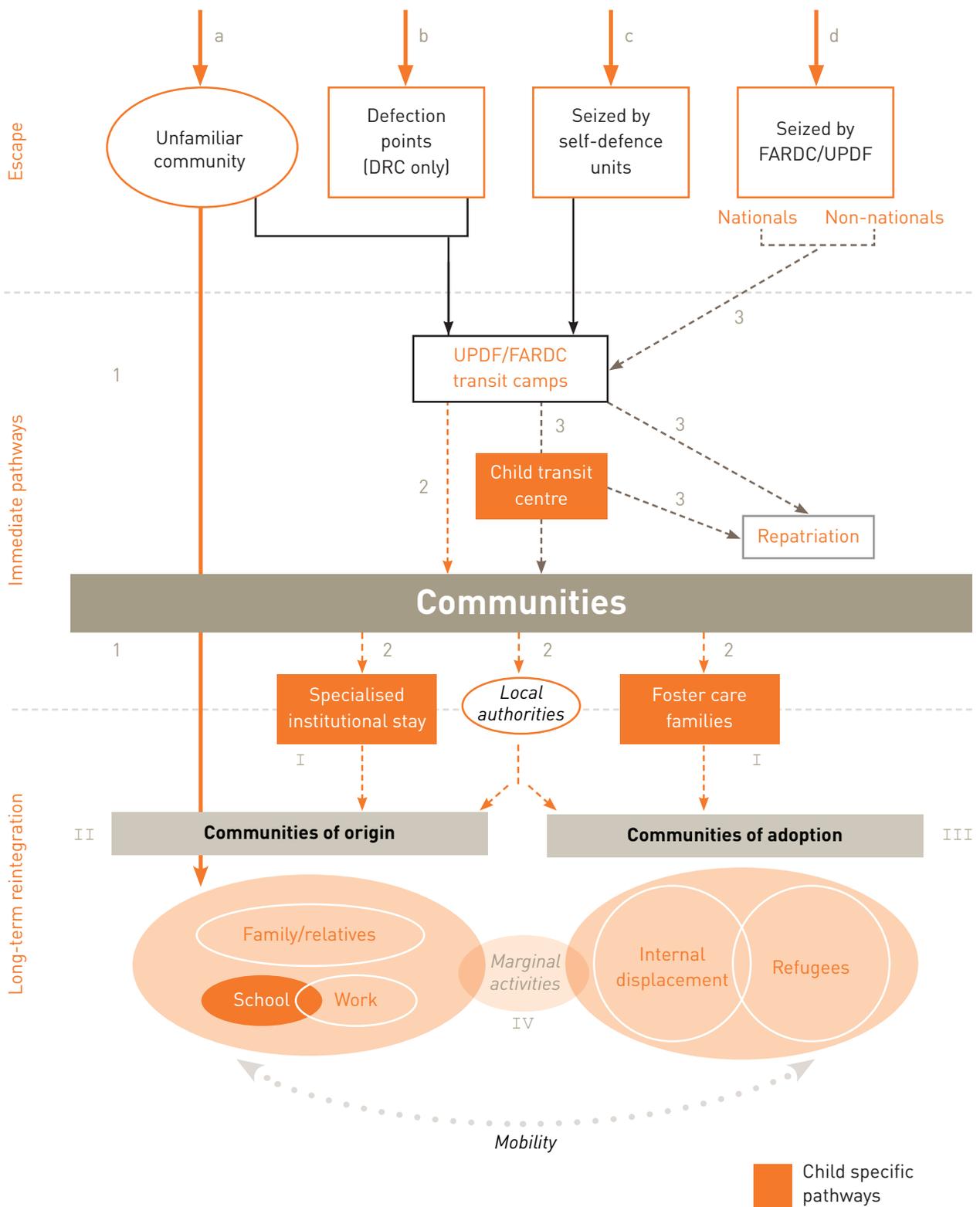
10. International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Intersos, International Medical Corps (IMC), Catholic Medical Mission Board (CMMB), World Vision, Winrock, African Education Trust and Discover The Journey (DTJ).

11. United Nations Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), UNICEF, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

12. Elikya Centre and Associazione per la cooperazione internazionale (COOPI) in the DRC and the Child Transit Centre in Yambio, South Sudan.

13. The Arrow Boys, also known as the Home Guard, are civilian self-defence groups from Western Equatoria State, South Sudan which consist almost entirely of the Zande ethnic group.

**Figure 1:** Returnees' immediate and long-term pathways in the DRC and South Sudan



- d. the Ugandan army (Uganda People's Defence Force, UPDF) or Congolese army (Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo, FARDC) seize them.

Their pathways subsequently differ according to whether they are adults or children and national and international agencies' interventions.

### Immediate pathways

The number of pathways open to LRA returnees immediately after their escape is extremely limited.

**Pathway 1:** Most returnees find their way back to their relatives – communities of origin or adoption – without any international or official support. (In South Sudan only one out of 27 children interviewed received external assistance). For the most part, returnees receive help finding their way home from people they encounter on the way. Many arrive to discover villages deserted, and children learn that their parents have been killed or are missing: 23 out of 27 children interviewed in Gangura and Nayimbio in South Sudan had lost their parents. Abductees return to their communities of origin or to new communities where they feel safer from LRA attacks. Others decide to live in urban areas, camps or in new communities where they can remain anonymous. In some instances, the community to which they defect or self-defence units direct them to FARDC or UPDF camps.

**Pathway 2:** Returnees seized or identified by community members, self-defence groups or the UPDF are brought to local authorities, child transit centres or foster care families on the rare occasions when these facilities are available.<sup>14</sup> Local authorities (e.g. local chiefs and commissioners) play a crucial role since they often use their own means to cater for returnees' basic needs until the families come to collect them.

**Pathway 3:** Finally, returnees who come into contact with the UPDF or FARDC follow different routes according to their nationality and the country in which they defect.

- Returnees who are not nationals of the country in which they defect are officially dealt with at the UN country mission where

they are 'debriefed'<sup>15</sup> before a UN agency or the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)<sup>16</sup> repatriates them. These international agencies have no further involvement in their reintegration. The UPDF always repatriates Ugandan nationals regardless of their age or the country in which they defect.<sup>17</sup> A few children stay in a transit centre or with foster families while their families are traced.

- Returnees who are nationals of the country where they are seized or defect sometimes pass through UPDF or FARDC transit camps. The 'debriefing' period of several days allows time to trace the communities to which they would like to return. Most returnees brought to UPDF camps receive medical care. This is less common for returnees brought to FARDC facilities or to local authorities. In rare instances, children are subsequently sent to child-friendly facilities operating in the area.

### Long-term reintegration

Pathways I, II, III and IV show that the options available to returnees after their immediate return are very limited. The routes for adults and children follow approximately the same pattern:

**Pathway I:** Some Congolese child returnees stay in a specialised institution before returning to their homes. Until mid-2013 and the closure of the Elikya Centre<sup>18</sup> and Catholic-run orphanages in the Uélé region, some community leaders and international NGOs were encouraged to refer returnees to these institutions in order to ease reintegration.

**Pathway II:** Most former abductees return to their communities of origin when safety allows and when they can find their relatives or parents. Many seek to resume their social life by re-joining their partners and children, their parents or, if their close relatives have been

14. Between January and mid-May 2014, only ten returnees passed through the child transit centre in Yambio, South Sudan.

15. The FARDC, UPDF, Joint Intelligence Operations Centre (JIOC) and US military advisers all debrief returnees.

16. The ICRC only repatriates children and vulnerable mothers every three months due to the limited number of returnees passing through official channels.

17. One interviewee expressed concern about the mismanagement of the repatriation of returnees who became fluent in Acholi, the LRA's main language. He argued that some of his former LRA colleagues lied and said that their families were in Uganda because they were told that Uganda would give them 'money' (i.e. reintegration packages). Two other interviewees claimed that the UPDF encouraged them to settle in Uganda.

18. The Elikya Centre was a Congolese rehabilitation centre for child returnees in Dungu, Haut-Uélé district, DRC.

killed or displaced, their extended family. Some returnees come back to find that their partner has started a new life with somebody else. Returnees experience two phases once they have arrived back in their communities:

At first, families and communities give returnees a warm welcome and, if they can afford it, a small party. Neighbours and friends join in and the local priest may lead a prayer session. In some instances, however, their relatives and communities are too concerned by the LRA threat or absorbed by grief to celebrate abductees' return. Many returnees receive a visit from a chief who offers them guidance on how to join in community life. In South Sudan, family and community members often prompt returnees to share details about their life in the bush. Children from wealthier families or who still have their parents go back to school, while those from poorer backgrounds help their parents earn money or care for family members. Tension and uneasiness typically arise when returnees bring with them children who were born in the bush and when child returnees are not familiar with the relatives who look after them.

