The People’s Peacemaking Perspectives project

The People’s Peacemaking Perspectives project is a joint initiative implemented by Conciliation Resources and Saferworld and financed under the European Commission’s Instrument for Stability. The project provides European Union institutions with analysis and recommendations based on the opinions and experiences of local people in a range of countries and regions affected by fragility and violent conflict.

The Lord’s Resistance Army

THE CONFLICT WITH THE LORD’S RESISTANCE ARMY (LRA) is a regional issue directly affecting the people and governments of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Central African Republic (CAR), South Sudan and Uganda. Taking place in remote areas largely devoid of state provision, the LRA conflict continues to cause destruction, abduction, displacement, death and distress for civilians and communities.

The following findings and recommendations were generated from research in areas of Uganda, eastern DRC, eastern CAR and South Sudan affected by the conflict with the LRA. The research sought to gain a ‘people’s perspective’ on the conflict by involving those most affected, including community representatives, civil society leaders and LRA returnees, in reflection on the conflict and national and international responses to it.

On the ground people express despair at the lack of prospects for an end to the conflict and anger at feeling imprisoned while the LRA has freedom of movement. People are sceptical about the potential success of a renewed military strategy. There is an overwhelming appetite among those who bear the brunt of the violence for a solution based on protection and engagement with the LRA.

The regional political and security dimensions of the conflict require a comprehensive and coordinated response, which gives priority to civilian protection and addresses the multiple dimensions of the conflict. The new African Union (AU) strategy is a welcome attempt at improved coordination, but risks relying too heavily on military means, which have failed to end the conflict and protect civilians over the past 25 years. Underlying political and governance drivers of the conflict remain, key among them the historical antagonism between the governments of Uganda and Sudan.

The European Union (EU) and its Member States have a key role to play in supporting and influencing such a comprehensive strategy, but coordination and coherence in the EU’s own strategy and actions on the LRA issue are also needed. As such the LRA conflict offers a test case for the coherence of the EU’s external policy and the European External Action Service (EEAS).

KEY OUTCOMES

- The LRA conflict requires a holistic and coordinated response from the AU, regional governments and other international actors, including the EU, which addresses the multiple dimensions of the conflict.
- Civilian protection by national armies and the planned AU Regional Intervention Force (IRF) should be a priority, with progress monitored and reviewed and the means for doing so elaborated prior to deployment. The EU should make this a precondition of its support and press for benchmarks of success in this area.
- Policy-makers should recognise and support the valuable role that civil society across the region can play in understanding local dynamics, building resilience of communities, aiding return, reintegration and reconciliation, as well as in facilitating unofficial contacts and engagement with the LRA.
- A coherent regional framework that supports the safe return and reintegration of LRA abductees is needed in order to address the long-term impact of the conflict.

Since the failure of the Juba talks in 2008, over 2,300 people have died as a result of the LRA conflict and over 400,000 have been displaced in DRC, CAR and South Sudan (based on UN sources).
Findings and Recommendations

1. The LRA conflict requires a holistic and coordinated response from the AU, regional governments and other international actors, including the EU, which addresses the multiple dimensions of the conflict.

The LRA is one of a host of critical problems facing national governments in all four affected countries, but not one of their top domestic priorities. However, the LRA poses a threat to the stability of the region as a whole. Operating in remote and neglected areas outside the control of national governments and inaccessible to international aid agencies, the LRA’s tactics of terror cause massive displacement and destabilise already fragile local dynamics.

“How can a few hundred rebels displace 350,000 people?”
*Question posed by diplomats in Kinshasa, DRC and Bangui, CAR*

Local perceptions of the LRA vary across the region. In DRC many suspect the LRA presence to be a pretext for Uganda’s exploitation of DRC’s natural resources. In South Sudan people see the LRA as an instrument of Khartoum, used in turn by Uganda as justification for its presence in South Sudan. In CAR, the LRA are considered a spill-over from another theatre of war and ultimately Uganda’s problem. Such perceptions point to the political complexity of the region at the strategic level, the underlying feature of which is the long-standing hostility between Khartoum and Kampala, which continues through alleged support to proxies.

The planned AU regional cooperation strategy is a welcome attempt to structure a coordinated response. However, ultimately the initiative will be the sum of its parts. National armies are failing to protect civilians and the UPDF’s credibility among local populations is extremely low. A military response might succeed in killing or capturing LRA leaders and help to address the visible impact of the conflict, but it will not resolve its underlying causes, drivers and consequences.

