

ALONE & FRIGHTENED



Experiential Stories of Former Child Soldiers
in Northern Uganda on Improving Reintegration



Alone and Frightened:

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in Northern Uganda on Improving Reintegration

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List of Key Acronyms

AACAN	Action against Child Abuse and Neglect
CHA	Cessation of Hostilities Agreement
CPA	Concerned Parents' Association
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration
DRPT	District Reconciliation and Peace Team
GoU	Government of Uganda
GUSCO	Gulu Save the Children Organization
ICC	International Criminal Court
ICD	International Crimes Division
IDPs	Internally Displaced Persons
JPC	Justice and Peace Commission
JRP	Justice and Reconciliation Project
KICWA	Kitgum Concerned Women's Association
LC	Local Council
LCV	Local Council Five
LRA	Lord's Resistance Army
NAADS	National Agricultural Advisory Services
NUSAF	Northern Uganda Social Action Fund
PRDP	Peace, Recovery and Development Plan
RDC	Resident District Commissioner
TEWOPE	Teso Women for Peace
TIP	Teso Initiative for Peace
UNICEF	United Nations International Children Emergency Fund
UPA	Uganda Patriotic Army
UPDF	Uganda Peoples' Defense Forces

Key Terms and Definitions

Child soldier: A child soldier is one under the age of 18 and part of a regular or irregular armed force or armed group participating directly or indirectly. Child soldiers perform a range of tasks including combat, laying mines and explosives; scouting, spying, acting as decoys, couriers or guards; training, drill or other preparations; logistics and support functions, pottering, cooking and domestic labor; and sexual slavery or other recruitment for sexual purposes (UNICEF 2003).

Disarmament: According to United Nations Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (UNDDR) frame, disarmament is the collection, control and disposal of weapons (Torjesen 2009:412).

Demobilization: It is the release or discharge of combatants, their reception and the initial assistance provided to them to return to their homes, community or other place of settlement (Verhey 2001:6).

Reintegration: According to Paris Principles (2007), reintegration is a transition into civil society and meaningful roles accepted by families and communities in the context of local and national reconciliation.

Transitional reintegration: It is interventions done to assist war communities and individuals to survive at the basic subsistence level as they re-adjust to community's productive life (Stockholm Initiative on Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration 2006:6).

Reinsertion/Transitional Safety Nets: It is the act of interventions geared towards helping war communities, including child soldiers, to have initial basic necessities like food, shelter, drugs, clothes, hoes, mattresses, blankets and other needs enough to make violence less attractive (The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers 2008:30)

Agency: It is active engagement of a person without duress or force and with full knowledge of the impact of one's action and responsibility (Maeland 2012:12-13).

Foreward

Even though we lose 30,000 fewer children each day than a half a century ago, we still are losing 20,000 children daily. The tragedy is that these deaths are largely preventable. Some of these lives are lost in violent wars where children are conscripted against their will to kill, maim and plunder. Often, they are forced by their abductors to turn the gun on their relatives, even parents, so that they have no one to go back to—effectively transforming murderous gangs to be their families.

Alone, abandoned and frightened: these are the words that describe the state of children affected by the brutal war in Northern Uganda pitting the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) against the Uganda People's Defense Forces (UPDF). The stories of the Former Child Soldiers (FCS) and those children affected by the conflict we spoke with were heart-rending. Their stories about their lives after the conflict were deeply heartbreaking.

Our work towards preventing and mitigating the effects of conflict on children in Eastern and Central Africa presented a chance for us to learn how the children and former child soldiers were coping in their struggles in their own words. We found severely traumatized children and young adults who were striving to become whole again and in need of special care and assistance from all of us. What happened to these children and young adults are inexcusable.

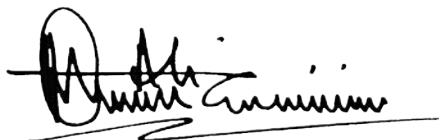
The study ***Alone and Frightened: The Experiential Stories of FCS in Northern Uganda on Improving Reintegration in the Region*** is an important addition to the knowledge of the state of children in war and former zones and how they are coping, as well as what communities are doing to support them. We thank the entire team that made this study possible, especially the research team of former child combatants who courageously told their stories and collected and analyzed stories from their peers.

The FCS affected by the war who you will read about in this study—and who made the difficult choice to get back to society to try and live normal lives despite horrendous past forced upon them—are our real heroes. We salute all of you.

Sincerely,



Mr. Travis Rejman
Executive Director
The Goldin Institute
Chicago, USA



Dr. Mustafa Y. Ali
Secretary General
Global Network of Religions for Children
Nairobi, Kenya

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Goldin Institute (GI), Arigatou International (AI) and the Global Network of Religions for Children (GNRC) partnered with the African Council of Religious Leaders — Religions for Peace (ACRL—RfP) and the Interreligious Council of Uganda (IRCU) in a project to establish a regional mechanism for child soldiers' prevention and reintegration. Uganda, South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) were the initial target countries. The first phase of the project focused on establishing a national platform in Uganda through a participatory and consultative approach. There was need for the platform to operate on the basis of grounded knowledge, and so the purpose of this study was to listen to people impacted by the Northern Uganda civil war as key to fully understanding and improving the lives of FCS. The findings of this study would inform the setting and operationalization of the national platform.

The study sought to achieve the following objectives:

- To facilitate a platform for FCS to share their experiences and challenges of abduction and escape from captivity.
- To establish the community and family perceptions and attitude towards FCS.
- To identify gaps in the implementation of the Cessation of Hostilities /Juba Peace Agreement (CHA) (2006), agenda item V on DDR, the institutional mechanisms and the current state of FCS with regard to DDR.
- To establish and highlight the locally-generated and FCS-based frameworks for reintegration.
- The content scope of this research was to document and analyze the experiences and challenges of FCS with regard to their reintegration into families and communities within the CHA broader agenda item V.

Design and Methodology

The research was exploratory and used an experience-based approach in order to access credible first-hand information on the status of FCS. It also used an intervention-oriented method to get perspectives of FCS regarding current interventions and local resources for effective reintegration.

A total of 180 primary informants were purposively selected using the principles of participatory feedback and primary respondent-centered ownership of the research. Of the total primary respondents, 52% were male and 48% were female. Information from secondary respondents who included parents of FCS, community leaders, district leaders, NGO representatives and opinion leaders corroborated data from the primary respondents. In total, 264 respondents were interviewed. Additionally, secondary sources such as the report on an earlier consultation carried out by ACRL—RfP among religious leaders in view of the national platform establishment were used to provide theoretical basis for the findings and the research as whole. Focus Group Discussions (FGD) were avoided due the sensitive nature of the primary respondents.

Interviews in addition to observatory methods were employed in the study. This enabled the team to probe further where information was considered inadequate. In addition, it helped to create relationships of trust between the team members and respondents and this led to the latter opening up. All interviews were conducted in local languages and within the respective communities and homes.

The districts covered were Adjumani, Amuru, Gulu, Kitgum, Lira and Soroti. Within the districts, twelve parishes, namely, Logoangwa, Mgbere, Lacor, Kal, Tegwana, Kanyagoga, Gang dyang, Pandwong, Mwol Bune, Barlonyo, Adwoa and Apalayet were purposively sampled.

Key Findings of the Study: Experiences and Current Status of FCS

- a. Although the study planned to have an equal number of male and female respondents, more males than females participated. Females seemed more unwilling to respond probably due to fear of being identified, fear of community reprisal or, a manifestation of inadequate or lack of psycho-social support.
- b. According to the findings the majority of the children abducted (58.9%) were between ages 15 and below- a clear indication of loss of childhood including schooling for many, in addition to horrifying traumatic experiences.
- c. Major health issues identified among FCS include bullet wounds and fragments in the body, septic wounds, fistula, HIV/AIDS and cardiac problems. The physical scars or bullets lodged in their bodies has rendered some of them unable to find spouses or fend for themselves. In fact some claim to have been divorced because of the health challenges.
- d. Of the 87 females interviewed, 39 returned as child mothers; also an indication of defilement, sexual harassment and sexual slavery compounded currently by lack of community acceptance and difficulties in providing for the child/children. More painful is the lack of identity on the part of the child/children.
- e. While 60% of the abducted children found themselves in the hands of Uganda People's Defense Forces (UPDF) and later reception centers, many (40%) did not receive initial counseling and support having bypassed the reception centers on their way home. Considering the kind of experiences they went through such as constant death threats, spiritual initiation rituals ranging from sitting on dead bodies to having sex with an older person and the duration in captivity of between 1-6 years, one can understand the trauma levels and poor livelihoods among FCS currently. The duration in captivity seemed to impact on the psychological and physical state of the victims.
- f. Large portions of the FCSs expressed concern that they continue to experience psychological suffering and/or trauma as a result of their experiences in captivity. This includes nightmares, anxiety and fits of anger in addition to alienation, appropriation, dispossession, guilt, loneliness and poor relation with others (aggression, shouting, commanding, etc.).
- g. Over half found either one or both parents dead. This means a sizable number of the FCS returned as orphans with a greater number losing their fathers. The situation points to the loss of primary hope, protection, support and identity for the FCS. Constant feelings of guilt were common for having contributed to the death of their parents either through direct killings or by making it difficult for injured people to access health facilities. This parental death phenomenon compounded their level of guilt upon return.

- h. Largely, UPDF was lauded by many victims for treating them well although some complained of being harassed, stigmatized and mocked by the government forces. Reports of UPDF luring FCS to join the army were also reported by some FCS interviewed. The victims considered this a second form of victimization.
- i. For most FCS, family members were generally more receptive than community members. To date FCS are pained by the level of stigmatization by members of their larger community who perceive them as wild and guilty with agency and responsible for the “crimes” they committed. Worthy to note is that even globally accepted and widely used terms such as “former child soldier” and “ex-combatant” make FCS feel stigmatized. This stigmatization and victimization has exposed females to desperation and risks including defilement, prostitution, diseases and psychological and mental break down.
- j. For most of the FCS interviewed, their healing and general reintegration started with the family. The reception centers, although playing a key role, actually prolonged their return to their families where critical healing and reintegration could take place.

Reintegration Interventions

The study revealed that systems and structures within government to address plight of FCS were not well targeted and organized. Majority of the respondents indicated they had not received any benefits from government programs. They seemed disillusioned, even fed up, with interventions by both government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) which more often than not did not target or get to them despite the fact that they were the reason such donor or government money was frequently coming into their areas.

Respondents were of the opinion that government through its programs such as the Peace Recovery Development Programme (PRDP) and the Northern Uganda Social Action Fund (NUSAF) together with microfinance services rolled out, laid more emphasis on general infrastructure like roads and bore holes, leaving unattended the physical and health needs of FCS. Many claimed to have been registered numerous times but with no support or even a simple follow-up thereafter.

Rightly so, the interventions by government were more community’ than FCS targeted. In relative terms however, NGOs were keener on the idea of targeted beneficiaries. It is important to point out that many people in the community contributed to the decision about the approach taken in that they were against FCS’ targeted interventions and instead rooted for a community based one. International organizations also preferred a community broad-based approach. Program interventions by NGOs and government were inadequate. The few that were available were largely standardized within the dominant global frame of psycho-social support, counseling and rehabilitation. They failed to appreciate the important factor of duration in captivity and the varied experiences by each FCS. The reception centers were thus ‘insensitive’ to the depth of the experiences of FCS.

Community-based organizations (CBOs) creatively introduced non-conventional ways of psycho-social support or counseling, reconciliation and skilling for livelihood. These indigenous modes of correction, reconciliation and forgiveness included use of wang’oo (bon fire) where proverbs and ododo (riddles) were told, traditional music, dance and cultural values like mato oput (stepping on an egg) and gomo tong (bending of spear) were performed. Those who went through CBOs emphasized benefits in terms of having learnt to cope, how to forgive each other, how to appreciate cultural values and how to relate properly contrary to the others who emphasized being given money, sewing machines, clothes, shoes, hoes and being “trained” in

ways of unlearning the past in addition to being trained on how to deal with trauma and post-conflict traumatic situations. However, just like government and NGOs, CBOs made fatal assumptions and treated all FCS as though they went through similar experiences.

Secondly the age factor contributed greatly to neglect of FCS. Those below age 13 were considered to lack agency of their own and, so were left in the hands of their ill prepared and ill equipped families and communities. On the other hand, those above 18 years were considered adults and, therefore, could not be eligible for assistance under the umbrella of 'children'. Due to delays, those FCS who at the time were aged between 16 and 17 years transitioned to adulthood before they could be assisted.

Other than weaknesses inherent in the program content, the programs only focused on those who passed through reception centers leaving a large portion of about 40% of the FCS without any form of support.

In general, government interventions are not only limited and skewed but also not known by most FCS. In addition, challenges of limited resource capacity and the lack of awareness of existing programs have all combined to generate a feeling of neglect and insensitivity pointed at government by many FCS.

However, in addition to these concerns, the study established a more challenging situation, the lack of understanding by government and NGOs of what reintegration really is in terms of its basic traits and manifestations.

FCS Coping Strategies

Beside individual search for protection, FCS have evolved strategies of group healing comprising counseling and comforting each other, working together, helping each other, talking, staying together and knowing each other's location. The process seemed to have played a vital role in bringing about healing especially on the aspect of identity and belonging. It was also found that they have resorted to marrying each other on the basis of knowing and understanding one another better, given their shared experiences.

Through the study, it was found that FCS in Northern Uganda tended to use peaceful means to resolve conflicts and challenges contrary to common belief and documented research evidence.

Conclusions

The study concludes that the agenda item V of the Juba Peace Process on DDR and particularly the reintegration of FCS has been inconclusive in many respects. First, is the ill-conceived notion of reintegration that had been reduced to reinsertion. Second is the little or misconstrued understanding and appreciation of the post-return problems and challenges of the FCS.

The ongoing manifestations of psychological trauma, depression, and stigmatization, feelings of neglect and a cycle of victimization, poverty and internal displacement causing disorientation, appropriation and alienation among FCS reflect the inadequacy of the current reintegration interventions.

A government driven multi-faceted and multi-sector approach must be put in place to realize sustainable recovery and peace in northern Uganda, taking into consideration the unique and individualized experiences of FCS.

The unconscious coping mechanism developed by FCS and termed “collective healing” by the study opened the way to a realization, appreciation and validation of FCS’ aspirations and gave them a sense of belonging. This finding should be of interest to the government and civil society since if well-structured and utilized, it becomes an entry point through which individual FCS are made whole with a ripple effect on individual and national development. Clearly FCS are a great resource for development which, unfortunately, has been left untapped with lackluster results.

General Recommendations

In view of these findings, effective reintegration should combine both conventional and traditional approaches such as spiritual healing and cleansing of the FCS.

Reintegration should be distinguished from reinsertion.

Reintegration should be a process designed to address broad and specific issues which, according to the FCS, are family and community acceptance, healing the trauma and physical sicknesses and deformities, correctional surgery, formal education and meaningful and relevant vocational skills training that can help one to gain normal and competitive livelihood. FCSs had manifest unstructured and yet multiple collective healing traits, outside the norms of “legal association”, with hugely phenomenal success. This line should be pursued with an aim of deepening understanding and formalizing its processes.

A distinction needs to be made between transitional and development reintegration while keenly listening to what the victims have to say.

This is important for defining both the entry and exit point in any reintegration efforts. Transitional reintegration should deal with transitional safety nets while providing for community needs as a positive process to lessening tension between beneficiaries and the local communities. Similarly, there should be a targeted framework of interventions to avoid the situation of neglected beneficiaries and, a follow-up mechanism to evaluate and appreciate new, emerging or persistent challenges faced. Closely connected with this is the definition of who a child soldier is.

The study, however, argued for an integrated notion of a child as provided in the Paris and Cape Town Principles. In addition, the study recommends that the child soldiers who have transitioned to adulthood while in the bush or shortly upon return should still be considered as FORMER children for purposes of benefiting from interventions targeted at this group.

The mental health effects of violence and social strife on the FCSs are not primarily due to discrete traumatic events but to more pervasive loss of meaning, order, relationships, community and the sense of a just social world. The salient concerns for survivors become less focused on the meaning of the past than on the realities of the present and possibilities for the future. Reintegration strategies should therefore be progressive and forward looking.

Healing and general reintegration starts from the families and communities. Therefore, family reunification should not be an instant but a ongoing conversation with a network which this study tentatively calls “Community and Family Reintegration Network” (COFRENET) with the object of continuous positive engagement for understanding and healing.

Specific Recommendations

Former Child Soldiers:

- Being primary and direct victims, FCS should play greater roles at all stages of program interventions.
- FCS should take full responsibility for all aspects of their healing and self-development.
- They should choose to interact with other members of the community to create opportunities for greater understanding.

Family and Community:

- Show love, sympathy and give support to FCS to fast track their community reintegration, and physical and psychological healing.
- Establish a community-based driven framework that enhances interaction between FCS and other youth and with other community members to help break barriers.
- Give formal recognition and support to 'collective healing' process that is already impacting on FCS.

Development Partners and DDR Experts:

- The FCS should be positively engaged to identify most suitable reintegration programs based on personal experience.
- Partners should transgress the attitude of "working for" and embrace "working with."
- Avoid labels such as, "FCS", "victims", since such terms deepen feelings of stigmatization.
- Design a dual reintegration strategy which focuses on the FCS and the community.
- Involve spiritual leaders in the African context for sustainability purposes.

Government of Uganda:

- Devise an effective and efficient communication strategy to beneficiaries and stakeholders.
- Put in place institutional measures that focus on the reintegration of FCS.
- Establish community and family reintegration networks.
- Restructure PRDP II, NUSAF II and NAADS to allow for greater attention and allocation of funds to take care of the physical and mental health needs of FCS.
- Remove the burden of guilt from FCS by formally apologizing to them for failure to protect them against abduction.

Researchers and Scholars:

- Conduct research on 'collective healing' approaches and their impact.
- Carry out studies on the impact of spiritual and cultural rituals on healing.

National Platform for Child Soldiers Prevention and Reintegration:

- Should act as a link and entry point for regional and international engagements addressing plight of child soldiers.
- Should play key national roles including developing a database of all FCS in the country and championing their cause through policy formulation advocacy and collective program interventions.

Acknowledgements

The Goldin Institute, Arigatou International, the African Council of Religious Leaders (ACRL) and the Global Network of Religions for Children (GNRC) had one clear mission from the outset; to establish a regional platform for child soldiers' reintegration and prevention in Uganda, South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Lessons learned from Goldin Institute's work on child soldiers in Colombia were to be effectively utilized in this process. Efforts were concentrated in the establishment of the Uganda National Platform in the first phase of the project.

Initial consultations with various stakeholders including the Inter-Religious Council of Uganda (IRCU), religious leaders, private sector, non-governmental organizations, the government, learning institutions and FCS (FCS) pointed to a need for more information on the needs of FCS whose voices and involvement seemed to have been minimal or lacking in the planning and designing of existing reintegration programmes. We therefore thank all those who participated in the initial consultations for laying the basis for this study.

The Goldin Institute and the Arigatou International generously supported this study by providing the funds required. The Founder of Goldin Institute Ms. Diane Goldin and the Executive Director Mr. Travis Rejman deserve a special mention for their guidance and persistence that kept this study on target. We equally thank Dr. Mustafa Y. Ali, the Secretary General of the GNRC (immediate former Secretary General of ACRL) for prioritizing and directing funds towards the study.