In a second phase, community members start to fear and discriminate against returnees in their daily life (e.g. at church, at school, in the neighbourhood and at work).<sup>19</sup> Many start calling them insulting names (e.g. *tong-tong*: an Acholi name that means the one who cuts people into pieces), implying that they belong to the LRA and not to the community. Returnees' relatives often adopt the same attitude, gradually excluding them from family decisions and activities, and blaming them for any problem that arises within the family setting. Former partners often reject returnees whom they associate with the LRA. Children placed under the care of their extended families also appear at higher risk of discrimination. Many returnees are soon asked to leave their homes, sometimes with their children, regardless of the length of their abduction. A few men abductees said their wives had not rejected them, but only because the women feared their husbands would react violently if they did. The discriminatory dynamics in these contexts push many returnees to leave their community of origin for one where their LRA background remains unknown.

19. Several girl returnees described how, on becoming pregnant after their return, they were rejected by their new partners because, due to the girls' association with the LRA, communities discouraged the relationships.

**Pathway III:** For a number of reasons former abductees frequently choose to settle in new communities (communities of adoption) in their country of origin or bordering countries. The presence of the LRA and Mbororo herders prevents some returnees and their families from pursuing traditional livelihoods in their home areas.<sup>20</sup> Returnees sometimes choose a bigger town in the hope of finding economic opportunities, while others try to tap into the patronage networks. Other returnees associate their communities of origin with their abduction and past atrocities; these traumatic memories prompt them to go elsewhere. Some also fear that if the LRA were to abduct them once again from their community of origin, they would be recognised and killed straight away.

Child returnees settle in new communities to be close to members of their extended family who are able to look after them. Some returnees fear the social stigma attached to involvement with the LRA and so choose to settle in communities where their identity is unknown. However, communities often learn quickly of returnees' LRA background and the latter become as stigmatised as they would have been in their community of origin.<sup>21</sup> Insecurity and returnees' difficulty in reintegrating socially often means they move between their communities of origin and adoption.

**Pathway IV:** Less frequently returnees who cannot reintegrate into their families or who cannot adjust to their communities become involved in marginal activities (e.g. prostitution or crime). Some community members in the DRC believe strongly that a few LRA defectors who were too fearful to return to civilian life and who face potentially deadly reprisals have organised themselves into small groups of bandits.<sup>22</sup>

## 4. Dynamics affecting reintegration

This section identifies the various factors that ease or hinder the reintegration of returnees into civilian life. Returnees' prospects are

20. Traditional livelihoods include hunting, herding, fishing, petty trade and small-scale farming.

21. Several returnees said that their LRA past became public because church communities encouraged them to reveal the cause of their sorrow.

22. Although these returnees look like LRA combatants, they are reportedly only interested in small-scale looting and occasional highway robbery for their own survival and do not intend to harm others.

primarily determined by the relationships they make with families and communities, the extent to which communities are involved in the reintegration process and the availability of support systems. These determinants are in turn shaped by other historical, social, economic and personal factors.

## A. State of social fabric

### Collective trauma

The degree to which communities accept or marginalise returnees varies according to each community's history of trauma. The instrumental factor accounting for this variation seems to be the qualitative difference in the way the LRA perpetrated violence against communities, as well as the effect this has had on the community's collective psyche. The types of collective trauma can be categorised as follows:

1. A single but extremely traumatic event (e.g. mass killing and abduction at Faradje, DRC in December 2008);
2. Repeated and on-going traumatic events (e.g. continuous LRA attacks in the Ezo area, South Sudan);
3. Major traumatic events and the continuous threat of LRA attack (e.g. mass kidnapping of schoolchildren at Duru, DRC and ongoing sporadic attacks);
4. No traumatic history (e.g. Aru town, which has been spared LRA attacks).

These four kinds of experiences affect communities' social fabric in distinctive ways and therefore shape differently their attitudes towards the reintegration of returnees. Thus to understand this process, analysis of communities' collective memory and of the way communities have dealt with their experiences is crucial.

### Community involvement

Successful reintegration significantly depends on the readiness of families and communities to be inclusive, as well as emotionally, socially and economically supportive towards returnees. Returnees' involvement in formal and informal ways in family and community life greatly determines their perceived sense of belonging, security and well-being. However, the greater the structural challenges communities face (poverty, displacement, insecurity, trauma), the

more community members are concerned with their own situation and the less they are involved in the reintegration of returnees. Thus, more recent waves of displaced people and refugees have suffered from less social and livelihood support and a weaker sense of belonging, making the experience of displacement much more painful. Returnees' reintegration has been eased and strengthened when community members have demonstrated great empathy and volunteered to care for their well-being.

## B. Group belonging

Community members' willingness to accept returnees is often tempered by the lingering fear that they are still loyal to the LRA and adhere to its dangerous belief-system. Indeed, LRA leaders use extreme tactics to ensure the loyalty of abductees. Yet the warmth of a community welcome and other activities that foster a sense of common identity between returnee and community can counteract these tactics and become a determining factor in successful reintegration.

### LRA strategies to ensure loyalty

Soon after their abduction, individuals are forced to go through a series of traumatic recruitment processes and initiation rituals, usually involving the perpetration of atrocities. These aim to tie abductees to the LRA by making them fear the consequences if they were to return home and by degrading their humanity to such a point that they feel too ashamed to go back. The LRA ensures that community members witness abductees carrying out acts of extreme violence. This encourages communities to conclude that because abductees no longer behave like humans they can no longer belong to the community.

#### **Veronica, 30, abducted by the LRA in Ezo, South Sudan in 2009:**

"When they (LRA fighters) took us, they forced us to carry heavy loads. On the way, they asked this mother to put her baby in the mortar and pound it. She refused, screaming and begging them not to make her to do it. They beat her so hard for this that she eventually pounded her own baby to death."

Former abductees in Congo and South Sudan said that they did not fully understand the LRA

belief-system and rituals because commanders performed them in the Acholi language of northern Uganda. Nonetheless abductees did grasp aspects related to their immediate survival: the so-called 'intoxications'. These rituals are part of the LRA witchcraft system that purportedly connects members to the group's godly spirits and other supernatural forces. LRA commanders and traditional healers perform the rituals to protect members against the enemy's spells and bullets, to increase their endurance of physical pain and to inspire the aggression needed to perpetrate violence on civilians.<sup>23</sup> The LRA's magic spells are also meant to give its members powers to use against the enemy through fetishes.

**Jean de Dieu, 17, who from the age of 11 spent three years with the LRA:**

"Each time I hear a loud noise or somebody shouting I feel this compulsion that I should kill somebody. [pause] They [LRA commanders] gave us the training for this. They would make cuts above our eyebrows to put on their traditional medicines to make us strong and to kill without thinking."

It is hard to establish how much these altered states of consciousness are psychologically and/or chemically induced.<sup>24</sup> Certainly, these intoxications enable abductees to deny responsibility for the violence they perpetrated both during their time with the LRA and once they have returned.

### Fostering a shared community identity

Successful reintegration depends on the ability of returnees to distance themselves from the LRA and develop a strong sense of belonging to their community and on community members recognising and reinforcing returnees' membership through their behaviour. This mutual process of nurturing a shared identity depends on the social and emotional support of family, friends and neighbours as well as church and traditional leaders.

23. The rituals were performed by LRA commanders and others who were traditional healers and witch doctors in their home communities.

24. The LRA's ointments mainly comprise shea butter and herbs, but traditional healers in the region often use herbs with chemical properties which, when combined with alcohol, can induce altered states of consciousness.

For returnees, a sense of belonging arises from a feeling that they are welcome. Important symbols of welcome include spontaneous celebrations at which family members, friends and neighbours sing, dance and consume alcohol or expensive items such as meat and soft drinks. Interviewees also found it helpful when local priests joined the celebrations to lead prayer sessions and blessings and when local chiefs visited in the first few days after their return to provide moral guidance and encouragement to forget their 'LRA ways'.

Returnees can also develop a feeling of togetherness and shared identity through daily activities. Going to a church service or to school, working together in the fields and playing games with others in the neighbourhood provide returnees with emotional support and diffuse tensions with their families. Socialisation activities are of particular importance for child returnees who sometimes feel more secure and at ease with their peers than with their parents or relatives. Returnees' friends sometimes display a particularly high tolerance of their challenging behaviour.<sup>25</sup> However, returnees' social and economic marginalisation can limit their access to these social mechanisms. Name-calling by family or community members that associates returnees with the LRA (e.g. 'LRA son' or 'LRA wife') directly undermines their sense of belonging to the community.

