

The Acholi of Uganda

Sustainable Peace and Development through Reconstruction of Education and Promotion of Social Enterprise in the Acholi region of Uganda

This campaign aims to pilot sustainable peace and development in the Acholi sub-region of Northern Uganda by promoting social enterprise and encouraging investment in a region that has, for two decades, been caught in a brutal war between the Ugandan government and the notorious Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) rebels.

The campaign will be focused on rebuilding schools, empowering women, enhancing food security, encouraging a culture of savings, mitigating the impact of poverty and working towards the millennium development goals (MDG).

HISTORY

For at least three decades, conflict has plagued much of northern Uganda, particularly the Acholi sub-region. The last two decades particularly have witnessed a brutal civil conflict between the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) rebels and the Government of Uganda (GOU).

Hundreds of thousands lost their lives and livelihood; millions lost their homes, and the entire sub-region was economically, culturally and socially destroyed.

Women and children have suffered the brunt of much of the conflict, and remain the most affected psychologically. Children, particularly, were targeted for abduction into the LRA and conscripted into the national army. As a result, the vast majority of them have missed out on their education entirely or had it severely disrupted. Though relative peace now prevails, the Acholi sub-region still faces disproportionate hardship.

Since gaining full independence from the British in 1962, Uganda has suffered a string of military coups and civil wars. There remains a North-South divide that continues to plague the country. The first post-independence Prime Minister, Dr. Milton Obote, from the north, was perceived by South Ugandans to have committed injustices against them. In 1971, General Idi Amin, again from the (Kakwa Tribe) from north western Uganda, deposed Obote and began one of the worst periods of violence and brutality in Ugandan history. Amin carried out tribal massacres and political killings against Obote's people.

In particular, Amin persecuted the Acholi and their neighbours, the Langi. His rule brought intense suffering, economic decline, social disintegration, and massive human rights violations (U.S. Department of State, 2008).

In addition to the Acholi and Langi ethnic groups of the north, Amin also targeted other groups, including those from Teso and Karamoja. It is estimated that approximately 300,000 people were killed in the eight years that Amin ruled.

Following Amin's deposal in 1979, Obote returned to power for the second time, and a wave of violence again gripped Uganda.

In 1981, the current President of Uganda, Yoweri Kaguta Museveni, launched an armed rebellion – drawing his support largely from the southern Bantu tribes. It took five years of

civil war for Museveni's National Resistance Army (NRA) to take power, in January 1986, from The Military Junta of the Okello Generals who had deposed Obote six months earlier.

The defeated national army (the UNLA) fled to the north, pursued by Museveni's NRA soldiers who left a trail of atrocities in their wake. This constituted the beginning of rebellions in the north by numerous rebels groups.

THE LRA & THE CAMPS

Unlike earlier resistance movements, The LRA, led by Joseph Kony, quickly became unpopular because of its attacks on the local civilian populations, including pillaging and destruction of villages, mass murder, rape, and abductions.

Attacks in the Acholi region intensified in the 1990s and eventually spread to the Lango and Teso sub-regions.

Over two million people were forcefully deported from their homes into Internally Displaced Persons camps (IDPs) (U.S. Department of State, 2008).

However, these camps, originally intended to offer protection, soon became targets for LRA raids and kidnappings. At one time, as many as fifty thousand "night commuter" children left their homes every night to sleep in larger towns for fear of being abducted or killed.

The level of protection provided by the government of Uganda was considered inconsistent at best (Carlson & Mazurana, 2008).

The camps meant a life of abject poverty: scarce food and water, no sanitation, inadequate clothing, no bedding, no healthcare and no schools. The poor living conditions were made even more unbearable by the inability of its occupants to walk even a kilometer outside the camp due to fear of rebel attacks or being labeled a rebel sympathizer.

The camps also played a major role in eroding some of the cultural traditions in the region. The Acholi society is structured in such a way that every family lives in its own compound and everyone gathers by the fireplace each evening for traditional teachings. This was destroyed by the camps, where parents were forced to sleep in one small hut with their children.

