



Grass-roots Perspectives on Return and Reconciliation

Report of a Dialogue in Padibe Displaced Persons' Camp

Justice and Reconciliation Project (JRP)¹, 30th July 2009

Introduction

In this community dialogue, respondents voice their views on the challenges affecting their communities in the wake of decades of violent conflict in northern Uganda. The issues discussed include the unexploded ordinance scattered throughout the region, disputes over land ownership amongst those returning from conflict or from displaced persons camps, the negative effects of humanitarian aid and the issues that arise as former LRA attempt to return to civilian society. The comments of many of the respondents reveal a deep distrust of the Ugandan government as well as a strong faith in traditional spiritual beliefs, often used as a means of making sense of and developing solutions to many of the problems faced by war-affected communities.

The dialogue was attended by approximately 50 participants including women, men, and youth. It was facilitated by Odong Geoffrey and Arach Dolly. Welcome and opening remarks were made by the village head/ LC I chairman of Te-Got village in Padibe west Sub-County.

R1: I would like to take this opportunity to thank the organisers of this community dialogue. It is something that has never taken place here in Padibe West. We only used to hear about it over the radio in other parts of the district. I am happy with the Justice and Reconciliation Project for having brought us this programme. One of the challenges of return is that spirits of dead are haunting people who are returning to their home villages. This has made many people hesitant to return to their villages. This phenomenon is common in villages like Ywaya and Tumbapu.

R2: I am very happy with the government of Uganda for bringing back security to the region. We used to live in fear in the camps but now the situation is back to normal. We have plenty of space and freedom for grazing our animals. This indicates that there is hope for the future as compared to the time when we were in the camp.

R3: In the camps people used to depend on aid from relief agencies but today as people return to their home villages, there is plenty of food because people have embarked on agricultural production to sustain themselves. The return of people from the camps has done away with the dependency syndrome which prevailed for the last two decades.

R4: *Cen* (spirits of the dead) is rampant in many areas that people are returning to and it is preventing many people from returning to their homes. This comes as a result of the prolonged conflict that led to the death of many innocent people.

R5: I would like to begin by thanking JRP for coming here in Tegot village to document our challenges in regards to return and resettlement. Another challenge we have in addition to *Cen* is that there are still many unexploded ordinances scattered everywhere in northern

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.

Uganda. I personally found one land mine in my garden and reported the case to the police. It was detonated in June this year.

R6: I also found a land mine in my village in Ywaya Tumbapu. This shows that there are still a lot of unexploded ordinances in northern Uganda and there is need for collective efforts by both the local community and their leaders in reporting such cases.

R7: One day when we were in Alur chapel, a 14 year old girl was haunted by *cen*. Another victim was a boy who was a member of a group called Coorom Bwola Traditional Dancers' Group. In both scenarios, prayer was the only solution to address the problem of *cen* that had possessed the two youth.

R8: Land wrangles are so rampant to the extent that Orphans are being chased from their ancestral lands. These acts are usually perpetrated by the neighbours of children whose parents died during rebel attacks. If people had not been forced into the protected camps in northern Uganda, land wrangles would not have been rampant today.

R9: I blame the government of Uganda for allowing people to encroach on land that belongs to others. This is because the constitution of Uganda automatically grants ownership of land to someone who has settled in a location for 12 years or more. This has made some people to claim land that did not belong to them. The politicians have also fuelled the land conflicts by telling their voters that the government wants to grab their land. The local people misinterpreted these messages and started fighting among themselves for land.

R10: Some villages were used as hideouts or camps for rebels during the conflict which means that means there are many unexploded bombs and other ordinances in those places that put the lives of many people at risk as they return home from the camps. Furthermore, many areas such as Omot and Mucwini have experienced horrific killings or massacres. This makes it very difficult to begin a new life in such places due to fear of *cen* and revenge by victims.

R11: Death of elderly people in northern Uganda as a result of massacres by both the NRA and LRA has made it very difficult to solve the problem of land wrangles that are so rampant. In the past the elders in Acholi used to teach their children about their ancestry and how they settled on a given piece of land. But today since most of these elders are dead. The ones who survive are taking advantage of the others who are dead and fuelling land wrangles by giving wrong information. Land wrangles are affecting the return process so the government has got to do something to solve it by educating the people about land laws.