“With all the armies of the world here, why isn’t Kony dead yet and the conflict over? When will this end and what will it take?”
*Civil society leader, Dungu, DRC*

A comprehensive approach needs to combine political, mediation, security, humanitarian and developmental efforts. It should start with civilian protection in tandem with political dialogue involving regional governments to address the political and military rivalries driving the conflict. It requires efforts to reduce the strength of the LRA, for example through safe defection, investigation of external supply lines and strategies and to seriously address the governance, social and developmental challenges in these neglected areas. The strategy should also include space for informal dialogue with the LRA.

Support for a strategy based on protection and engagement is widespread among those who bear the brunt of the conflict, civil society and communities across the region.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

- The EU should appoint a full-time EU Special Representative (EUSR) on the conflict with the LRA. The EUSR should be of sufficiently high stature to engage with the AU Special Envoy and EU Member States on LRA-related issues.
- With support from Member States and the EEAS, the EUSR should lead on the formulation of a strategy to coordinate and bring greater coherence to EU actions in the LRA-affected areas. The strategy should include:
  - Improved coordination and communication between EU Delegations in the affected countries.
  - LRA-specific and mutually coherent provisions within new EU country strategy papers for CAR, Uganda, South Sudan and DRC (from 2013).
  - Use of the Instrument for Stability and other funding streams to support regional work on the LRA, including work with civil society groups.
- The EU should give political and governance perspective to the AU LRA strategy by making financial support for the office of the AU Special Envoy for the LRA-affected areas contingent on a comprehensive mandate for the post, including engagement with civil society.
- EU–AU ministerial dialogue and EU Member States’ bilateral relations with governments in the region, the United Nations (UN) and the United States’ Government should also be used to urge broader thinking on the LRA.
- The EU should urge the AU to use its good offices with Khartoum and Kampala to help address outstanding bilateral political issues, which in turn fuel the LRA conflict.
- The EU, including its Member States, should investigate and take action against LRA supply lines outside the region.
2.

**Civilian protection by national armies and the planned AU Regional Intervention Force (IRF) should be a priority, with progress monitored and reviewed** and the means for doing so elaborated prior to deployment. The EU should make this a precondition of its support and press for benchmarks of success in this area.

“Anybody who knows anything about LRA should have first planned for civilian protection. [...] This is because the pattern of their attacks is clear. When [the LRA] are attacked, they strike against soft targets connected with their attackers, or to capture international media and divert attention.”

*County Commissioner, Western Equatoria State, South Sudan*

Over the last two years the military effort, led by Uganda’s armed forces, has been focused on containment of LRA actions and movement and pursuit of Joseph Kony. It has kept the LRA out of northern Uganda, but in doing so has displaced the conflict to areas of DRC, South Sudan and CAR. Civilian and child protection, though a stated priority, has not been provided in practice.

In the absence of adequate protection by national armies or international missions, vulnerable communities feel they have no choice but to take up arms. Local defence units have multiplied across the region. In Western Equatoria State, South Sudan, parliamentarians as well as the coordinator of the so-called ‘Arrow Boys’, estimate around 17,000 people are participating in self-defence units. However, due to their lack of oversight and training in basic concepts such as human rights, self-defence units in themselves can become a driver of conflict. Some have turned to banditry, been used for state-sponsored violence or themselves become rebel movements.

“In May 2011 Doruma suffered over six successive attacks by the LRA. [...] The community is sceptical about the effectiveness of FARDC [DRC’s armed forces] and UPDF’s efforts to protect them against LRA attacks [...] Instead the population has more confidence in self-defence units.”

*Situation report by civil society leader, Doruma, DRC, July 2011*

Protecting civilians in the context of a guerilla war is highly problematic. In Dungu, local NGOs feel that the push to scale up the military offensive against Kony is unaccountable, at least to the people on the ground who bear the brunt of a violent backlash by the LRA. Abductees, many of them children, within the LRA’s ranks are put at risk by military action against the LRA. Human rights abuses by the national armies of DRC and Uganda in some cases pose a threat to the local population equal to that of the LRA.

“People in the area of Kiliwa prefer the presence of LRA to that of FARDC.”

*Human rights worker, Dungu, DRC*

The planned AU IRF needs to have civilian protection as its primary objective in both policy and practice and it should be held accountable for progress. Protection should be provided across the affected region: in CAR the situation for refugees is precarious with little to no state provision and a weak UN presence in the affected area. However, a realistic understanding is needed of what is possible. Prior to deployment the standards of success in civilian protection by the AU IRF and means of verification for cases of abduction, displacement and death need to be worked out. These should be seen as merely the first step in the implementation of a holistic strategy addressing the drivers of the conflict.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

- The EU, through the EUSR and Member States, in consultation with local civil society, should press for clear benchmarks of progress to be integrated into the AU IRF’s plans for civilian protection and for an agreed point for review and re-evaluation of the strategy should it fail to protect civilians from death, abduction and displacement.

