



## Kacel Watwero. *Together We Can.*

### Introduction

*At the conclusion of the CSiW / RLP Summer Institute in Kampala in May 2017, six men and six women from the Gulu area came together to form Kacel Watwero (Together we can) advocacy and peer support group. Their aim is to work together to bring attention to the needs of LRA returnees locally and internationally, and to earn income and pay for their children's school fees. They also expressed frustration at the media coverage and community reactions to LRA returnees. We asked them to share their perspectives with us and give their own headlines to their stories. We are grateful for their contributions. Here they are:*

### The untold burden of LRA returnee

Before escaping, one always has the thought of living a descent and improved life at home. My escape in 2003 at the age of 18 was one of the best moments of my life, very well knowing I had either dodged living in fear or staying at the mercy of death. I thought of getting all the community and government support to recover and reintegrate, but government support comes in handy only for a selected few. The few are not returnees or the most vulnerable in the community but the well-to-do, or those with some form of support from relatives. I then realized that I should have stayed where everything comes free, though the feeling of being home wears off. The community I thought would support and help me pick up from there turns its back on me, with denials of ancestral land to stay on or cultivate.

As one moves, fingers are pointing at one's back and words are heard, "see the rebel walking freely." This is traumatizing and the stigma is huge to bear and it provokes thoughts of acting otherwise.

*Kidega Bosco*

« The actual gunshots seem silent but their effects still follow us. For us to feel better and recover well, there is a need for a holistic approach to the rehabilitation of the victims in northern Uganda : physically, psychologically, economically, politically and socially for us to have total peace in our heart and around us. » **Grace Acan**

### We don't see government support: A cry of an LRA returnee

The LRA insurgency was a call for NGOs to come to the service and rescue of the people of northern Uganda, taking play in the fields of security, health, nutrition, and education of direct and

indirect victims. They took a bigger part of the government of Uganda's roles and responsibilities towards its citizens.

As returnees from LRA captivity, we appreciate the support extended to us from the different humanitarian support groups whose position and stay is known to be temporary. We therefore seek to find out the position of the government of Uganda in extending support services to the benefit of returnees specifically. Questions asked are "what program has been put on the line for us to benefit?" Among others is the handy general program designed for general consumption from which we are excluded based on some kind of consideration unknown to us.

Our outcry is the position we take. As such the period of war was one during which we sought complete security from the government but this didn't come as it ought to and many in northern Uganda (Acholi, Lango, West Nile and the Teso) faced abduction, torture in different inhumane ways such as thousands of beatings on the body, carrying heavy loads beyond human effort, hunger, cutting of body parts, walking long distances and destruction of farms, burning of houses, killing of animals and uncountable number of deaths/ massacres.

To this, we say that these have happened and we accept our position in life. But the government has not taken into account as part of its mandate to cater for the needs of its citizens but has left such works of recovery to NGOs and other volunteer groups. Our prayer therefore is that, if possible, the world could have a say and pressure the government to address our cry.

We thank RLP for this platform. For God and my country.

*Akena Samuel*

### When two elephants fight, the grass suffers

There was an LRA insurgency in northern Uganda perpetuated by 2 groups: the government of Uganda and the Lord's Resistance Army. The outcome of this was death; death that affected children, housewives and men. Properties were lost both living and nonliving; hunger and HIV, among other sexually transmitted diseases, have spread as well as hepatitis B and the nodding syndrome. The number of street kids and land wrangles, amongst others, has sharply increased. This is to say that, before there was no wrangles of land whatsoever unlike now where brothers are fighting each other, people are selling land. This was never the case as it is highly geared towards the government most noticeably the Apaa wrangle.

The outcome of all this is death of the people who question the whereabouts of leaders of high position and stature. As civilians, the women elders decided to go nude in public for government officials who had traveled to resolve the land issue (case study of Apaa). This was a true portrayal of dissatisfaction with the government and that the government doesn't care about and take into consideration the people of northern Uganda, yet this entire fight started between the two.



As civilians, we have no power, no voice and no strength to do as we please for we are like the dead who accept any grave they are being put into. The government has put us into a bottle, biting each other like grasshoppers put into the same container. Development programs come for this very region but why send us a non-tribe's man to head the program. The answers to these lie in nepotism. For deeper understanding, we look at the different ministries of the republic of Uganda which are headed by persons from other region except only in the north. It a true picture of the Acholi being non important to the Republic of Uganda. The kind of jobs left to us are petty ones such as the military. For deeper understanding, one needs to only pay a visit to any government facility and find the true picture of this.