We are most grateful to IRCU under the leadership of Mr. Joshua Kitakule who provided much support to ensure that this process was concluded. Our gratitude goes to all ACRL and IRCU staff who contributed to the success of this study. Special mention goes to Mr. Godfrey Oontho of IRCU for his coordinating role and insightful contribution to the research work. We cannot forget the contribution of Mr. Fulgencio Kayiso for planning the study and reviewing the report. We also appreciate the great support provided by Joy Kemirembe and Jolly Opobo of IRCU and ARLPI respectively. We are deeply indebted to Mr. Daniel Komakech of Gulu University for his expert knowledge and technical leadership throughout the research process.

Deep appreciation goes to our research assistants, the majority of whom were victims of abductions by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). We salute them for their resolve to lead productive lives in spite of their chilling experiences in captivity. Their academic knowledge and skills proved invaluable to this study. They are our heroes and we honor them for being symbols of hope. We are grateful to all our respondents in Northern Uganda including local and religious leaders, government officials, civil society representatives and political leaders for their unreserved information sharing. We deeply thank the parents and child victims of abduction for their courage to share with us their experiences and aspirations.

It is our hope and desire that the findings and recommendations of this study shall find a place in the minds and hearts of those most responsible for ensuring that the affected children of Uganda who bore the brunt of the brutal war are supported to fulfill their God-intended mission in this life.

Thank you,
Dr. Dorcas Kiplagat
Project and Research Coordinator

SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

1.1 Introduction

Within the broader global appreciation that Former Child Soldiers (FCS) have to be reintegrated if peace is to be consolidated (Ginifer 2003:23), this research sought to understand the process of re-integration of FCS in post-war northern Uganda and examine the available expanded interventions to return FCS into normal community life. This examination was guided by UNICEF's three phase frames of "turning a child soldier back into a child", namely; disarmament and demobilization, physical and psychological rehabilitation and reintegration into their families and communities (Singer, 2005:188).

The purpose was to gain critical knowledge of the experiences of re-integration from FCS in northern Uganda in light of ongoing efforts established after the signing of the "Cessation of Hostilities Agreement" in Juba in 2006.

1.2 Contextual Background

By mid-2002, late 2007 and early 2008, the Juba Peace Talks between the Government of Uganda (GoU) and Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) of Joseph Kony, yielded some remarkable outcomes; namely, the signing of all five (5) agenda items: The Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (CHA) signed on 26th August 2006, The Comprehensive Solutions to the War Agreement signed on 2nd May 2007, The Accountability and Reconciliation Agreement signed on 29th June 2007, The Permanent Ceasefire Agreement signed on 23rd February 2008, and The Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration signed on 29th February 2008.

When LRA boycotted signing the Final Peace Agreement (FPA) in November 2008, Uganda Government launched the 'Operation Lightning Thunder' as a pressure mechanism to force LRA to sign. However, the operation largely had the negative effect of scattering LRA all over the region, particularly into the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Central African Republic (CAR).

In response to the LRA, Parliament leveraged agenda item III on Accountability and Reconciliation and created a national transitional justice framework known as the International Crimes Division (ICD) in the High Court of Uganda, which effectively domesticated the Rome Statute (Conciliation Resources, 2010:6). To implement the law, Parliament passed the ICC Act in 2010, which was later assented to by the President of the Republic of Uganda on 25th May 2010, and became law on 25th June 2010 (Uganda Gazette Notice Number 39 of 2010). The law paved the way for the creation of the ICD and other mechanisms to try perpetrators of war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Article 17 of the ICC provides that a case will be inadmissible before the ICC when the case is being investigated or prosecuted by a state, which has jurisdiction over it, or the state is unwilling or genuinely unable to carry out the investigation or prosecution. At the same time, the prosecutor has countervailing discretion under Article 53, clause 2(c) to consider that there is no sufficient basis for a prosecution because a prosecution is not in the interest of justice, taking into account all the circumstances, including the interests of victims (International Criminal Court, 2007). In brief, the Rome Statute allows a state to deal with war crimes provided it demonstrates the capability to do so through an internationally accepted mechanism — a mechanism that the ICC Act 2010 established.

In Hopwood (2011:6), we note that there is generally a skewed understanding by government, civil society and the international community about the transitional justice process for Northern Uganda. While their efforts are in line with agenda item III of the Juba Peace Agreement, there is a strong justification for further dialogue on “what-works-best” for effective reintegration of FCS if sustainable peace and reconciliation is to be achieved in northern Uganda.

Accordingly, agenda item V of the Juba Peace Agreement on Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) was signed specifically to address issues regarding child soldiers. Clause 2.1(a) of the agenda requires that all necessary actions are taken to achieve the overall purpose of the DDR process. Clause 2.7 provides for government’s commitment to implement a return and reintegration programme for children associated with the LRA that harnesses national and community ownership and adheres to relevant international standards, including the Paris Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups. Clause 2.9 provides for reintegration support that emphasizes educational and livelihood opportunities, with particular attention to the special needs of the girl-child. Clause 2.10, on the other hand, seeks to address the need for children to be reconciled with their families and communities.

Unfortunately, the agenda item does not seem to have been given close attention in terms of implementation compared to agenda item III. Instead, it seems it has simply been pegged to the Peace, Recovery and Development Plan (PRDP), and Northern Uganda Social Action Fund (NUSAF). However, in light of the current post-war transition, there is a strong necessity for DDR, with a particular emphasis on the re-integration of FCS if meaningful peace and reconciliation is to be attained. Given that over 70% of prisoners in both the juvenile crime unit and the government main prisons in Gulu District alone are FCS, incarcerated on charges of rape and assault (Akello, 2006:229), it typifies the former child soldier’s trigger challenges that breed violence or crime as survival or coping strategy. Moreover, the act of being charged for the crimes shows the community’s difficulty in accepting the innocence of a child who was forced to commit war crimes (Ibid).

1.3 The Problem

The transition from war to peace in northern Uganda has been framed within the expanded programmes of PRDP, and NUSAF without specific interventions targeting FCS¹. This is despite mention of the need for such interventions in agenda item III on Accountability and Reconciliation and the ICC Act 2010 meant to create mechanisms (legal and institutional) at national level to try perpetrators of war crimes and crimes against humanity in line with the Rome Statute of 1990. Furthermore, agenda item V that is specific to the DDR has hardly been operationalized in a comparative manner unlike agenda item III and, instead, pegged to the PRDP and NUSAF.

Consequently, with limited attention paid to DDR, the transition process of FCS from war to normal life has been largely ineffective. Little attempt has been made to involve FCS in the design of these programs or to document their experiences regarding ongoing reintegration efforts. The inadequacy of the programs available to FCS poses a significant barrier to sustainable peace and reconciliation in Northern Uganda. According to Thokozani and Meek (2003:23), based on experiences elsewhere, post-war peace can be sustained only when DDR takes a central position in the transition process. This served as the motivation for this research- to examine the efficacy of the DDR process as it relates to FCS and to explore and document the specific challenges faced by FCS as they participate in reintegration efforts.

1 Refer to the goal of the research, for more reading on NUSAF and PRDP.

1.4 Conceptual Framework

This research argues that the government's expanded empowerment provisions and interventions such as PRDP and NUSAF are general frameworks that many times do not address personal or individual experiences and needs of war survivors. The research also notes that government, civil society and non-governmental organizations need to give special attention to the unique experiences of individual FCS in order to sustain recovery and peace.

Consequently, agenda item V on DDR, particularly within the frame of FCS, needs a clear interplay between Disarmament, Demobilization and Re-integration reinforced together with institutional mechanisms that facilitate its normal operation similar to what had been done with agenda item III. It is this frame that will proactively restore hope, the broken relations and create a good condition for normal transition and reintegration of FCS.

FAC researchers argued that we should engage in unscripted conversations with the FCS, their families and communities to understand the challenges they face, and to establish actual and potential solutions to the challenges. Researchers utilized the school of thought which argues for the inclusion of local societies and indigenous knowledge for success and sustainability within peace building initiatives and re-integration. (Cubitt, 2010:32).

This approach stretches beyond the assumption that recovery and re-integration comes from generalized post-war development programmes such as NUSAF and PRDP. The study held that the third party intervention is unfortunate because it prevails over the former child soldier's discourse while replacing them with privileged architecture and mechanics of re-integration.

These arguments were guided by the following thematic areas:

- The voice space of FCS to share their experiences and challenges of abduction and escape from captivity.
- Community and family perception and attitude towards FCS.
- The gaps in the Juba Peace implementation of the Agenda item V on DDR, institutional mechanisms and current state of FCS in regard to DDR.
- Locally-generated and FCS' based frameworks for re-integration.

These thematic areas subsequently formed the outline of the presentation and discussion of the study and the recommendations based on the findings.

1.5 Purpose of the Study

The overall purpose of the research was to document and analyze the experiences and challenges of the FCS with regard to re-integration within the broad agenda item V on Disarmament, Demobilization and Re-integration (DDR) and specifically, their reintegration into the families and communities from the perspective of FCS.

1.6 Goal of the Research Study

The goal of the research was to raise awareness of the need for the government of Uganda, civil society and non-governmental organizations to move beyond DDR institutional mechanisms and begin to appreciate the indigenous capabilities of FCS with regard to their experiences and perspective on reintegration services.

The Government implemented a number of recovery programmes for Northern Uganda such as the Northern Uganda Reconstruction Programme (NURP) I² which operated from 1992 to 1998 and Northern Uganda Reconstruction Programme (NURP) II in 1995 whose approach changed from top-bottom to bottom-up. NURP II established NUSAF as a subsidiary fund³. However, the initiatives were riddled with numerous strategic challenges.

First, the Local Governments in the intended districts did not have a clear understanding of program implementation, which impeded their level of participation in the programmes in terms of planning, supervision and monitoring. Second, it was heavily institutionalized; the intended beneficiaries were left out, particularly in terms of projecting the strategic intervention areas and owning the process.

This was occasioned by the fact that there is normally very little effort directed to clarifying both the concepts and practice of the institutions and their operational mechanisms. As a result, the study defined clearly what it means to emphasize creation of institutional mechanisms for reintegration.

In clarifying the concept and practice of *institutions and the operational mechanisms*, the study provided an expanded definition that does not tie it to the domain of some static and rigid non-living thing. This was done to ensure that emphasis is placed on processes of change or a change system that can withstand the limitations of institutions to transform, holistically, the plight of the FCS.

This was particularly important in this study's context where institutions have become engines for personal wealth-creation through corrupt means. It is this critical frame upon which we assessed all the current initiatives.

1.7 Specific Objectives of the Research

- a. To give voice space to FCS to share their experiences and challenges of abduction and escape from captivity.
- b. To establish the community and family perception and attitude towards FCS.
- c. To identify gaps in the implementation of the Juba Peace agenda item V on DDR, the institutional mechanisms and the current state of FCS with regard to DDR.
- d. To distinguish between the locally generated and FCS' based frameworks for reintegration.

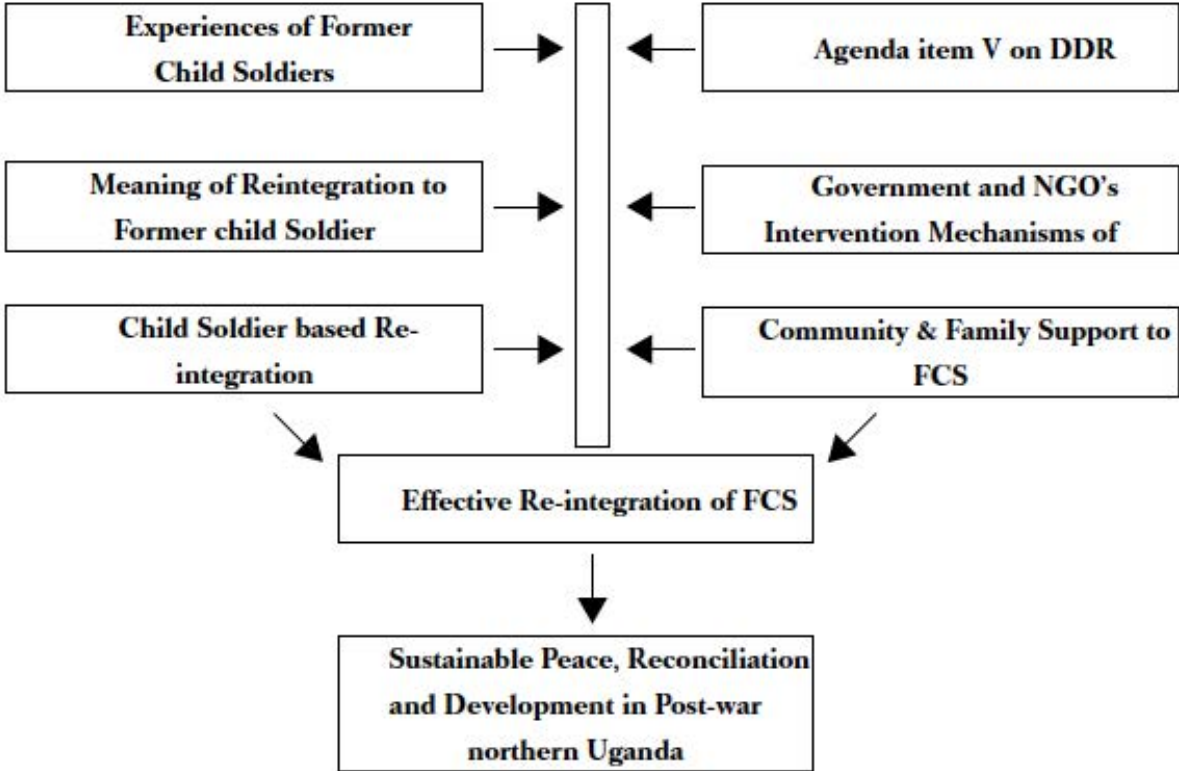
² NURP 1 had a budget of US dollars 600 million but only 93.3 million was spent. See, Refugee Law Project; Is the PRDP Politics as Usual? Beyond Juba, Briefing Note Number 2, December, 2008, p.2.

³ NUSAF 1 was a US dollars 100 Million IDA Credit from World Bank to GoU and became effective on February, 2003. See, Christopher Blattman (ed), et al, Impact Evaluation of the Northern Uganda Social Action Fund Youth Opportunities Project, Uganda. Results from the Baseline Individual and Group Surveys organized by Youth Opportunities Programme (YOP), 4 February 2009.

1.8 Conceptual Model

The conceptual model illustrated the arc of the experiences and challenges of the FCS with regard to reintegration within the broad agenda item V and, specifically, their re-integration into families and communities. It presented the notion that effective reintegration of FCS is crucial to achieving sustainable peace, reconciliation and development in post-war northern Uganda.

Figure 1.1: Conceptual Model



This conceptual model argues that a FCS' led or focused process results in effective reintegration for sustainable peace, post-war development and reconciliation in northern Uganda. To this end, experiences of countries such as DRC, Liberia, and Sierra Leone show that if not done well, former combatants can resume armed struggle, justifying their actions as a result of inattentiveness to their needs.

1.9 Scope of the Research

The content scope of this research was to document and analyze the experiences and challenges of FCS with regard to reintegration within the broader agenda item V under The Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (CHA) of 2006, and, specifically, their reintegration into families and communities. The research's geographic coverage was informed by this motivation. Consequently, it covered northern Uganda districts of Gulu, Amuru, Kitgum, Adjumani, Soroti and Lira. These districts were selected because they were the central areas during the LRA insurgency and registered the highest number of FCS in the history of armed conflict within the boundaries of Uganda.

SECTION 2: DISARMAMENT, DEMOBILIZATION AND REINTEGRATION

2.1 Concepts Defined

Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration are concepts that have evolved over time acquiring both theoretical and practical contextual meanings. Torjesen (2009:412) uses the United Nations (UN) frame to define disarmament as the collection, documentation, control and disposal of weapons and demobilization as the formal and controlled discharge of active combatants from armed forces or other armed groups. Similarly, Vertiere (2001:6) captures the main ideas in the UN definition and, so, defines disarmament as removal and accounting for weapons. To him, demobilization is the release or discharge of child soldiers, their reception and the initial assistance provided to them to return to their home, community or other place of settlement.

The Paris Principles (2007) defines Former Child Soldiers' (FCS) reintegration as, 'The process through which children transition into civil society, enter meaningful roles and identify as civilians who are accepted by their families and communities in a context of local and national reconciliation'.

Similarly, the Paris Principles emphasize that sustained reintegration is achieved when the political, legal, economic and social conditions needed for the children to maintain life, livelihood and dignity have been secured.

The United Nations Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards (UNDDRS 2006:20), looks at child reintegration as:

“... Family reunification, mobilization and enabling the child's existing care system, health care, schooling and / or vocational training, psycho-social support.”

UNICEF and the Inter-Agency Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Working Group, produced a guiding principles' code named, “Children and DDR”, which defines reintegration as a long-term process in which soldiers transition to civilian life, achieving a viable civilian role and identity. According to Lindsay (2009:7), reintegration is a social process of gaining acceptance, becoming functional in the social context and developing appropriate relations with families.

As a result, “Children and DDR” guiding principles gives five areas of focus: psycho-social support and care; community acceptance; education and livelihood; inclusive programming for all war-affected children and follow-up and monitoring.

Similarly, Lindsay (Ibid) cites the Psychosocial Working Group (2003) and Canadian International Development Agency (2005) which define psychosocial as social, cultural and psychosocial influences on wellbeing. The “Children and DDR” principles stipulates that psychosocial support should be offered instead of individual therapy so they are able to improve self-esteem and express their emotions. Community acceptance is established as community sensitization and community support.

Education is understood as a protection tool with the capacity of enhancing human security and livelihood. The argument for “inclusive programming for all affected children” is premised on the assumption that all children suffered during the war, not only child soldiers (UNICEF, 2004). Accordingly, “follow-up and monitoring” is regular visitation of families and communities concerned to find out how the process of reunification is proceeding.

2.2 Experiences of FCS

An understanding of the experiences, motivations, and needs of FCS (FCS) is a critical component as it lays a strong foundation for long lasting peace based on correct reintegration strategies. Williamson (2006) concluded in the case of Sierra Leone that the country’s future stability depended on whether the majority of youth would find access into the nexus of education, skills training and employment and that ensuring the access of FCS to these opportunities was a critical part of the reintegration phase of the country’s DDR process.

In the Uganda case, Angucia (2010) observed that a majority of the FCS were forcefully recruited and many escaped from the hands of LRA. She rightly equates their episode of escape to demobilization itself. Child Soldiers Global Report 2008 calls this “informal demobilization.” In retrospect, more focus and attention in northern Uganda should be on reintegration and less on disarmament and demobilization (DD).

2.2.1 Life in Captivity

Angucia (2010) carried out a study between 2006 and 2008 to determine social reintegration of Formerly Abducted Children in northern Uganda. The study involved a total of 255 respondents, of whom 97 were formerly Abducted Children. The study employed action research method to help clearly understand the victims’ past experiences and the extent to which their lives had normalized. Angucia (Ibid: 117) described life in captivity as one of constant fear and threat. She noted that this threat ran through ones entire life in captivity. The story of Denis, a former child soldier, perhaps is the best illustration of the situation:

In the merry month of December 1996, the villages were filled with flowers of gay to celebrate the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. This turned out to be a night to remember for the young boy Denis by then. He cried the night he was abducted just as a newly born child cries when it is born. Have you ever asked yourself why newly all born babies cry the first nights they are born. The child simply cries because it has sensed the problems that he is bound to face in the beautiful world. Denis lives with his uncle, aunt and grandmother in a village called Koch Goma which is about 15 km from Gulu Town. He was abducted sixteen years ago in 1996 at the age of 5 years from Layibi village in Gulu town where he lived with his uncle and grandmother. As a teenage child, Denis spent nine years in captivity before finally returning home in December 2005.

