

**STRENGTHENING THE
ECONOMIC DIMENSIONS
OF PEACEBUILDING**

CASE STUDY SERIES

**ENHANCING SOCIO-ECONOMIC
OPPORTUNITIES FOR EX-COMBATANTS
IN UGANDA**

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About International Alert

International Alert is a 26-year-old independent peacebuilding organisation. We work with people who are directly affected by violent conflict to improve their prospects of peace. And we seek to influence the policies and ways of working of governments, international organisations like the UN and multinational companies, to reduce conflict risk and increase the prospects of peace.

We work in Africa, several parts of Asia, the South Caucasus, the Middle East and Latin America, and have recently started work in the UK. Our policy work focuses on several key themes that influence prospects for peace and security – the economy, climate change, gender, the role of international institutions, the impact of development aid, and the effect of good and bad governance.

We are one of the world's leading peacebuilding NGOs with more than 159 staff based in London and 14 field offices. To learn more about how and where we work, visit www.international-alert.org.

About this series

This is part of a series of case studies which explore the socio-economic aspects of reintegration programmes for ex-combatants in a number of conflict-affected countries where International Alert works: Nepal, Liberia and Uganda. The aim is to stimulate discussions at the local, national and international level about the role that private sector actors can play in the effective reintegration of ex-combatants, and to strengthen practice by developing recommendations for future socio-economic reintegration programmes.

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Introduction

In northern Uganda, over two decades of conflict between the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the government of Uganda involved massive displacement of the population and the systematic abduction of civilians by the LRA. At the height of the conflict 1.8 million people, mainly from the Acholi and Lango sub-regions, lived in camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs), a situation which severely disrupted the economic and social fabric of society.¹ The conflict had significant adverse impacts on youth – not only IDPs and former abductees, but also other young people who were affected by the war.

This case study illustrates how a large-scale, protracted conflict can influence youth livelihood opportunities. It also demonstrates the potential that disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) interventions have for supporting the socio-economic integration of youth in post-conflict environments. The study is based on interviews with national and international NGOs in Kampala and Gulu as well as a survey of 1,136 young people aged 14-16, which International Alert conducted in 2011.² It centres primarily on formerly abducted persons (FAPs) and ex-combatants, as they were the direct beneficiaries of education and vocational skills training in the context of the DDR initiatives.

Background

The LRA, led by Joseph Kony, developed from the armed resistance against Yoweri Museveni's government, with the aim of creating an independent Acholi in the late 1980s. Peace talks between the Ugandan government and the LRA in Juba in 2006 failed, however a ceasefire agreement was reached which, along with other factors, led to the LRA reducing its activities in Uganda. Prior to 2006 the conflict in northern Uganda generated huge internal displacement, the phenomenon of night commuters³ and the forced recruitment of thousands of civilians into the LRA. The LRA modus operandi consisted of attacking villages and abducting people, often children and youth. Girls were frequently used as cooks, scouts or sex slaves, while boys were deployed to the front lines. It has been estimated that 60,000 people were abducted by 2004; some for a few days, a small minority for years.⁴ At the height of the conflict approximately 1.8 million people were internally displaced and living in IDP camps under squalid conditions, with poor access to education and scant recollection of normal community life.

Current situation

Since 2006 the Acholi and Lango sub-regions have seen some gains in terms of economic growth, especially in urban centres, but development remains slow. Much progress has been driven by the Peace, Recovery and Development Plan (PRDP),⁵ initiated by the government with a view to aiding the recovery of northern Uganda. In light of the struggling economy and the large number