« Bringing the victims together like it happened in this institute is the beginning of social and psychological healing in us. A wound can never heal without pain as at times it has to be opened and cleaned in a more painful way then the right treatment is applied. Our sharing during the institute has opened the wound that was covered but I see it has the genesis of healing in the lives of the victims and survivors of the northern Uganda war. This institute should consider other victims and survivors out there so that they benefit like we did. Therefore many partners and stakeholders should borrow from the institute the aspect of "victims and survivors-centered approach" in their programming that looks at supporting the victims and survivors. » **Alfred Arop**

The government programs have excluded LRA returnees as there is no direct rehabilitation or support of any kind offered to them. The government should also consider widowers whose wives passed on while in captivity and who are left with children. Don't we know that for a woman to conceive she needs the services of a man? Some men bore children in captivity and returned home with them minus their mothers. I say this out clearly that the rain that dropped on abductees doesn't decide who to hit or not, male or female, young or old. The stray bullets too do not differentiate. Government should consider both sexes in programs. For God and my country.

*Okwera Patrick Lumumba*

### Where is the difference?

East or west, home is best. 14 years in captivity from a teenage age of 16, I returned when I was 30 years old and to me having

grown in captivity that is the home I have known. It is now 13 years since my return and I feel a lot of regret for why did I return to civilian life where everything is costly and there is no direct support from the authorities to lift our standards. Everything was free in captivity starting with clothes, food, and medical care and this makes me say I should have stayed in captivity.

Government programs come with no supervision and monitoring which could be to our benefit as returnees. Take, for example, the Laroo boarding primary school put up to educate children who returned from captivity in the early 2000 but this was left to the management who turned out to be segregative and corrupt which led to the collapse of the school by taking in children of the well off at the expense of LRA children. To this we grieve to date and blame the system that is not transparent in any way. Our return home was to see that we could lead better and dignified lives in comparison to the kind of life we lived while in captivity. But I can testify that it is worse than I thought, as my very own family and relatives have turned their back on me and my entire household and the sight of us is enough to do away with us. My husband's family publicly told him that his children are not welcome by them for they are not part of them. My children are still growing as though they are in the bush where no one is your relative except yourself.

We have searched and tried to get support from the government but all in vain. Suing the government for neglect, something that was backed by CSOs and other organizations for government action on returnees, has proved to be a waste of time. It is therefore common today to hear that if only the LRA could make a U-turn from CAR back to Uganda, we would reconsider signing for the group to lead a better life because there is basically no much difference from life then.

*Akello Milly Grace*

« Psychological healing of the victims and survivors of war is the gateway to social and national healing. Our mind is the center of our strength in terms of positive and negative changes in ourselves and around us. An institute like this is a psychological therapy for the victims hence many victims should be involved, this should cut across to other partners working with victims and survivors. Unless they are involved and consulted, no support for the victims shall be ideal. We always see and hear of support for the victims and survivors of war but the real victims and survivors don't benefit and yet out there (to the donors) it is seen as something benefiting the victims and survivors. » **Lanam Stella Angel**



## **I am not pleased with the government**

Often time then, at 21:00 o'clock we could hear the commanders listen to the radio – the radio stations then being radio Uganda, Mega FM and Speak FM where we could hear cultural leaders, political leaders and LRA returnees begging for our return back home, living one with thoughts of what will be one's fate if he or she tries to escape and is caught.

On return, it is now sad to say that we have become the laughing stocks for the kind of situations we underwent. It is never an easy one with the community as many words are spoken and fingers pointed. For example, often our children are not allowed to mix with fellow children of the community for they are burdens with the mentality of the bush and deserve to be thrown into the waters. These are heart breaking words and moments that trigger past memories.

Yet, I am grateful and want to acknowledge one impact from the government in relation to providing amnesty for returnees accompanied with the amnesty certificate. However, I am not pleased with the government in relation to programs meant to address our better stay at home. Children's education and rehabilitation programs, among others, are only in words and have yet to be put into action and where they exist, they are not properly implemented, monitored and evaluated leaving us hanging by a thin thread.

It is also not mentioned anywhere the atrocities committed by government forces during the period of war. Rape, defilement, beating, and sodomy, among others, happened and this touches our hearts. I don't ask for much other than justice from the identified perpetrators or an apology. The blame game syndrome needs to stop. This is cropping up as a result of the many killings in Gulu town in particular where unknown killers are taken to be LRA returnees. This is not fair and should stop.

*Ladu Beatrice*

## **Supporting LRA returnees**

I consider the fact that we the unfortunate who were abducted and have returned home, returned with children and these are children who require education. Considering the parents' situation, it is not easy for us returnees who possess nothing that can support our families. If it weren't for the lack of some form of wealth, our children wouldn't suffer in poverty and for this, I would request that if at all there is any form of support, please extend it so that our children lead better, improved and dignified lives. Need we understand that our condition requires not only financial consideration but also some form of technical skills to enhance our capacity to support our family? Following my return from the Kampala summit, I am living an improved life and in relation to the community's attitude towards returnees, I do a lot of ignoring and carry my own burden. This has kept me moving on happily.

Thank you and forever grateful.

*Odiya Bosco*

*The CSiW project team would like to thank the authors for their contributions:*

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*Special thanks also to Fred Ngomokwe and Grace Acan for their collaboration on this special issue of the CSiW Newsletter.*