



Grass-roots Perspectives on Return and Reconciliation

Report of a Dialogue in Kitgum Matidi Displaced Persons' Camp

Justice and Reconciliation Project (JRP)¹, 13th August 2009

Introduction

In this community dialogue, respondents discuss some of the many problems faced by those living in areas affected by the conflict in northern Uganda. The issues mentioned include the reintegration of formerly abducted youth, disputes over land amongst those returning from captivity and from displaced persons camps and the collapse of traditional family structures through family breakdown, the phenomenon of child-headed households and a loss of respect for parents and elders. Traditional spiritual understandings, particularly those related to the burial of people killed in the conflict, are used by many of the respondents to explain the hardships faced by their communities and to formulate possible solutions.

The community dialogue started with a prayer led by Mr. Oryem Bosco, the village head of Bobi B village who also made opening remarks. The dialogue was facilitated by Achan Jackie and Odong Geoffrey.

R1: One of the challenges we are facing is that there are many young people who were abducted by the LRA during the conflict. These youth need to be assisted. I would like to know what JRP or the government can do for these youth and the families of the children who were abducted, killed and or are still missing and those whose whereabouts are still not known?

R2: Many agencies are now trying to address the problems being faced by people since we begun to resettle back in our communities in 2008. I have a memory of a very bad incident which I experienced during the conflict. One day the LRA came to our village in Bobi B. They abducted many people and pushed us into a small grass thatched hut. They selected some people among us and told them to kill all the cattle that my father had in the kraal. However the people selected for the job were not able to kill all the cattle so they were beaten seriously. The rebels killed some people including my brother. This incident took place on the 27th June 2000. I am now too scared to return and live in my village because I fear that the rebels may come back anytime. This is a challenge that I am facing

R3: There are many challenges that are being faced by the local people in the return areas and this includes land wrangles. There are households that were been seriously affected by the conflict and as a result are now being headed by children because their parents were killed by the rebels. Such children are easily cheated by their neighbours during the return process. The children end up having their land taken because they don't know their land boundaries. The government should intervene to help such vulnerable people.

R4: Land wrangles are common among the orphans whose parents were killed by the LRA. Their neighbours unlawfully encroach beyond their boundaries and leave the children with very little land. Furthermore, many villages such as Bobi B acted as burial grounds where

¹ The Justice and Reconciliation Project (JRP) works with war affected communities to conduct advocacy and action oriented research aimed at documenting the justice needs of grassroots populations and forwarding them to the policy makers, development partners and other stakeholders.

people were quickly buried because of insecurity. This has created a big challenge because the spirits of the dead keep disturbing those that have returned to live in such areas.

R5: *Cen* (spirits of the dead) has also manifested itself highly in Layamo village. This is because the village is close to Kitgum Matidi camp and many people who were either killed by the LRA or died naturally with diseases were hastily buried in the village. Their spirits feel abandoned by family members as they return home from the internally displaced people's camps. I lost my father in 2008 when he came home to build a hut so that his family could return home from the camp. Unfortunately on his way back he was possessed by *cen* and he could not speak to anybody until he eventually died. Since then we fear returning home because I believe something like that may repeat happen to me too. This has forced us to remain in Kitgum Matidi camp up to now.

R6: People in Kitgum Matidi have suffered and lost the lives of their loved ones by both as a result of LRA attacks and the Karamojong warriors. Corpses of some people who were killed were thrown into the bush and abandoned. As a result something needs to be done by the traditional leaders to cleanse the area just like they did in Padibe west Sub County. My sister was also a victim of *cen* and I since have stop her from going far into the bush to fetch firewood. I fear she might even die from the effects of *cen*.

R7: I personally tried to return home on two occasions but I had to come back because of *cen* which used to manifest itself at night in form of soldiers who would try forcing me to join them but I would refuse and run away. One time it manifested itself in form of two women who came as corpses but were speaking to me as if they were still alive. I woke up but found nothing in the house where we were sleeping with the children. I cannot continue staying at home in the village given this kind of occurrences.

R8: What kind of work does JRP do in a situation where one has been haunted seriously by the devil spirits? One day in June 2008 when I went to the bush to fetch /chop firewood I heard some one whistling to me but when I look all round I couldn't see anybody. At night of that day I experience a dream that was a nightmare because someone came to me and asked why did I went to their home making a lot of noise to them, that was by chopping the fire wood with the axe. The following morning I felt so debacle with such occurrences.