### C. Attribution of blame

Successful reintegration also depends on communities perceiving returnees' as victims rather than blaming them for the crimes they committed. Most communities initially see returnees as victims and do not hold them responsible for their acts of extreme violence. However, in a context of generalised insecurity, displacement and great challenges to survival, attitudes shift. Apprehension and suspicion lead to social exclusion of returnees even in communities where the social fabric is less damaged. Returnees are sometimes perceived as 'LRA spies' or 'LRA members who could kill at any time'. Discrimination then becomes more or less overt. Women returnees have more difficulty finding a partner and when they become pregnant the fathers, feeling social pressure not to be associated with 'LRA

25. In the areas where the LRA abducted many children (e.g. Duru, DRC), other children likely identify with the plight of their peer returnees and therefore develop a greater empathy for them.



People forced to flee their homes by the LRA attend a large Catholic Church between two camps for displaced persons just outside Dungu, DRC. © Tom Bradley

wives', often deny their fatherhood and reject them.<sup>26</sup>

More serious bullying can follow. This can include name-calling, exclusion from normal socialisation opportunities and even barring returnees from their homes. Some former partners reject returnees, regardless of their length of stay in the LRA. Although returnees' partners may initially welcome them, family and community members can put immense pressure on men to separate from their wives and sometimes even their children.<sup>27</sup> The social stigma is worse for women who are seen as 'contaminated' by sexual intercourse with LRA fighters. This is exacerbated by the stigma associated with rape in South Sudanese and Congolese societies. Discriminatory behaviour also worsens when returnees behave 'oddly', although violence towards new returnees, beyond

the reported cases of lynching in 2008 and 2009 in the Uélé districts, has almost disappeared.

These extreme levels of discrimination can result in the near 'social death' of returnees. This seriously hinders their psychological reintegration and leads some to believe in desperation that returning to the LRA might give them a better life than their current existence.<sup>28</sup>

## D. Social capital and economic resources<sup>29</sup>

Returnees' access to social and economic capital through their extended social network is also crucial to their reintegration into societies that operate through patronage systems. Without the support of family, friends and other

26. Men in the region often reject women and children if they have fathered a child out of wedlock.

27. Cultural practices surrounding widows are also concerning. After a husband's death, his family rejects his widow, sends her back to her parents and sometimes forces her to leave her children behind.

28. See open letter from the returnees of Nzara in Appendix B. The researcher was unable to establish the number of returnees who actually returned to the LRA.

29. The notion of social capital refers to 'The sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition' (Bourdieu, 1992).

members of the community returnees have limited opportunities to rebuild their lives.

Problems that affect the wider civilian population such as poverty and displacement make the reintegration process considerably more difficult. Host communities were able to cater for the first waves of displaced people and share their means of subsistence as they would with extended families including by giving them plots of lands to cultivate. But this system of reciprocity has already been overstretched and people are less ready to extend socio-economic assistance to members of the wider community, let alone the most vulnerable, such as returnees.<sup>30</sup>

On return former abductees often find that they have lost both social and economic capital which severely hampers their reintegration into civilian life. Association with the LRA constrains their social opportunities in daily life, such as finding a spouse, having children or consolidating their social support network. The discrimination they experience also reduces their access to economic opportunities (e.g. farming) and limited access to formal education shrinks their chances of finding more lucrative employment in the future. Returnees are also more vulnerable to LRA attacks as they are reluctant to migrate to safer communities knowing they will not benefit from a support network. Returnees and displaced people may be exposed to security threats for longer periods since they have limited alternatives to their current living conditions.

## E. Returnee-family relationships

A healthy relationship between returnees and their families is crucial for effective reintegration. Families can provide the social and psychological support that returnees – some emotionally unstable – often need, while the strength of the family structure can also provide the tolerance and empathy needed to support returnees who display challenging behaviour.

Returnees from dysfunctional families experience the greatest challenges in their social and psychological reintegration.<sup>31</sup>

30. For example, fewer people are willing to share their plot of land with others looking to build temporary accommodation.

31. The term dysfunctional is used here to refer to families in which some members' attitudes, conflicts, misbehaviour, neglect or abuse leads other members of the family to adapt and conform to such actions. These dynamics tend to reinforce family members' dysfunctional behaviour by enabling or perpetuating it.

Relationships that were troubled prior to a family member's abduction often continue or worsen after their return.

**Pauline, 18, returned home in March 2013 after spending two years with the LRA. She lives with her parents in a small hut with seven other family members. She said this about her time in the bush:**

"They separated the girls into two groups. I was part of the ugly girls so I was not used as a wife but to transport loads. ... I also received military training to know how to protect myself against the enemy, to run away or to hide if we were attacked."

**Pauline's parents said she would sometimes climb trees and repeat LRA habits, pretending she was still in the group. She would be so uncontrollable that her older brothers had to beat her so she would understand that she risked harming herself. When asked what came into her mind during these episodes, Pauline explained:**

"It's to observe the enemy from a long distance and to be able to protect yourself. I like it, it's like I remember the things I was taught in the bush and I keep practising it without even thinking about it. It's as if I was still there."

**Her mother expressed her frustration:**

"We love her so much...but sometimes she gets into these states of extreme anger. If there is conflict between us [her parents] and she doesn't like it, she threatens him [the father]: 'Just one hit only and I can kill you. If I touch one part of your body you'll die! Don't forget that I am an LRA!' She then becomes uncontrollable and we all have to leave the house for a couple of hours until she calms down. She can't hear us then. She sometimes goes to the river or by the fields. Nobody can talk to her. She eventually calms down. What can we do?"

Returnees from these families are more likely to live on the margins of society and take up criminal activities or prostitution, either directly after their escape or after falling out with their family.

## F. Access to religious and customary care

Access to religious and customary systems of support is also a critical factor that facilitates returnees' recovery and reintegration. LRA-affected communities adhere to both religious and customary systems of belief and practice even though they do not readily admit to customary practices. The efficacy of these two systems as healing mechanisms derives from the faith people place in their healing power. While some have lost faith in the rituals and associated belief-systems, others are curious of their power and willing to experiment with them.

### Customary practices

The Zande ethnic group's customary belief-systems offer explanations for environmental adversity, insecurity, illness and conflicts between individuals, families or clans, and prescribe ways to address these difficulties.<sup>32</sup> Generations of chiefs, traditional healers and sorcerers or witchdoctors have passed down a sophisticated set of rituals to prevent and address misfortune and conflicts. The rituals can have a real healing effect if administered with the appropriate knowledge of what constitutes harmful practices (e.g. false information, beatings, physical restraint).<sup>33</sup>

Since the beginning of the colonial era the Church has persistently condemned customary beliefs and practices in the region, particularly witchcraft. It has campaigned against traditional healers, and endorsed the burning of their materials. This prohibition has reinforced the secrecy in which these practices are conducted, and thus indirectly their power. Local authorities also sometimes forbid customary rituals fearing they put participants at greater risk of LRA attack; rituals usually occur at night in secret locations and often involve participants entering altered states of consciousness through alcohol and other substances.

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32. Most of the territory where the LRA has operated since 2008 in DRC, CAR and South Sudan is occupied by the Zande ethnic group.

33. For more information see Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) in Emergency Settings (2007), in particular action sheet 6.4 (p.137) which advises those delivering help to "Learn about and, when appropriate, collaborate with local, indigenous and traditional healing systems". See also World Health Organisation (WHO) report on the use of traditional medicine, retrieved on 26 June 2014 from [http://www.who.int/topics/traditional\\_medicine/en/](http://www.who.int/topics/traditional_medicine/en/).

The Church's prohibition and official bans discourage many from using all forms of customary support. This denies individuals access to powerful tools of recovery derived from the Zande collective psyche built over generations. For example, *pika atoro* is a ritual that enables the chasing away of evil spirits through the power of a clan elder. *Dokpo*, *gundu* and *tande* are leaves that can cleanse a person of anger and other elements harmful to their mind. The *vuga* ritual involves feasting and jumping on animal blood as a sign of purification while *vonimi* enables forgiveness and reconciliation between conflicting parties. Returnees who practised these rituals found they helped them deal with their anger and traumatic memories, and increased their sense of belonging to the community.

### Christian practices

Christian belief-systems (both Catholic and Anglican) have a strong influence on the well-being of communities in the region.<sup>34</sup> Religious practices regulate daily social life and offer opportunities for healing and soothing of sorrows. The Church provides emotional support, varying from individual counselling to 'trauma-healing' workshops and charismatic group prayer sessions.<sup>35</sup> These religious spaces are safe and cathartic and offer returnees narratives that reframe their painful experiences into a coherent and meaningful framework.

