

## When Two Elephants Fight

### *Reflections from the Mucwini Community Dialogue*

On June 6, 2010, the Justice and Reconciliation Project (JRP), in conjunction with radio station Mega Fm, traveled to Mucwini sub-county, Kitgum district, to hold a community dialogue on issues of justice and reconciliation. During the dialogue, residents in Mucwini had the opportunity to share their experiences during and after the conflict and offer recommendations for justice and reconciliation. This reflection summarizes the discussion and Mucwini's opinions on the complex issues facing post-conflict societies.

It is mid-morning on a beautiful, sunny Sunday, June 6, 2010. Residents of Mucwini, mostly men, are chatting away, seated in small groups at the trading centre. Meanwhile others, mainly women and children, are returning from church, most likely heading to their homes to prepare meals for the family. It is the season for mangoes, and children seem to be more interested in the seasonal fruits than going straight home to eat the meal prepared by their mothers.



Above: Community members participate in the dialogue under the mango tree shade (Photo Credit: JRP, 2010)

Under the famous mango tree shade in the compound of one of the elders in the area, located just about 20 metres from the sub-county headquarters, two large public address system speakers, mounted by the JRP and Mega FM team, are playing loud local music by

Acholi artists and attracting curious passer-by. This mango tree shade is a favourite spot in the area for hosting community events. Today's gathering is part of a series of community dialogues organised by JRP in collaboration with Mega FM, a popular radio station in Northern Uganda. Later the opinions recorded here will be fittingly aired on Mega FM's 'Te-yat' programme, meaning "under the tree," a reference to Acholi traditions of discussing important issues collectively under the shade of a tree.

### **DIALOGUE IN CONTEXT: REMEMBERING THE MUCWINI MASSACRE**

In the memories of these seemingly happy people lies an unforgettable event. In the early morning hours of July 24, 2002, residents of Mucwini awoke to the bloodied corpses of 56 innocent men, women and children who were massacred as a deliberate and brutal retaliation act by the Lord's Resistance Army, or LRA. As a rationale for the slaying, the LRA claimed that one of the villagers from Mucwini who was formerly abducted, had escaped with their gun.<sup>1</sup>

At the time of this dialogue,<sup>2</sup> the community was busy planning for the eighth anniversary of the loss of their loved ones in the massacre. In this regard, the dialogue presented the residents of Mucwini with a unique opportunity to openly discuss what happened to them during the conflict between the LRA and the Government of Uganda, or GoU.

Cultural leaders, local government officials, and a large number of elders, youth, women and children used this public forum to openly explore the justice needs and options for this community and share their thoughts across the airwaves of northern Uganda.<sup>3</sup> Kitgum district LC.V chairman Mr John Ogwok, the Resident District Commissioner Mr. Omony Ogaba, and a small section of civil society members also attended and greatly shaped the discussions.

That over 150 community members gathered under the mango tree to discuss their ordeals is a demonstration of how a community, which struggles to cope with day-to-day challenges of conflict, seeks redress for past violations.

### **A HISTORY OF ABUSES**

The mid-morning community dialogue began with a prayer and keynote address by members of the JRP team. A panel discussion was held so as to provide basic background information and updates on the theme of the day's dialogue. Community members were then invited to make contributions and provide comments.

Many felt as though they were victims who do not understand all of the complex dynamics of the conflict.

*"...I have been fought on like grass. I was just trampled upon in some other people's fight..."*

-Comment from an elder

This statement references the violations and harms suffered during the over two-decade conflict between the LRA and the GoU. It is a war they, the grassroots victims, do not readily understand, and they feel they are caught in between two opposing sides, each demonstrating their might to overpower the other. In the end, as the elder says, "the grass suffers."

Physical abuses noted by community members included the loss of arms and legs to landmines, lips and nose being chopped off, rape, defilement, the contracting of diseases like HIV/AIDS, and abductions. Others spoke of suffered psychological harm as a result of the violence, including the death of their relatives and loss of properties and livelihoods.

<sup>2</sup> This year's 8<sup>th</sup> Annual Mucwini Massacre Memorial Service was held on August 14, 2010. See <http://justiceandreconciliation.com/#/mucwini-victims-statement/4543187073> for a joint statement between the massacre memorial committee and JRP.

<sup>3</sup> Segments from the community dialogue in Mucwini were aired on the June 19, 2010, episode of Mega FM's 'Te-Yat' programme.