Signs of social breakdown soon became apparent. With no schooling and no income-generating activities to occupy them, youths in the camps become idle, left to self-destructive practices like drinking alcohol, unprotected sex. Girls were forced into early marriages due to unplanned and unwanted pregnancies. Diseases spread rapidly in the harsh and congested living conditions of the camps, including HIV and AIDS and nodding disease.

The extended duration in the camps slowly destroyed the dignity of its occupants, with many elders forced to drink, and others increasingly suffering from mental illness. Across more than 200 camps, the rate of suicide rose to three people per day.

The death and displacement completely obliterated the main sources of income – cattle and subsistence agriculture – making it impossible to rebuild lives. With many men killed during the conflict, women's burden doubled, encompassing responsibilities inside and outside of the home.

Very few people in the Acholi sub-region have escaped without physical and psychological trauma. Many returned LRA abductees, in particular, suffer from social and behavioural problems that limit their access to and participation in society. In addition, many have been

rejected by their families and the wider community, stigmatised for their forced association with the LRA.

Since 2006, following the Juba Peace Talks that resulted in the cessation of hostilities, there has been a perception of relative stability and security, although no formal peace agreement was signed. Today, the LRA remains active in the Central African Republic (CAR) and parts of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

CHALLENGES

Several development initiatives have been undertaken in the north of Uganda, with some targeting the Acholi sub-region to try and address the numerous problems in the post-conflict period. However, due to high levels of corruption, lack of skills and poor understanding of the needs of the people, these attempted interventions have failed, and development outcomes continue to be poor.

Overcoming the challenges that exist in the Acholi sub-region is an enormous task that requires not only require a massive injection of time and resources, but also strong leadership (free of corruption) and clear developmental strategies for moving the region forward and alleviating poverty.

The development approach should cease to be emergency in nature, with high dependency on relief, to a sustainable, long-term model. Sufficient and well-targeted funding for the process of transition, from relief to development, is a necessity that would require commitment from all interested parties, including the government of Uganda.

FUNDAMENTAL NEEDS OF THE REGION

1) Education

The continued improvement of security in the Acholi sub-region has resulted in a steady return of IDPs to their villages of origin, aiming to rebuild their lives and work.

However, Acholi institutions remain weak, understaffed and under-resourced, resulting in very weak provision of basic social services and infrastructure such as education, health, water, food, and poor economic opportunities.

Education facilities remain in a state of disrepair, and indeed non-existence in some places. Many of the schools in the villages are barely functional due to a severe lack of facilities (including sports facilities), teachers, and teaching materials. Many teachers hold their classes under trees or in the open fields. The food deficit also severely exacerbates poor attendance and achievement.

Although Uganda has Universal Primary and Secondary Education which is supposed to be free of charge, in practice there are often hidden costs – such as a shs20,000 fee towards Parents Teachers Association (PTA), books and uniforms – that prevent children from attending school. Family poverty and early marriage, lack of feeding programs in schools, and household duties such as chores or farming, mean that many children drop out of school. Although enrolment rates are over 90%, only 43% of boys and 27% of girls actually complete primary school in the Acholi sub-region (Government of Uganda and UNICEF).

Proposed educational initiatives:

- Implement projects to reconstruct school structures and provide equipment and teaching materials.

- Identify children from the poorest and most marginalised communities (e.g. orphans, those living with HIV, child-headed households etc.) and support them with their education or vocational training.
- Parents should be encouraged to form brick-making groups, using hydro-form brick-making machines, for the schools' construction. They could also use the machines to make and sell bricks for other construction projects in the community – thus generating a steady source of income.
- Build resource and vocational training centres, giving training and grants to the parents and siblings (and in some cases the children themselves) to set up their own income generating activities. Examples include Carpentry, masonry and craftsmanship, construction training, market stalls, bee-keeping, tailoring, livestock, setting up micro-finance groups, and encouraging agriculture production.

2) Agriculture

Decades of war have caused overall development in the Acholi sub-region to lag behind the rest of Uganda. However, as the security situation continues to improve, it is widely believed that agriculture will lead local economic recovery. Prewar, the population was predominantly rural, and farming was the primary source of livelihood. Therefore, promoting agriculture is a particularly promising approach as the main post-conflict development activity the region.