## G. Mental health

The ability of returnees to rebuild social ties in their community also depends on their psychological state. If returnees are mentally disturbed they have greater difficulty in forming relationships and functioning in their daily lives, at home, at school and at work. A vicious circle ensues: the more their behaviour appears unusual and out of place, the more communities marginalise them and the harder it is to receive the emotional support they need. Structural violence aggravates both returnees' psychological disturbance and the readiness of community members

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34. Church leaders provide pastoral support even in remote areas.

35. Returnees believe prayer sessions provide opportunities to communicate directly with God. Participants can acknowledge their sins in public while remaining anonymous in the brouhaha of the crowd.

to tolerate these mental health difficulties.<sup>36</sup> The case study of the Kumbo family (in box) illustrates how poverty and returnees' inability to access healthcare exacerbates the effects of traumatic experiences.

The LRA abducted the entire Kumbo family in 2012. Grace, the mother, managed to escape after a week, hide in the bush and muffle the voice of her baby daughter whom she was still breastfeeding. Her two sons, aged 7 and 14, were caught. Grace watched what happened next. LRA fighters ground up her older son's legs, pulled his intestines out from his back, chopped and cooked them in front of her youngest son, Tim. The father managed to escape with Tim, but was later caught and killed. Grace subsequently moved to Nzara, South Sudan for safety.

Grace keeps a smile on her face throughout the interview. Her two remaining children are clearly malnourished and Tim also suffers from tuberculosis. As he leaves the discussion, he displays a back full of cuts. These are 'plastic teeth' that traditional healers have made to cure his disease. The family had no money to pay for medicine from the hospital. Grace tells her traumatic story to whoever wants to listen. She finds it difficult to make friends and cannot find any advice to relieve her sadness. "If a husband dies, then the older son replaces him. Now they are both dead, who will look after us?"

She explains that her "head is not functioning any longer", so she sometimes spends days without eating. Grace characterises her emotional state with the Pazande idioms begbenebera [extreme sadness] and rungo in her heart. Rungo, which means poverty, metaphorically captures her current economic and emotional poverty. Her distress is so great that she sometimes thinks about killing herself.

This vicious cycle of violence, marginalisation and deprivation makes returnees even more vulnerable to exploitative or abusive relationships.

36. Structural violence is one way of describing social arrangements that put individuals and populations in harm's way (Farmer, 1996). The concept refers to systematic ways in which social structures harm or otherwise disadvantage individuals.

Local belief-systems shape community members' attitudes towards returnees with mental health problems. The dominant customary belief-systems in the region, especially those of the Zande people, explain mental health difficulties by reference to witchcraft and the spirits of ancestors. Some communities believe that returnees' disturbed behaviour is the effect of curses used by community members to defeat the LRA. These spells are believed to make individuals ill, soulless, emotionally unwell, self-destructive and sometimes 'mad'.<sup>37</sup> It is thought that abductees could withstand the spells while under the effects of the LRA's intoxications, but once they leave the group they are no longer immune. Others interpret returnees' dysfunctional behaviour as the sign of conflict between the demonic power of the LRA's intoxications and the community's own witchcraft system.

However interpreted, the erratic behaviour of the most psychologically damaged returnees reminds community members of LRA fighters who committed acts of extreme brutality against them and thus exacerbates their fear of the returnees. Several interviewees said that family members or acquaintances even poison mentally ill returnees if they become too aggressive.

## 5. Analysis of local and international initiatives<sup>38</sup>

In the DRC and South Sudan, returnees from the LRA do not benefit from any formal institutional recognition or support, regardless of their age, and are not recognised by any state authorities. National and international efforts to support reintegration are almost non-existent.<sup>39</sup>

### A. Leadership

Effective reintegration of children, women and men requires leadership and coordination at all levels. Various coordination structures exist but neither national nor local government

37. Here 'mad' is used in the popular sense of irrational or no longer making sense.

38. This analysis is informed by international guidelines for best practice in the reintegration of children and adults and recent academic literature. See in particular *The Paris Principles* (2007) and *Integrated Disarmament Demobilisation and Reintegration Standards* (2006).

39. For more on reintegration in LRA affected areas see [www.c-r.org/LRA-reintegration](http://www.c-r.org/LRA-reintegration)

authorities have dedicated plans and strategies for the reintegration of returnees into communities, through which donors, if willing, might channel support.

The focus of the few agencies operating in LRA affected areas is mainly on defection, despite the fact that the reintegration of former combatants into impoverished communities without support is a recipe for future instability. The DRC and South Sudan have received limited and unequally distributed national and international assistance for returnees.

Part of the problem is that most LRA returnees do not fall under the provisions of existing national disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programmes. In South Sudan LRA returnees are not recognised as 'ex-combatants'. As a result, adult returnees are excluded from the DDR process operated by the National DDR Commission; a decision justified by the limited number of returnees currently passing through official channels.<sup>40</sup> In the DRC, only non-Congolese adults receive institutional attention; the UN stabilisation mission, MONUSCO, is mandated to organise their transit and repatriation under its DDRRR programme.<sup>41</sup>

Neither the DRC nor South Sudan government has a reintegration policy to cater for child returnees, although once formally identified children do receive relatively more attention than adults. UNICEF's mandate complements the remit of state authorities in both countries. Under its 'emergency phase' up to mid-2013, UNICEF was coordinating and funding organisations in Haut-Uélé district, DRC to cater for child returnees' immediate needs.<sup>42</sup> In South Sudan UNICEF sought to meet the immediate needs of the first waves of child returnees, but currently appears to play a lesser role in the coordination of reintegration activities.

A number of coordination structures exist at different levels, but their effectiveness in meeting the reintegration needs of returnees

is undermined by the disjointed nature of their efforts and a lack of common vision. At the international level, the International Working Group on the LRA, set up in 2010 and co-chaired by the European Union (EU) and United States, coordinates efforts of various donor countries and agencies engaged in counter-LRA efforts, including the reintegration of returnees. Implementation of the UN's regional strategy to address the threat and impact of the LRA, launched in June 2012, is led by the UN Regional Office for Central Africa (UNOCA). The African Union's Regional Cooperation Initiative for the Elimination of the LRA (RCI-LRA), headed by the AU Special Envoy for the LRA issue, forms part of the UN's regional strategy.<sup>43</sup> The Special Representative of the UN Secretary General (SRSG) / Head of UNOCA and the AU Special Envoy regularly convene LRA expert meetings in Entebbe, Uganda and have travelled the region to garner political support for counter-LRA initiatives. However, local government leaders and non-state actors, such as local NGOs and religious and cultural leaders – the only set of actors currently focused on long-term reintegration in the DRC and South Sudan – have never participated in the UN-AU led expert meetings. Resulting action plans therefore lack the input and perspective of those directly involved in the reintegration process.

At the national and state or province levels,<sup>44</sup> representatives of a UN agency and a national authority co-chair protection cluster meetings at least once a month; in Western Equatoria State, for example, this role falls to UNICEF and the Ministry of Gender, Child and Social Development.<sup>45</sup> Reintegration falls under the remit of the Protection and Education clusters but the focus of the meetings is mainly on refugees, Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and vulnerable children in general, less on LRA returnees. The focus for children is limited to family tracing and reunification (FTR) with only isolated cases of follow-up. In the DRC, the UN refugee agency (UNHCR) leads a weekly coordination and security meeting for the Uélé region in Dungu, and MONUSCO heads territory-level DDR coordination of non-Congolese

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40. Interview with DDR officer in Yambio, Western Equatoria State, South Sudan.

41. DDRRR stands for disarmament, demobilisation, repatriation, reintegration and resettlement.

42. The head of UNICEF's office in Dungu, DRC confirmed in February 2013 a plan to shift to a 'development phase' in which it intends to fund Intersos, an international NGO, to provide psychosocial support to child returnees in the border areas of the DRC and South Sudan with the aim of easing cross-border exchanges. However, in May 2014 the activities had not yet started and were unknown to local organisations.

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43. The RCI-LRA was authorised by the AU Peace and Security Council in November 2011 and officially launched in March 2012.

44. South Sudan is divided into states while the DRC has provinces.

45. The meetings bring together mainly local NGOs and a few INGOs and UN agencies that are still operating in the LRA affected areas.



Local women take part in a training workshop in Yambio, South Sudan. © Conciliation Resources

returnees who go through official channels of demobilisation. Congolese authorities have almost no involvement.

