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Listening to Youth: The Experiences of Young People in Northern Uganda

(summary report)

Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children



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Mission Statement

The Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children works to improve the lives and defend the rights of refugee and internally displaced women, youth and children. We advocate for their inclusion and participation in programs of humanitarian assistance and protection. We provide technical expertise and policy advice to donors and organizations that work with refugees and the displaced. We make recommendations to policy makers based on rigorous research and information gathered on fact-finding missions. We join with refugee women, youth and children to ensure that their voices are heard from the community level to the highest councils of governments and international organizations. We do this in the conviction that their empowerment is the surest route to the greater well-being of all forcibly displaced people.

The Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children was established in 1989 to address the particular needs of refugee and displaced women and children. The Women's Commission is legally part of the International Rescue Committee (IRC), a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization. The Women's Commission receives no direct financial support from the IRC.

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Executive Summary

As Uganda moves forward in an uncertain peace process and faces the challenges of rebuilding, young people will play a key role in shaping their country's future. As the international community strives to better understand, support and uphold the rights of youth affected by armed conflict, young people's voices, opinions and recommendations are a necessary and critical resource.

In many ways, young people¹ in northern Uganda have been the group most deeply affected by the brutal two-decade conflict between the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the Government of Uganda. Hundreds of thousands of young people have seen their communities attacked and destroyed, have lost parents and relatives to violence and disease, have been separated from their families and displaced from their homes. Thousands of young men and women have been abducted by the LRA and forced to participate in violence, or serve as porters, cooks and sex slaves, resulting in many young women becoming mothers at a young age.

As a result of the conflict and ensuing poverty, the vast majority of youth have missed out on opportunities to go to school. Young women and men identify education as their priority concern and the solution to the many challenges they face. The lack of opportunities to earn an income to support themselves and their families, which often results in sexual abuse and exploitation, is also a priority concern. Health is a major concern, including the spread of HIV/AIDS, and in particular the lack of facilities and distance to health clinics, which are not considered "youth-friendly."

The current peace process between the LRA and Government of Uganda has led to increased security in the region. Of particular relevance to young people is the dramatic reduction of abductions by the LRA. "Night commuting" from camps to town centers has all but ceased. Formerly abducted young people who are participating in programs to support their reintegration into families and communities appear to be adjusting well.

However, along with these improvements have come new risks for young people. Children are increasingly being left alone in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps so they can continue to access services, while older family members return home to prepare land. This leaves children and youth vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. Young people and their families may face challenges in acquiring or reclaiming land. Meanwhile, the possible transition from relief to development may precipitate a drop in international funding at a critical moment for peace and development.

Young people demonstrate extraordinary resilience and employ a number of strategies to survive. Forming and belonging to youth groups addresses multiple needs, including companionship and support, the opportunity to develop new skills and address community problems. Young people preserve their cultural heritage by learning and performing traditional music, dance and drama. These activities are also used as vehicles to raise awareness and address challenges such as HIV/AIDS prevention and conflict resolution.

Young people demonstrated an awareness of the peace talks between the LRA and the Government of Uganda but said that they have had little opportunity to participate in the process. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), UN and government agencies appear to recognize and value the importance of youth participation. However, while young people are participating in activities, their role in decision-making is less clear. Youth organizations appear to be the most prevalent form of participation; however, most organizations lack adequate funding and capacity for innovative programming.

Uganda



Key Findings

Young people recommend that the Government of Uganda, with support from donors, UN agencies, international and local NGOs, academia and community members:

- increase and sustain support to their communities, especially if a transition to peace begins;
- support them in achieving the highest level of education possible, which requires catch-up classes and bridging programs to prepare young people to enter/re-enter the formal education system;
- support them in obtaining safe, dignified and sufficient sources of income;
- take immediate action to prevent and appropriately respond to sexual exploitation and abuse;
- support youth-friendly health services in IDP camps and home villages;
- provide more financial and technical support to youth organizations;
- provide young people with more opportunities to participate in decision-making about issues that affect their lives.

Methodology

From May 3 – 17, 2007 the Women’s Commission visited the conflict-affected districts of Kitgum and Gulu, including Labuje, Amida and Ogili camps in Kitgum and Coo-pee and Palenga camps in Gulu. The team conducted 16 focus group discussions in camps² and town centers, with a total of 101 young women and 90 young men ranging from approximately 10 to 30 years old. The young people included those in school and out of school; those who are involved with youth groups; both those who are, and are not, accessing any services; formerly abducted child soldiers; and child mothers. Local young women and men co-facilitated eight of the focus groups.