The day was long for the children that day because they had a lot of fun and games to play before the dark night God created for man to rest clocked. As usual, after a long day of games and fun, the children had to go to bed and rest. Denis being a child then went to his bed after his meal. His grandmother sung him a lullaby and he fell asleep. The people in that village believed that their ancestors always protected and alerted them either through a dream or in another way in case any bad omen was to befall them. But this time round, their ancestors kept silent and paid deaf ears to the people and failed to protect them.

The rebels came to the village at about 10:00 p.m. in the night, everyone around in their households were already asleep. Denis then was just a child and didn't even know what was happening although he only remembers that some group of people came to their home and entered their house and took him out of the house. They then carried him and told Denis that they will help his parents to take good care of him plus the other boys. The rebels had abducted ten young boys who were of his age from the neighborhood. On their journey to captivity, the rebels continued with abduction of young boys of his age, but because Denis was a very young child then, and he could neither remember nor trace the route they used to reach Sudan in order for him to find his way back home.

Being a young child, Denis was ignorant about the reasons behind the abduction. But later, as he spent more time in captivity, he got to interact with other soldiers in his group. He learnt that the rebels wanted young children with fresh, young brains that could easily be diverted for recruitment into the LRA. When Denis reached Sudan, the Commander, Tullu, who was the leader of the LRA group, Triangle, that abducted him, absorbed Denis to stay at his place simply because he was a young child and he basically took care of him as he was to grow up at his home.

While at the Commander's home, Denis's duty was to take care of his baby and play with his children then. But as he was growing up with a sense that he could then understand whatever was taking place around him, the Commander started by teaching Denis the different parts of the gun, and what it is used for. He would carry his commander's gun each time he was going somewhere and that was at the age of 6. When Denis reached about 7 years, the commander then made him his escort and he started training and teaching him how to use a gun. After a short time when Denis finished his training, he started going with his boss, the Commander, for operations, as a child soldier, in the villages.

Life in captivity was not easy says Denis. He describes it as cruel, harsh with very cold, sad and sleepless nights. There, you have to move in the bushes for more than forty nights and days without a proper place to rest, eat or take a bath. In his description of life in captivity, Denis had this to say, "honestly I don't remember the names of the different villages then, because I was young. And the reasons as to why we visited these villages was just to loot property like medicine, cloths and food stuff in order for us to survive". Denis's rebel group was called "Triangle" and the Commander was called Tullo.

In all these movements, Denis and his group would move to different places, and where they found food stuff like cassava in the garden, they uprooted them for food, then camped in that particular place and cooked or boiled the cassava for food. After their meals, they spent the night in that very place and the next day continued with their journey.

As Denis wandered in the wilderness in captivity, his first movement and operation was the time they went to Atiak and massacred people in their quest and hunt for survival.

[Live Story adopted from The Justice and Reconciliation Project (JRP) Community Documentation Department, Uganda.]

According to Angucia, the life-threatening situation made the victims feel extremely insecure causing them to exhibit emotional states of anxiety, trauma and victimhood. These, they extended to new abductees.

Peter Singer as cited in Tonheim (2010:65) illustrates the development of this state of mental being when he quotes a former child soldier he interviewed:

“... I was lying almost numb in ambush watching kids my age being shot at and killed. The sight of blood and crying of people in pain, triggered something inside me that I did not understand, but it made me pass the point of compassion for others...”

The instrument of fear and threat forces the children to commit themselves to the orders of the commanders, while at the same time, utilizing it as a survival strategy or to gain the confidence of the commanders. The abductees also undergo initiation rites that are spiritual in nature. This is what Angucia (Ibid: 119) described as psychological conditioning of the children into believing that they were under some kind of surveillance.

While all abducted children suffer high levels of torture, differential gender-based violence in captivity is evident, with the girl child suffering the most. Angucia (Ibid) captures this intense experience of the girl child soldier through the quote:

“...for instance, mothers carrying their babies on their backs will be running with a corpse on their back without ...noticing. You can only realize it when you want to breastfeed and, some could even remove their kids from the back without the head....”

While the study by Angucia utilized methods of data collection (interviews) similar to the current study and provided valuable data, a reasonably long period had elapsed resulting in a need for more current information on the status of reintegration of FCS. In addition, Angucia covered only three districts of Northern Uganda- a geographical scope which in our case would be too small to provide all the needed data and information adequate for generalization on a national scale, considering that the basis for our study was to inform the establishment and operationalization of a national platform for child soldiers' prevention and reintegration.

2.2.2 Post-Captivity Experiences

Continuation of victimhood and victimization according to Huyse (2009:24) has no expiry date, but rather what appears to have passed exists in innumerable guises, particularly, post-abduction traumatic conditions. These are manifested as flashbacks, nightmares, alienation, appropriation, dispossession, guilt and mental recounting of the past. Moreover, physical scars in the form of deformity, bullet wounds or bullets in the body and more critically, the question of “illegitimate” children born in captivity remain a constant reminder.

The victimization process includes rejection by either family and/or community members on the basis of disclosure of rape, pregnancy or having children considered as “rebel children” or, “children of hate” as in the Liberian and Sierra Leonean phrases respectively (Gislesen 2006:71).

Maeland (2012:13) conceived the negative perception and treatment of FCS as having connection to theoretical discourses of whether FCS should be appreciated as innocent victims, claiming non-agency and not responsible for the “crimes” they committed, or as guilty with agency and responsible for the “crimes” they committed.



Globally, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) argues that children are innocent and, therefore, with abdicated responsibility. The Cape Town Principles and Best Practices (1997) clearly establish the phenomenon of child soldiers as child vulnerability. This “vulnerability” image is reinforced by its emphasis on the plight of the girl child soldier, largely abducted for sexual purpose and for forced marriage. Similarly, the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (2002) outlawed involvement of children below 18 years in armed conflict, which was an increase from the age of 15 which was set in the 1949 Geneva Convention and the 1977 Additional Protocols, to 18 years. It is on this ground that the International Criminal Court (ICC) has criminalized the use of children below 15, in the armed forces.

To reinforce the view that children have non-agency, and are therefore not responsible, the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1539 (2004) and 1612 (2005) established a monitoring and reporting strategy on children and armed conflict. In the same year, it also established a working group on children and armed conflict. Similarly, in 2003, the European Union set a guideline on children and armed conflict as did the African Union Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.

Paris Principles (2007) define a child soldier as one “associated with an armed force and armed group.” This portrays a former child soldier not as vulnerable but an active agent and responsible. This discussion brings out the moral tension of agency and non-agency, engagement and disengagement, and the notion of victim – perpetrator as it relates to FCS. Additionally, Coulter (2010:91) observed in a different study that the conduct or behavior of the FCS was framed within the discourse of “taming” or “domesticating” their ‘bush-like’ behavior.

Supporting this perspective, Coulter (Ibid:92) cites Susan McKay’s statement about abducted girls in Sierra Leone and how they learned to survive in the bush by traditionally losing their ‘femininity’ and being ‘tough and aggressive’, or ‘wild.’ These perspectives seem to have support from even scholars. For instance there has been an assumption in the mainstream academia on the DDR process which suggests that threats, fear and violence experienced by FCS and ex-combatants, generally, reignite or force them to what Nussio (2011:579) calls, “re-engagement in violence.” Marques (Ibid: 12) had early on given a similar view to saying, “these children tend to use violent methods to get what they want, just as they learnt.” Such perceptions have tended to influence the direction taken in DDR.

2.3.1 Levels and Forms of Reintegration

Distinct from reintegration is reinsertion which is the immediate short-term focus, a mechanism that is distinct from longer term focus of sustainable reintegration which should lead to development. During reinsertion beneficiaries are linked to their communities and families and provided with a means to survive that can include food, clothes, shelter, medical services, short-term education, training, employment and tools (Stockholm Initiative on Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration-SIDDR 2006:6).

These activities are termed “transitional safety nets (TSN)” since they function to assist ex-combatants and FCS to survive and take care of themselves or their families as they re-adjust to the society’s productive life, (Ibid:6). The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers (2008:30) uses the term “transitional safety nets” to similarly mean returning child soldiers to viable alternatives better or good enough to make violence less attractive and to help them resume life in the community.

What is common to these two points of view is that both look at transitional safety nets as alternative incentives to violence. However, SIDDR (Ibid:27) adds another term to reinforce transitional safety nets, namely, “transitional reintegration” as opposed to “developmental reintegration”, with the object of defining a tipping point between transitional and developmental reintegration. It is crucial to identify both the exit point of transitional reintegration and the entry point to developmental reintegration.

2.3.2 Community and Indigenous Reintegration Frameworks

Community based reintegration finds support in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) which indicates that a child is to be supported in the community-based reintegration programs. The Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (2000) on the other hand puts emphasis on more inclusive eligibility criteria and less on weapons and the child. Both reiterate that children below the age of 13 lack agency of their own and are to be supported by their families and the community. Whether reintegration should focus on the FCS, the whole community or both is an ongoing debate. The SIDDR (Ibid: 32) recommends that the local communities also need the capability and functioning to receive FCS. This is considered a positive process for lessening tension between FCS and the communities they are in. In the same logic, one can imagine that the community may also complain if FCSs are left

unattended. This, calls for a dual intervention that targets FCS, but also assists or benefits the community.

Effective community reintegration puts family reunification at the centre. Borrowing from a model adapted by United States of America's Airmen, Civilians and Family Members Reintegration Guide in its five phases of reunion, we see how family reunification is complex and intricate.

Family reunification is not linear but circular with five phases. The first phase is the pre-entry phase as the initial luminal process of return characterized by a deep sense of excitement in the form of fantasies, plans, etc. The second phase is the reunion phase where the FCS has a happy moment of return and welcome characterized by exciting conversation and sharing stories of experiences and social events such as slaughtering of chicken, goats and feasting.

The third phase is the disruption phase, when excitement of return stops and in its place are the hard facts of seeable and unforeseeable challenges of pain, loss, unresolved questions and issues, economic hardships, relational problems and emergence of earlier on suppressed feelings. The fourth phase is the communication phase that necessitates the FCS, together with families and community members, to enter into a conversation or dialogue with a view of renegotiating their feelings, relations and readjust to the new challenges and realities. The last phase is the normalcy phase which is determined by the success of the communication phase. A successful communication phase brings with it, family re-connection, reconciliation and improved relationships.

Family reunification should not be instantaneous but rather a continuous conversation within a network, the objective of which is positive engagement for understanding, resolution and healing. This frame was successful in Sierra Leone when it established post-war family mediation and reconciliation around its traditional value of FAMBUL TOK (Family Talk).

2.3.3 Institutional Reintegration Frameworks and their Limitations

Whereas community based reintegration is a long-term complex process, the institutional model reflects a linear process of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration including family unification. Under this model the danger of 'Medicalizing' psychosocial problems exists. Rubenfeld (2005) proposes a process that links the individual to his environment as conceptualized in his analogy below:

“One can imagine a traumatized individual being a spider anchored in a complex and often invisible web. When looking at it, one sees the spider clearly and does not have to see the web at all. However, the spider does not exist and cannot live without the web. The web must not be overlooked. The web is the metaphor for the victim's context, for all those intra-psychic, interpersonal, and socio-political domains that define him/her. Since trauma does not take place in a vacuum or only in a head or brain of the victim, but in a 'real world' and in a society that surrounds him/her, treatment should not take place in a vacuum either, and must address

the often very complex array of factors that affect both origins of trauma and healing.

Without paying attention to these factors, psychiatric interventions are aggressive and haughty, they can be experienced as distant by the users, and users, our traumatized clients, will not admit professionals into the 'private world' of their psyche...humans are anchored in socio-cultural contexts that both give them ways to react and bind them, they are born and bred in relations, they are inevitable influenced and influencers."

It is on this basis that Kirmayer (1989:31) argued that disturbances of mood, post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD) and other maladies are not only clinical medical issues but also, social, family and community issues. Yet what is found largely in the institutional reintegration is a western psycho-social frame that prefers; rational over intuitive, analysis over synthesis, reductionism over holistic approach, linear over non-linear thinking, and quantity and domination in understanding and resolving the psycho-social problems while neglecting family and community conversation, cooperation, quality and partnership (Summer 1999: 47).

Stark (Ibid: 7) argues that in institutional reintegration, the object of "study" is an individual whose interwoven role of the family and communities is not appreciated because the western understanding of trauma and healing emphasizes diagnosing and treating symptoms in an individual without looking at the bigger picture of the problem. It is on this basis that Moodley and West (2005:32) highlight limitations of verbal therapies akin to these institutions, while rooting for an integration of traditional, culturally sensitive healing practices into counseling and psychotherapy.

2.3.4 Indigenous Collective Healing

To emphasize collective healing, Sliep (2009: 2) noted that healing is not an event but a process done with the support of many. This understanding propelled his organization – War Trauma Foundation, to start Narrative Theatre, where war victims could come together and have collective healing through resolving conflict, peace building and other related activities (Ibid:11).

2.3.5 Collective Healing Through Social Action

The approach developed Yvonne Sliep as described in *Collective Healing: A Social Action Approach, 2009. p.10* outlines different phases of collective healing. Phase I is a positive engagement with the community. Here, community engagement is a process or an attitude of group or collective resolution of a problem, conflict or violence. Phase 2 is a narrative theatre, an event of sharing experiences a common problem. The objective is to name and clarify the issue / problem and get to appreciate each other's experience while reaching common points for action.

Phase 3 is healing action whereby the collective narratives and experience is in itself therapeutic and also a strong point for advocacy. Phase 4 is healing reflection which is a continuation of collective advocacy and an assessment and evaluation of the healing process.

2.3.6 Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration in Northern Uganda

To begin with, the agenda item V of the Juba Peace Agreement on Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) was signed specifically with attention to issues regarding child soldiers.

The government of Uganda implemented the reintegration component of its DDR framework through the Amnesty Commission. Elements of its strategy included: the provision of Amnesty Certificates, money (about 270,000 Uganda shillings), bedding and some seeds and hoes to start life in the community. With these interventions, government was convinced that the FCS were, if not “fully”, at “least”, substantially reintegrated into their communities. The common indicator of reintegration used by government has been, “being home with families and communities.” The second indicator is the state of peacefulness and security built around the notion that there is no more fighting, no more systematic violence and LRA incursion, no more weapons in the hands of FCS and no more resurgence of insecurity or violence.

However, religious leaders in the North have faulted this frame of intervention through what they call, ‘a mind-set fixated around materiality’ whereby reintegration not only takes a limited, narrow and generalized form but also, is skewed towards basic needs provision which lacks in empowerment and transformative components. It is this particular concern that Archbishop Jonah Lwanga of the Orthodox Church faulted government on the general approach to the plight of FCS noting that government should have established specific interventions targeting this group, beyond simply material hand-outs. Reverend Father Julius of the Orthodox Church – Gulu, requested for urgent and specific interventions targeting this group (ACRL — RfP Report, 2012).

Similar sentiments were echoed by Sheik Musa Khalil who observed that there has been little reintegration attempts for the FCS by the government. Reverend Canon Joyce Nima argued that vocational training, now popularized as an intervention strategy, is not as good as prioritizing formal education. To support this perspective, she gave examples from Luwero and Mbarara where the government opened formal schools for the FCS and, as a result, the reintegration process was smoother.

Consequently, the need for an alternative intervention frame has been called for by the religious leaders, mediated by what in their views are the intervening variables. First is the issue of agency and non-agency of FCS. Monsignor John Kauta and Monsignor Francis Ndamira of the Catholic Secretariat in Kampala reiterated that FCS should not be held accountable for their actions noting, “The children went to the bush without clear understanding of the war and that nobody should treat them as criminals but as victims” (Ibid.). The second is the current plight of the FCS, which for many is deplorable. Third is the potential for recurrence of conflict given that the children are largely left on their own and roaming the streets - a situation described as ‘negative peace’ by Archbishop John Baptist Odama of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Gulu (ACRL — RfP, 2011). Lastly, is the issue of being haunted by the spirits of the dead, those killed by the FCS on the orders of the LRA commanders.

This haunting, according to FCS, manifests itself in different ways; flash backs, bad dreams, screaming, interrupted sleep, nightmares among others. In explaining this aspect before a Parliamentary Committee on Defense, Security and Legal Affairs that sat in Gulu (Ker Kwaro Acholi) in February, 2013, Bishop John Gakumba of the Anglican Church, Gulu, observed that there has been rampant suicide after the war and that in Gulu alone, Koro Sub-county

registered over 20 cases of suicide just within five months. As a result, under the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative, healing prayers in Koro were organized.

From the submission of the Bishop, what the religious leaders are emphatic about is the fact that effective reintegration should also combine the efforts of spiritual healing and cleansing of the FCS from the bad spirits (cen) of those they were forced to kill while in the bush. The object of this is to help cleanse and exorcise evil spirits from the former child soldier, his / her family and the community to avoid afflictions, illness, trauma and depression often associated with these spirits (Tim Allen 2008:31).

2.3.7 Collective Healing Among War Victims in Northern Uganda

It is instructive to point out that, there have been several structured or institutionalized manifestations of collective healing in northern Uganda evidenced by the establishment of groups of victims in a bid to collectively heal. For example, Atiak Massacre Survivors' Association in Amuru District established in 1996, Mucwini Massacre Widows and Widowers Group in Kitgum District established in 2002 and Lango War Claimants Association in Lira District established in 2008. The latter is currently demanding 1.4 trillion Uganda shillings from Government of Uganda. The court process to hear their case began in October 26, 2011 but the government of Uganda requested that the matter be settled out of court (JRP, 2012:6).

In Teso, Otingteba Women's Group was established in 2005 in Soroti District while the Mukura Memorial and Development Initiative was established in 2011 in Ngora District. In West Nile sub-region, the Metu War Victims Association was formed in 1999 to seek compensation from the government of Uganda over the destruction of property and lives by the LRA and West Nile Bank Front (WNBF) II. In the same region the West Nile Kony Rebel War Victims Association (WNKRWVA) was established in 2006 as an umbrella organization to bring together all war-victims in West Nile. JRP (2012:10) reports that the objective of this organization is to enable the West Nile war-victims to have a stronger position while approaching the government, instead of uncoordinated individual efforts.

SECTION 3: DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This section describes the research design, data collection instruments, study population, sample size, data presentation and analysis.

3.2 The Research Design

The research was an exploratory study based largely on qualitative data with an inductive approach. The study used an experience-based approach in order to access information on the experiences of abduction, return and reintegration process of Former Child Soldiers (FCS). Similarly, the study used an intervention-oriented method to access knowledge of the perspectives of FCS regarding current interventions and local resources for effective reintegration.

In observing the ethical considerations of carrying out research, the objective of the study was explained to the respondents. The names and identities of the respondents were kept confidential all through the research and writing process. Similarly, the research findings were shared with some of the respondents for authentication.

The study employed mostly FCS as its research assistants. Through them, the research was able to access certain meanings, contextual expressions and language cues which may have been unfamiliar to non-former child soldier research assistants. By utilizing FCS as research assistants, the study was able to foster community-ownership of the research, as well as build confidence between and among both the respondents and the interviewers. This participatory approach helped reduce the gap between the study itself and the respondents. Moreover, access to the FCS and their location was easily attained as the research assistants had a good knowledge of how to locate and access the respondents.

3.3 Tools of Data Collection

The primary data collection method was face-to-face interviews with the respondents, conducted between October and early November 2012. Interviews with FCS, their parents and their community leaders were all conducted within the respondents' homes. Although Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) had been planned, the practical aspects of gathering FCS in one place proved to be difficult. Thus, the research focused more on face-to-face interviews. However, FAC researchers were able to review and approve the analysis.