## B. Reception points

The reception points available to returnees have inadequate facilities and weak strategies and provide insufficient services during the transit period between their escape and return home.

### Centre-based reception

Facilities to receive abductees after defection are almost non-existent and the few available are ill adapted. The military camps and the facilities arranged by governors or local authorities to receive them are not adequately equipped; they provide no hygiene kits, medicine or clothing. Transit centres no longer operate in the Uélé districts, DRC and there is only one in Western Equatoria State, South Sudan (in Yambio), which caters solely for children and non-national defectors. The centre is based in a town serving an entire territory and is logistically inaccessible for dispersed populations. The room for returnees is unhygienic, unsafe and ill equipped; there are loose electrical cables and no toys or

activities for children. The criteria for selecting beneficiaries, the lack of clarity in its purpose and the centralised approach mean the facility is mostly empty. Furthermore, most communities are unaware of the centre, transport from most parts of the state is too costly and it serves only as a temporary hostel.

The additional drawback to a centralised approach to reception that caters solely for former LRA members is that it does not favour returnees' socialisation and the normalisation of their behaviour. This delays unnecessarily the process of rebuilding a common identity between returnees and their community as well as a sense of togetherness, which is crucial to their well-being and effective reintegration.

### Foster families

An effective decentralised alternative is a system of foster families such as the one used by COOPI, an Italian NGO, and ICRC. This initiative benefits children and adults when carers receive adequate training and on-going supervision. It also builds on the spontaneous social system of reciprocity existing in communities. For example, the Diocesan Committee for Justice and Peace (CDJP) in

Aru, DRC has a well functioning system of committees through which volunteers have demonstrated tremendous commitment to the well-being of returnees, sometimes caring for them in their own homes. A decentralised approach to the transit of returnees can be more effective and sustainable by focusing early on strengthening returnees' group identity and relationships with others. It also offers an incentive for communities to include returnees and to prevent stigmatisation. However, without financial incentives it can be difficult to implement in areas severely affected by the conflict and where community members can no longer afford to support returnees financially or emotionally. Financial incentives may also be unsustainable in the long-term and can undermine the social system of reciprocity.<sup>46</sup>

### Access to services

The ineffective delivery of services in the few transit centres that do exist is further complicated by the multiplicity of agencies involved and burdensome procedures. The variable length of the transit period does not prepare returnees for reintegration. Transit centres do not plan preparatory activities, such as basic modules on human rights, literacy, socialisation activities and psychosocial and religious counselling. The few operating institutions lack a clear timeframe, procedures and mandate in relation to the work of other agencies.

## C. Family tracing, reunification and repatriation

International NGOs and the UN have implemented a few family tracing, reunification and repatriation activities, but their mandates only cover children in the DRC and the few non-nationals seized in the DRC or South Sudan. Moreover, there is no formal provision for these activities since there are no official DDR policies for LRA returnees.

### Tracing

Tracing activities, which seek to locate returnees' relatives, are limited by the fact that most returnees reunite directly with their families without the knowledge and involvement

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46. Families were paid around \$3 per day to host returnees, which is considerable in a context of high unemployment and where the average salary is considerably less.

of state authorities. Besides the lack of support and limited number of local focal points, returnees and communities are unaware of the services that do exist and how to use them. Community leaders do not always have the knowledge or the capacity to assist, although several governors in Western Equatoria State (WES), South Sudan have informally helped trace returnees' families and reunify them.

The absence of a regularly updated central database of missing persons with basic socio-demographic characteristics is another impediment to tracing. And while a few local NGOs in the DRC have sufficient capacity for the task, they face the logistical challenges of accessing remote and insecure areas, which in turn sometimes makes the process too long. The ICRC has been very effective in tracing families across the region due to their institutional expertise and logistical resources.

### Reunification

Reuniting returnees with family members and preparing returnees, families and communities for reunification through family visits, community meetings and radio and newspaper sensitisation campaigns are two areas of work that have been largely neglected. Most child and adult returnees find their own families with or without the help of local authorities. The Ugandan and Congolese armies do not routinely provide logistical help. There is a sore need for standard reunification procedures to guide actors involved in the reintegration process.

Neither returnees nor communities are helped to prepare for the challenges of reintegration. Families often have an idealised view of the abductee's return and are neither ready nor equipped to deal with the challenges that returnees can pose. Awareness campaigns conducted at the height of LRA violence reportedly helped reduce returnees, families and communities' expectations. However, local leaders and authorities, crucial in mediating between families and community members, lack the skills to monitor returnees and intervene to prevent stigmatisation and bullying. Nor are there community-level contact points who could assist throughout the reintegration process.

### Repatriation

The repatriation of non-national escapees has been carried out relatively effectively, but it is a slow process that could be better

coordinated. Returnees are obliged to wait for long periods in unsuitable conditions and in a fragile psychological state. Tension between UN agencies and the ICRC over their repatriation mandates complicates the transit and repatriation process.

## D. Social activities

Some local and international initiatives have focused on strengthening returnees' sense of belonging and socialisation. Yet they remain sporadic, unmatched to individual needs and almost non-existent in areas where community and family relations are most damaged.

In general, initiatives have not recognised the importance of a sense of belonging in the reintegration process. As noted above, social activities such as welcoming rituals and local leaders' home visits are vital. The few campaigns conducted in the Uélé region, DRC successfully reduced returnees' stigmatisation through radio programmes and community-based sensitisation. However, potentially hostile attitudes towards returnees remain largely unaddressed since the activities were not widely performed and only concerned children. In particular, initiatives have not addressed popular attitudes towards gender-based violence and towards abductees who have been victims of sexual violence during their stay with the LRA.

The Self Help Women's Development Association (SHWDA) in Yambio, South Sudan has set up local associations and peer support groups using an approach that enables the social inclusion of returnees. They organise community activities involving male and female returnees and other adults suffering as a result of the LRA conflict. Locally respected community figures act as mediators in the case of conflicts. This community-based approach enhances the social reintegration of returnees and community ownership of the process. By allowing returnees to lead their own support groups and involving them in their own care, the local associations help returnees to feel empowered. However, where groups only involve returnees, not other community members, this tends to reinforce negative attitudes towards former LRA members rather than uniting both groups around common suffering and social affiliation. Other victims of the LRA who do not receive any recognition or help see the exclusive focus on former LRA combatants as a reward for violence.

Support for returnees' socialisation through everyday activities, access to emotional support and in regaining social skills is an important area that has received very limited attention. Funding schools to cover the fees of returnees and other vulnerable children is essential to strengthen returnees' normal social interaction and their social identification with peers. Yet such support is rare.

Similarly, peer support through games and other social activities is lacking. The rehabilitation strategy of the Elikya Centre adopted this approach through games and other mediation activities. But the impact was limited since staff only involved individuals who came straight from the bush. A more inclusive approach would be to involve returnees' peers in the community, with whom returnees can identify and who can act as role models. The life skills programme that is currently being piloted in a few schools in WES, South Sudan responds well to this need. The curriculum is comprehensive, adapted to the cultural context and involves activities through which children can gain these skills. However, a similar provision to support the socialisation of adults is lacking.

## E. Education and other basic services

Local and international organisations have expressed limited interest in strengthening services that address the basic physical needs (food, shelter, water, basic health care) of LRA-affected communities. These constitute the first level in the pyramid of interventions in the UN Inter-Agency Standing Committee's guidelines for mental health and psychosocial support in emergency settings.<sup>47</sup>

Education is a neglected activity in the LRA affected area but instrumental in returnees' successful reintegration. Donor agencies have funded some reforms of formal education in WES, South Sudan but there has been no such interest in Haut-Uélé and Bas-Uélé districts, DRC.

Key reforms, ensuring safe learning spaces, school codes of conduct, life skills and the improvement of teachers' training curriculum have been successfully undertaken in WES. Nonetheless, the initiative has not been widely implemented across the region and has yet

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47. The pyramid is in Appendix A.

to ensure the affordability of school fees and materials. Psychosocial support for pupils in difficulty, such as returnees, within and outside school is also needed.

There has been little investment in sustaining communities' livelihoods and almost no interest in supporting the economic reintegration of returnees. GIZ<sup>48</sup>, a German development organisation, has funded some agricultural initiatives in WES such as tool distribution, but some community members complain that there was no clear strategy and long-term view to really affect local productivity. Intersos-DRC used an effective approach and funded income-generating activities combined with mental health support to LRA-affected adults with the most severe disturbances.

However, these projects have lacked technical supervision, in particular with individuals too unwell to maintain a decent livelihood. In South Sudan Intersos's work on economic recovery was limited to a few adult returnees, and excluded other groups. It therefore suffered the same limitations as previously mentioned: by not integrating the broader needs of the community, the initiatives risked deepening existing tensions between returnees and their communities.

