



Children from the LRA and services for formerly abducted persons

Summary

There has been failure of protection in Northern Uganda particularly for the children who were abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) or born in captivity. Things can be done to rectify the situation and immediate action is essential.

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Background

In Northern Uganda, between the late 1980s and 2004, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) recruited more than 50,000 people, mostly by force. Around half of those taken were children under 18 years-old. A large number were never seen by their families again, but more than 20,000 returned through humanitarian aid- financed reception centres.

Gulu Support the Children Organization (GUSCO), facilitated by Save the Children, was responsible for reintegration processes in Gulu district. GUSCO received boys, girls and child mothers and provided them with physical healthcare, counseling and support to return home. The length of stay at reception centres ranged from one month to one year depending on how long it took to trace families. The reintegration process was shaped by the Cape Town principles 1997 and Paris principles 2007, which seek to reunite children with their immediate families.

Reintegration was mostly completed on the child's maternal side and for unaccompanied children (children born in the bush who arrived at the reception centre without their mothers) with maternal relatives. For those whose relatives could not be traced, GUSCO worked with the probation office to settle them in children's home. GUSCO based its rehabilitation and reintegration process on traditional Acholi ways, such as traditional cleansing ceremonies, which they organized in communities upon return. Subsequent research has produced mixed and often conflicting findings in terms of how 'successful' the reintegration process was, and how well LRA returnees are doing since their return (e.g. see Jeanie et al., 2008).

Method

GUSCO has records for 4,000 formerly abducted children who passed through their system. The research team drew a random sample of 304 - 10% from each year of return between 1997 and 2008, and 20% from 2009 to 2013 when fewer people returned. Fieldwork in northern Uganda between August 2013 and 25 March 2014 involved ethnographic research and 234 qualitative in-depth interviews with former LRA abductees, or in some instances where either the person had died or was living far away from home, with a family member.



Findings

The ethnographic research highlighted key issues:

1. At the time most children were reintegrated, the dominant discourse was about welcoming the children home, and the need for forgiveness (*timo kica*). GUSCO, in common with other reception centres, used a rather dualistic and simplistic framing of the issues. Terms such as victim/perpetrator; innocent/guilty; passive/active; good/evil were widely used, with children and young adults at the centres learning to think of themselves as innocent victims, devoid of agency. Contemplating any kind of responsibility for participating in dishonest, violent or murderous acts was deemed inappropriate; and left no option other than to 'forget the past'. These messages deny any possibility of agency and ignore the possibility that relatives, neighbours and the individuals themselves do not perceive events in the same way.
2. There had been a remarkable and misleading expectation that families would welcome back their loved ones, and that formerly abducted children would be easily assimilated. Children born in the bush and brought as babies were, at the time of data collection, around 15 years old and mostly living in highly abusive circumstances. Those linked to more urban-based networks were an exception to this pattern.
3. The probability of obtaining ancestral land declined in relation to the length of time spent with the LRA, but those excluded from the ancestral land were generally doing better than those living with their clans and relatives. Those most vulnerable and most stigmatized were most likely to suffer from *Cen* (a spiritual pollution or a malevolent force that emanates from those who have witnessed or perpetrated violence) and were those living with their fathers, mothers and close relatives.
4. The GUSCO returnees were the least likely to have been followed up as compared to the other groups of returnees. 75% of the GUSCO sample have not been followed-up since, their return, are living in rural areas and are not in a formal 'support network' (originally formed by NGOs and consisting of women who returned from LRA to get support from each other and from the government/other organisations). 40% of male children in the GUSCO sample who returned between 2002 and 2005 were not traceable.
5. The experience of stigma and *Cen* was found to decline in relation to the length of time spent with the LRA. Those who spent longer in the LRA were most likely to be involved in a 'support network'. Those people who survived successfully in the LRA are most likely to survive successfully on the return.
6. Those who spent longer time with the LRA were mostly living in an urban location and were most likely to have been interviewed many times by researchers. The GUSCO group were the least likely to have been researched. This finding highlights a serious limitation with research that has been based on describing experiences based on these networks, which are based in Gulu and other towns, as well as other snowballing and other ad hoc methods, which have been used to locate a sample. It also explains conflicting research findings when researchers have looked in different areas.
7. Most of the women in 'support networks' were found to be previous wives of the LRA commanders; with often the senior wives in permanent leadership positions, which was not always well-perceived by junior wives. NGOs explained that the leaders were elected by their colleagues, yet their constitution says the leadership roles should be rotational.



Recommendations

When defining policy for the improvement of services for formerly abducted persons, both in Northern Uganda and globally, the following must be considered:

1. Find the invisible people. In Northern Uganda there should be a massive follow up of the children that returned from the LRA and the creation of a new database with the purpose of accounting for and documenting their whereabouts and ongoing needs.
2. There should be a government programme that aims specifically at compensating those that returned from the LRA in-line with their self-identified needs and priorities.
3. There should be a review of the constitution of the formal 'support networks' in Gulu district and future funding should be contingent on a clear policy of rotational leadership that gives opportunity to other women, not only those who were senior while in the bush.
4. Actors working in the field of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) and in post-conflict settings globally should not assume that there is a positive correlation between time spent in captivity and vulnerability/ease of reintegration.
5. Research should be carefully planned and well-coordinated so as to avoid over-researching in one area, capturing only one viewpoint, and creating 'research fatigue' which can potentially affect the quality of data collected.
6. These findings raise serious global questions about what to do in DDR with reference to children involved in armed groups. Key learnings include not over-simplifying the issue of agency, and not assuming that families are always be the best option. Programmes must allow for careful analysis of what is best for a child on a case-by-case basis. These programmes must also be accountable and have long-term follow-up mechanisms. Any fundamental revisions from policy level must include and consider ethnographic research and other forms of local expertise.

References

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