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- 1 Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (2012). *Uganda: Need to focus on returnees and remaining IDPs in transition to development*. Available at <http://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/uganda>
 - 2 International Alert (unpublished). *Unlocking economic opportunities for war-affected youth: Youth perception survey in Acholi and Lango* (publication forthcoming). The study was conducted in seven districts of Acholi and Lango in June 2011. We relied on a statistical abstract from the UB05 2010 which left us with a number of 19.7 percent of youth aged 14-26. This was used to extrapolate 19.7 percent of youth in the seven districts of Acholi and Lango, with additional Acholi and Lango youth residing in Kampala through a tracer study. The research covered a total of 1,136 youth, of which 51.8 percent were female. Of these 20 percent considered themselves FAPs and 1.8 percent ex-combatants.
 - 3 Night commuters were an estimated 30,000 youth and children walking every night from their homes to urban areas or larger IDP camps to avoid attacks and possible abduction by the LRA.
 - 4 C. Blattman and J. Anan (2008). 'Child combatants in northern Uganda: Reintegration myths and realities', in R. Muggah (Ed.). *Security and post-conflict reconstruction: Dealing with fighters in the aftermath of war*. Routledge. pp.103-126. Available at <http://www.chrisblattman.com/documents/research/2008.DDR.pdf>
 - 5 The Peace, Recovery and Development Plan for Northern Uganda (PRDP) is a government strategy aimed to aid recovery and development in northern Uganda. It became operational in 2008 and is available at <http://www.ugandaclusters.ug/prdp.htm>

of youth in the region, many of whom have little or no education or vocational skills, generating employment for young people has become a cross-cutting priority among private sector actors, the government and development partners.⁶

Northern Uganda is a fertile region, with high potential for agriculture and dairy production. Under the PRDP agriculture is being developed by companies as well as small-scale farmers, yet land conflicts are becoming increasingly frequent as IDPs return to their original lands. The previously vigorous cross-border trade with Sudan continues to lack investment due to inadequate infrastructure and insecurity on both sides of the border. At the same time, the property and construction markets are experiencing growth due to the large humanitarian operations in northern Uganda. They are particularly booming in urban centres, where hotels and restaurants aimed at the NGO sector are under development. Trade in consumer goods is being carried out by small enterprises and traders.⁷

Education and vocational training

Uganda's education system provides for free primary education. However, few of Alert's interviewees in northern Uganda had sat the Primary Leaving Examination (PLE).⁸ Of those questioned, 31 percent male and 32 percent female youth had attained the PLE. The research established that female respondents consistently lagged behind their male peers in further education levels. The difference between the sexes is also illustrated by the much larger number of young women attesting to having received no training at all (47 percent) compared to their male peers (29 percent). Among all youth surveyed, ex-combatants and FAPs had the highest percentage of those not having any education (47 percent male and 67 percent female). The lack of education certificates – a common admissions criterion for vocational training – has been recognised as thwarting their possibility of accessing further education or vocational training.⁹

6 International Alert (unpublished). Op. cit.

7 Ibid.

8 The current education system in Uganda, which has been in existence since the early 1960s, provides for the testing of pupils at the end of their seventh year of primary education. It is on the basis of PLE results that pupils are admitted to secondary school.

9 International Alert (unpublished). Op. cit.

The DDR process and formerly abducted persons

In an effort to deal with the large number of FAPs and ex-combatants in the country, the government of Uganda has been concurrently running two different initiatives: an official DDR process (also known as the Amnesty Commission) for ex-combatants, and reception centres for FAPs. The majority of the rank and file of the LRA were FAPs. Those who fulfilled the Amnesty Law criteria were labelled ex-combatants and became eligible for amnesty, whilst the remaining majority would be assisted in their rehabilitation through reception centres run by national and international NGOs.

The amnesty process¹⁰

The official amnesty process was supported by the Multi-Country Demobilisation and Reintegration Programme (MDRP).¹¹ Its aim was to demobilise ex-combatants from any of the armed groups in Uganda and provide reinsertion support to those fulfilling the Amnesty Law criteria.¹² Abductees and ex-combatants who were either captured or escaped from the LRA were often debriefed by the Ugandan People's Defence Force (UPDF), after which they were placed in reception centres. Once in the reception centres they could formally apply for amnesty. The DDR process under the Amnesty Law had four main components:

- **Sensitisation and dialogue:** Towards the public and former combatants.
- **Demobilisation and processing of amnesty applications:** Disarmament, identification and documentation.
- **Resettlement support (in cash and in kind):** Provided through the reception centres where applications for amnesty were submitted; psychological and health assessments were also available.
- **Longer-term social and economic reintegration:** Activities included counselling, economic and education opportunities.