The team conducted structured interviews with representatives of 11 international NGOs, five local NGOs, four UN agencies, two academic research institutions and three local government offices in and around Kitgum and Gulu. It conducted seven in-depth interviews (four females and three males), primarily with young women and men who had participated in the Women’s Commission’s 2001 participatory research project with 54 adolescent researchers in Kitgum, Gulu and Pader, which culminated with the report, *Against All Odds: Surviving the War on Adolescents*.³

As focus group participants were not randomly selected, the findings cannot be construed to represent the youth population as a whole in the locations visited. The assessment is therefore best read as a “snapshot” of young people’s perspectives in the two localities in which research was conducted. Time constraints prevented visits to additional districts and camps.

This study, which was supported by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), contributes to the 10-year Strategic Review of the “Machel Study” on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children. (For a more comprehensive report, visit http://www.womenscommission.org/pdf/ug_machel.pdf.) It also contributes to the Women’s Commission’s ongoing advocacy to increase attention and support for youth in northern Uganda.⁴ It includes a follow-up examination of the Women’s Commission’s 2001 participatory research study.



Challenges

Education

Across the board, young women and men in northern Uganda identify education as their priority concern—and the solution to the many challenges they face.

Despite the Government of Uganda’s Universal Primary Education policy enacted in 1996, many children in the north do not attend school. According to the 2006 Uganda Demographic and Health Survey (UDHS), while the national completion rate of primary school is 48 percent,⁵ only 20 percent complete primary school in the north.⁶ A number of economic, security-related and cultural barriers are keeping children out of school. Many families cannot afford the costs of sending their children to school, such as Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) fees, uniforms and school materials.

Very few young people in the north are able to go to secondary school. The primary obstacle cited was school fees and related costs. According to UDHS, only five percent of secondary school-age children in the north are in secondary school.⁷ In 2007, the Government of Uganda adopted a policy of Universal Secondary Education. However, to be eligible, children must have completed primary school in the previous year and it only partially covers fees. In practice, therefore, it provides little opportunity for young people in northern Uganda who were forced to drop out of school due to abduction, extreme poverty, poor health or household responsibilities.

Additional barriers to continuing school include traditional beliefs that favor sending boys over girls to school, early marriage and pregnancy and security concerns about traveling to and from school. Many youth who lost their parents and are responsible for caring for younger siblings are unable to continue their studies. Young people who were abducted and missed school while in captivity⁸ are unable to re-enter the school system. Few, if any, “catch-up” or bridging programs were in evidence to support young people who wish to re-enter the formal education system. Meanwhile, some displaced youth living in IDP camps said that a lack of access to schools in their villages prevented them from going home.

The poor quality of education is also a significant concern. There are too few teachers, and low salaries result in absenteeism and/or lack of motivation. Classes, especially at the lower-primary level, are overcrowded (a teacher described teaching a primary class of 100 students) and few scholastic materials are available. One leader of a large local organization expressed concern that he is “afraid that we are producing the worst generation of students.”⁹

Lack of economic opportunities

“If [the organization] doesn’t provide machines after training, [the training] is as good as useless. It’s like teaching someone to hunt without giving them a spear.”

—Youth participant, vocational training program, May 10, 2007

The other concern widely voiced by young people was the lack of opportunities to earn a safe and dignified income to support themselves and their families. This problem is compounded for youth who are the heads of their household and responsible for providing for younger siblings. Young women and men said that exploitation and abuse, poor health and hygiene and lack of food were all a direct result of their inability to earn income. Meanwhile, international and local agencies expressed concern for boys under the age of 18 who are susceptible to recruitment by the Uganda People’s



Case Study: Prossy*

Like most students in medical school, Prossy sometimes has trouble believing that she will soon realize her dream of becoming a doctor. But as she tells the story of the challenges she has already overcome, it is difficult to believe that anything could stop her.

Prossy, now 23, was born two years before civil war broke out in Uganda. The youngest of nine children, she was in primary school when her father was abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). When she looks back on her early education experiences, most of what she remembers is fear. Walking to and from school, or even in their classrooms, children were at risk of abduction. "I remember at the point [in 1996] that the rebels came to our school...and then we got really scared," Prossy recalls.