The interviews were conducted in local languages, which contributed to the cultural relativism of the study, further eliminating any gap between the study and its respondents.

Key elements of our data collection approach were:

- The interviewers were FAC. This helped minimize the power-dynamics that often skew data when using outside researchers. Further, this approach allowed us to shape the research goals and methodologies in ways that were authentic to the concerns, aspirations and realities of FAC.

- As members of this unique community, our FAC researchers were able to conduct the interviews in ways that were sensitive and comfortable for respondents. Of particular assistance was the way the FAC researchers could ask probing questions without crossing sensitive lines and respondents were able to share stories and perspectives that would have been impossible with outsiders.
- Finally, FAC researchers were experts in this field and knew which questions to ask that would elicit useful and meaningful responses.

3.4 Study Population

Respondents were categorized into two groups; primary respondents and secondary respondents. The primary respondents consisted solely of the FCS, while the secondary respondents included the parents of FCS, community leaders, district administration officers, representatives of non-governmental organizations and opinion leaders. Acting as our primary respondents, interviews with FCS were carried out with a standard interview guide, and their responses helped trigger the topics discussed in our subsequent in-depth interviews with secondary respondents.

The data collected from the primary respondents (FCS) guided both the subsequent selection of secondary respondents and preparation of their interview guides. Thus, the topics of the secondary respondent interviews were primarily based on the issues raised by the FCS that needed clarification. The aim of this procedure was to encourage discussion and debate to elicit a variety of opinions and expressions.

Similarly, ten additional interviews were conducted with opinion leaders, representatives of non-governmental organization and district officials in order to fully understand and synthesize the emerging issues. Such theoretical issues include double victimhood, personal security and government development programmes meant for the reintegration of communities in northern Uganda.

The study covered Adjumani, Amuru, Gulu, Kitgum, Lira and Soroti Districts. The specific parishes within the districts were

- Logoangwa and Mgbere in Adjumani,
- Lacor and Kal in Amuru,
- Tegwana and Kanyagoga in Gulu,
- Gang dyang, Pandwong and Mwol Bune in Kitgum,
- Barlonyo and Adwoa in Lira, and
- Apalayet in Soroti.

The interviewees were chosen based on a sampling procedure, with the primary respondents randomly sampled. The assumption held was that the primary respondents more or less had similar experiences so the interviews conducted were both adequate in number and evenly distributed across the sampled districts and parishes. The secondary respondents were purposively sampled. The assumption held was that the observations and issues raised by the primary respondents needed specialized responses that the chosen secondary respondents were in position to answer.

3.5 Sample Size

The sample population was drawn using the principles of participatory feedback, and primary respondent-centered ownership of the research. Consequently, in the sampled districts, two parishes per district were selected where face-to-face interviews were conducted. For each parish, a uniform number of respondents were selected, and consisted of: 15 (68%) FCS, 5 (23%) parents of FCS; 1 (4.5%) local (LC) leader; and 1 (4.5%) opinion leader. The locations were chosen based on their experiences in terms of LRA operation, impact and assumed number of FCS.

Table 3.1 Summary of Primary Respondents

District	Parish	FCS	Parents	Community Leaders	Opinion Leaders	Total
Amuru	Lacor	15	5	1	1	22
	Kal	15	5	1	1	22
	Subtotal	30	10	2	2	44
Adjumani	Logoangwa	15	5	1	1	22
	Mgbere	15	5	1	1	22
	Subtotal	30	10	2	2	44
Gulu	Kanyagoga	15	5	1	1	22
	Tegwana	15	5	1	1	22
	Subtotal	30	10	2	2	44
Kitgum	Gangdyang	15	5	1	1	22
	Alango	15	5	1	1	22
	Mwol Bune	15	5	1	1	22
	Subtotal	45	15	3	3	66
Lira	Orti	15	5	1	1	22
	Andwoa	15	5	1	1	22
	Subtotal	30	10	2	2	44
Soroti	Apalayet	15	5	1	1	22
	Subtotal	15	5	1	1	22
					TOTAL:	264

Secondary data complemented the primary data and, as stated earlier, the selection of interviewees was based on the issues raised by the primary respondents and the need for clarification of those issues. Consequently, the number of secondary respondents was not uniform in any of the districts involved in the study. As a result, the study has variation on the number of respondents per parish.

Additionally, in all districts, the following were interviewed: the Resident District Commissioner, the District Local Council Chairmen, Senior Community Development Officers / District Welfare Officers, a minimum of three non-governmental organizations, and at least one government institution such as the Amnesty Commission.

Table 3.2 Sample of Secondary Respondents

District	Type	Office	Total
Amuru	Government	District Speaker	1
		Community Development Officer	1
	Subtotal		2
Adjumani	Government	Local Council Five Chairman	1
		Community Development Officer	1
	NGOs	Justice and Peace Commission	1
	Subtotal		3
Gulu	Government	Local Council Five Chairman	1
		Local Council Five Speaker	1
	Religious	Anglican Bishop	1
		District Khadi	1
	NGOs	Orthodox Church Representative	1
		GUSCO Representative	1
		Justice and Peace Commission	1
		World Vision Representative	1
		AC Representative	1
	Subtotal		9
Kitgum	Government	RDC Representative	1
		Local Council Five Speaker	1
		Community Development Officer	1
	Religious	Retired Anglican Bishop	1
	NGOs	CPA Representative	1
		KICWA Representative	1
		World Vision Representative	1
	Subtotal		7
Lira	Government	Local Council Five Chairman	1
		Probation and Welfare Officer	1
	Religious	Anglican Priest	1
		Catholic Priest	1
	NGOs	FRC Representative	1
		CPA Representative	1
		Justice and Peace Commission	1
Subtotal		7	
Soroti	Government	RDC Representative	1
		Local Council Five Vice-President	1
		Senior Community Development Officer	1
	NGOs	AACAN Representative	1
		TIP Representative	1
		TEWOPE Representative	1
		Subtotal	
		Government Total:	14
		Religious Total:	6
		NGOs Total:	14
		GRAND TOTAL:	34

3.6 Presentation and Analysis of Data

The findings were coded and plotted around emerging themes that were uncovered during the interview process, namely: the notion and narratives of abduction (captivity), the process of return (escape), arrival at home, acceptance by the families and communities and the process of reintegration. Within the ambit of reintegration emerged issues of transitional reintegration and development reintegration, personal security, follow-up mechanisms, double (changing) victimhood, neglected beneficiary (non-targeted by government and non-governmental organizations interventions), collective healing and the perspectives of FCS regarding the overall reintegration process (local resources for reintegration).

In addition to analysis and interpretation, some narratives, experiences and responses were stated verbatim, in order to display an idea or issue strongly and specifically. Similarly, some experiences and expressions that were significantly imposing were elaborated within a box. There was a validation workshop to verify findings as well as foster community ownership of the study by involving respondents in all phases of the study's process. In the validation process, there was a plenary presentation and reactions and, thereafter, the study team closely scrutinized the report.

The limitations of the study are as follows:

- The study covered only six districts in northern Uganda, namely; Gulu, Lira, Soroti, Adjumani, Kitgum and Amuru. As such, it did not focus on the national phenomenon of FCS and various civil wars fought in Uganda and was limited to northern Uganda and the armed conflict involving the Lord's Resistance Army and the National Resistance Movement (NRM) Government.
- In Soroti, research could not be conducted in one of the parishes because one research assistant could not be accessed due to short notice and the short period of time for the process. As a result, the study was only done in Apalayet parish, Tubur sub-county.
- Another incongruence within the study emerged from Kitgum District, in which three parishes were covered in the study instead of the planned two. One of the two research assistants proved to be less competent in conducting interviews and so another parish was included in order to balance the findings. This incongruence may appear to be a weakness within the study, but given the study's attempt at community ownership and the focus on participatory process, this provided a learning experience for the above research assistant. With participatory research, such setbacks must be expected as we begin to break the divide between 'researcher' and 'researched'.

SECTION 4: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1 Daring the World: the Experiences and Challenges of FCS

In this section the demographic data and experiences of Former Child Soldiers (FCS) are elaborated. An attempt is made to understand the different levels of victimhood and, more importantly, the resilience of FCS.

4.2 Bio-Data of FCS

This section is an overview of the FCS as the primary respondents. It focuses on the statistical distribution of the respondents, ranging from the gender ratio and its significance, the distribution of the ages at the time of abduction, duration in captivity, the education level at the time of captivity and post-captivity (at the time of the study). The second focus is on the number of returning children who received psycho-social support and initial skilling at the reception centers, the number of those who returned as child mothers and the initial needs of all the FCS.

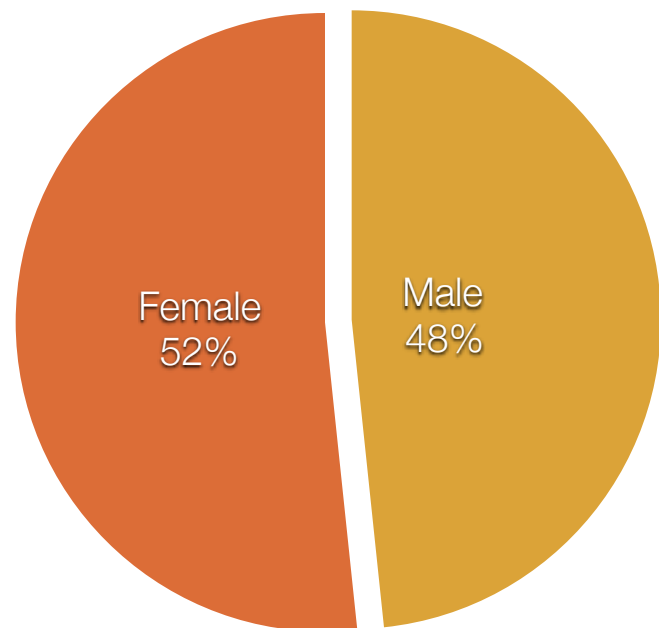
4.2.1 Gender Distribution of the Respondents

The gender distribution of the respondents was fairly well spread, with the males at 52% and females at 48%. Initially, the study planned to have an equal number of male and female respondents. However, a higher number of male child soldiers were willing to participate. This was neither by design nor omission but, as the study revealed, the females were more reserved.

Although reasons of fear or indifference could not be verified, explanations ranged from the fear of re-traumatization, identification and community reprisal or, a manifestation of inadequate or lack of psycho-social support. Similarly, although the data indicated that males were the majority, listening to their accounts and transposing them to those who were non-committal to talk, indicated that their experiences were not as deeply traumatizing as for those who were non-committal and could easily talk over it.

Consequently, the study discovered that there are a lot of FCS who are not comfortable opening up to share their experiences in captivity and, as such, need more time and confidence building to be able to do so.

Figure 4.1: Gender Distribution

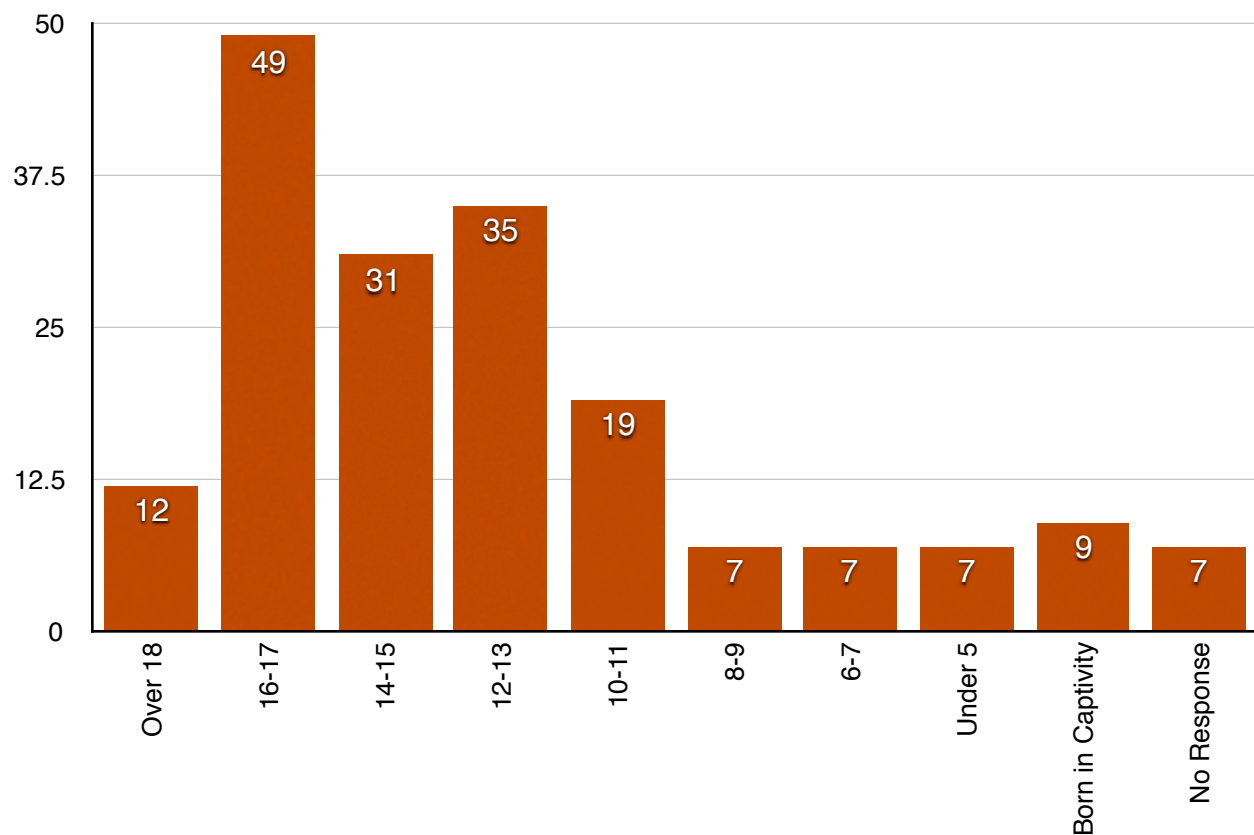


4.2.1.2 Age at Abduction

As can be observed in Figure 4.1, the children abducted were between 12 and 13, and 16 and 17 (19.4% and 27.0% respectively). However, the respondents between 15 and below accounted for the majority abducted (58.9%).

The data displays not only the numerical age of the FCS at the time of abduction, but more importantly, the violence level that abduction and captivity meted on the children. As such, their traumatic experiences reached the threshold of international war crime and the opportunity of childhood was lost.

Figure 4.2 Age at Abduction



Through the instrument of violence, fear and threat, the children developed destructive tendencies. They were completely brain washed, substantially removed from their family relations, community values, norms and traditions, and in its place, the LRA became the 'family'. Most of all, this complexity of experiences created a huge challenge to trauma healing, unlearning of the past and subsequent complete reintegration.

The range of experiences of FCS faults the uniform application of universal methods and tools of psycho-social support, without considering the above factors.

4.2.1.3 Educational Level at Abduction

As shown by the data in Figure 4.2, a majority of the children (85%) were of school going age at the time of abduction. Most of the children were abducted when they were between primary three and six, accounting for up to 52.2%, and resulting in disrupted education and high levels of vulnerability.

Figure 4.3 Education Level at Abduction

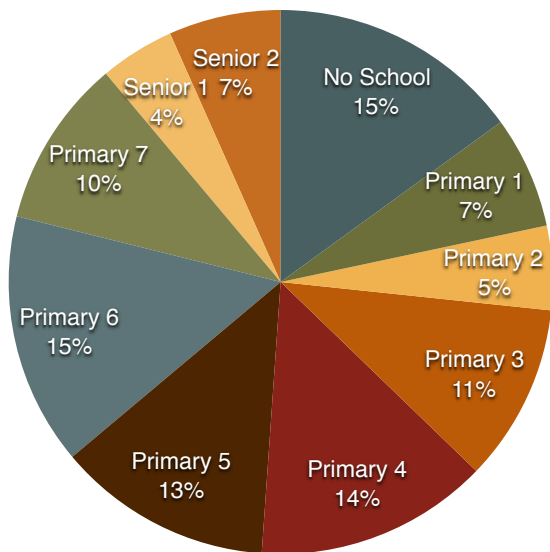
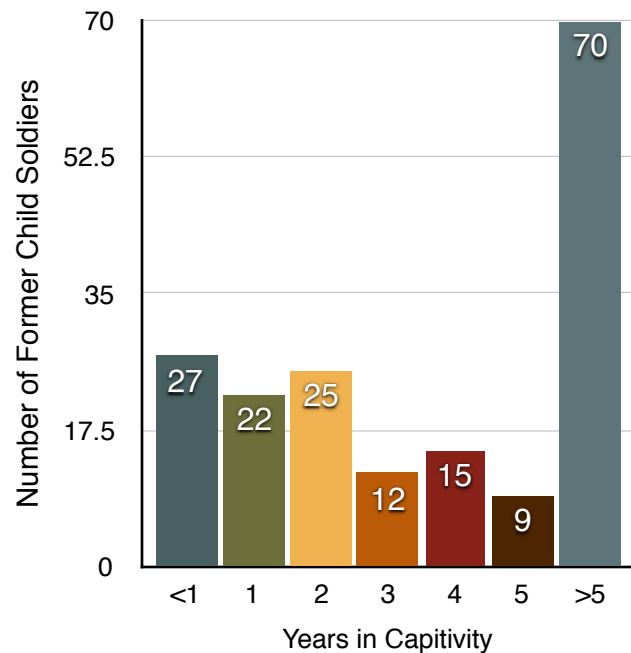


Figure 4.4 Duration in Captivity



4.2.1.4 Duration in Captivity

The majority of the respondents, 27 (15%) spent less than 1 year in captivity while those who spent 1 year were 22 (12%) in number. 25 (14%) said they spent 2 years in captivity while 21(12%) spent 3 years.

4.2.1.5 Return as Child Mothers

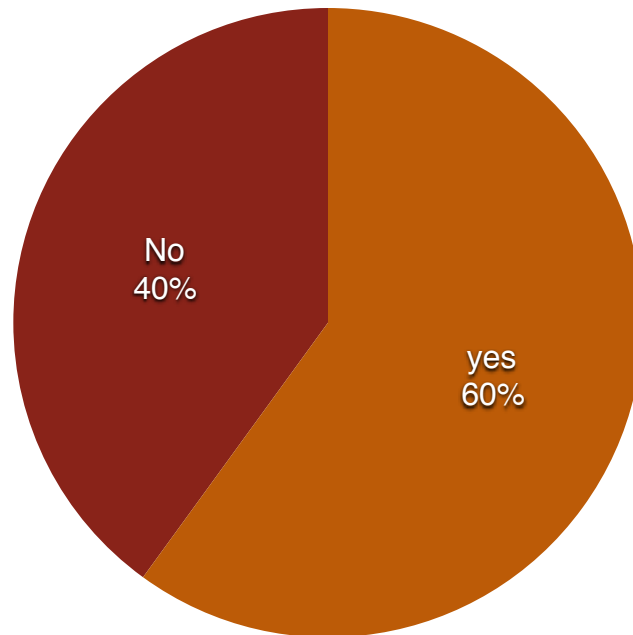
The data showed that, out of 87 female child soldiers abducted, 39 (21.7%) returned as child mothers, 16 (41%) of the child mothers had 2 children each, while 12 (30.8%) had one child each. 8 (20.5%) child mothers had an average of 3 children each while the smallest percentage was observed among child mothers with 4 children each (7.7% or 3 child mothers).

This situation helps one appreciate the plight of the female FCS, particularly with regard to family and community acceptance of her and the child (children), which is compounded by the challenge of ensuring provision of basic and other needs. Other than forced motherhood, returning with children is also an indication of defilement, sexual harassment, sexual slavery, all of which meet the threshold of international war crimes.