The Amnesty Commission

The Uganda Amnesty Commission (AC) was established by an act of Parliament in 2000 to support the return to civilian life of "reporters" – those individuals associated with rebel groups who renounced and abandoned involvement in armed rebellion and applied to the government for amnesty. To date, more than 21,000 former members of different Ugandan rebel groups have reported and received amnesty and reinsertion support from the AC. Fifty percent of reporters belong to the LRA, whereas the remainder belong to the West Nile Bank Front (WNBFB) and the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF). By the time the programme closed, 16,256 individuals had demobilised and reinsertion support had been provided to 14,816. The main difference between the LRA and other rebel groups was that LRA reporters could show that they had been abducted at an earlier age, especially girls. For more information, see <http://www.mdrp.org/uganda.htm>

¹⁰ The research for this case study was carried out in 2011. The information in this section is therefore based on the situation as it stood in late 2011.

¹¹ The Multi-Country Demobilisation and Reintegration Programme (MDRP) operated from 2002 to 2009 in the Great Lakes region of Africa and supported DDR processes. Its main donor was the World Bank, in addition to other donors. The MDRP worked across borders, with national governments and had more than 30 partner organisations, including UN agencies and NGOs. More information is available at <http://www.mdrp.org/uganda.htm>

¹² The Amnesty Law of 2000 provided an amnesty for those who had engaged in war or rebellion against the government since 1986 but had renounced their association with warring groups. Only LRA senior commanders were exempt from amnesty. The law has undergone three amendments since 2000. For more information, see <http://justiceandreconciliation.com/2012/06/who-forgives-whom-northern-ugandas-grassroots-views-on-the-amnesty-act/>

Formerly abducted persons and reception centres

The large majority of FAPs did not apply, or were deemed ineligible for amnesty and were therefore not part of the official DDR process. Due to the modus operandi of the LRA (abducting some people for a few hours, others for years, and often using abductees for supporting tasks rather than combat), many FAPs could not meet the criteria of the Amnesty Law applicable to ex-combatants. Furthermore, some abductees perceived the amnesty option as a government attempt to obtain their details and prosecute them at a later stage. Many children, youth and adults therefore went through reception centres such as the ones operated by World Vision and Gulu Support the Children Organisation (GUSCO).¹³ These reception centres provide healthcare, psycho-social support and a certain measure of vocational training. They also deal with emotional and physical trauma and assisted with family reunions, i.e. tracing FAPs' original communities and helping with abductees' reintegration.

World Vision reintegration programme

Since 1995 the World Vision centres in Uganda have received 14,000 people. The services which they provide include: psycho-social counselling, medical treatment, family-tracing, artisan apprenticeships and seed capital for start-up businesses. Challenges to the reintegration of FAPs that they have encountered are:

- Communities less prepared to accept FAPs if they are identified as having committed atrocities in the area;
- Community structures such as local councils and child protection committees not active or functional, which impedes communities' preparedness for the return of FAPs;
- Dependency of FAPs on the reception centres (upon encountering difficulties many choose to return to the centres);
- Women returning with children face greater obstacles reintegrating into communities due to clan and child identity issues.

Source: International Alert interviews with World Vision staff in Kampala and Gulu in 2011.