Prossy's father eventually escaped from the LRA, but when he returned he was too brutalized to work. "He was weak, because of the beating," Prossy explains. Her mother struggled to sustain the family financially, by brewing and selling alcohol and by selling vegetables she grew on the family's land. Prossy's six older brothers eventually dropped out of school, in part due to the economic hardship they faced. Despite this, Prossy and her two sisters managed to finish elementary school—a remarkable achievement in a region in which, today, only 20 percent of children achieve a primary education.

However, the costs of secondary school were too great for her family to bear, and Prossy was unable to continue her schooling. For two years, she stayed at home to help her family, working as a paid volunteer for the international NGO World Vision.

In May 2001, Prossy's supervisor at World Vision selected her to participate in the Women's Commission's Youth Participatory Research Study. Prossy feels that the experience helped her learn useful new skills, and gave her the confidence to speak publicly on behalf of other young people. However, the most important benefit of her experience was the opportunity to travel to the United States as a representative of the group to conduct advocacy in Washington, D.C. and New York City. There, she met Amanda*, an American woman who now provides Prossy with financial support to continue her education. "To crown it all, that is the best thing I have gained! Because I got a sponsor, and I am able to be what I want. Many people out here don't have this. So I'm really proud of that." Prossy describes her sponsor as "motherly," adding, "she gives me advice apart from funds. She encourages me to continue, even when it gets tough. And I tell her, 'It's tough! The road is really tough!' so she encourages me. She's a nice lady."

Prossy lives in Gulu today, and will begin her final year of her medical studies next year.

** Names have been changed to protect the identity of people in this report.*

Defense Force (UPDF), as it provides one of the few opportunities to earn some money in the north.

Many young people called for more vocational training and income generation projects. Many existing livelihood and income generation activities do not appear to result in increased income. There does not appear to be sufficient market analysis to identify what vocational training is appropriate in camps, towns and areas of return. While community members are routinely consulted to identify the specific activities, without adequate analysis, constructive discussions and creative interventions, the programs appear to be the same, one-size-fits-all model.

Few programs facilitate the transition from training to paid employment. Participants also requested resources that would help to market their services, such as T-shirts or uniforms certifying their participation in training programs and advertising their skills.¹⁰ One of the most impressive projects the Women's Commission visited, the Norwegian Refugee Council's (NRC) Youth Education Pack, helps graduates form cooperatives where they share tools and receive continued support. However, some members of cooperatives established through NRC's programs experience challenges continuing to work together as some members return home or relocate, while others remain in towns or camps.¹¹ In addition to skills-building programs, the Women's Commission heard about savings and loan schemes where youth are accessing credit. Few included a business training component.

Sexual abuse and exploitation

“I say no each time as it is better to be healthy without any money than have a big job and be sick.”

—Young woman, May 8, 2007

Concerns about sexual abuse and exploitation were repeatedly raised by young women and men as a distressing outcome of the conflict and ensuing poverty. The Women’s Commission was told that sexual violence is widespread. Child-headed households are most vulnerable to attacks by men at night, including by UPDF soldiers. It is common practice for girls to engage in sex for money, gifts or employment.

A heated topic of discussion in the humanitarian community is the government’s “defilement law,” which prohibits sexual relations with a girl under 18 and is punishable by death. Many argued that it has been applied more often to cases of consensual sexual relations and is often settled with payment to the girl’s family. Young men who cannot afford to settle out of court end up in detention centers where they wait months, if not years, for their case to be heard. Many in the humanitarian community said that the defilement law is being abused by families using it as an opportunity for economic gain. Also, parents or relatives may encourage young girls to get married for the dowry payment, or as a way to reduce household responsibilities of caring for the young girls.



Health threats, including HIV/AIDS

“Soon we may be holding more funerals [due to HIV/AIDS] than raising a serious productive workforce.”

—Local community leader, May 11, 2007

Health is a major concern, in particular the lack of facilities and distance to health clinics. While general clinics and hospitals exist in some urban centers and camps, agencies expressed a concern that these centers are not necessarily “youth-friendly.”¹² This may account for the dearth of young people accessing health services, specifically for HIV/AIDS testing and family planning services. To address this challenge, the Gulu Youth Center (GYC) is providing comprehensive reproductive health care aimed specifically at youth. (See box on page 8.)