There is abundant fertile land in the region, and substantial markets for local produce in Gulu, the region's main city, and increasingly in Juba, the capital city of South Sudan. At the height of the war, communities in the IDPs relied on food rations and relief from WFP and other NGOs. This completely destroyed traditional coping structures, leaving communities who have now gone back to their villages poorly placed to reap the benefit of the peace and trade with neighboring countries like South Sudan. Households will need to be given tools and high-value seeds in order to reconstruct agriculture in the region.

Proposed seeds for distribution:

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| ● Shea Nut | ● Beans |
| ● Sunflower | ● Groundnuts |
| ● Rice | ● Sesame |
| ● Maize | ● Millet |
| ● Wheat | ● Sorghum |
| ● Cotton | ● Soya |

Livestock production

Livestock keeping has always been crucial to the cultural, economic and social wellbeing of the Acholi people. The region boasts one of the best grazing grounds for livestock production in the entire country. Cattle was traditionally used in ceremonies like marriage as well as for ploughing, using ox-drawn ploughs – a great benefit to farmers, who could utilise more of the land. Cattle has traditionally also been a sign of wealth in a family or clan. During the civil war the Acholi lost literally all their cattle, goats and sheep, for the first time in living history, which dramatically exacerbated the hardships and suffering of the Acholi people. Livestock – in particular cattle – has only recently begun to return. The government has promised to compensate the Acholi people for the loss of their livestock, but this programme

has been hampered by the corruption and remains unfulfilled. People returning to their villages have very little or nothing to work with. This must be given high priority when looking at resourcing agriculture in the Acholi region.

Highly vulnerable groups

Conflict in the north has made certain groups within society particularly vulnerable. Such groups include the numerous abducted children, internally displaced persons, people with disabilities due to landmines and torture, orphans whose parents have been killed by rebels, female headed households and the elderly who lack support in conflict situations.

Health

Overall, basic health services, and particularly access to necessary health treatments, remain extremely weak in Acholi. The average travel time required to reach basic health services is approximately four hours, and only one in eight people across the sub-region can access a health centre, though generally the treatments they need are usually not available. Malnutrition in children, due to lack of food, is common.

Coping mechanism

Women and young people have insufficient knowledge of their rights and are rarely involved in decision-making processes. This can be resolved by advocacy campaigns and linking the population to rights-based agencies; building the capacities of women and young people to participate effectively, as they are likely to be the drivers of change for the future.

Skills, unemployment and low income

67%-70% of former IDPs have no cash income. The problem can be resolved by promoting a savings culture, and providing training, enterprise development and guidance. Village Savings & Loan Associations must be introduced.

Environment and Carbon credit

Due to the years of restricted movement and fear of the LRA, IDPs have depleted natural vegetation for cooking and constructing grass-thatched dwellings. This can be resolved by promoting tree-planting and brick-making as income-generating activities.

Lack of Diaspora Investment

Over one million Ugandans work and live overseas, and contribute tremendously to economic development. In 2012, remittances from the Diaspora community registered close to \$1 billion (Shs1.9 trillion), up from \$750 million registered the previous year. This has been trimmed down to about \$500 million because of the global economic meltdown which saw many lose jobs and income. But these remittances have contributed less in terms of investments, as most of the money is channeled to relatives, who have made little or no value from it. This could be resolved through working with Government of Uganda, in particular the Uganda Investment Authority: organizing an annual Diaspora investment summit and considering tax relief for Diaspora investments in the region.

Lack of capital for business start up

The opportunity for cross-border trade between Uganda and South Sudan remains very limited due to insecure conditions and lack of capital within the border communities. Group farming for commercial agriculture should give the necessary foundation for savings and joint venture investment within women and farmer groups.

REACHING OUT TO THE WIDER WORLD

Though print media is available in the urban towns across the Acholi sub-region, coverage of local issues is not wide enough. It is for this reason that *Acholi Times* (www.acholitimes.com) was established in October 2010, to provide a channel for the 'silent' majority to make their voices heard to the wider community, nationally and internationally. *Acholi Times* is currently published as an online weekly and has continued to generate a lot of interest and debate.

Acholi Times is making a difference by providing intelligent, cogent, accurate coverage of local and regional news. Through savvy, well-written features, exposés and articles, we explore and illuminate the news that doesn't always make the news.