There are also programmes which do not concentrate solely on FAPs or ex-combatants, but take a more holistic community approach. A survey of war-affected youth carried out in 2006¹⁴ indicated that the number of persons abducted by the LRA could be as high as 60,000. This is significantly higher than the number of people who have undergone the formal amnesty process or have passed through the existing reception centres. A follow-up study in 2008 established that 50 percent of FAPs surveyed had chosen to self-reintegrate and thus had never approached reception centres or the Amnesty Commission.¹⁵

13 These centres continue to operate and receive FAPs. World Vision has received FAPs since 1995. By May 2011 it had received 14,000 people. Currently they only receive males; all females and children are cared for in GUSCO reception centres. GUSCO has lost its initial dataset of received FAPs, however they estimate that by 2009 they had received more than 7,000 people. For more information, see <http://www.gusco.org/Publications/published/EU%20RESEARCH%20REPORT.pdf>

14 Available at <http://chrisblattman.com/projects/sway/>

15 C. Blattman and J. Annan (2008). *Op. cit.*

Empowering Hands Uganda (EHU)

EHU was founded in 2004 by formerly abducted children's mothers as a response to the challenges faced by FAPs upon return from LRA captivity. Their aim is to promote reintegration of FAPS through economic empowerment, peacebuilding and dialogue, and psycho-social support. The three-pronged approach is geared towards holistic and meaningful community transformation:

- Economic empowerment is based on the realisation that FAPs constitute the poorest community members. Activities include support and training to provide sustenance and livelihood opportunities.
- Peacebuilding and dialogue promotion takes place through the community dialogue groups, which enable community dialogue and mediation on topical issues affecting peace in the region.
- Psycho-social support is used to deal with the trauma experienced by FAPs, by preparing communities to receive traumatised children and adults. Assistance is provided through peer support groups, group or household counselling and play therapy.

Source: International Alert interviews with EHU staff in Gulu in 2011.

Outcomes

The research conducted by Alert revealed that FAPs, ex-combatants and displaced youth faced many common challenges in their efforts to reintegrate into communities, albeit to a varying degree.

Former abductees and ex-combatants had received some vocational training as part of the DDR programme. However, upon re-joining their families in IDP camps they had limited employment and livelihood opportunities. After 2008, when the camps began to close down, the main obstacle that FAPs, ex-combatants and IDPs more generally were confronted with was access to land. With no formal land tenancy agreements and many elders either dead or no longer present in the original communities, knowledge of territorial boundaries had been lost and land claims had become difficult to resolve. The issue was particularly contentious for some former abductees and combatants, who found out that their land had been sold by relatives or grabbed by other community members. This was part of their marginalisation as a group and the stigma that attached to them upon their return home.¹⁶ The situation for women was compounded because, traditionally, land could only be inherited by men. Those returning with children were in an especially vulnerable position.

In terms of livelihood opportunities, the research established that ex-combatants and FAPs lagged behind their peers, regardless of their access to support, education and training in reception centres, or through the official amnesty process. This outcome was particularly prevalent among women. Returning females – especially FAPs and ex-combatants – had the lowest education levels. Female respondents in our survey were more likely than males to have dropped out of school and to have had limited education opportunities.¹⁷ Their schooling had been interrupted by the war, and lack of funds for school fees impeded their subsequent return. More generally, boys were prioritised over girls to receive education, with girls often relegated to work in small family farms. Moreover, ex-combatant men enjoyed an advantageous position, as the amnesty process provided them with start-up capital or facilitated their access to micro-loans. Male ex-combatants were therefore more able to invest in high-yielding items, such as motorcycles (motorcycle taxi drivers in northern Uganda tend overwhelmingly to be ex-combatants), which gave them higher earning power compared to women.

Reintegration was further impeded by the disconnection between the available vocational training options and the livelihood opportunities that could viably be pursued upon graduation. Of the 1,136 respondents in our survey, only 131 held formal vocational qualifications (of these 41 were female). The most common training pursued by men was construction (46.7 percent), followed by tailoring (22.2 percent) and carpentry (15.6 percent). Tailoring was the most common training for women (70.7 percent). Of these respondents almost twice the number of females believed that the acquired skills did not give them an advantage (23.8 percent) compared to males (13.5 percent). Training providers seemingly offered qualifications in traditional vocations which were not in sync with the needs of the local labour market. Female survey participants also indicated that they had limited choice as to the training they could opt for. As a result of gender stereotyping and the few training options on offer, the market had become saturated with certain vocations, which further impeded the pursuit of sustainable livelihoods.

