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# Ending Poverty, Enriching Children: Inspiring and Acting to Change the lives of children

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## **Ending Poverty, Enriching Children: Inspiring and Acting to Change the lives of the children affected by the LRA**

### **1. Introduction**

I wish to discuss the above theme with particular reference to the children of Uganda, South Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the Central African Republic (CAR), who have borne the brunt of the brutal activities of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) of Joseph Kony. The experience of the LRA-affected children has been exceptionally sad.

### **2. Overview of the LRA treatment of children**

Although flushed out of northern Uganda in 2005, the LRA rebels still continue to perpetrate heinous crimes against innocent civilians including children, in the DRC and CAR. The LRA typically recruits children by abducting and forcing them to fight and commit crimes, while many also suffer some of the same atrocities. The rebels brutally indoctrinate abducted children into acts of violence such as killing their own neighbors, fellow children and parents or community members; looting; and burning houses while ensuring that the community members know the identity of these children so as to deliberately block their return to their villages for fear of reprisals. Many of the children have committed atrocities, moreover against their will. Between July 2009 and February 2012, LRA abducted an estimated 600 children, about 50% of them girls, mainly in the DRC and CAR.

The LRA often subjects girls to sexual abuses such as rape and sexual slavery, resulting in physical harms, disease and forced pregnancies. On 12 May 2012, when the Ugandan contingent captured "Maj-Gen" Caesar Acellam, a senior LRA Commander, they rescued, in the process, a 12-year-old CAR girl whom Acellam had abducted from a village within CAR and turned into a baby-carrier [not baby-sitter since the rebels are on constant move in the jungle!]. You can imagine the distance the young girl may have covered on a difficult terrain and under stressful conditions while in captivity! LRA has abducted an estimated 600 children across

the region in the recent years. Some of them still remain in LRA captivity.

### **3. Impact of the LRA activities on the affected children**

The general impact of armed conflict on children worldwide has been well-documented in a 1996 UN report following a three-year comprehensive study commissioned by the Secretary-General in 1994 and spearheaded by Grace Machel, former Education Minister and former First Lady of Mozambique and South Africa. Many scholars and researchers have done the same. However, in line with my mandate on the LRA, I wish to specifically articulate the impact of LRA activities on children in the affected parts of Uganda, DRC, South Sudan and CAR:

#### **a) Deaths from war-related diseases**

The LRA activities have enormously risked and severely impacted the lives of children in the affected parts of northern Uganda, north-eastern DRC, South Sudan and south-eastern CAR. Many abducted or displaced children die from war-related causes because war conditions exacerbate health and nutritional deficits in them. The situation is worsened by the inaccessibility of many remote places such as Bambouti, a small town at the CAR border with South Sudan. It has a quasi-government presence with only 04 soldiers protecting a population of about 1,200. The area lacks clean water and has inadequate health facilities as well as trained personnel. Since the LRA entered CAR in 2008 Bambouti only received 01 Medical Nurse in March 2012. In such a situation how can the 05 women in Bambouti, who are reported to be quietly suffering with fistula, get medical treatment?

#### **b) Physical disability and deformations**

The LRA atrocities have resulted in physical disability/deformation in very many children as a result of bullet wounds, physical torture, maiming and mutilations (of lips and limbs) or landmines. Today many child

survivors in northern Uganda bear scars, disability or deformations from these atrocities and are living in anguish, self-hatred or self-pity. Others regret their continued existence on earth.

**c) Increased dependency due to dysfunctional families and broken communities**

As a result of the destabilizing activities of the LRA, many children have become orphans, child-mothers, house-hold heads, or homeless and hopeless destitute with destroyed relationships in their devastated communities. Whereas northern Uganda communities accept and reintegrate their girls and women who had been abducted and raped by LRA, in CAR such women are treated as out-castes and not easily accepted back into their marital or parental homes. Instead, they may be labeled as “wives” of TONGO-TONGO (a painful, derogatory nick-name for the LRA, meaning “mutilator”). Babies born by women who have been raped by LRA are rejected whereas their mothers are stigmatized and ostracized. This is undermining the coherence of families and communities in south-eastern CAR. There is a big risk of these young women and their apparently stateless children waging a future war to fight for dignity and identity. Their current predicament is therefore a recipe for future violence and instability in the region.