4.2.1.6 Reception Centre Attendance

As shown above, a majority of the FCS (60%) went through the reception centers, while 72 (40%) did not. Forty percent (40%) is a large portion that poses a significant challenge to the reintegration process. Reasons for bypassing the reception centers will be discussed later in this section.

Figure 4.5 Reception Centre Attendance



4.2.1.7 Parent Presence Upon Return

The data shows that 83 (46.1 %) of the FCS interviewed found both their parents alive while 97 (53.9%) found their parents dead. Specifically, 42 (23%) found that both parents were dead, while 32 (17.8% or 18%) found only their mothers alive and 23 (12.8% or 13%) found only their fathers alive. This means, a sizable number of the FCS returned as orphans, with a greater number losing their fathers.

When we inquired about the source of the death, the research study revealed that many of the parents were killed by LRA (54.6%), and a sizable portion (39.2%) by natural causes. A few were killed by the UPDF (6.2%).

This data points to the loss of primary hope, protection, support and identity, given the cultural significance of a family. Similarly, it helps one understand the level of guilt particularly among those who felt that they were directly or indirectly responsible for their deaths.

Figure 4.6 Parent Survival

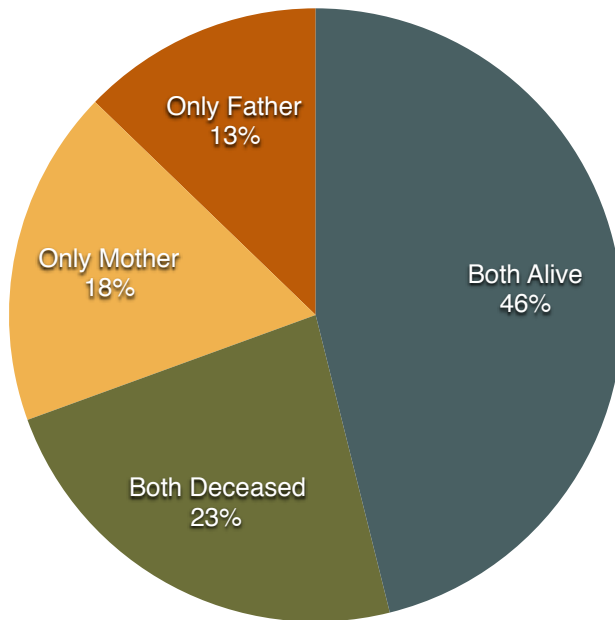
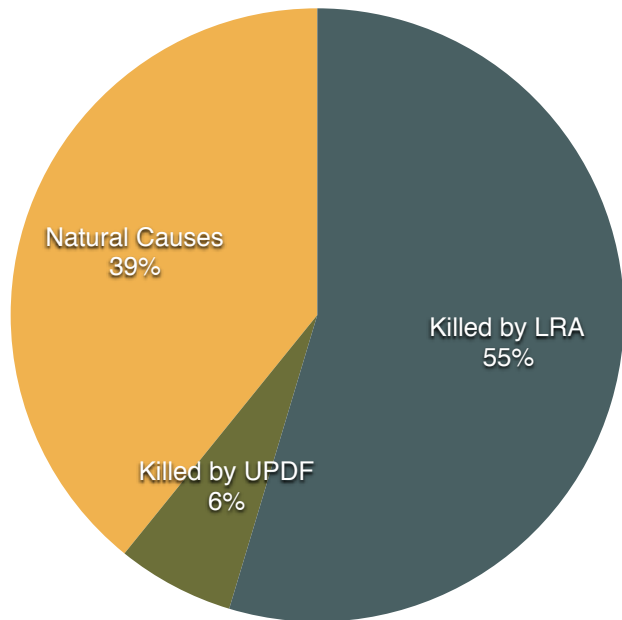


Figure 4.7 Parent Cause of Death



One needs to understand the “guilt” factor from the perspective that most LRA incursions in the villages caused many deaths. Abducted children of the villages often led raids and village burnings, resulting in feelings of responsibility for the violence.

Even in the case of natural deaths, many FCS suffered guilt as they felt that their activities forced people into camps and made medical services or palliative care difficult or impossible.

4.2.2 Narrative Experiences of FCS

This section highlights the little understanding of FCS’ experiences by responsible agencies which affects the level of advocacy and interventions available for their needs.

Consequently, this section is largely dedicated to establishing these stories, and in many situations reporting them verbatim, to draw on the original stock of experiences and challenges without diluting the flavor and context.

However, it was difficult to ascertain the overall number of children who were abducted and the number who had returned because the study did not get authentic information since all the districts under the study lacked records.

As a result, the study decided to exclude this information since the data would suffer from credibility test.

4.2.2.1 Life in Captivity

The choice of the stories and narratives provided by FCS were varied, giving the impression that each experience was weighed differently according to its specificity in terms of its threat level or unusual occurrence. The second probable answer is that the experience could easily be told, remembered or was deemed less offensive to oneself or community.

Nevertheless, the period and experiences in captivity creates intense and extensive memory and narratives so that the presentation in this report represents only a shortened caption of the inexhaustible stories and experiences. These experiences, as recounted by the FCS, ranged from long marches into the wild bush; forced killings of fellow abductees; combat, committing torture; witnessing fellow children being killed; and for the girl child abductees, all forms of sexual abuse, forced marriage and motherhood. One respondent described this instrument of fear and threat as follows:

“We were always gathered to witness the hacking of one of us to death for trying to escape.”

“Life became so complicated for her when she sustained some injuries from bullets on her foot. Giving birth at her age of 13 and with two children to run around with, one at the back and the other, in your arms, while carrying luggage, knowing fully well what will happen if you dropped the luggage, was a nightmare. On one occasion, an LRA commander seeing the slow pace in which she was running, forced her to push one of the children into a cave. She had no option but to do it.”

Former Child Soldier
Bar Dege Division, Gulu District

Similarly, as part of the induction, new abductees would be warned:

“If you try to escape, you will be killed immediately.”

A similar fate they were told, also awaited those who would lose a gun, uniform, food stuff, or those under whose command, abductees escaped. Disobeying orders also attracted a similar fate.

These experiences ensured that life was one of constant fear and threat concurring with the findings of Angucia (2010). This threat to live made the FCS extremely insecure. In establishing this, one respondent from Apalayet Parish, Tubur Sub-county, Soroti District had this to say:

“If you do not obey orders, you will be killed.”

In other words, one already in the state of dread, trauma and victimhood could now, for example, “hit a baby against a tree for dead” as one of the respondents recounted.

Building this fear and threat type, was the function of initial rites that were carried out. The rites ranged from training to negative images and labels about the government of Uganda, being smeared with shear butter oil and “sitting on dead bodies”, as recounted by a parent to a former child soldier in Kal Parish, Pabbo Sub county in Amuru District or “having sex with an old person.” One of the respondents, Jogole Christopher, Director of Freidis Rehabilitation Center-Lira, painfully narrated a story of a former girl child soldier who returned but with a very serious condition of fistula, pointing to gang rape incidences and severe sexual abuse.

Some of the initiation rites were spiritual; for example prayer, being taught the ‘Bible’ verses and the mystic personhood of the LRA head, Joseph Kony, being ‘baptized’ in the LRA spiritual rituals and, being introduced to the various LRA spiritual deities and their specific functions. The rites were meant to control the psyche and mind of the children and instill a sort of supernatural feeling that one was always being monitored. The above findings agreed with those of Angucia (Ibid).

Through the study, four scenes of captivity emerge; the first one being the experience related to distance and location. Whereas life in captivity was similar for all the FCS, the distance and location was a significant addition to the fear and threat factor. For example, the children who were abducted and taken to Sudan, suffered physical fatigue and exhaustion caused by the long distance they had to walk, thirst and starvation, threat of attack by wild animals, beatings, torture and rape. Many also alluded to constantly living in fear of being killed if they showed signs of weakness or complained of exhaustion. However, once one reached the Sudan destination, he/she was socialized in a sort of home-like life of captivity. Angucia (Ibid: 116) confirms what the FCS interviewed said:

“Sudan was like an army detach or barracks. Because you were free to cut trees and burn it for charcoal and we could take it to the centre for selling. And they could even buy clothes from there.”

Life in captivity in Sudan was relatively sedentary compared to that of FCS who stayed within Uganda and, specifically, northern Uganda. It entailed being constantly on the run, fatigued and in continuous pursuit by Uganda Peoples’ Defense Force (UPDF). One of the FCS in Logoangwa Parish in Dzaipi Sub-county, Adjumani District recounted how he was able to escape when, one day, they were ambushed and many in their group were killed by the UPDF.

The second scenario was the differential gender-based violence level in captivity. Whereas the boy child soldier went through a lot of threatening and traumatizing episodes as recounted above, the girl child soldier had a more intense episode of rape or gang rape, forced marriage and forced motherhood. Although all children in captivity suffered, the girl child was most affected.

“I spent two weeks in the bush after escaping from the bush. Eventually, I reached a village where the villager took me to the barracks. On that same day, the army (UPDF) transported me to Gulu on a military Tata to GUSCO.”

Former Child Soldier
Logoangwa, Dzaipi

Angucia (Ibid) captures this intense experience of the girl child soldier:

“For instance, mothers carrying their babies on their backs will be running with a corpse on their back without ...noticing. You can only realize it when you want to breastfeed and, some could even remove their kids from the back without the head.”

The fear and threat level the girl child underwent is illustrated by the story below of one respondent from Kanyagoga Parish, Bardege Division, Gulu District:

“I was abducted at the age of 14 in 1999 when I was in primary three and returned from captivity in 2006. While in captivity, I was forcefully given a husband when I was at the age of 15 and shortly, I gave birth to my first child.”

One can notice that the torture level of the girl child abductee is multifaceted; the episode of being forcefully given away to a stranger ‘husband’ at a very tender age of 15 years or below; being abused sexually, then getting pregnant and giving birth to a child. Although innocent, the baby becomes a constant reminder of the torture level the girl has gone through.

The third scene is the time spent in captivity. As revealed by the data, 95 children (53%) spent between 1 – 3 years, while 41 children (23%) spent between 4-6 years in captivity. These categories of children were more vulnerable and with very high threat and fear level than the rest. As a result, these were more traumatized and damaged physically, mentally and/or psychologically than their counterparts.

4.2.2.2 Episode of Escape

As explained, the constant threat to life and fear in captivity forced many children, against all odds, to escape and come home. We need to add here that escape attempt was never easy because many children, who tried to escape and were noticed or captured, were summarily killed -often by their own peers. This served as a tool for scaring those thinking about escape. As a result, many children who made foiled attempts to escape brutally perished in the hands of their captors.

Considering the severity of the punishment escape attracted once discovered or caught; the distance to be covered; the hostile wilderness; diseases and hunger, daring an escape was such a risky affair. The episode was a moment of courage, resolution and optimism about reaching home and being re-united with one’s family members. It is this ordeal that prompted a successful escape to be seen as a defining moment that was remembered in detail and with a sense of victory and triumph.

Explaining the escape episode, the FCS recounted the fact that opportunities for escape were presented in different ways, including combat engagements with the UPDF, subsequent defeat or overpowering of LRA and rescue of children or the children used the opportunity to escape. Also during military operations against civilians, some children used the opportunity to escape.

Others escaped during occasions to fetch water, collect firewood, look for foodstuff and in rare cases, were released by LRA under unclear circumstances.

Upon escape from captivity, those in Sudan were aided in various ways by the Sudanese, South Sudanese soldiers or the UPDF, to return home, while those within Uganda or northern Uganda were aided by the UPDF.

For those who did not come through any of the above, they walked until reaching a village or human settlement, and were then assisted by local leaders like Local Councilors, Religious Leaders or concerned community members. However, those who knew the geography and the bearing of the place, walked straight home.

This study, reveals that the trend of escape and return for FCS was both sporadic and structured. It was sporadic in the sense that many of the FCS who escaped walked straight to their homes and villages; and was structured in the sense that many passed through UPDF and were later taken to the reception centers, specifically:

- Gulu Save the Children Organization (GUSCO);
- World Vision in Gulu, Amuru, Lira, Soroti and Adjumani;
- Concerned Parents in Kitgum;
- Concerned Women Association in Kitgum and;
- Rachele Centre and AACAN.

Consequently, there is a need to understand the motivations and circumstances for walking straight home versus being taken to a reception center and the implications for both scenarios.

Significantly, 40% of returning FCS walked straight home without undergoing post-captivity counseling and training. FCS clarified the circumstances which allowed them to walk home. These included: geographical knowledge of their home locations; the capacity to reach home unaided; a strong urge to reach home; no immediate contact with UPDF; lack of knowledge or absence or very few reception centers, particularly in Soroti and Adjumani; and support from community members who either knew the family or the geography of the place.

Most importantly, once home, the joy of parents and close relatives and the subsequent reception ceremonies, made it difficult for parents to “send away” their child to reception centers.

We were attacked by UPDF and that is the time I got the chance of escaping. On the way, I took three weeks to reach to the place where there are people. Meanwhile as I struggle to reach at a village where people are, I was feeding on mangoes. Finally, I reached a village and the people took me to UPDF. The UPDF fed me, clothed me and took me to World Vision and Rachele Reception Centre in Lira.

Former Child Soldier
Logoangwa, Dzaipi

Expanding on the lack of knowledge and absence of reception centers, the Resident District Commissioner (RDC) of Soroti noted that the support mechanisms and interventions (reception centers) in Apalayet, Tubur Sub county and Soroti in general, were low and less vigorous compared to those in Acholi. This concern was also echoed in the Justice and Reconciliation Project Field Note XIV (2012:14), which carried a report indicating that most of the psychological needs of the formerly abducted persons were provided at World Vision, Gulu or GUSCO, and in Lira, the Rachele Reception Center (now a Senior Secondary School).

However, considering the experience the children went through in captivity, being home was the logical thing one would wish. But again, picking from the same logic of the 'experience in captivity', one needed a rehabilitative intervention to help him/her unlearn the experiences and be able to cope while gaining some intermediary skills and livelihood. It is this gap that could explain a response from one of the FCS from Kanyagoga, Layibi Division in Gulu, who never went through a reception center;

"I feel like I am yet in the bush and I also imagine my brothers and sisters are rebels and sometimes I am harsh or rude to them."

Similarly, a respondent from Gang-dyang Parish in Kitgum who went straight home after their group in the bush was attacked and dispersed expressed a similar condition in his narrative; "I really suffer from bad dreams and constant reminder in my mind as though it were a cinema." All in all, the children who went to the reception centers were largely occasioned interception and rescue by the UPDF or, brought to the UPDF by Sudanese or South Sudanese soldiers, and by local councilors or community leaders /members. A second category of children are those who upon escape and, on their own or with guidance from a community member, searched for a UPDF barracks or detach for assistance.

Either way, the UPDF was central to the escape and return of children from captivity. On being received, the UPDF would bring children to specific NGOs or reception centers. Due to the difficulty in securing an appointment with UPDF officers, it was not possible to ascertain the number of children who passed through the Barracks.

Appreciating this effort, a number of FCS narrated many positive things the UPDF did for them, including warm reception, provision of food and clothing, protection and transportation to their homes or reception centers. One of the respondents from Tegwana, Layibi Division in Gulu, confirmed this by saying; "It was the army that assisted me to get back home", while another respondent from Kal Parish, Pabbo Sub-county in Amuru District, expressed gratitude to the UPDF for treating her well. Most children in Orit Parish, Agweng Sub-county in Lira District expressed this opinion. However, some FCS were concerned that the UPDF mistreated them in various ways, ranging from being harassed, stigmatized and mocked for being LRA soldiers and wives and, in some cases, the girls claimed to have been sexually harassed. One of the respondents in Kal Parish insisted,

"The army did not treat me well because they were beating me, calling me rebel."

A female respondent from the same Parish had this to say;

"The army mistreated me seriously in terms of sexual abuses and calling me a rebel's wife."

4.2.2.3 Reception Centers

In an attempt to understand the organizational character of the reception centers and the activities related to post-conflict and post-return traumatic healing, the study found out that community-based organizations (CBOs) tried to creatively transgress the rigid frame of reception centers by introducing non-conventional ways of psycho-social support or counseling, reconciliation and skilling for livelihood. These indigenous modes of correction, reconciliation and forgiveness included use of wang'oo (bon fire) where proverbs and ododo (riddles) were told, traditional music, dance and cultural values like mato oput (stepping on an egg) and gomo tong (bending of spear). However, the international and national non-governmental organizations remained largely 'international' and operations of their centers standardized within the dominant global frame of psycho-social support, counseling and rehabilitation.

Consequently, the FCS who went through the reception centers had two separate processes with different learning experiences and feedback. Further inquiry revealed that those who went through community-based organizations tended to have a better outcome compared to those who went through international and national organizations. An interesting indicator is the narrative of those who went through community-based organizations and learned coping mechanisms, forgiveness and an appreciation of cultural values. Those who went through international and national non-governmental organizations, on the contrary, emphasized being given money, sewing machines, clothes, shoes, hoes and being "trained" in ways of unlearning the past in addition to being trained on how to deal with trauma and post-conflict traumatic situations. More research is still required to determine the actual number of children who received help and those who did not. However Susan Alal of World vision, Uganda put the approximate figure of those who passed through their centre at 14,000 while Robert of GUSCO put the number at 8,000.

Comparing the two approaches, one can notice not only the standardized operations of the international and national non-governmental organizations along international dominant frames but also the hierarchical nature and the emphasis on experts and expert knowledge. Community-based organizations were more relational, horizontal, and participatory and used mostly local resources (indigenous approaches). In making the comparison as to which mode was better, responses from the FCS were used as a guide. The narratives indicated the success of the methods used by the community-based organizations.

However, the study noted that both categories made fatal assumptions that violence, threat, fear levels and the general experiences of the FCS in captivity were uniform and mistook as similar experiences that needed similar treatment and post-captivity care. For example, it was assumed that all FCS were suffering from similar "sickness" and needed "similar medicine" and were to be treated similarly, and in metaphorical terms, with "panadol" and to take similar average period of 3 – 6 months in the reception centers. The reception centers failed to recognize that each former child soldier had unique experiences, hence different violence, threat and fear levels or intensity, with different psychological impact.

Another weakness in reception center service was to entrap the time scale of the violence, threat, fear levels and experiences in captivity as though it were a movie of finite duration. However, the study found out that the time scale or duration spent in the bush on average ranged between 2-5 years. The time factor is significant and directly correlates with the depth of the experiences that the FCS went through. The failure to appreciate this important factor implied that the reception centers were insensitive to the depth of the experiences of FCS.

4.3 Understanding the Different Levels of Victimhood and Resilience

This section discusses the perceptions and attitudes of the community versus the families, victimhood and pain, the problem of images of agency, perception of FCS by community members as 'wild and belonging to the bush', community attitude and stigmatization, re-militarization process and finally threat to personal security.

4.3.1 Community Versus Family Perceptions and Attitudes

In view of the fact that "perception" and "attitude" are not only difficult to determine but also complex, the study relied heavily on the following: the linguistic cues of the respondents – both the FCS, and community and family members; the nuanced meanings; and narratives on shame and despair.

This section seeks to show how the perception and attitude levels hindered meaningful reintegration and, at the same time, challenged the dominant discourses taken by both NGOs and government in the process of reintegration. The section also seeks to show that community and family perceptions, and attitudes are core issues that need to be dealt with if sustainable family reunification, trauma healing and reintegration are to be attained.