Uganda has been the poster-child of fighting AIDS in Africa. However, HIV/AIDS remains a serious issue in the north, and many young people identified the disease as a major concern in their communities. While there is a nationwide prevalence rate of 6.4 percent (8 percent for women and 5 percent for men), it is estimated at 9 percent in the north.¹³ The vast majority of young people the Women’s Commission met knew about HIV/AIDS and were aware of how to protect themselves. Condoms, however, were not readily available and girls expressed concern about their ability to negotiate condom use with men. Many organizations raised alarms that the HIV/AIDS situation has the potential to get much worse with the prospect of people returning home and increased population movement.

Food insecurity

Many young women and men expressed concern about not having enough food. Those interviewed in Gulu and Kitgum cited the recent cuts in the World Food Program (WFP) food rations from 60 percent to 40 percent of the daily standard food ration as the cause.¹⁶ The Women’s Commission was told this was due to financial constraints that WFP is facing, as well as a response to people beginning to return home. Many young people expressed concern about the poor

Case study: Gulu Youth Center

Reproductive health care—protection from the spread of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs), birth control and pregnancy care—is one of the greatest concerns for young people in northern Uganda. Across the region, access to reproductive health services is inadequate, and young people face additional obstacles in availing themselves even of those services that do exist.

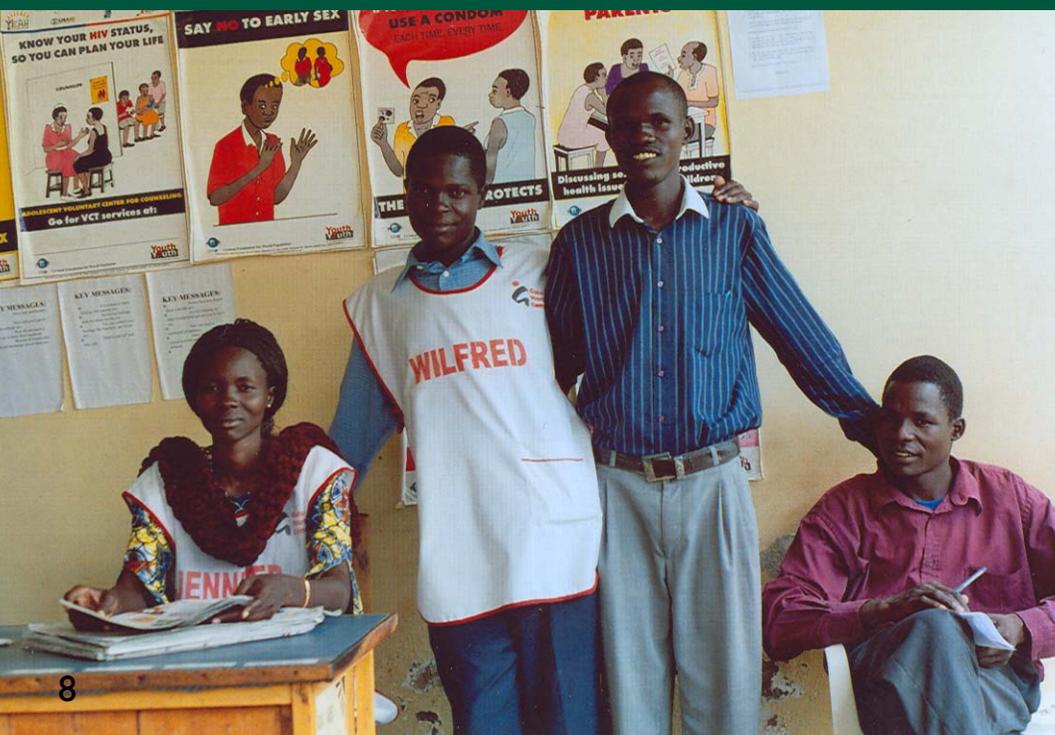
The Gulu Youth Center (GYC), a multi-service youth center, has developed several innovative approaches to encourage young people to take advantage of the reproductive health services they offer, while also promoting healthier behavior. GYC originated as a pilot project of the Straight Talk Foundation, a UNICEF-funded international NGO that promotes health education through various initiatives, including media and agricultural projects. GYC is designed as a "one-stop" center offering HIV testing and counseling, STI diagnosis and treatment and family planning services. The center's youth-friendly activities and services draw large numbers of young people from Gulu and surrounding areas.