- Recognising the behaviour of national armies towards the local population, the EU should press for an urgent review of the factors driving human rights abuses by national armies.

- The EU should press the AU, UN and national army missions to develop a communication strategy to engage with local communities on the aims and limitations of military efforts and provide a focus point for discussion of human rights abuses.
3. **Policy-makers should recognise and support the valuable role that civil society across the region can play** in understanding local dynamics, building resilience of communities, aiding return, reintegration and reconciliation, as well as in facilitating unofficial contacts and engagement with the LRA.

“No one has been to the forest to count the LRA.”
*Priest, DRC*

Credible and verifiable information about the LRA is in short supply, leading to rumours and suspicion on the ground. Many local people suspect collusion between the LRA and the UPDF; suspicions fuelled by cases of former LRA combatants within the UPDF’s ranks and of LRA rebels dressed in UPDF uniforms. Also accused of collusion are the Mbororo, nomadic Fulani-speaking pastoralists present in the affected countries. While there is evidence of occasional collaboration in attacks by Uda – a Mbororo sub-group – the Mbororo too appear to be victims of the LRA, suffering abductions and thefts, as well as being demonised by locals and the DRC Government.

Civil society can provide vital insights into the LRA and their impact on local dynamics and, in so doing, help build up a deeper understanding of the conflict and of the underlying governance and social drivers perpetuating it. Such an understanding can fill a gap in the knowledge of national and international decision-makers grappling with the issue. Mechanisms to facilitate constant dialogue between the two are needed. Civil society also needs to be supported to hold national governments to account for neglect of the regions in which the LRA operate.

“[International] humanitarian NGOs in Dungu act as if [local] civil society does not exist.”
*Civil society network memorandum, Dungu, DRC, September 2011*

Many local civil society organisations (CSOs) complain about a lack of consultation in the design of international aid programmes, poor communication by international agencies and NGOs about their role and objectives and lack of accountability to the local population for their actions and policy messages. Local civil society actors and organisations are a potentially invaluable partner in humanitarian and development efforts to build up the resilience of communities to the LRA, for example through information dissemination to otherwise inaccessible areas. They also have a vital role to play in aiding reconciliation and reintegration of LRA returnees into communities.

However, the predominance of short-term, international humanitarian funding programmes attracts staff away from local CSOs and has also resulted in a proliferation of opportunistic local CSOs. Recognising the impact of their presence on local society, international organisations should seek to invest in and include civil society organisations in order to build local ownership and sustainability.

Only civil society has so far in practice endorsed the importance of a regional approach to end the conflict by peaceful means. A Regional Civil Society Task Force, comprising a number of religious and traditional leaders from across the conflict-affected countries, gathers at regular intervals to analyse the status of the conflict, provide mutual support and look for ways forward. Since they began, these interfaith meetings have come a long way in achieving consensus and provide evidence that civil society is playing a key role in bringing diverse and sometimes dissenting voices together through dialogue and thus laying the ground for coordinated action.

Civil society leaders can also help pave the way for political dialogue. In the lead up to the Juba Peace Process (2006–2008) civil society leaders in Uganda and South Sudan played a pivotal role in building bridges between the LRA and Government of Uganda. Notwithstanding the limitations of Juba, this experience can be built upon.

**Recommendations**

- The EUSR should work with the AU Special Envoy to develop a more sophisticated analysis of the LRA conflict through engagement with civil society and, in order for this to happen, create mechanisms for regular dialogue.
- The EU should review funding streams and their duration, including the Instrument for Stability, in order to allow international support for the development of civil society capacity in LRA-affected areas.
- EU Delegations, humanitarian agencies and international NGOs should identify and include local civil society actors as partners, rather than passive beneficiaries, in programme planning and in formulation of policy responses to LRA issues in order to build local legitimacy and sustainability.
- EU Member States and the missions in the region should liaise on and support the development and capacity of regional civil society networks.
Repatriation of LRA fighters to their native countries is highly problematic as programmes across the region are not adapted to the regional nature of the conflict. Repatriation processes can be inordinately long; youngsters from CAR related how it took months from demobilisation in DRC to their return to CAR.

Self-demobilisation and the lack of a regional registration process or regional database to collect and collate all the data on returns and match the identities of returnees against those of abductees, mean there is no clear idea of how many people are actually still missing. Furthermore, Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) programmes in the various countries do not cater to former LRA. Those over the age of 18 do not benefit from national DDR processes and may be excluded from repatriation processes. No formal facilities or mechanisms appear to exist to assist their reintegration into their communities.