While all respondents report a sense of happiness now that they have returned from captivity, life still remains difficult as they continue to face many challenges. Upon return, many were informed that their parents had been killed. Of the 180 former child soldier respondents, 42 (23.3%) found both parents dead, while 32 (17.8) had only their mothers alive and 23 (12.8) had only their fathers. The majority of the reported cases of death of the parents were caused by LRA, natural causes (disease) and the UPDF, with the LRA accounting for 53 (54.6%), natural causes accounting for 38 (39.2%) and the UPDF at 6 (6.2%).

This compounded their levels of guilt upon return in that many felt, at least partly, that they were responsible for the deaths either by leading the LRA group into the village in one of their forced village raids or, the natural causes could have been induced by their conduct that made it difficult for the dead to access hospitals, medicines and other necessary medical care and support. This single episode caused further despair, distress, pain and deep sense of regret among the respondents.

The level of welcome and acceptance respondents experienced upon return was split, with a majority (87.2%) reporting acceptance at the family level and 12.8% saying they were not welcomed. However, from the narratives of the FCS, disparity in the nature of welcome by family members and community is noticeable. While family members were generally more receptive, community members were less receptive.

This disparity, as understood by respondents and explained to researchers, was based on the notion that their family members were their own kith and kin and could not abandon them, and that they particularly understood their victimization better, while the community members were distant to their experience of abduction, captivity, violence and the threat levels they underwent. But more importantly, some of the community members also had their children in captivity and the trigger factor of hate on them was occasioned by the fact that they had safely returned home while their own children were either still languishing in captivity or dead.

In view of the community's insensitivity to unsolicited experiences in captivity, the FCS painfully decried the state of open stigmatization by members of their larger community, which often manifested in different forms. For instance, many FCS experienced name calling, many were called; 'rebel child' or 'Kony.' A general feeling of animosity coming from individual members of the community also permeated FCS life after returning from captivity. The three local leaders interviewed in Kanyagoga had similar responses regarding the status of reintegration among the estimated 35-40 FCS in their village. They reported a general acceptance by the family members but, a lesser acceptance from the community members. They pointed out that stigmatization occurs, particularly among school children and youth who frequently tease and provoke the FCS using names like 'rebels' or 'killers.' The local leaders, however, reported that many of the FCS tended to be short-tempered, and such unpleasant 'jokes' often resulted in aggravated behavior.

Consequently, what emerged from this situation was not only a mixed level of acceptance but more profoundly, the continuation of victimhood and victimization within the community setting. The section that follows seeks to elaborate this form of victimhood with a view of expressing actual and potential violence, and threat levels in the communities where the FCS reside. The study also reflected on the responses and strategies employed by the FCS to accommodate, thwart or correct the situation.

4.3.2 Victimhood and Pain that Persists

As presented in the introduction, continuation of victimhood and victimization manifests in various ways. This section of the study seeks to dispel the idea that 'time heals all wounds' and, in the words of Huyse (2009:24), there is no expiry date for pain. What that means is that what appears to have passed does not fade completely and that victimhood and victimization lives on in innumerable guises, particularly, post-abduction traumatic conditions manifested as flashbacks, nightmares and mental recounting of the past, alienation, appropriation, dispossession and guilt. Added to these, there are physical scars in the form of deformity, bullet wounds or bullets in the body and more critically the question of "illegitimate" children born in captivity.

From the findings, most FCS received acknowledgement of victimhood from their parents but the larger community remained indifferent and, many times, blamed the FCS for their situation. As a result most of them have inner pain that has never been expressed because the community did not acknowledge the victimhood nor offer time and space to narrate their injuries, but instead, hurled insults and blame.

4.3.3 The Problem of Images of Agency

The study established that reasons for the negative treatment of the FCS in the community had roots in the notion of 'agency' or 'non-agency' – the question of whether they should be appreciated as innocent victims and not responsible for the "crimes" they committed while claiming non-agency or as guilty with agency and responsible for the "crimes" they committed. The latter is the perception, 'wild and belonging to the bush'.

Anek Josephine, the Project Officer of Concerned Parents Association, Kitgum District, gives testimony to the fact that part of the community in Northern Uganda view the FAC as bearing agency. She reports that a number of times she has heard, "wun aye oweko kwo wa obedo tekki" (you are the ones who made our lives difficult) - community perceptions that she feels must change.

While this theoretical discussion is appreciated, it is important to note that the FCSs in northern Uganda were not just enlisted or lured, but abducted into the rebellion and did what they did under force or threats. This point was elaborately put by a respondent from Logoangwa, Dzaipi in Adjumani:

“You would be told to kill someone and if you refused, you too would be killed.”

Consequently, these theoretical discussions on “agency” and “non-agency” are actually not applicable in the case of northern Uganda. The vulnerability of the FCS is demonstrated through the information on the ages in which children were abducted. Majority of the children abducted were between the ages of 13-17. However, the respondents between 15 years and below accounted for the majority abducted. These were children at a most vulnerable age; hence, agency could not be adduced.

4.3.3.2 ‘Wild and Belonging to the Bush’

Anek Josephine again observed that, FAC were most of the time seen as wild. “If you have a small disagreement, they can hack you to death” she lamented. This perception of FAC as wild led to negative labels by community members, so that, they were constantly reminded of it, with the females derogatively referred to as “bush wives” or “wives to Kony.”

The findings supported earlier findings by Coulter (2010) who observed that the perception created the need within the community to ‘tame’ and ‘domesticate’ their ‘bush-like’ behavior. This manifests itself in the words of a mother to one of the FCS in Apalayet, Tubur, in Soroti, when she remarked about her son;

“It was difficult from the start because he still had anger from the bush; rude, abrupt silence and does not like noise.”

In the same way, the local community leader – Local Council I in Adwoa Parish, Ogur, in Lira District remarked: “Some of them from the bush, misbehave, especially the boys and they tend to be aggressive.” It is the position of this study that communities need to appreciate that behaviors exhibited by FAC were not chosen conducts, but survival and coping strategies and hence need for understanding and support.

4.3.3.3 Community Attitude and Stigmatization

According to the findings, most communities have failed to understand that the FCS have no agency and are not wild, given the circumstances and experiences they went through. The community continues to blame and victimizes them, both overtly and covertly, through what is referred to in this study as ‘attitude and stigmatization.’

All the FCS interviewed pointed out that they were often stigmatized because the attitude of the community towards them was largely negative. Expression of negative attitudes and stigmatization were expressed in the form of name calling, labels, finger pointing, hurling of insults, and subtle complex forms like losing jobs, not getting gainful employment, losing marriage and being targeted politically as soon as it emerges that one was once a child soldier.

Political victimization may come in the form of failure to secure a job in a responsible position or being monitored by the military.

Confirming this phenomenon of negative attitude and stigmatization, Okot Ronald (LC I Chairman, Gang Dyang in Kitgum), remarked:

“Some community members are not happy with FCS because they think they are destructive.”

Obina Alenysio (LC I General Secretary for Children Affairs, Tegwana, in Gulu District) concurred with the comments of Mr. Okot. In their own words, the FCS were frustrated by the high level of stigmatization that makes them feel alienated, appropriated and dispossessed. Reinforcing this point, they said they were often referred to as “bush wives or bush girls”, “dwog cen paco (returnees)”, “evil spirits”, “dangerous”, among other labels.

While commenting on the problem of attitude and stigma, the Chairman Local Council Five (LC V) of Lira, Oremo Alot Alfred, introduced a new dimension to this challenge. He noted that even use of globally accepted and widely used terms such as “former child soldier”, “ex-combatant” etc contributed greatly to feelings of stigmatization. His sentiments were also echoed by Etonu Ben, Resident District Commissioner (RDC) of Soroti. Following this, the Vice Chairman LC V of Soroti District, Opado-Otija Simon, added:

“Whereas the traditional attitude and stigmatization process need to be elaborated as is always the case, we need to begin to understand and appreciate this new dimension which, although renders itself as implicit, is actually concretely manifest.”

As an outcome of this emphasis, the study sought to find out whether this “new dimension or form” is a typical scenario. Accordingly, a search through the reports revealed that it was one of the issues raised. For example, a respondent in Mwol Bwone Parish in Pajimo, Kitgum District had this question:

“Why are we called ‘FCS’ or dwog cen paco (returnees)? These words annoy us!”

In the same way, Amnesty Commission staff in Gulu confirmed this concern saying it actually became a big issue in one of their community dialogue forums with the ex-combatants in Pabbo protesting the use of these terms. It may be the reason why the Deputy RDC of Gulu reminded one researcher not to refer to formerly abducted children as child soldiers but as traumatized children.

4.3.3.4 Re-militarization Process

In December 2004, the Daily Monitor carried a story from Olara Otunnu (then United Nations Undersecretary for Children) that there was a recruitment drive of the ‘former rebels’ into UPDF’s newly established 105th Battalion. Earlier on, the Human Rights Watch report of 2003 had indicated that a number of FCS were being recruited in the UPDF.

When asked about this allegation, the Gulu 4th Division Spokesperson denied and asked all concerned to first verify information from the army before reporting in the media.

However, the study received unsolicited information from some FCS that actually, there were incidences of being forced, lured or accepted to join the UPDF. A former child soldier from Alango Parish in Kitgum District confirmed this allegation when he said:

“UPDF wanted to force me to join them but I refused and, after a long struggle to convince me, they grudgingly took me to the reception center.”

This similar pressure was also registered in Kal Parish in Amuru, Mwol-bune in Kitgum, Orit in Lira, Mgbere and Logoangwa in Adjumani.

“We mobilized FCS and ex-combatants and the intention was to put them as reserve force. Some said, if there is no other source of living, why they can’t be allowed to join UPDF and earn a living.

Office of the Resident Commissioner

What is interesting, is that other areas under study did not give this impression about the UPDF but instead, praised UPDF for good treatment and conduct. The researchers tried to get an explanation from the FCS but did not succeed since many did not have an idea. Consequently, they attributed it to distance and scrutiny, specifically, the further the parish from the political center of the district, the more likely the abuses by UPDF since no one would be watching closely. This seems to explain why the parishes mentioned above suffered UPDF abuses while others closer did not.

In confirming this act of the UPDF, a senior staff of one of the organizations in Kitgum added that the UPDF actually accepts the FCS, and, in her view, “UPDF thinks FCS are better equipped and battle-hardened and, therefore, useful.” Similarly, the RDC in one of the districts under study confirmed this adding:

“We mobilized FCS and ex-combatants and, the intention was to put them as a reserve force.”

When asked about the proportionality and acceptability of this given the violent militarization of the children by the LRA, we were reminded that:

“It was voluntary and that some FCS had no other source of livelihood yet they could earn a decent living in the UPDF.”

When asked why they were being forced or accepted into the UPDF, the FCS gave varying reasons; for example, the UPDF perceived them as battle-hardened thereby offering a fight against LRA. UPDF also assumed that FCS could easily locate key LRA hide outs or positions for eventual strikes by the UPDF since they had been in the LRA circles.

However, to the FCS, this is double victimization - the victimization by the LRA, and by the UPDF. To them, this second level of victimization comes along with double threat and fear in that refusal to join UPDF would mean increased insecurity from UPDF, likely reprisals, being spied on, followed or watched. On the other hand, if they accepted to join UPDF, they would again be exposed to recapture by LRA and the risk of getting killed in the process.

4.3.3.5 Threat to Personal Security

The sense of security was not assured for the FCS considering that on arrival from captivity many found themselves without parents, and their communities and families interned in the infamous internally displaced persons' camps (IDPs).

It is here that most of them came face-to-face with the startling poverty. This new reality was to them majorly their doing as a result of their rebellious activities. It is this state that FCS, using the phrases of Neto (2011:11), found themselves in, "locked in fear, living in a combination of pain and guilt, sadness, depression and isolation."

"School children and local community members have now isolated me because they keep on reminding me that I am Kony's child and I have to go back to the bush."

Former Child Soldier
Dzaipi, Adjumani

The study argued that it is largely within this frame that the perceived threat to personal security can be enumerated and understood. This perceived threat to security ranged from re-abduction by the LRA to the perception of being followed by the community members to be harmed or killed. Accordingly, most of the FCS remain scared that the LRA might come back and re-abduct them.

A respondent from Adwoa in Ogur Sub-county, Lira District had this to say:

"My fear is, I always think that LRA will follow me because I came with their gun and the people at home fear me because of that."

Similarly, a respondent from Apalayet added, "On hearing a dog bark or seeing a military uniform, I always feel afraid." He added:

"I was abducted when it was raining and so, when it is raining, I feel the LRA are again coming to abduct me."

The second dimension of the LRA factor is the community threat for having been associated with the LRA. A respondent from Mwol-bune retorted, "Some community members call me 'Vincent Otti' because I was guarding him."

While a respondent in Tegwana echoed this:

“I am not happy with the way people are treating me because they are always blaming me for some killing which was done by the LRA. They argue that I was the one who led them and yet, I did not. I fear that I may be killed by the people who are blaming me for that killing.”

Other than the LRA security threat, there is the threat of phobia. Some of the examples of phobia given by FCS include phobia for torch lights at night, a barking dog, fear of someone walking from behind because it is associated with being followed to be killed and a gripping fear as soon as one reaches or sees the physical places they were abducted from.

The findings also brought out another perspective of looking at a threat to security; one that touches on functional ability and capacity as a result of disability which have had ribbon-effect.

One of the respondents in Orit reinforced this picture when he lamented:

“Women are divorcing some of us because we are physically and functionally weak as a result of beatings, bullet wounds or bullets that are stuck in the body. This makes us sad, rejected and of little value.”

To another respondent in Gang-dyang, the physical weakness has not created the threat of being divorced but the threat of hunger and famine.

Closely related to physical inability is the health threat which, according to the study is not only rampant but severe. Emphasizing the state of the health of the FCS, Jogole Christopher described it as “pathetic, “worrying” and disappointing.”

He summed up the major health issues as being bullet wounds and fragments in the body, septic wounds, fistula and cardiac problems. He noted that various types of treatments were required, including corrective surgery, chemotherapy, physiotherapy, plastic and orthopedic treatment.

Describing the health problems, a respondent from Logoangwa stated:

“My health status is worrying because I was used in the bush by men who were already infected by HIV/AIDS.”

Another respondent from Alango lamented:

“My parent has only taken me for minor treatment but not for major check-up and medication, because she does not have money.”

4.3.4 Village to Town: The Continuous Displacement of the Female Former Child Soldier

The specific attention on the female former child soldier is not to be viewed as a “special” focus but rather, a case scenario, highlighting the extra level or double victimization that they faced and continue to face. The object of this identification and the subsequent narrative is to begin to build consensus on this double victimization and later on, see the practical challenges and solutions to their reintegration. This pernicious victimization process of the female FCS, reinforced violence, threat and fear substantially reduced their physical and emotional space to experience compassion and as a result, inhibited the normal reintegration process.

The victimization process includes rejection by either family, community members or both on the basis of disclosure of rape, pregnancy or having children considered as LRA ‘bastards’ or in the Liberian and Sierra Leonean phrase, as elucidated by Gislesen (2006:71), “rebel children” or, “children of hate.” When asked why such misfortunes like rape attracted rejection, the respondents said, these experiences were considered shameful to the family and the community at large and meant not being able to marry anymore - adding to the “shame” level in the family and the community.

One of the respondents interviewed in Orit in Agweng Sub-county in Lira District decried the constant abuse from the community where she is always referred to as ‘Kony’s wife’, while in Kanyagoga in Bardege Division in Gulu, a respondent mentioned how her own aunt continuously tormented her saying:

“I wish you had died in the bush with all your children.”

Similarly, in Apalayet, Soroti District, a respondent spoke of how she had to constantly endure questions from her son who wanted to know who his father is. She said, “His friends abuse him that he is a bastard.” According to her, she has no answer to offer him because he was conceived after she was raped by an LRA soldier she never knew and has not met since the rape ordeal.

A respondent in Tegwana in Layibi Division, Gulu District remarked:

“If given an opportunity, I would like to get land so that I settle in it with my children because I have been rejected by my people.”

One of the respondents narrated her ordeal, linking various types and levels of victimhood she underwent:

“I found both my parents dead and, although I was at first warmly received by the family members, they chased me afterwards, calling me ‘bush wife with evil spirits’ and, my two children, ‘bastards’ ‘without a father and without a future.’”

Consequently, I left home and came to Kanyagoga, a suburb of Gulu town where I began to rent a grass thatched house at fifteen thousand shillings (US\$15,000). Given the hardship of staying alone with the two children, without a husband to provide for them, I was forced to enter into a relationship with a man whom I later on learnt was HIV positive and died shortly.

Right now I have HIV, my landlord wants rent that has accumulated for three months, my children want food and not even school fees because they do not go to school and, myself, I am weak without relatives by me and, most of all, if I die tomorrow, where will my children go? I came and found my parents dead. But my relatives did not treat me well.

At one point, they broke into my house and took everything that was given by GUSCO. I had no choice but to leave the village and come to Gulu town. However, the relatives followed me in town and on one fateful night, burnt down my rented grass thatched house. When I reported the matter to LC I, I was not helped.

When I went to a government office that I thought would help me since they initially helped me go home, I was told by an official; "How many times do you want to be forgiven." Amnesty Commission: here I am. Is this what I came to be? I wish I had not come back from the bush."

These accounts are not simply emotional expressions but indications of an agonizing situation which most female FCS experience. Confirming this situation, the Chairman Local Council V of Gulu District – Ojara Mapenduzi, lamented the large number of former female child soldiers who left the villages and relocated to town but have since been under significant burden of disillusionment. He gave the example of a middle aged female who went to his office, and desperately requested money to buy food and pay several months of house rent arrears.

In his view:

"Quite a number of the ladies have ended up in prostitution, being exposed to HIV/ AIDS and other related diseases, sexual abuse, physical harm and psychological breakdown."

Similarly, the study found out that some of the girls were given some basic training in catering and tailoring, but because it was not professional and their expertise was relatively low they have ended up accepting meager pay in their various humble workplaces. The majority work in make-shift food joints as food vendors, while the tailors often line up on the verandah of an understanding shopkeeper, waiting for hard-to-find customers.

Some are in the market, selling basic items like tomatoes, small fish (traditionally called, *lacede*), okra, sugar cane and other groceries but with profit that cannot sustain their livelihoods. The majority are nannies or domestic workers who work in constant fear of being discovered as having been abducted by the LRA – something that would immediately jeopardize their jobs.

In concluding this section, we want to highlight the observation made by Calvin Opio, the Manager of World Vision – Kitgum. He wondered aloud, “If life is really ‘normal’ for female FCS, why are they constantly defiled and infected with HIV/ AIDS and other infections”? The study tried to answer these important questions, arguing that the cross cutting reasons were predisposition to rejection, threats and denial and a lack of access to sources of livelihoods, such as land. This victimization process has in turn, exposed them to desperation and risk factors, including defilement, prostitution, infections and psychological and mental break down.



4.3.5 Resilience and Persistence of FCS

Besides individual search for protection, the study established that there was also group protection which entails counseling, talking and staying together, knowing each other's location or place, all of which provides a sense of comfort. The usage of the phrase "they", although unspecified, was common in the conversations of the FCS and is used to point to the source of threats and violence, commonly the family members and the community. Another important characteristic of FAC of Northern Uganda involves their reaction when faced with challenges.

Through the study it was found that they have tended to use peaceful means of resilience and persistence as resolutions; for example, relocating to towns or resorting to group protection. The aspect of group protection seemed to border on what Nussio (2011) described as 'group protection as consequential strategies.' This behavior is also similar to 'collective healing' described by Bar-Tal,(2007) as a group mobilization effort aimed at shifting one from the state of rejection, deprivation, threats and violence, with an aspiration and expectation of a positive goal accompanied by positive feelings and positive anticipated outcomes.