R12: I am happy that JRP is not giving any physical items to people like the other NGOs have been doing. Those who had the opportunity to access support from NGOs that were providing thing like oxen are more stable and have been able to engage in agricultural production. However they usually leave their animals to graze on people's gardens because they don't know how to control them. This is bringing tension between those who have the oxen and those don't.

R13: We were forced into internally displaced persons' camps by the government in 1998. Now it is the same government is forcefully telling us to return home and yet we are still afraid that the LRA might come back to Uganda and resume its atrocities. This is an indication that the government want us to be killed by the notorious rebels of the Lords Resistance Army. The rebels are very slippery and if they want to come back to Uganda they

will cross the border even if the government forces try to stop them. The rebels always attacked the civilians even in places where security was assumed to be guaranteed by the Uganda Peoples' Defence Forces (UPDF). We should not be forced to go back home in the same way that we were forced into the camps. I wish I were speaking live on air so that the government officials hear me talking right now.

R14: We have many human remains such as bones of the dead all over northern Uganda. It is very difficult for the local people to live with such items amidst them. We need the traditional leaders in Padibe West to assist communities in cleansing areas of return and bury the human remains that are littering the area. Unless this is done people will have no peace of mind. The level of trauma in Northern Uganda will keep on increasing as we return home from the camps.

R15: The return process is being greatly hindered by the serious drought that has destroyed our crops. I have never witnessed such a disastrous situation which is putting people at risk of famine. I blame this on the mass burial of the human bones that was conducted Ker Kwaro Acholi with support from the Northern Uganda Transitional Initiative (NUTI). The cultural procedure was not followed when conducting the exercise. Cattle are not supposed to be used in any cleansing ceremony or any ritual according to Acholi traditional and cultural practices. But in this case the elders went ahead and slaughtered cattle in addition to the goats and sheep. That could be the reason why we have experienced serious drought, because the souls of the deceased could have been angered.

R16: There are many children who were abducted by the LRA. We do not know where some of them are to date. Some died in captivity while others become soldiers and others are missing because they are neither in the bush with LRA nor at home with their parents. As a result the parents of such children find life very difficult because they have to live with the memory of their dear ones. I was present during the cleansing ceremonies held in Padibe but what happened was that the elders ate all the meat without giving any to the spirits the deceased people for whom the ceremony was meant. This means that the ceremony had no effect. Another challenge in burying the bones of the dead is that it is difficult to differentiate between the bones of some wild animals and that of humans. This could have led to the burial of some animal bones along with that of human beings. The result is manifested in disasters such as the recent drought that we had.

R17: I want to supplement what my colleague has just said about the cleansing ceremony which was conducted by Ker Kwaro Acholi with support from Northern Uganda Transitional Initiative (NUTI). The organisers of the event restricted the numbers of elders to attend the ceremony and yet such elders who were denied the opportunity could have been very helpful in guiding the entire process. Some elders said that sheep should have not been eaten but rather sacrificed in totality. However the organisers went ahead to slaughter and eat them contrary to the required procedures. The sheep should have been slaughtered and thrown into the bush for wild animals to eat it and the spirits of the deceased would have accessed their share but this was not done.

R18: We were not consulted before the ceremony was conducted. I am worried that bones of both human beings and animals might have been buried together in the same grave. The procedures were not followed systematically. If they had been followed we wouldn't have experienced droughts like this one.

R19: There is serious lack of safe drinking water in areas of return. The wells that used to supply people before we were forced into camps have dried up. I believe these wells dried up simply because they were not being used and also because many people were killed in such places. Therefore, the souls of the deceased were angered and want to prevent people from using the wells where they were innocently killed.

R20: I am finding it very difficult to return to our home village because Padoke clan members want our clan (Payer) to pay death compensation for the death of their son. My nephew was forced by the LRA to kill their son after he was abducted by the LRA. As a result I and my clan mates cannot go back to our village unless we pay the death compensation for their son. The Padoke and Padyer live in the same village in Te-got sub ward.

R21: Stigmatisation of the formerly abducted persons by a cross section of the community is another challenge hindering the return process. The danger is that formerly abducted persons always get emotional when they are stigmatised. Some of them could be having guns that they hid before coming out of captivity. If they are angered it may cause them to retrieve their guns and retaliate.

R22: There are thugs who are terrorising people in areas such as the Lalak hills. The government has to do something about that. Otherwise that insecurity will again force people to come back to the internally displaced peoples' camp. The thugs comprise of former fighters of the Lord's Resistance Army.