Also absent is investment in professional education. WES is the only state that possesses a state-run training centre, which could be used for this purpose, provided that it is fitted with appropriate equipment, staff are trained, the curriculum reformed and that the professions offered suit local market needs.

International donors have invested in medical services through specialised units, particularly at the height of the conflict. The Catholic Medical Mission Board (CMMB), the Combini sisters and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) supply some of these state-run structures with affordable or free medicine, have refurbished local facilities and provide technical expertise in hospitals and primary health care centres. Nevertheless, these medical units often lack the specialised services for returnees, such as treatment for sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and psychiatric care, as well as a sustainable exit plan owned by local governments. In the Uélé region, MSF handed over its services to government authorities, but the state is struggling to continue its work.

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48. Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit.

## F. Psychological support

Psychological support services are scarce in the LRA affected areas and the existing initiatives often lack an approach that is comprehensive, sustainable and culturally-sensitive.

### Community and family support<sup>49</sup>

Successful initiatives at this level have operated through self-help groups, local associations and guided religious coping mechanisms (e.g. prayer sessions, group charismatic healing). Their strength lies in being locally owned, having strengthened local resources in psychological care and being culturally grounded in local belief systems. Many initiatives have nonetheless overlooked the need to restore functioning social relationships in the communities receiving returnees. Social care for LRA victims as a whole is limited, in part due to the massive scale of the need and the limited engagement of the international community. Initiatives have failed to consolidate and enhance the informal coping mechanisms that communities spontaneously develop. For example, local leaders and international actors have not seen commemorations and other ways to strengthen collective memory as an opportunity for reconciliation between returnees and their communities or LRA victims. The dominant perception of returnees as perpetrators and not as victims can only be redressed through the public recognition of their plight as well as the plight of other victims of LRA violence. Initiatives do not yet make use of the wealth of resources existing in traditional methods of healing, coping and reconciliation.

### Focused non-specialised services<sup>50</sup>

Several initiatives have been tailored to address the psychological impact of the LRA experience on returnees and other victims. The Inter-Church Committee (ICC) and the Combini sisters in South Sudan provide one-off intensive group therapy sessions which appear to be very effective in addressing the initial post-traumatic effects of the LRA experience and in easing forgiveness and reconciliation. The model's strength is that it addresses the interplay between psychological well-being and social ties by reinforcing the shared dimension of participants' traumatic

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49. Level 2 services in the IASC-MHPPS pyramid (see Appendix A).

50. Level 3 services in the IASC-MHPPS pyramid (see Appendix A).

experience and suffering. Solidarity and Integral Assistance to Destitute People (SAIPED), a Congolese NGO, with the support of Discover the Journey (DTJ), an international group, also provided highly innovative and appropriate one-off intensive group workshops focusing on parenting skills and family relationships with child returnees. The strength of this model is that it has been tailored to an understanding of the mind specific to the local culture and aims specifically to address the challenges faced by parents of returnees in the Uélé region. The Elikya Centre also provided specific post-traumatic care for child returnees.

The greatest limitation of these initiatives is that they do not address the need for long-term, sustained support that is integrated into the individual's socio-cultural environment. A further limitation to the Elikya Centre's approach to rehabilitation is its cultural inappropriateness; it used a Western Cartesian model of the mind that assumes it is internal to the individual, independent from culture and therefore functions independently of the environment.<sup>51</sup> Interviewees complained of 'boredom' and of not understanding the purpose of their stay. The centre prescribed certain services and often failed to ask families and returnees for their consent before admission, which raises ethical questions. Returnees expressed doubts about its contribution to their recovery and questioned the delay in the longed-for reunion with their parents. This approach is not in line with best practices in the field. Indeed, it is unclear how an institutionalised stay detached from the children's familiar environment would offer advantages over the social and emotional benefits children's families and communities could provide. Initiatives in conflict zones can continue to operate effectively through remote technical support and monitoring similar to the community-based model Intersos and ICRC developed in the Uélé territory.

### Specialised services<sup>52</sup>

This is another area where services are severely lacking despite the tremendous need. This is mainly due to a lack of technical capacity,

as well as donors' lack of interest in funding mental health programmes. Despite the availability of psychiatric drugs in all general hospitals and primary healthcare centres in the region, psychiatric care is not provided in these facilities. The absence of services addressing more severe psychological disturbances makes it more difficult for returnees to reintegrate. A comprehensive system of care that caters for the full spectrum of mental health difficulties is essential for ethical and clinical reasons. There is a risk that well-meaning families and communities or non-specialised services for mentally disturbed returnees may unintentionally harm the most unwell individuals by opening wounds or because they are unable to refer individuals to specialised professionals.

## G. Local capacities

Reflecting a general disinterest in the LRA issue, governments and donor agencies have neglected strengthening local capacities to cope with the various economic, social and psychological dimensions of reintegration. Limited to one-off, short trainings without follow-up or long-term strategies, the limited investments in local capacity tailed off after the peak of the violence.

International organisations in the Uélé region, DRC provided local professionals with basic training and some specialised skills during the emergency period.<sup>53</sup> There are thus some trained professionals, although they need refresher courses and up-to-date skills. In WES, a few professionals received longer academic training in social work and counselling that included formal training, practical placements and regular supervision. Such training is essential to ensure the availability of professionals who can provide specialised services for returnees experiencing the most difficulty with reintegration. DTJ designed a useful manual on psychosocial interventions that is well tailored to the cultural dynamics involved in returnees' recovery.

Yet these initiatives are too few, resulting in the loss of a wealth of experience built up in the region that could in turn be used to develop other professionals' skills to deal more effectively with reintegration issues. A longer-term comprehensive plan to train those working

51. The centre's cultural inappropriateness in part derives from the fact that its rehabilitation model was copied from the Nerera trauma centre in northern Uganda on the assumption that the Ugandan and Congolese mind work in a similar manner.

52. Level 4 services in the IASC-MHPPS pyramid (see Appendix A).

53. Some received training on how to provide psychosocial support to parents, undertake group management and administer medical care to victims of SGBV.

with returnees is sorely missing. Additionally, these frontline professionals, who for example deal with returnees' violent behaviour or listen to their stories, are in serious need of institutional support in the form of self-care, peer support, supervision and individual debriefings. The risk of professional burnout is high and already visible.

Professionals and local authorities involved at different phases of reintegration are ill prepared to engage with returnees who are often in a fragile psychological state. For example, teachers and local chiefs lack skills in psychosocial care and conflict mediation that would enable them to adopt an inclusive approach to returnees in their work. Most professionals working directly with returnees have never received training or sensitisation on how to engage with survivors of violence while avoiding their own secondary traumatisation.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, there is no clearly enforced code of conduct, no procedures and supervision of how various actors engage with returnees. This absence of regulatory mechanisms provides opportunities for a wide range of abuses to occur in a context where returnees are particularly vulnerable.<sup>55</sup>

## 6. Ways forward

The reintegration of returnees from the LRA is a major challenge that affected communities will face for decades to come. Adopting the right approach now will help returnees, their families and neighbours lead more peaceful lives and enjoy more secure livelihoods in the future, and can inform future programming in this and other contexts. The findings of the research suggest that interventions to promote reintegration will be more effective if they benefit from strong and collaborative local leadership, a community-based, culturally-specific approach and long-term, holistic support.

### Strong and collaborative local leadership

The failure of national governments to take ownership of the multiple challenges facing

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54. Secondary traumatisation (or compassion fatigue) is the cumulative transformative effect on helpers who work with survivors of traumatic life events.

55. For example, a few child interviewees mentioned that the military staff who dealt with them tried to recruit them or encouraged them to go to Uganda even though they were not Ugandan.

LRA affected communities has left an acute lack of leadership of the various responses, including reintegration. Dysfunctions in coordination mechanisms at the international, regional and local levels have added confusion as to which actors are supposed to take the lead in responding to which problems. Fostering ownership at the provincial and local levels so that state authorities, traditional chiefs and church ministers together drive reintegration activities is critical.

Local leaders, including those from NGOs and civil society groups, are uniquely placed to play pivotal roles in the swift return of escaped LRA members, in meeting reintegration needs and in coordinating responses. First, their proximity to affected communities gives them a nuanced understanding of everyday challenges and an ability to support community mobilisation, coordination and advocacy. Second, their positions in the state apparatus, traditional chieftaincy or church hierarchy give them the credibility and influence to encourage community members to welcome, care for and include returnees. Third, they have vital lines of communication with counterparts in their own country and across borders, with higher ranks in national capitals and with international actors. Finally, local leaders are well placed to design and drive advocacy campaigns, making the case to governments, military actors and international donors for greater and more sophisticated reintegration support for local communities. The following recommendations suggest ways they might realise their potentially invaluable role.