The findings of this study contradicted common belief in the academic findings on the DDR process which suggest that threats, fear and violence experienced by FCS and ex-combatants, generally, reignite or force them to re-engage in violence or use violent methods to get their way.

The subsequent discussion is to expound on the idea of collective healing and personal security as recurrent exemplification of the modes of resilience and persistence. However, we add here that the idea of security and healing is not going to be discussed within the dominant and conventional frame but within the narratives based on the experiences of the FCS.

4.3.5.1 Collective Healing

The study notes that collective healing traits or activities among FCS in northern Uganda and, particularly, in the villages were less complex and casually framed. It can be said, without much controversy, that the process of collective healing in northern Uganda, is in a large part unconscious because it is not studiously built or encouraged but rather maintained in the function of basic provisions (needs), identity, passing time, hair dressing, playing and other needs. However, in all these, the study found that the process was indeed playing a vital role in causing healing and, as such, significantly important to detail it.

What came out clearly was that the majority knew the location of fellow FCS, suggesting that they had regular visits. There has been a strong network of taking care of each other's challenges mostly, by advising or counseling the affected. This was revealed through the testimony of a respondent in Kal who reflected on working with community members:

"My friends (FCS) have been giving me some advice but they do not advise the people disturbing me."

This raises an interesting question: Why do they not advise the community as well? Likely answers are: the community may be too big for them, low self-esteem, lack of techniques and inadequate capacity, and the possibly that their overriding desire is to help each other as FCS.

In addition, the study found that they have resorted to marrying each other on the basis that each knows and understands the other, given the shared experiences. Although it is not always the case, in many instances, they move together while carrying out daily chores such as going to fetch water, collecting firewood, going to the village markets or running their small businesses of tailoring in the same location within the village market.

It is also interesting to note that, for the females in the village market and with their children, each would be concerned about the other's child as the rest of the community is going about their business.

For those in the urban centers, the study noted that the collective healing traits or activities were quite different from those in the villages and were more assertive and conscious. It involved the following: renting houses or shops in close vicinity with each other, selling or working either together or close to each other, walking together after work, visiting each other, borrowing money amongst themselves and confiding in each other.

Speaking to Milly of Empowering Hands (a community-based organization in Gulu Town working with and for female FCS), she was able to confirm these aspects and, particularly, added:

"We encourage the ladies to counsel each other, advocate for themselves and also have some level of economic empowerment through micro-finance system locally called boli cup."

What is strange in the urban setting is how the FCS are able to locate each other and what mechanism they use to identify each other, given the busy and more dispersed setting of the urban centers. However, when asked about the mechanism used, nearly all of them were hesitant and they would simply retort back, "I can tell", "I know" or, "why are you asking? Reading the moods, it was not wise to insist and, unfortunately, no concrete answer was ascertained.

This collective healing has had a significant positive impact, particularly healing from lack of identity - one that comes from the knowledge that you are not alone. A group framework is reassuring and a source of security and protection to FCS. The strategy of identifying with each other and talking with each other is a form of therapy like the "narrative theatre" and is vital to the healing process.

4.4 DDR, Institutional Mechanisms and Current State of Reintegration of FCS

This part sought to deal specifically with the conceptual and theoretical notion of reintegration from the point of view of the FCS in northern Uganda. This meta-narrative or reflexive thought is a combination of the institutional notion of reintegration, particularly from the point of view of the United Nations and its associated family agencies, the NGOs based in northern Uganda and the Government of Uganda. These discussions began by showing the continuous internal displacement of the FCS and their various requests, indicating that their version of reintegration is actually different. The objective of this chapter is to clarify on the term 'reintegration' and look for a locally-based and former child soldier-centered notion on reintegration.

4.4.1 Reinsertion Versus Reintegration

This section is a recap and a presentation of the experiences upon return. The objective of the section is to dissect our taken-for-granted notion of reintegration and, at the same time, show that what had happened was simply reinsertion. This discussion is not necessarily to trivialize the efforts of government and development partners, but to help begin to expand our horizon on the traits of reintegration.

Regarding the effectiveness of government interventions, the majority of the respondents expressed that while they had heard of government interventions, they had not received any benefits from such programs. Respondents seemed disillusioned with interventions by both government and non-governmental organizations which did not target them, despite donor intent for these services. Further, while many reported being registered numerous times by non-governmental organizations and government programs, they had not received any support, or even a simple follow-up. A former child soldier, from Apalayet in Tubur Sub-county, Soroti, asserted:

"The government and NGOs should stop registering our names for fun as if we are fools."

It is clear from the responses of FCS that current interventions are not adequately meeting the needs of the beneficiaries, and that an existing disconnect between the beneficiaries and the programs inhibits any meaningful change in their lives. In all the parishes visited, the FCS, their parents and the local leaders reported that no group was currently targeting or even helping the FCS in their community.

It is also important to indicate that although the study took note of the common problem of lack of interventions in all the parishes, some disparities existed within these locations. For example, with approximately 90 FCS, it seems as though government and NGO interventions have been more successful in Pukure in Amuru District than in Kanyagoga, and Tegwana in Gulu, and Adwoa in Lira. However, the situation in Mgbere and Logoangwa in Adjumani and Apalayet in Soroti seems to be the most dire, as support seems to be non-existent. It was also found that these last three parishes recorded the smallest number of FCS who went through reception centers which corresponded with the highest rates of trauma, medical needs and elevated poverty levels.

In general, victimization of FCS continues as indicated by name calling, negative attitudes from members of the community and finger pointing whenever crimes in the community are committed. The majority are shifting from the village to urban centers only to be confronted with continuous internal displacement. Effectively, what this points to is both the implicit and explicit failure of NGOs and the government whose interventions may have been predominantly reinsertion. This calls for a shift to more progressive reintegration strategies.

The section that follows takes a critical look at the interventions of both NGOs and the government, and attempts to determine whether actual reintegration took place or if it was merely reinsertion. The discussion starts by looking at the general assumptions and interventions by NGOs and the government. The section is a critical evaluation, based on the voices of FAC, of the intersection between the process of reintegration in Northern Uganda and DDR policy instruments and common global practices. To do this, various respondents were selected per district under the area of study, specifically one NGO, the RDC, Local Council Five, Probation and Social Welfare Officers, Community Development Officers and Amnesty Commission representatives in Gulu.

4.4.2.1 Non-Governmental Organizations' Intervention Modes

All interviewed representatives of NGOs confirmed some common and basic intervention activities provided to the FCSs with the aim of assisting their 'reintegration'. These interventions were commonly psycho-social support and counseling, vocational skills such as tailoring, bakery, catering, fabrics and designing, carpentry and joinery, motor vehicle mechanics and provision of basic requirements such as seeds, hoes, blankets, mattresses and other necessities. These were the skills and provisions that were supposedly meant to help FCSs reintegrate normally, the most common being vocational skills, provision of basic requirements and family tracing.

For example, Ocitti Denis of GUSCO enumerated the skills and provisions given to over 3000 FCS who stayed at GUSCO reception center for about 3-6 months, ranging from psycho-social support through counseling and peer-to-peer support, vocational training in carpentry and joinery, motor vehicle and tailoring, to provision of hoes, seeds, tool boxes and some money to go home and start life. In the same spirit, Arwai Christopher, Manager - Kitgum Concerned Women's Association (KICWA) confirmed assisting about 4300 FCS with vocational training, psycho-social support, recreation, treatment, raising awareness about HIV/AIDS, beddings and some little transport money to go home after 3- 6 months in the reception center.

In Lira, the Director of Freidis Rehabilitation Center, Jogole Christopher confirmed intervening much more on health issues, carrying out follow-ups on over 500 FCS with some funding from the International Criminal Court Victims Trust Fund through CARE International. Freidis Rehabilitation Center has been able to provide chemotherapy; pre- and post-operative nursing and care; screening for referral to their partner hospital – CORSU in Kisubi, along Entebbe-Kampala highway, for major corrective surgery; and has been able to provide orthopedic treatments.

In Soroti, George William Okwabut working with Action Against Child Abuse and Neglect (AACAN) reported that their major interventions have been HIV/AIDS voluntary testing, counseling and treatment; psycho-social support; family tracing; vocational training in the areas of tailoring, catering, carpentry and joinery; and helping FCSs who ended up on the streets of Soroti because of the difficulty of life after captivity. In their view, their center has been the largest in Teso, assisting over 5000 Uganda People's Army (UPA) and LRA's FCS. By and large, these modes of interventions were viewed as core traits of reintegration for the FCSs. These activities were elaborated with a lot of enthusiasm and optimism, which pointed to some level of satisfaction on the part of the NGOs.

4.4.2.2 Government's Intervention Modes

“Government has fully resettled the former child soldiers and now they are peacefully at home.” — **RDC Officer, Kitgum**

As phrased above, government is confident that the FCSs are, if not “fully”, at “least”, substantially reintegrated into their communities. One of the determining indicators is “being home with their families and communities”. The components of reintegration strategy under the Amnesty Commission include the following: issuance of an Amnesty Certificate, some money (about USH 270,000), beddings, and some seeds and hoes to start life in the community.

In Kitgum, Baluk Dominic⁴ reported that with the help of Kitgum Concerned Women's Association (KICWA), they were able to support the FCSs with non-food items and livelihood support like oxen and ox-ploughs, these interventions were also confirmed by Apollo Jessi Dokolinga⁵.

The second indicator is the state of peacefulness and security built around the notion that there is no more fighting, systematic violence and LRA incursion, no more weapons in the hands of FCSs and nothing akin to resurgence of insecurity or violence. The government views the process of FCS reintegration as simple and straightforward, resulting in their confidence in substantial reintegration.

In Lira, Okello Tom Richard⁶ conceded that as an office, they did not have a targeted reintegration program for the FCSs and a lack of funds hindered its establishment. However, he expressed gratitude working with NGOs to provide various items and vocational training necessary for assisting FCSs reintegrate into the community. Alot Oremo Alfred⁷ admitted that the Council had not done much to address needs of FCSs, but they had been encouraging NGOs to assist in terms of vocational training and any other forms of assistance they could afford.

In Soroti, Ekallama Joseph⁸, argued that the LRA-induced FCS' phenomenon was not a significant problem. He indicated that the problem existed much earlier, created by the defunct Uganda People's Army (UPA) that operated in Teso around late 1980s and early 1990s⁹- a view echoed by Peter Odeke¹⁰. FAC researchers uncovered competing narratives about which rebel group actually bears the greatest responsibility for the abductions in Teso region and how one would measure the degree of that responsibility. But there is also a contestation on the level of intensity as a measure of prominence between LRA and UPA as indicated by mixed responses about the two rebel groups.

Consequently, the study decided to follow the line of argument around LRA for reasons that the LRA incursion in Teso was the most recent, the scars on children more visible and, the children (FCSs) visibly present. Whereas it would have been a good idea to include the UPA-induced abductions of children, it was practically difficult because this happened more than 10 years ago, thus, tracing the UPA-induced FCS would be difficult. The RDC of Soroti District added a new perspective to the child soldiers' phenomenon in the District. He lamented that the child soldiers' phenomenon had metamorphosed into the problem of street children in Soroti Town. Consequently, the RDC highlighted the modes used to tackle the problem. Together with the UPDF, they received and sent the children to AACAN and World Vision reception centers to be counseled and later, given some items and money to get reintegrated into the communities. A similar explanation was given by the Local Government Council V, Mr. Opado Otinga Simon¹¹.

⁴ Probation and Social Welfare Officer and also the Community Development Officer for Lagoro.

⁵ Senior Resettlement Officer, Gulu Demobilization and Resettlement Team, Amnesty Commission.

⁶ Labour Officer and Former Senior Community Development Officer in Lira.

⁷ Chairman, Local Council Five, Lira.

⁸ Senior Probation Officer, Soroti District.

⁹ For further reading, see Allen Tim (2006) *Trial Justice: The International Criminal Court and the Lord's Resistance Army*. New York. Zed Books in association with International African Institute.

¹⁰ Teso Initiative for Peace (TIP).

¹¹ Vice Chairman, Soroti Local Council Five.

In Gulu, Ojara Mapenduzi¹² acknowledged the lack of formal Council discussions and resolutions on the FCS but added that, Gulu District has a peace working group called District Reconciliation and Peace Team (DRPT) that has a strong component of FCS reintegration. However, he pointed out that inadequate resources had been a major hindrance to their work and that they were busy looking for a development partner to work with. At the time, they were working with NGOs to try and intervene on the challenges faced by the group.

When asked about the reason the local government had not taken a formal stance on the plight of the FCS, it was explained that the initiative had to begin from the Committee of Health, Education and Development or other Standing Committees, or a Councilor upon identifying it in a location, after which that person or committee makes a substantive presentation to the Council. Mr. Mapenduzi further added that Senior Development Officers or Community Development Officers could also report an important issue, including the issue of FCS to the Council through Committee meetings, which can later on become a substantive item in the Council's proceedings.

It was on this basis that Odongkara Christopher¹³ and Oguti Geoffrey¹⁴ were able to refer the matter of challenges and problems facing the FCS for formal recognition at the district level in Amuru and Kitgum Districts respectively. Generally, however, there seemed to be little appreciation of the problem of FCS to warrant action by those concerned. Nevertheless, the most pronounced of the government emphasis has been on the provision of programs and services like NUSAF, PRDP, National Agricultural Advisory Services (NAADS), microfinance services and the establishment of the Laroo boarding primary school – Gulu, for the war-affected children. When asked whether, apart from Laroo boarding primary school, the programs and services were specifically benefiting the FCS, most of the government officials, including the RDCs were of the opinion that the FCS were to tap into this opportunity for their benefit.

Achievements of such programs and services, as narrated, include building access roads, digging bore holes, building health centers and schools, and many other initiatives under PRDP. Also listed were community or group enhancement of livelihoods such as livestock, microfinance and other projects implemented through NUSAF and NAADS. In the opinion of government, these were programs, services and provisions meant specifically to reconstruct and reintegrate communities in northern Uganda into normal life.

4.4.3 Assessing the Modes of Interventions

This section starts with startling questions posed by a senior officer from World Vision in one of the districts:

“We have injected a lot of money in northern Uganda in the last 10 years. But what is the impact and who are the beneficiaries? What has the money done?”

Considering his position at World Vision, one would expect him to have the answers.

¹² Chairman, Gulu Local Council Five.

¹³ Speaker, Amuru District Local Council Five.

¹⁴ Speaker, Kitgum District Local Council Five.

As the answer was not forthcoming, further questions emerged which addressed the quality of services provided by NGOs.

Mani (Akello) of the Justice and Peace Commission (JPC) inquired: “Were the NGOs aware of what was / is happening?” Mani questioned the fundamental aspects of NGO service delivery and the extent to which NGOs believed their reintegration services were effective. While questions continued to be asked, it became clear that follow-up, performance evaluation and measurable goals were lacking in the NGO service delivery model. Many NGOs acknowledged this failure; regretting the error in their implementation or providing assurance of follow-up once funds were available. Others cast blame on their development partners for discontinuing funding. Most notable amongst the NGOs were those that expressed concern and were designing follow-up and evaluation strategies that would soon be operational.

4.4.3.2 Government Programs and Services

From government programs and services like NUSAF, PRDP, NAADS and microfinance services, two elements emerged; an emphasis on infrastructure, i.e. roads and bore holes and non-child soldier- targeted interventions. However, the FCS faulted this approach, saying that it was skewed against them.

In Apalayet, for example, Eyoru Yuventeno¹⁵ and Nicolas Okello¹⁶ confirmed the concerns of the FCS. One of the FCS in Apalayet lamented:

“The government programs and provisions lump the whole population together without due consideration for those who were abducted like us. NUSAF, PRDP and so on, are not for us.”

Another respondent from Apalayet argued:

“Nobody has tried to help me apart from my mother. I have not benefited because they have not come to help us who were abducted. I do not know why government thinks we are not there or, is it because we have no voice or someone to talk for us?”

In addition, one notices a sense of desperation from a portion of FCS who feel an inequity in the services provided to them. Many believe that several of their counterparts are benefitting from services while others are left behind. This was the case in Apalayet where the dominant view was that their colleagues in Acholi and Lango were receiving more assistance than they were getting in Teso, particularly in Tubur. In reinforcing this viewpoint, Aliaca Salume from Kelim Village B, Tubur, had this to say; “Some of my friends in Acholi say they were being taken care of and also paid school fees.”

¹⁵ Community Leader of Acnyalai Village, Apalayet, Tubur Sub-County, Soroti District.

¹⁶ Community Leader of Kelim A Village, Apalayet, Tubur Sub-County, Soroti District.

The FCS from Acholi sub-region, however, did not agree with this view arguing that they were equally vulnerable and not any better than the rest. In addition to other comments by FCS, one of the respondents from Mwol Bune said:

“We got the usual package of beddings, some simple equipment and some little money from World Vision. Government has not yet helped us and we are waiting.”

A respondent from Kanyagoga lamented that some of them were sick (the nature of the sickness not disclosed) and were wondering if government wanted them to die first before they could be helped.

In Lango sub-region, a similar argument was that the government had not done enough and that they (FCS) had not benefited much, except the sporadic assistance from NGOs. To triangulate this feeling, they were asked if they had benefited from the government interventions mentioned. A majority of the respondents indicated that they had neither benefited nor heard about them. One of the FCS in Adwoa lamented:

“We have never heard of any government programs or help from government.”

Similarly, a majority of the FCS in Orit Parish had the same opinions and were equally concerned. Oboke Moses¹⁷ concurred with the views of the FCS.

From the ongoing discussion, the Acholi and Lango sub-regions like all other regions seemed not to have benefited. A feeling of neglect and disappointment, just like in other sub-regions, was widespread. However, the study noted that although this was the case in comparative terms, other regions such as Apalayet in Soroti District and Mgbere and Dzaipi in Adjumani District had more serious concerns and higher levels of vulnerability and desperation amongst the FCS than in other areas.

4.4.3.3 Neglected Beneficiaries

The study revealed that, the kind of interventions implemented by both government and NGOs were largely for those who had gone through the reception centers, overlooking those who had not. This type of neglect was based on the need for convenience, as it was easier to assist those in the centers than those scattered all over. The neglected group was 72 in number, accounting for 40% of the total- arguably a significant portion.

An additional and more challenging type of neglect was one based on the criteria of age and broad-based community (change order) notion of intervention. It was argued that children below the age of 13 lacked agency of their own and were to be supported by their families and the community. This was the view echoed by the office of the RDC in Kitgum, arguing that the children below age 13 were too young and needed special community support.

¹⁷ Councillor LC III, Adwoa Parish.

The study also found that, other than the 'underage' criterion, interventions were also crafted around 'overage' eligibility criterion. This affected children above 18 years of age who were considered adults and could not be eligible for the assistance under the umbrella of 'children.' This eligibility criterion curved out in many respects. FCS aged 16-17 who, because of delayed intervention from both government and NGOs, transited to adulthood before they could be assisted.

The second domain is the debate on whether the interventions should specifically target the FCS, or the community broadly. The study found out that the government programs and services put emphasis on community broad based interventions within which all war victims, including FCS would be assisted. However, the study established that the NGOs were keener on the idea of targeted beneficiaries, partly to meet the goals of their donors and partly due to appreciation of humanitarianism built around a specific suffering group. Nevertheless, the notion of community broad based intervention has taken the center stage because of two fronts of pressure; the community being against targeted intervention and international institutional preference for community broad based intervention.