"Before, I could go out and grab a chicken or radio or anything, now I’m trying to do the right thing, but I have no money to buy anything."
Former combatant (over 18), CAR

Unable to return to school, without jobs and often highly traumatised, returnees are left isolated and alienated. Unassisted reinsertion of former LRA abductees into society thus poses the biggest danger to the local social fabric. Girls and young women returning from the LRA with children constitute another neglected and vulnerable group and face specific problems of acceptance into society.

Six women interviewed in Yambio (South Sudan) told how they had escaped during an exchange of fire and had simply walked back to DRC. The trip, fraught with danger, took them a month.

4.
A coherent regional framework that supports the safe return and reintegration of LRA abductees is needed in order to address the long-term impact of the conflict.

In the absence of legal frameworks such as the Uganda Amnesty Act, escape from the LRA is perilous, both for escapees, local intermediaries and receiving communities. The usual punishment for attempted escape is death, while receiving those fleeing the LRA is equally dangerous; a traditional chief in Dungu explained how the LRA had killed two other traditional chiefs after they had taken in a number of LRA escapees. The LRA are also known to carry out fake surrenders, which target the community as well as potential escapees among its own ranks. Fear, especially among women, of stigmatisation by communities also acts as a deterrent to return.

Defection from the LRA is encouraged by donors and the UN in some areas through leaflets and radio messaging. Such programmes carry a responsibility to ensure the safety of LRA escapees and receiving communities. Communities and army units need to be informed of clear procedures for defection, especially for small group surrender, which holds the greater risk for communities.

Radio messaging to attract people out of the bush is limited by the capacity of some local stations to broadcast within a very small radius. A coordinated and more effective approach to encourage return needs to operate from a regional platform and to be linked with safe procedures on the ground. One such platform exists – run by Fondation Hirondelle, which runs Radio Ndeke Luka in Bangui (reaching Obo), Radio Okapi in Bunia, and Radio Miraya in South Sudan – but it is not used.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

- The EU should work with the AU to promote greater coherence across the region in mechanisms for the return and reintegration of former LRA, including:
  - Inclusion of former LRA in national DDR mechanisms and provision for those over 18.
  - Work with UN agencies to maintain a register of abductees and to create a regional database to log returns against information on abductees.
  - Support for regional radio platforms, through provision of equipment and training of radio personnel, including in sensitising communities to issues around reintegration of returnees.
  - Clearer procedures and guidance to communities on defection.
  - Support to local and national initiatives to create a legal framework for safe return.

- EU and UN programmes should build on civil society’s local knowledge and capacity in order to build more sustainable reintegration of former LRA, particularly for those over 18 and female former LRA members with children.
Interview with Claudine, near Djema, Central African Republic

Claudine (17) was abducted with her sister by LRA combatants, who stole bags of cassava from their house and told Claudine and her sister to carry the load. They joined a large group of LRA and a number of other abducted girls.

On their way to join another LRA group they came under fire from UPDF forces. Along with some LRA, Claudine, three other girls and four male abductees fled the UPDF attack. Three of the men were shot because they were too slow. One escaped.

At night the girls were divided between the LRA soldiers and raped. Claudine suffered repeated rape by one particular commander during her three weeks of abduction.

One night Claudine and another girl escaped. Terrified, they ran as fast as they could until they reached a river bank where they slept. After walking for 10 days, the girls met a Fullah (Mbororo) herder. Because of community tensions between Claudine’s tribe (Sango) and the Fullah herder, she hid her identity. However, the Mbororo took care of her, fed her and treated her wounds and then took her to the nearest city where she called her father.

Claudine is now in secondary school. She still suffers from nightmares and has received no psychological support. At times she feels she wants to take revenge on her aggressors and at other times she wants to understand why they did this to her.

Methodology

In order to gauge the perspectives of those affected by the conflict across the region, interviews, group discussions and workshops were held with local communities, religious and traditional leaders, government officials, members of parliament, army officers, diplomats and staff of international organisations over the period March–July 2011. Group discussions involved LRA abductees, Mbororo, self-defence units, refugees and civil society representatives. Research was carried out in DRC (Bunia, Dungu, Duru and Kinshasa), CAR (Obo, Mboki, Rafai, Zemio and Bangui), South Sudan (Maridi, Ibba, Nzara, Yambio, Juba, and Wau) and Uganda (Gulu and Kampala). The research included contact with representatives of the African Union.

REFERENCES AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The cover picture shows a young woman, held by the LRA for three years, sitting with her sister in a camp for Internally Displaced Persons following her escape a month earlier. Dungu, DRC, July 2011.

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