Visitors arriving at GYC are greeted by "peer educators," young volunteers who provide counseling and information to clients and coordinate other activities for young visitors. Peer educators receive training and are paid a small stipend. GYC has trained over 200 peer educators to work in five local IDP camps, where they serve as liaisons for camp residents in need of clinic services. Center Director Dennis Kibula believes that peer educators are effective because their advice "carries more weight" with other young people.¹⁴

On a typical afternoon, the compound surrounding the clinic is full of young people engaged in activities one might not expect to find at a health clinic. A few are playing badminton and volleyball in the courtyard. Others are reading in a small room that has been stocked with books and transformed into a library. Some are sitting in the shade and talking. A chance to interact with peer educators in this informal, fun atmosphere attracts young people to the center and may also build their trust and comfort in speaking with them about health concerns. When young people spend time at GYC participating in healthy, safe activities, it may also decrease the possibility they engage in behavior that puts their health at risk. The presence of these activities also helps to protect the privacy of the young people who attend, as others need not assume that they are attending the center to seek health services.

Peer counselors and other staff often discover that their clients need services beyond those that GYC provides, such as formerly abducted young people in need of support as they reintegrate into their families and communities. In response, the GYC administration has developed a referral network with other local agencies, such as Gulu Support the Children Organization (GUSCO), to ensure that their clients receive comprehensive care for all of their needs.

A group of young women who visit GYC regularly spoke enthusiastically about the benefits of the activities and services provided. "What we're getting here is very important and marvelous," one explained. "Some of what we are getting here we were not even getting from our parents."¹⁵



timing of the cuts as people require strength now for plowing their fields and food will not be harvested for another few months. There was also criticism of the decision to cut WFP's school feeding program, which has been credited with getting many more children, especially girls, into school.

Vulnerable groups

Certain youth, those who are physically, mentally or severely emotionally disabled, remain more vulnerable or less likely to access services or participate in existing programs. Many programs designed to support young people focus on physical activities such as sports, theater or cultural dance, which are less accessible to youth with physical disabilities. Humanitarian organizations expressed a concern at the significant lack of professional expertise and requisite resources for disabled children and youth, especially those with severe emotional or psychological disorders.

Both young people and others identified young, married mothers (referred to as "child mothers") as the most vulnerable group of young people. Young, unmarried mothers are often formerly abducted girls and young women who were raped or given to LRA members as "bush" wives.¹⁷

Humanitarian organizations are also concerned about young men who are in conflict with the law over defilement cases that were based on consensual sexual activity. Some argued that legal consequences for those who had become "child fathers" as a result of sexual activity not only put them at risk, but prevented them from becoming a resource of support to their children.



Emerging Concerns

“This is a very critical moment for northern Uganda and there are discrepancies between the political, public discourse and the reality on the ground.”

—Senior UN official, May 4, 2007

Young people expressed concern about threats that have emerged recently. In recent months, there has been increased population movement to home villages and smaller satellite camps closer to farmable land. As a result, children are increasingly being left alone in the IDP camps to continue accessing services, such as schools, while older family members return home to prepare the land. Child- and youth-headed households are more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation; some young women cited the occurrence of rape of girls who are left in homes without older family members. The Women's Commission heard reports of fires in camps, many of which are believed to have been started by children cooking without supervision.

Young women and men also expressed apprehension regarding land ownership and their prospects for reintegration into their villages of origin. Many young people have spent their entire lives in camps and have never been to their ancestral land nor learned how to farm. Those who have lost their parents may encounter difficulties in locating and gaining legal claim to their families' land. Many young people, such as unmarried women, girls and young women who are orphans and children born out of officially recognized marriages, may not have a legal right under Ugandan law to inherit land.

Community leaders and local organizations expressed concern about the population that will remain in the camps as the services currently provided are discontinued. Those who remain will likely be the most vulnerable, such as the elderly, disabled and orphans. Many also expressed concern about the potential of revenge killings by victims' families against former LRA members, including former abductees, as communities begin to return home.