**d) Affected normal development due to exposure to all forms of risks and abuses**

The LRA activities have deprived the affected children of their right to protection from all forms of abuse, especially those abducted or separated from their parents. This affects the affected children’s normal physical, cognitive/intellectual, social, moral and emotional development. It is highly risky for children such as Caesar Acellam’s 12-year old baby-carrier to be wandering for years in the jungle with rebels, or to be displaced to live in congested IDP camps (as was the case in northern Uganda) or flee to exile and live in a refugee camp in Nzara (South Sudan) or Obo (CAR) where they are exposed to risky factors (e.g., difficult terrain, harsh weather, lack of food, water, shelter, armed clashes with

government troops, etc.) which increase their psychological and physical vulnerability, causing others to die during and after these stressful journeys.

**e) Exacerbated gender-related complications**

LRA mistreatment of the girl child has been exceptionally deplorable! They distribute abducted young girls to their commanders as rewards and sex-slaves. Kony, leader of LRA is reported to have variously abused over 54 such girls as his “wives” or sex-slaves, and fathered an unknown number of children with them. The rebels repeatedly rape the abducted girls, thus exposing them to a greater risk of AIDS/HIV and other Sexual Transmitted Diseases. No wonder, the prevalence of HIV/AIDS is reportedly high in south-eastern CAR due to LRA sexual violence women.

Moreover, some of the girls are raped together with their mothers while other family members, including children, are forced to witness the incidents. This is a taboo in the African traditional culture. The resulting humiliation, shame and anguish inflict a deep psychological harm in the affected girls and their family members. Besides, these rapes have often resulted into unwanted pregnancies, and severe complications at birth. Child-mothers who have been forced to bear and carry children of their aggressors suffer serious mental, physical and spiritual harm and sometimes fail to bond with the children. This has been reported in northern Uganda and CAR.

Boys too suffer sexual violence although it is hardly reported. An International conflict consultant revealed that 7% of some 2,000 former LRA abductees one time interviewed in Northern Uganda reported having been raped (or forcefully sodomized) while in LRA captivity.

**f) Moral degeneration and cultural disorientation**

The LRA violence has undermined the affected children’s spiritual development by eroding their morals and disorienting them culturally. In

northern Uganda, the child-soldiers committed widespread abominations through acts of killing, rape, burning of property; desecrating or mistreating corpses; while other children in the congested IDP camps may also have violated taboos through acts such as incest; desecrating totems; seeing the naked of their parents because of having to share accommodation; disrespect of elders, perceiving them as obstacles to freedom; and other cultural “Do’s” and “Don’ts”. That is why each returning former LRA child-soldier is required to undergo a cultural cleansing ritual before re-joining the family or the community. Therefore, from a cultural perspective, the LRA war grossly violated the moral order of the affected communities in northern Uganda. Likewise, some of the former LRA abducted children in CAR suffer spiritual problems, attributed to the mystic and violent ways in which Kony indoctrinates them. Others exhibit extreme morale degeneration. For example, a certain frustrated former LRA abducted child in south-eastern CAR openly boasted of his murder skills and threatened that he could kill anybody who joked around with his life. Some disgruntled youth who feel unwelcome or uncatered for by their community are wishing to return to the bush where they had the means to fend for themselves. Worse still, some have threatened to replace LRA in future if the CAR government continues neglecting them.

#### **4. Hope for recovery, healing and transformation**

Despite their harms, many LRA-affected children maintain hopes for a fulfilling future. They yearn to return to school and dream of becoming doctors, teachers, engineers, nurses and soccer champions. Studies and experience show that certain factors protect children or enhance their recovery from the negative consequences of armed conflict as articulated in the way forward.

#### **5. The way forward for ending poverty in children and inspiring them to transform**

Informed by the foregoing impact of LRA activities on the affected children, I would advocate that any strategy aimed at ending poverty among war-afflicted children should take cognizance of their harms and predicaments as both victims and offenders. We need to critically rethink broader



options for effectively healing the war-afflicted children's wounds.