Consequently what emerged is the awareness that government interventions are not only limited and skewed but also unknown by the FCS. Therefore, limited resource capacity and skewed and unknown programming have generated a feeling of neglect amongst FCS. Government insensitivity and lack of commitment have also added to FCS perspective on services. In addition to these concerns, the study established that NGOs and the government lack knowledge about what reintegration is in terms of its basic traits and manifestations.

The findings point to a need for a more elaborate reintegration program as proposed by religious leaders while giving their views before and during this study. Retired Anglican Bishop Macleod Baker Ochola II¹⁸, when interviewed, lamented that there was no clear intervention by the government and that the NGOs were (using the phrase of the big size of an elephant) simply tackling parts of a bigger problem. It is in the opinion of this study therefore that:

Any intervention should be two pronged, namely, educating the community on their role to bring healing while, at the same time, providing direct support to FCS. Secondly, reintegration can only take shape when there is a deliberate national policy and legal framework, hence need for a National Child Soldiers Prevention and Reintegration Platform and at the same time, a National Compensation Policy.

The national strategy must not neglect the need for FCS to be freed from the bondage of evil spirits whether real or imagined. Thus, effective reintegration should combine the efforts of spiritual healing and cleansing of the FCS from the bad spirits of those they were forced to kill. In view of these clarifications, one can safely conclude this discussion and note that the NGOs and government modes of interventions have not progressed effectively from reinsertion or "transitional reintegration" to proper reintegration. What then is reintegration, its manifestation and traits? The chapter that follows explores this in depth. However, it does not seek to establish some form of global frame but uses the local resources for reintegration drawn from the above clarification and more importantly, from the expectations of the FCS in northern Uganda.

¹⁸ Retired Anglican Bishop, Kitgum Church of Uganda Diocese.

4.5 Beyond Institutional Framework to Local Frameworks and Resources for Former Child Soldier Reintegration

The previous sections discussed experiences of FCS starting from the time they returned from captivity, focusing on their current reintegration status within the family and community at large. This section is an attempt to clarify the concept and usage of the term and practice of “reintegration.” This critical analysis emerged from the concerns and aspirations of the FCS on what they regarded as “reintegration.” Their concerns built earlier serve as analytical tools to understand that a relevant reintegration model is based on local resources.

4.5.2 Indigenous Reintegration in Northern Uganda

“Reintegration is not an Industry.” — **Komakech Daniel**¹⁹

Coinage of the phrase “reintegration industry” comes from the backdrop that the process of reintegration has been linear – from disarmament, demobilization and then reintegration and also, institutionalized with rigid and hardly flexible frame of knowledge and process of reintegration. As a result, the reintegration process is marred by the elitist approach, grand design, so called expert models of ‘authoritative’ global institutions and organizations. Like an industry, the reintegration process is to manufacture and supply the reintegration model like a commodity, to the customers (the war victims) who demand it. As a commodity, it has prescriptions of how it should be utilized or implemented. Its utility is conditioned by strict observation of the procedural prescriptions and its failure is blamed equally on the lack of, or weak grasp of, its procedures. Subsequently, in the attempt to apply them to all possible conditions, local and indigenous possibilities become limited, pushed to the margin or, only offered visibility space simply as an alternative peripheral “trial model.”

As we look into the local resources for a reintegration model desired by the FCS, it is at this point that it is necessary to recap the study not only to refresh our memory on the key points of interest but, more importantly, to locate the focus that the FCS think reintegration should take. To begin with, the study established that the episode of abduction and life in the bush as a child was not only threatening but brutal as well. Of all those abducted, 48.3% were females while 51.7% were males. The ages at the time of abduction fell between 13-17 years with the majority being between the age of 15 and below, accounting for up to 51%. Up to 85% had their education disrupted with the majority having been abducted when they were between primary three and primary six. The duration in captivity varied from less than a year to up to 20 years, with the majority falling between 2-3 years.

Upon return, only 46.1 % found their parents alive, 23% found both parents dead while 30.6% had one of their parents’ dead. 54.6% of the parents’ deaths were caused by LRA. Whereas a majority (87%) reported acceptance by the family members, a sizeable number (12.8%) were not welcome. The study also established that the family was more receptive to the FCS than the community. For the females, returning as mothers was a common phenomenon, with the majority of the girls (41%) having at least 2 children, and a few returning with 4 children. Those who attended reception centers upon return were 60% while those who did not were 40%. Back at home, they continued to experience victimization, stigmatization and internal displacement in addition to experiencing fear of being remilitarized, attacked or killed.

¹⁹ Komakech Daniel was the lead consultant on this study.

Consequently, this complex interaction of experiences presents specific and concrete problems that cannot simply be theorized and framed within the dominant global and impersonal frame of theories amalgamated from the so called 'international experiences.' Secondly, the experiences do not need 'experts' to tell FCS how they should be reintegrated since their problems and eventual solutions are clear to them.

Similarly, the material provisions supplied by both NGOs and the government were only stop gaps. Their paramount concern was gaining acceptance at the family and community levels; unlearning their past experiences; and healing from various manifestations of trauma. This notwithstanding, the approach should not be elitist and mechanical with donor driven success stories and exaggerated data on those counseled or supported.

Rather the approach should be child soldier-driven and indigenous, focused on enabling FCS to lead normal lives.

To conclude, *reintegration* is not an industry or an event but, a process designed specifically to resolve issues which, according to the FCS, are family and community acceptance, healing trauma, physical sicknesses and deformities; correctional surgery; formal education; and meaningful and necessary vocational skilling that can help one gain a normal and competitive livelihood.



4.5.2.1 Linear Process of Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration

Whereas the institutional model intimated the linear process of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (according to the UN DDR framework), a similar framework may not apply in the case of northern Uganda because most FCS did not return through this linear process of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration.

In the first instance, there was no systematic disarmament and demobilization of the FCS, since many simply escaped or were rescued by the army. In this episode of escape or rescue, the study found that very few FCS arrived with their guns or weapons yet none was formally demobilized. As Margaret Angucia rightly argued, the episode of escape was itself demobilization²⁰ — what Child Soldiers Global Report 2008 calls “informal demobilization.”

As a result, the focus on FCS in northern Uganda should not be on disarmaments and demobilization (DD) but on reintegration.

4.5.2.2 Medicalizing²¹ Psychosocial Problems

The mental health effects of violence and social strife on the FCS are not due primarily to discrete traumatic events, but to more pervasive losses of meaning, order, relationships, community and the sense of a just social world so much so that the salient concerns for survivors become less focused on the meaning of the past than on the realities of the present, and possibilities for the future.

What the FCS emphasizes is summarized in the words of a respondent in Apalayet:

“Anybody of good will should help us to talk to our parents and community members to understand us and love us. It is this understanding and love that will make us heal. If your family members hate you and the community does not want you, you cannot be free, you cannot forget your problems and even if anybody talks to you like that, it cannot help much.”

This young girl confesses a very significant perspective about traumatic healing. She connects healing to acceptance by family and community. Like most of the interviewed FCS, their healing and general reintegration started with the family, so much so that the reception centers, although sincere, prolonged their return to their families and communities where critical healing and reintegration could take place. The above observation seemed to concur with Kirmayer (1989) who argued that disturbances of mood, post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD) etc, are not only clinical medical issues but most times, social, family and community problems.

²⁰ Margaret Angucia, Op. Cit. Page 41.

²¹ A phrase popularized by Summerfield (1999).

4.5.2.3 Linear Family Reunification

Although family reunification has been emphasized as adumbrated above, what one discovers is that it is assumed as though the process is linear and as a one single episode. Even when mention is made about monitoring and evaluation, the impression given by NGOs and government officials interviewed was that of a single event of successful or challenging family reunification, again, in a linear way.

4.5.2.4 Indigenous Collective Healing Among the FAC

The literature reviewed pointed to several structured or institutionalized manifestations of collective healing in northern Uganda evidenced by the establishment of groups of victims in a bid to collectively heal.

However, the study found that these “war victims” associations were not only unstructured but also lacked specific targets, and did not contribute to solving the FCS’s problems. The FCS themselves had unstructured, multiple, collective healing traits outside the norms of “legal association”, with hugely phenomenal success. It is this domain that the study took keen interest in, looking for the motivation, traits and characteristics.

To begin with, the study found out that the starting point to understand collective healing amongst the FCS is the shift in emphasis, from “I” or “me” to, “we” or “us”, referring to a collective identity as “FCS.” This can be explicated in their conversations and concerns; for example, concerns about false hopes given to them by development partners. A respondent in Alango complained:

“**We** are not happy because people are using our name, photos, to lobby for funds but in reality, **we** gain nothing from it.”

Similarly, a respondent from Tegwana had a complaint against government programmes arguing, “If government programs are there to support FCS, then it is not known to us (emphasis made).”

As already shown in a previous section, there is an interesting usage of the term “they” by the FCS. For example, it was common to hear complains such as, “they (emphasis made) mistreat us.” This anonymous “they” used by the FCS should not be seen as the duality of “we” as opposed to “they” but as an attitudinal language of collective identity as FCS and consequently, collectively under threat.

The source of the threat here is quite anonymous but, following the conversation, one finds in their narrative that the “they” is actually the family members and the community.

SECTION 5: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusions

The study concluded that agenda item V of the Juba Peace Process on DDR and, particularly, the reintegration of FCS has been inconclusive in many respects. First, the question of the ill-conceived notion of reintegration that had been reduced to reinsertion; second, little understanding and appreciation of the post-return problems and challenges of the FCS. As a result, the process of reintegration is marred by neglect, squandering of resources, a cycle of victimization and internal displacement, causing disorientation, appropriation and alienation. It is on this basis that the FCS built internal, indigenous or local resources for resilience mechanisms to cope with the situation on their own.

Interestingly, this coping mechanism termed *collective healing* by the study, opened way to a realization, appreciation and validation of FCS' aspiration, choice and what reintegration means to them. As a result, the study put emphasis on this opportunity referred to as 'indigenous or local resources' for reintegration as opposed to the globally dominant, linear and rigid frame.

5.2 Recommendations

From the discussion, the study recommends that reintegration must be distinguished from reinsertion, because reinsertion is the language of space, location or geography, and only concerns itself with being reinserted back into a village or community.

Reintegration is a principle of turning a child soldier back into a child through a process framed within physical and psychological disarmament and demobilization, and promoting the livelihoods within the family and communities of such individuals.

Therefore, reintegration should transgress the common mistake of “working for” and return to the positive reintegration of “working with” the victims and survivors, whom in this case are the FCS.

Again, while focusing on reintegration, there is need to distinguish between *transitional* and *development reintegration*. This distinction is important for defining both the tipping and exit point of transitional reintegration and the subsequent entry to development reintegration. Transitional reintegration should deal with transitional safety nets, namely, alternative incentives to violence and conflicts through provisions such as vocational skills, livestock, agricultural tools and seeds, while also providing for community needs as positive process for lessening tension between beneficiaries and the local community.

There should also be a dual progressive transitional reintegration agenda that aims at the target beneficiaries and simultaneously targets the affected communities. Similarly, there should be a targeted framework of interventions to avoid the situation of neglected beneficiaries, and a follow up mechanism to evaluate and appreciate new, emerging or persistent challenges faced. Under this, mechanisms should be put in place to identify formerly abducted children who were later recruited by the UPDF with the aim of establishing the extent of their reintegration and intervening where necessary.

Closely connected with this, is the whole idea of eligibility criteria and the problem of inclusivity built around the discussion of who a child soldier is. The study argued for an integrated notion of a child as provided for in the Paris and Cape Town Principles. In addition, the study also recommends that the child soldiers who have transitioned to adulthood while in the bush or shortly upon return should still be considered in reintegration efforts as children because their childhood was disrupted.

The mental health effects of violence and social strife on the FCS are not primarily due to discrete traumatic events, but to more pervasive losses of meaning, order, relationships, community and the sense of a just social world. Besides, the salient concerns for survivors become less focused on the meaning of the past than on the realities of the present and possibilities for the future. Secondly, reintegration starts from the families and communities where critical healing and reintegration take place.

Family reunification is not linear but circular, undergoing phases as mentioned. Therefore, family reunification should not be a continuous conversation with a network which this study tentatively calls “Community and Family Reintegration Network” (COFRENET), with the object of continuous positive engagement for understanding and healing. This frame actually worked in Sierra Leone when it established a post-war family mediation and reconciliation around its traditional value of FAMBUL TOK (Family Talk).

5.2.2 Specific Recommendations

Former Child Soldiers:

- Being primary and direct victims, FCS should be involved in all plans, programs and evaluation of all initiatives by different actors.
- FCS should make deliberate efforts to access healing services available in their areas in order to productively engage in their communities.
- FCS should choose to interact freely with other members of the community despite their feelings of neglect and rejection. Such interactions create opportunities to explain oneself and participate in community activities that divert people’s negative thoughts.

Government of Uganda:

- Being a key player in reintegration, the government of Uganda should clearly communicate to the beneficiaries and devolved structures about its reintegration programmes.
- Put in place institutional measures that focus on the reintegration of FCS.
- Establish community and family reintegration networks.
- Restructure PRDP II, NUSAF II and NAADS to allow for greater attention and allocation of funding to take care of the physical and mental health needs of FCS.
- Formally apologize to FCS for failure to protect them against abduction as this will help remove the burden of guilt from FCS.

Researchers and Scholars:

- More research needs to be conducted on ‘collective healing’ approaches that FCS have been using.
- Carry out studies on the impact of spiritual and cultural rituals on healing.

Family and Community:

- FCS were forcefully abducted and forced to commit atrocities. Consequently, instead of blaming them, families should sympathize and help them get over their physical and psychological problems.
- FCS are first and foremost our children. Families and communities should support, understand and love them to fast track their community reintegration, and physical and psychological healing.
- There is need to establish a community-based framework that enhances interaction between FCS and other youth and with other community members. This minimizes tendencies of exclusion among all in the community. It will also deal with the danger of emergence of a sub-culture driven by grievances and bitterness.
- A key finding of the study is that FCS developed mechanisms of collective healing that were non-structured. The mechanisms need formal recognition, support and broadening in scope to include participation of the larger community.

Development partners and DDR and peace-building experts:

- The FCS should be positively engaged to identify most suitable reintegration programs based on personal experience, instead of employing global notions that may not suit local contexts, challenges and interests.
- In our development work with FCS, we should transgress the attitude of “working for” and embrace “working with.”
- Avoid labels such as, “FCS”, “victims”, since such terms deepen stigma and interfere with reintegration process.
- There should be a dual reintegration strategy; one which focuses on the FCS and the other simultaneously focusing on the community.
- Spiritual leaders in the African context must be engaged throughout the project cycle to provide spiritual support and to ensure sustainability considering that after the conflict is over, religious and other local leaders are left to deal with the post-conflict challenges.

National Platform for Child Soldiers Prevention and Reintegration-Uganda:

- The national mechanism should act as a link and entry point for regional and international engagements working towards prevention of child soldiering and reintegration of FCS.
- The platform should play key national roles, including developing a database of all FCS in the country and championing their cause through policy formulation advocacy and collective program interventions.

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APPENDIX I: LIST OF TABLES

Table 4.1: Gender Distribution of FAC Respondents

Gender	Number	Percentage
Female	87	48.3
Male	93	51.7
TOTAL	180	100

Table 4.2: FAC Age at Abduction

Age in Years	Frequency	Percentage
1 and below	2	1.1
2-3	0	0
4-5	5	2.8
6-7	7	3.9
8-9	7	3.9
10-11	19	10.6
12-13	35	19.4
14-15	31	17.2
16-17	49	27.0
18 and Above	12	6.7
Born in Captivity	9	5.0
No Response	7	3.9
TOTAL	180	100.0

Table 4.3: FAC Educational Level at Abduction

Class	Frequency	Percentage
Non-School Going	27	15.0
Primary 1	12	6.7
Primary 2	9	5.0
Primary 3	19	10.6
Primary 4	25	13.9
Primary 5	23	12.8
Primary 6	27	15.0
Primary 7	18	10.0
Senior 1	8	4.4
Senior 2	12	6.7
No Response	0	0
TOTAL	180	100.0

Table 4.4: FAC Girls Returning as Child Mothers

Number of Children	Frequency	Percentage
4 Children	3	7.7
3 Children	8	20.5
2 Children	16	41.0
1 Child	12	30.8
TOTAL	39	100.0

Table 4.5: FAC Return Through Reception Centers

Used Reception Center	Number	Percentage
Yes	108	60.0
No	72	40.0
TOTAL	180	100.0

Table 4.6: FAC Parent Presence Upon Return

Status of Parents	Frequency	Percentage
Both Parents Alive	83	46.1
Only Mother Alive	32	17.8
Only Father Alive	23	12.8
Both Parents Deceased	42	23.3
TOTAL	180	100.0

Table 4.7: FAC Parent Cause of Death

Cause of Death	Frequency	Percentage
Killed by LRA	53	54.6
Killed by UPDF	6	6.2
Natural Causes	38	39.2
TOTAL	97	100.0

APPENDIX II: RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

2.1 Data Collection Tools Matrix: Interview and Focus Group Guide for Former Child Soldiers

Matrix 1: The implementation of the Government of Uganda's DDR process and institutional mechanisms from the perspective of former child soldiers:

1. Do you have knowledge on DDR?
2. In your view, how have the child soldiers benefited from the DDR process?
3. Have you or how have you benefited from programmes such as PRDP and NUSAF?
4. Are you satisfied with the way these programmes are implemented?
5. Do you see any gaps with regard to the current DDR process? Elaborate.
6. How do you think DDR needs to be managed so that it benefits the FCS?

Matrix 2: The Experiences and Challenges face by former child soldiers:

1. How were you treated while in the bush with LRA?
2. What did LRA tell you about the government of Uganda?
3. How were you trained and, what was taught to you while in the bush?
4. How did you manage to come back home?
5. What was your immediate experience after coming out of the bush?
6. What has been your experiences ever since you came back home from the bush?
7. What are your major challenges you face today?
8. If you were to advise government on what to do, what advice would you give them?

Matrix 3: The Community and Family Perspectives and Attitudes towards Former Child Soldiers:

1. What in your view in the community perception and attitude towards the FCS?
2. What in your view in the family perception and attitude towards the FCS?
3. Comparing community and family perception and attitudes, which of the two have a more positive or negative perception and attitudes towards the former soldiers? Why?
4. How do you think both the community and families could be helped to have a positive perception and attitude towards the FCS?

Matrix 4: Former Child Soldiers Framework Suggestions for Reintegration:

1. In your view, how should the integration and re-integration process be conducted?
2. What in your view, should be provided to you so that you can be well integrated in the community? Into your family?
3. What do you think, is the need of the community and families, in order that you are well integrated and re-integrated amongst them?
4. In your view, has the reintegration of the FCS been carried out well? Explain.
5. In your view, how should the integration and re-integration process be conducted?

2.2 Data Collection Tools: Interview and Focus Group Guide for Civic Leaders

1. How do you comment on the implementation of the agenda item V on DDR, institutional mechanisms and the current state of FCS in northern Uganda in regards to DDR?
2. What are the experiences and challenges faced by the FCS?
3. What are the community and family perceptions and attitudes towards FCS and why?
4. What are the locally generated and former child soldier- based frame works for integration and re-integration? Elaborate.
5. In your view, has the reintegration of the FCS been carried out well? Explain.
6. In your view, how should the integration and re-integration process be conducted?
7. As a community and families, what do you think the government should do to the FCS and to you, so that you can fully accept the FCS amongst you?
8. In your view, what have been the experiences and challenges of FCS?
9. What are the most pressing challenges that former child soldiers currently face?
10. If you were to advise government on what to do and the kind of institutional mechanism to support the former child soldiers, what would you advise?

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