R9: There are many return challenges that our community and other parts of northern Uganda are faced with. For example about 70 people who were killed by the rebels and the Karamojong warriors were buried under that mango tree (*the woman points at the direction*) there. One day a boy and a girl went picking mangoes from that tree and when the girl decided to stop and ease herself she heard a voice asking her why she (the girl) was defecating on them (unknown voice). The voice asked the girl if she did not know that that was their home. The boy also heard a voice telling him not to finish all the mangoes but to leave some for them. Since then the children have not been normal.

R11: The phenomenon of *cen* is rampant all over northern Uganda because of atrocities which were committed as far back as Amin's regime. Many combatants were killed in an area called Buluzi in Wol Sub County. During subsequent regimes government soldiers also killed several people in Buluzi. The LRA also have killed many people in the same place. That is why I am saying *cen* is everywhere in northern Uganda and people will continue to suffer from its consequences unless we all turn to God and prayer.

R12: As people are leaving the camps and returning to their home villages, the land owners whose land was used for camp settlements are being left in a dilemma. The Government has started implementing the resettlement programme but these landlords have not been informed about what will be done to compensate them because their lands which hosted the camps are no longer productive. They must be compensated by the government as a way of appreciating them for their generosity.

R13: Camp life ruined the future of our children. In the past when people were still in their homes in the villages parents had control over their children but the situation has changed. Today parents have lost control over their children simply because young people have become the sources of livelihood for their families. In the past youth valued and respected their parents because the elderly people had cattle and in order for a son to access them, he had to be a responsible person in the family. The reverse is true these days and any parent who tries to give good advice to their children is not listened to because they are poor and powerless.

R14: We are also faced with the challenge of domestic violence which can be linked to the phenomenon of *cen*. *Cen* is haunting some couples in the village. As a result of this some people abandon their spouses and run off to live with someone else. There is a high level of family break-ups during this transitional period.

R16: It is good that you have come to share with us the justice challenges that we are facing as a local community. In the early days of the conflict almost all the people in Acholi land supported the LRA rebellion because when the NRA took over power in 1986, they killed civilians looted much property including cattle, tortured people, raped women and men among other atrocities. In places like Burcoro in Gulu district and people started seeking justice through rebelling against the NRA. This was a way of expressing their feelings for the bad deeds that had been done to them by the government soldiers. Some people became collaborators of the LRA but now many of them have denounced the rebels because they started killing the civilian population.

R17: I would like to recommend that prayers should be organized to exorcise all the evil spirits haunting the local communities as we return home from the camps. Unless we all confess our sins to the almighty father we shall not be relieved from the effects of *cen*.

R18: Traditional justice mechanisms are now being used for the restoration of relations among the local people who had suffered as a result of LRA conflict. For instance a Mato Oput ceremony will soon be carried out between the clan of Gong (the perpetrator's clan) and the clan of Otong (the Victim's clan). Both of these clans are situated in Bobi 'B' village of Kitgum Matidi Sub county.

R19: There are many young people who were abducted by the Lord Resistance Army. Some of them were killed, others are still in captivity and some are still missing and their whereabouts are not known even by those who abducted them. The government should find ways of investigating where these children are, on behalf of the parents of the children.

R20: In the past we used to drink water from the wells and streams located in our villages. Almost all these wells have dried up because many people were killed in those places. I believe that is why the water is no longer flowing. Some rituals should be conducted to cleanse the areas of spirits that might have possessed those wells from flowing as they did in

the past. More boreholes should be drilled in areas where people have returned in order to deal with the shortage of clean drinking water.

R21: Much property was looted during the war by both the LRA and the government forces and many lives were lost through killings and massacres. This has reduced peoples' ability to stand on their own and as a result they have to rely on support from WFP. For people to attain justice, the consequences of the war have to be addressed by the government by compensating people for the losses they suffered.

R23: We should use the knowledge of traditional leaders in situations where prayers have not helped to cleanse areas of *cen*. In Pawidi village a young girl who was being haunted by *cen* was taken to the traditional leaders and now the girl is fine. I have heard many people saying that we need to turn to God in order to get rid of *cen* but I think if that fails then we should try the traditional system.