*'We go for training in certain skills thinking that we will get jobs. When we complete then we realise there are too many of us who have the same training and the work is not there for all of us.'*¹⁸

16 IOM, UNDP and Norwegian Refugee Council (2009). *Land or else: Land-based conflict, vulnerability and disintegration in northern Uganda*. Available at <http://uganda.iom.int/documents/Land.Or.Else.Oct.2010.FINAL.pdf>

17 International Alert (unpublished). Op. cit.

18 Ibid.

Last but not least, general unpreparedness on the part of the receiving communities posed a considerable challenge to the successful reintegration of war-affected youth. Reception centres had little funds for programmes targeting receiving communities, or for follow-up once FAPs had left the centres. Inadequate community structures and lack of capacity to deal with issues of stigmatisation and rejection often prompted the return of youth to the reception centres. To counter this, organisations like Empowering Hands Uganda and the International Rescue Committee (IRC)¹⁹ have made efforts to adopt a more holistic approach and support communities in facilitating the return of FAPs, ex-combatants and IDPs.

¹⁹ International Rescue Committee's (IRC) Livelihoods, Education, and Protection to End Child Labor Project. For more information, see <http://www.rescue.org/news/survey-commissioned-irc-reveals-widespread-child-labor-uganda>

Lessons learnt

- 1. Empower youth to identify and take advantage of economic and social opportunities in addition to providing them with specific vocational training.** Holistic programmes which enable participants to harness economic opportunities in their respective local areas are likely to increase their chances of finding sustainable livelihoods. Support from national and international institutions would be particularly useful in this regard, as it would help youth to navigate a challenging post-conflict economy. Such support could be in the form of follow-up training, advice on small business development and linking up with private sector actors in the region to facilitate job-seeking or business opportunities.
- 2. Involving receiving communities in programming initiatives has the dual benefit of reducing resentment against returning youth and repairing severed community and societal bonds.** Such involvement tends to generate greater ownership over the process and thereby enhance the chances for success. The work the IRC has been doing, for instance, requires that communities as a whole select at-risk youth and their families as beneficiaries, as well as the specific projects to work on. This helps rebuild ties that may have been severed or strained, by allowing people to engage collaboratively in the pursuit of common goals which they themselves have selected.
- 3. The potential disconnection between vocational trainings on offer and actual labour market needs is limiting youth livelihood opportunities.** Labour market surveys prior to the design of DDR programmes would provide a useful assessment of sustainable livelihood opportunities for graduates. Dialogue between private sector actors, providers of vocational training and youth could help open new doors for young people in a struggling economy, as well as contribute to overcoming possible resentment and prejudices across conflict divides.
- 4. Training providers and donors need to be more sensitive to the consequences of inadvertently entrenching gender stereotypes.** Limiting women's training options can lead to an oversaturation in specific niches of the labour market. It can also depreciate the value of certain professions and ultimately impede the attainment of sustainable livelihoods.

Conclusion

Since 2006 northern Uganda has experienced relative peace. Efforts to regenerate the economy have spurred development in affected regions, but recovery continues to be slow. Moreover, it is impossible to quantify the physical, psychological and social impacts that the conflict has had on the people of northern Uganda. The provisions put in place to deal with the return of FAPs, ex-combatants and IDPs have helped reunite youth with their families but have not provided them with adequate livelihood opportunities. Furthermore, the DDR programme for FAPs and ex-combatants seems to have been poorly coordinated and gender-insensitive. The experience of northern Uganda demonstrates that in a post-conflict economy, it is essential to work with the private sector to ensure that training and education options offered to youth are linked to realistic livelihood opportunities and match actual labour market needs. Socio-economic reintegration can only be effective when it is in sync with local realities rather than donor or government priorities, and when it provides long-term, sustainable support to beneficiaries.

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