- Local authorities in the DRC, South Sudan and the CAR could draw up comprehensive plans for the reintegration of returnees in their area. Budgeted and framed within long-term stabilisation and recovery strategies, these plans could be used to garner support from national capitals and form the basis of a subsequent donor conference initiated by local authorities with external support.
- Local authorities in the DRC, South Sudan and the CAR should maintain strong lines of communication with community leaders (priests, chiefs, local protection committee presidents, NGOs) through which to gather information related to the number and needs of returnees. This information is invaluable for persuasive advocacy.



Vulnerable women receive basic education in maths and business skills at a local organisation, *Dynamique Femme pour la Paix*, in Dungu, DRC. © Tom Bradley

- Local authorities and community leaders should play a greater role in the design and coordination of formal institutional reintegration initiatives by taking part in regional LRA conferences and strategic meetings with donors.
- Increased contact between local leaders and isolated communities is needed to canvas their concerns and ensure their voices are heard at higher level policy fora:
  - In the DRC, territorial, provincial and national authorities should hold regular discussions with community-level actors.
  - In South Sudan, Western Equatoria State officials should seek to strengthen their relationships with community leaders and national authorities in Juba.
- An advocacy and communications strategy devised by local leaders could serve to pressure national and international bodies to enhance reintegration efforts. Valuable activities could include:
  - Establishing a centralised database that gathers quantitative and qualitative

information on LRA returnees and reintegration activities.

- Empowering LRA returnees and affected communities to share their views on the impact of the conflict through short videos, radio diaries and photo documentaries.
- Engaging with local, national and international media (TV, newspapers, radio).

### **A community-based, culturally-specific approach**

Since the fate of former abductees rests on the strength of the relationships they build with their families and wider social networks, it is critical that all initiatives promoting reintegration involve and benefit community members in addition to returnees. To avoid creating resentment and attaching greater stigma to former LRA members, external support, whether in the form of healthcare, counselling, education or job opportunities, should also be offered to other vulnerable members of the community. Bringing returnees and community members together in shared experiences can assist in the slow process of reconciliation and acceptance.

The ability of returnees to earn the trust of their family and neighbours depends in part on the degree to which they can demonstrate that they have rejected the worldview of the LRA and adopted the beliefs and values shared by the community. Hence it is vital that activities aimed at promoting reintegration are tailored to the specific cultural context of each community. Both Christian and customary rituals can help re-establish a sense of shared identity and belonging. The following recommendations suggest ways in which international actors and local leaders could support this community-based and culturally-sensitive approach.

- Policies and services intended to cater for the needs of returnees should also be offered to other vulnerable groups.
- State authorities, local and international NGOs urgently need to encourage community members and LRA returnees to be actively involved in devising culturally appropriate reintegration initiatives. These could include:
  - Training local authorities and focal points to lead conflict-resolution and family mediation activities.
  - Conducting culturally-sensitive campaigns to shift the blame away from LRA victims.
  - Encouraging the performance of culturally-specific and case-by-case reconciliation ceremonies between returnees and affected community members.
- Local leaders should start initiatives to document and commemorate the history of LRA violence that their communities have suffered, thereby helping community members and returnees collectively to come to terms with the past.

### **Overall vision of long-term, holistic support**

The return and reintegration of children and adults who have spent months or years with the LRA into their communities is a complex and reversible process. It requires international and local stakeholders to commit long-term support in a range of areas. Successful reintegration rests equally on returnees' physical and psychological health, the strength of their social relationships and economic opportunities. Only a holistic approach involving actions in a range of corresponding areas can help the individual

recover and regain his or her status as a valued and contributing member of the community.

As part of this long-term approach, regular and systematic follow-up with returnees in their homes by local or outside actors is essential. In the case of children displaying problematic behaviour, this support helps family members as much as the child.

Supporting returnees' education and creating employment are also key. Schooling gives children an opportunity to relearn acceptable social behaviour, encounter positive role models and benefit from the emotional support of peers and protective adults. But many child returnees drop out due to stigmatisation, mental health problems or their families' inability to pay school fees. Likewise, through employment adult returnees readjust to civilian life and re-establish their social and economic self-worth. Vocational training in professions tailored to market demand can help them achieve this.

- Consistent, long-term donor funding of reintegration strategies for children and adults is vital. These strategies should:
  - Consider the full range of needs of children and adults and ensure that comprehensive services are provided.
  - Invest in building the capacity of local inhabitants in LRA affected areas enabling them to look after returnees whilst ensuring their own access to self-care and supervision.
- Regional governments, international NGOs and local groups should promote the holistic support of returnees which includes the provision of clothing, good hygiene, medical, gynaecological and psychological care, family reunification and educational and employment opportunities.
- Local-level (child) protection committees are an effective initiative providing basic social welfare to vulnerable children in certain areas. Local leaders and community members could use this model to monitor and support long-term reintegration.
- State social welfare authorities and NGOs should employ social workers to provide long-term monitoring and support of overall community reintegration under the supervision of local protection committees.

- Governments, Ministries of Education, donors and UN agencies need to ensure LRA abductees, together with other vulnerable groups, access an education that is adapted to their needs.
  - Teachers and school managers should be well versed in codes of conduct, teaching methods and psychosocial approaches, and receive adequate institutional help to support pupils in difficulty.
  - The most vulnerable children should have free schooling and school materials.
- Access to and the quality of education could be strengthened through initiatives such as the life-skills programme that addresses psychosocial and peacebuilding issues in the schools of Western Equatoria State, South Sudan.
- Donor governments, the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and local and international organisations should strengthen

community-specific livelihoods initiatives that benefit the whole community based on a local market analysis. They should:

- Acknowledge publicly the need for long-term socio-economic support for communities affected by the LRA.
- Endorse and support financially local and wider socio-economic recovery plans that include the reintegration of LRA returnees.
- Equip state-sponsored vocational training centres to train returnees and others in vocations that are suited to market needs.

Progress in these three areas has the potential to make a significant difference to the lives and security of individuals and communities in the neglected areas of the DRC and South Sudan affected by the LRA. The recommendations draw on what has worked or could work from the perspectives of returnees and communities themselves - the starting point for any external support.

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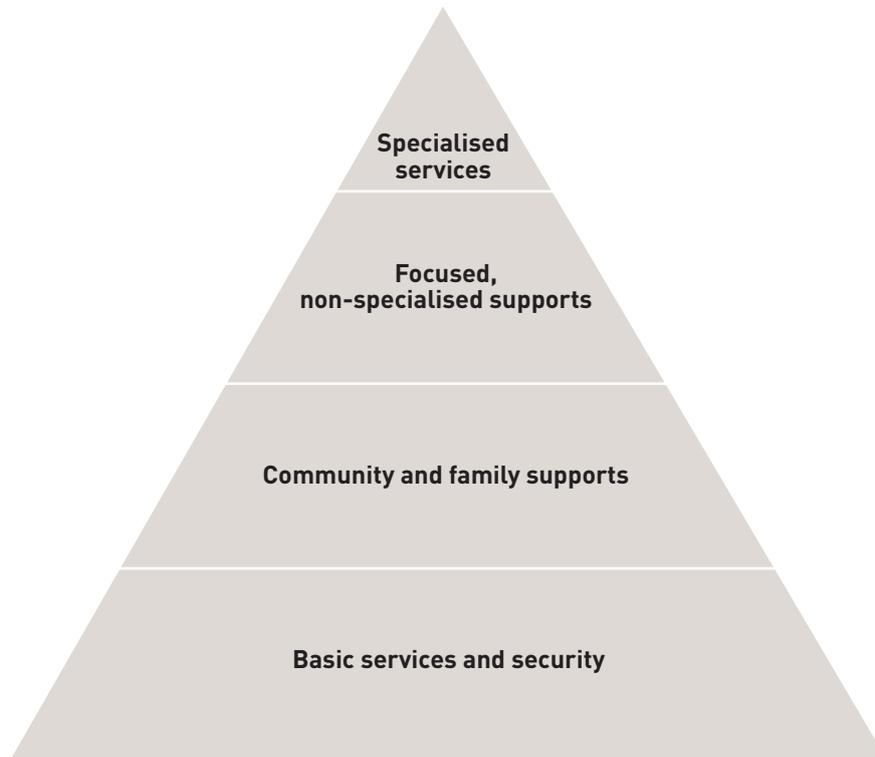
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## Acronyms