<sup>1</sup> See JRP's Mucwini massacre report at <http://justiceandreconciliation.com/#/publications/4540226079>

The intensity of the violations that the people have suffered has supported the notion that victimhood in northern Uganda applies to the whole community. However, there has not been comprehensive, official mapping and documentation of the exact numbers and what kind of atrocities the people in northern Uganda have suffered, hence a lack of formal acknowledgement of what people went through.

*“Whose war was this? Will *oput*<sup>4</sup> be done by the government or us the victims? Are we, the victims, supposed to be ones to ‘mato oput’ with Kony?”*

-Comment from a youth

## IEWS ON ATTAINING JUSTICE AND RECONCILIATION

While community members continued to explore initiatives for post-conflict reconciliation, it was obvious that the issue of compensation for victims was important. While drawing examples from the ICC’s *Trust Fund for Victims*, the community members urged the government to come up with a comprehensive law or policy to compensate the victims of the conflict. Almost all the comments stated that everyone is a victim and affected by the war, and that compensation should be for all.

One woman said that everyone should get compensation, and then only if there is more money, specific victims should get compensation.

*“To me concerning the issue of the conflict and compensation, I call for Parliament to come up with a law that stipulates who is to get what compensation. We can all talk here in vain because war in Uganda did not start yesterday with Kony. There was also the war in Luwero. In some places, the Karamojong were the ones who killed. So Parliament has to come up with a law just as the ICC has one”*

-Comment from an elder



Above: A woman narrates the experiences she and her children went through during the conflict (Photo Credit: JRP, 2010)

They further cautioned the government officials against corruption in case such a policy was enacted. They view corruption as one of the evils being practiced by many people. Leaders were urged to ensure that, when provided, such funds should be channelled to

directly benefit the victims of conflict.

Much as the ICC was applauded for having a policy on reparations, it was largely criticised for being one-sided while handling the case on Uganda, since there were two alleged parties to the conflict.

*“Some of us also see the role of ICC as one-sided because this war that was fought had two actors, and we as grass remained as grass. We were trampled upon when the two bulls were fighting, and it would have been wiser for the ICC to*

<sup>4</sup> Traditional Acholi process and ceremony performed in the case of an intentional or accidental murder.

*investigate the two parties. And in case the ICC was not able to, the Government should have investigated on its side to ascertain whether its forces did the right thing. Some people were killed from Mucwini here and their deaths have not yet been resolved.”*

-Comment from an elder

The *Trust Fund for Victims* was criticised for not considering atrocities before 2002 in order to benefit from the reparations fund, since many of the serious atrocities in northern Uganda happened before 2002. The *Trust Fund for Victims* was also urged to be transparent and direct its reparation funds to benefit the victims directly.

The L.C. V chairman called upon the government to institute a truth and reconciliation commission (TRC) so that people can come out openly and talk about the atrocities that happened and how they



Above: The L.C. V chairman addressing community members. (Photo Credit: JRP, 2010)

happened, so people can reconcile. He noted that there was a lot that people do not know about the conflict. For instance: Who did what? Where? Why? How many people were affected? How many are missing or unaccounted for? Such information would facilitate a process of healing and reconciliation. While many community members responded positively to this proposal, it is important to point out that JRP has been advocating and will continue to advocate for a community-driven national reconciliation process that promotes community healing and reconciliation. The chairman also called for free secondary and university education for any child who has been in the conflict for a period for at least ten years to enable the children in northern Uganda to compete favourably with the rest of the country.

While different post-conflict initiatives were discussed ranging from the ICC to national and traditional mechanisms, the community members noted that they themselves are central to the process of healing and reconciliation.

*“As the grassroots community, we also have a task. We should not only focus on the central government or RDC and L.C. V as individuals, but focus on the local institutions like the Ker Kal Kwaro, as well. Our traditional leaders like the Rwodi Moo have a big role to play so that we can find solutions to our problems among us.”*

-Comment by Jackson Omona, CSO representative

In conclusion, the discussions put a lot of emphasis on the need for all stakeholders to build on the Acholi traditional justice principles that involve compensation, truth-telling and symbolic ceremonies for the dead. Community members also urged each other to find ways to forgive one another and go back to start living as one people so that they can set good precedence for their children.

**Note:** This summary was compiled by Sylvia Opinia, Community Mobilisation Team Leader, and is the first in a series of reflections of JRP community dialogues. Copies of the full Mucwini dialogue narrative and audio are available upon written request to JRP. A comprehensive analysis of all 2010 JRP community dialogues is forthcoming.