**a) Rescue and rehabilitate abducted children**

First and foremost, we need to rescue and rehabilitate abducted children and women from LRA captivity. That is why the protection of civilians, facilitating the delivery of humanitarian aid to affected communities and creating an environment conducive for the long-term recovery and stabilization of affected areas constitute the core objectives of the African Union-led Regional Cooperation Initiative for the elimination of the LRA. We are working with international humanitarian agencies such as UNICEF to protect rescued children against a full range of violations associated with LRA activities and to ensure their secure reinsertion into their original communities. AU is working with the international community, particularly the World Bank, among other partners, to support the recovery of the LRA areas as part of the regional cooperation initiative to eliminate the LRA and address its adverse impact in the region.

**b) Role of religious institutions and functional families**

Certain institutions such as the Church/Mosques, schools, as well as strong family ties and support tend to diminish anti-social behavior associated with youth from disadvantaged childhood. Religious leaders and institutions need to re-moralize war-affected children by using God's teachings to break the cycle of hatred and violence, emphasizing forgiveness, justice, reconciliation and the healing power of the Word of God. We also need to provide them with family-centered and community-centered education. These could aid the spiritual, psychological, social and moral recovery of the war-devastated children, both victim and perpetrator of violence, who are being reintegrated into their families and communities. Many affected children in south-eastern CAR are getting deliverance from churches and traditional healers.

**c) Invest in the education of poor or war-affected children**

Former abducted children require catch-up educational programs, including literacy and mathematical skills to enable especially those who had miss education while in rebel captivity and return too old to rejoin primary school education to catch up with their peers in education. This should be followed by vocational skills training. For those still in school-going age, governments should be urged to provide or improve the quality of existing universal primary and secondary education, with better and secure learning environment. However, in a now globalized economy where the education sector has been largely privatized and commercialized for profit, religious institutions need to help provide education for, or sponsor, children from poverty-stricken families/communities as missionary schools used to do. JUPEDEC, an indigenous NGO working with LRA victims, has established a free universal primary education from Primary 1-3 for the children of nomadic Mbororo cattle-keepers. Such innovative voluntary efforts need to be supported so that more children disadvantaged children get educated.

**d) Invest in the health of the affected children**

Likewise, religious institutions need to provide some compassionate specialized medical programs, focusing on the psychosocial rehabilitation, plastic surgery for fixing the mutilated bodies of victims, correctional surgery to extract fragments of bullets and landmines in victims' bodies, and treatment of those who were sexual violated e.g. the fistula cases reported in Bambouti, CAR.

**e) Simultaneous healing with the affected care-giver community**

It is necessary that the harmed children are empowered to heal individually as well as collectively with their affected would-be caregiver communities. When war affects women, children too get affected because in many cultures women: mothers, older sisters, aunts, and grandmothers are the primary caregivers, taking key responsibility for children's physi-



cal and psychological development. Therefore, we need to also rehabilitate women's physical and psychosocial health in order to empower them to perform their supportive role in the family and community otherwise efforts to help children would be in vain.

## **6. Conclusion**

There is a price to pay if the LRA-affected children are not pulled out of poverty and given a meaningful future. Having lost nearly everything ranging from primary caregivers, siblings, and home, to hope and opportunities for normal development, these children may feel develop feelings that their lives have been turned upside-down, and that they have been robbed of their future hence grow into embittered, aggressive citizens or dictatorial leaders who nurture revenge and recycle violence. They have the potential to become spoilers and are vulnerable to recruitment for banditry, rebellion, terrorism, human and drug trafficking, among other things. The negative voices of the disgruntled children in south-eastern CAR are a pointer in this direction.

We should therefore act together to help end poverty among war-ravaged so that they can heal and transform positively with a sense safety and security, happiness, self-worth, self-respect and social acceptance. We need to search ways and means of supporting them materially, financially, emotionally, socially and spiritually, in addition to equipping them with peaceful problem-solving and resolution skills to reintegrate effectively into communities.