|              |  |                |  |
|--------------|--|----------------|--|
| <b>CAR</b>   | Central African Republic   | <b>ICRC</b>    | International Committee of the Red Cross                                     |
| <b>COOPI</b> | Cooperazione Internazionale  | <b>IASC</b>    | Inter-Agency Standing Committee  |
| <b>DDR</b>   | Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration  | <b>IWG</b>     | International Working Group  |
| <b>DDRRR</b> | Disarmament, Demobilisation, Repatriation, Resettlement and Reintegration  | <b>LRA</b>     | Lord's Resistance Army   |
| <b>DRC</b>   | Democratic Republic of the Congo   | <b>MHPSS</b>   | Mental Health and Psycho-Social Support                                      |
| <b>DTJ</b>   | Discover the Journey   | <b>MONUSCO</b> | United Nations Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo |
| <b>FARDC</b> | Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo ( <i>Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo</i> ) | <b>NGO</b>     | Non-governmental Organisation  |
| <b>FGD</b>   | Focus Group Discussion   | <b>PFA</b>     | Psychological First Aid  |
| <b>FTR</b>   | Family Tracing and Reunification   | <b>PTA</b>     | Parents Teachers Association   |
| <b>GIZ</b>   | Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit  | <b>SPLA</b>    | Sudan People's Liberation Army   |
| <b>ICC</b>   | Inter-Church Committee (South Sudan)   | <b>UNMISS</b>  | United Nations Mission In South Sudan  |
| <b>JIOC</b>  | Joint Intelligence Operations Centre   | <b>UNHCR</b>   | Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees                  |
|              |  | <b>UNICEF</b>  | United Nations Children's Fund   |
|              |  | <b>UPDF</b>    | Uganda People's Defence Force  |
|              |  | <b>WES</b>     | Western Equatoria State  |
|              |  | <b>WHO</b>     | World Health Organisation  |

## Appendix A

### Pyramid of interventions to provide mental health and psychosocial support in emergency settings



**Source:** *Guidelines for Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings*, Inter-Agency Standing Committee (2007), p.12.

## Appendix B

### Excerpt from an open letter written by the LRA returnees of Nzara County, Western Equatoria State, South Sudan calling for reconciliation with community members, 27 April 2014

During the severe insurgency of LRA attack in Western Equatoria State, Nzara was the most affected County. [...] Men, women and children were abducted and taken to the bush, we the LRA abductees experienced tortures. We were subjected to all kinds of exploitations or abuse, beating and carrying heavy loads. The LRA coerced or forced us to kill our own relatives, friends by striking them on the head with stuff, they also instigate us to go and loot or steal food, properties and burnt houses; if you intend to refuse they also will kill you.

With the support of the joint prayers held by the churches; Government; and families; God intervened to rescue us by providing UPDF, SPLA and vigilance home guards several attacks on the LRA, this made it possible for some of us to escape and came back and reach our respective homes alive here in Nzara. [...] our families and communities in Nzara County welcomed us with happiness and showed compassionate. They supported us by contributing food and clothes for our welfare. Thereafter, our people tended to inquire of how life was in the bush especially living with LRA soldiers. We shared the experiences we encountered from LRA, after hearing the incidences they became astonished to listen to the horrible stories that LRA detained us to do [...].

Getting this information, our families and communities frequently hated or rejected us. [...] When we became marginalized with no one to lean to either to shoulder us cope with the trauma of the experiences we went through and no one to help us deal with the health problems [...], we decided to transfer from our own communities to go and live in other places

where people are not aware or recall that we were abducted by LRA just to seek safety.

With all these uncertainty risks we committed against our families and communities; we the LRA Abductees, your sons and daughters, regrets and would like to beg your kindness to forgive us. [...] We confess with heartfelt that it was not our intentions to join LRA or to commit those crimes against our own flesh, but the circumstances forced us to be in such an environment. [...]

It is worth to mention that ... there is a great indication of stigma and discrimination from the communities, so that calls for such a forum to address these concerns, taking into consideration that being LRA Abductees does not mean that we are not valuable to our families and communities. Therefore, the aim of this meeting will deliberate on strategies of how we can prepare ourselves and the communities for reconciliation and peaceful reintegration through joining hands to ensure and maintain everlasting peace amongst LRA Abductees/Returnees and host communities in Nzara.

This is the voice of LRA Abductees/Returnees of Nzara County. We hope to make a difference in the lives of the brothers, sisters and children affected by LRA conflict and the communities in the priority payams of Sakure, Sangua, Basukangbi and Nzara Town Payams.

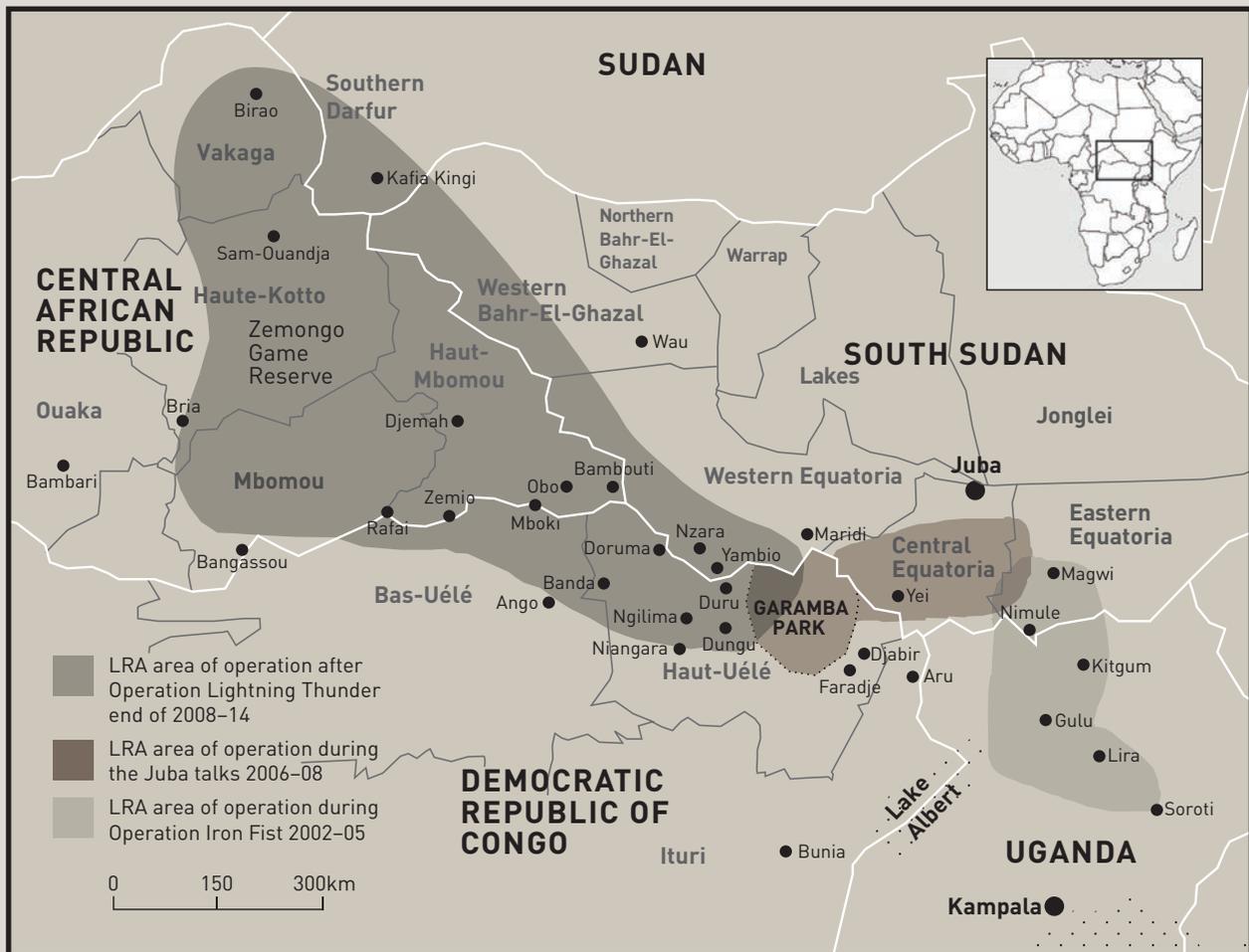
Thanks.

Voice of LRA returnees

Nzara County

Western Equatoria State

South Sudan



Map of LRA affected areas. This map is intended for illustrative purposes only. Borders, names and other features are presented according to common practice in the region. Conciliation Resources takes no position on whether this representation is legally or politically valid. © Conciliation Resources

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