There was widespread anxiety over the possible transition from relief to development. Individuals and organizations

expressed concern that donors will abruptly stop funding humanitarian activities before peace has taken hold and development activities are up and running. As of May 2007, the UN Inter-Agency Humanitarian Consolidated Appeal (CAP) for Uganda for 2007 was funded at only 47 percent.¹⁸ This is believed to be a direct result of donors prematurely assuming that development and reconstruction activities are underway. It was emphasized repeatedly that there is a need to gradually plan for the transition while recognizing that northern Uganda is still a protracted emergency. Approximately one million people remain in the camps and the most optimistic projections do not see people returning home for at least another 12-18 months. As the leader of a local women's organization told the Women's Commission, "The war is not yet over. It is still expected that there will be casualties."¹⁹

“Because most of us are formerly abducted children, people thought that we couldn't do anything, but now people recognize that we have a contribution to make.”

—Young female member, Empowering Hands, May 12, 2007

Many young women and men cited recent improvements in some aspects of their lives, the most important of which was the significant improvement of the security situation in the north over the past few months. There have been few recent reports of abduction and people can now move safely within and between town centers. As of May 2007, the UN estimates that in the Acholi region (Gulu, Amuru, Kitgum and Pader districts), approximately 21,150 people have returned home and an additional 367,985 are "commuting" to satellite camps or decongestion sites.²⁰ Humanitarian agencies also have greater access to affected communities, which is highlighted by the absence of a curfew or the need for armed escorts.

Another improvement was that night commuting was no longer happening. In June 2005, it was estimated that 40,000 children and youth were "commuting" to city centers each night to escape the possibility of abduction²¹; as of March 2007, only 979 continued to commute to official shelters in Kitgum, Gulu and Pader.²² This is an indication of the improvement in security and a positive example of the humanitarian community's successful efforts to shift their interventions in support of the changing needs of the community.

While formerly abducted youth expressed concern about stigmatization upon return, those who were participating in programs aimed at reintegration appear to be re-adjusting well. Community-based efforts, such as conflict mediation and traditional healing practices, have reportedly reduced tensions in some communities, resulting in greater acceptance of "returnees" or ex-combatants.

The humanitarian community in northern Uganda is also learning from past experiences of "targeting" ex-combatants or other categories of people for services which contributed to stigmatization. Staff of several humanitarian organizations explained that they now attempt to develop programs that will address causes of vulnerability rather than focusing on one particular group of people assumed to be at risk. Despite these attempts to improve services, the criteria used to identify vulnerabilities were not always clear. Meanwhile, young people expressed apprehension that community leaders may take advantage of this new approach and select family or friends to receive support who would not ordinarily qualify as the most vulnerable.

Peace and Reconciliation

“[Those participating in the peace negotiations in Juba should] feel and see the problems of people who live here.”

—Young woman living in an IDP camp, May 13, 2007

Northern Uganda is at a critical juncture, with the best chance for peace in over two decades. At the time of research, young people around Gulu and Kitgum appear to be hopeful that the negotiations underway between the Government of Uganda and the LRA will result in peace and stability. They see peace as paramount to addressing the numerous challenges they face.

Young people stated that they have had little opportunity to participate in the peace process. When asked how they

could contribute, young people shared ideas of creative ways to increase their involvement in the discussions. For example, at Coo-Pe IDP camp, a group of young men explored ways to contribute, such as recording tapes and sending them to the talks in Juba and inviting journalists to interview the youth at the camps for newspaper articles. Several young people stated the strong opinion that the young people who have been most affected by conflict—such as former abductees and the displaced—should be present at the negotiating table to represent their needs.

Youth Participation

While it is clear that young people are participating in *activities*, the extent to which young people are participating in *decision-making* is not clear.

The Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, the Uganda Child Rights NGO Network and UNICEF are developing a *National Child Participation Guide for Uganda*. Once finalized, the guide should be widely disseminated to agencies and directly to youth, with its key strategies implemented locally and nationally.

Several organizations cited the challenge of ensuring that young people's participation is meaningful and beneficial for all. It can be demoralizing when young people are invited to contribute to policy meetings convened by adult leaders and do not have their ideas taken seriously.²³ Roles must be appropriate to the age and capacity of the young people who fill them. Activities may still require oversight and support from more experienced adults.

Which young people participate and the method of their selection are not always clear. As one community member of an IDP camp outside Gulu said, "The community leaders and elders select the youth who are intelligent and capable of representing the views of others."²⁴ If not selected by their peers, it raises the question of how representative the youth leaders are. Other factors may restrict opportunities for young people to participate in decision-making; for example, due to chores and other household responsibilities, fewer girls participate in these activities than boys.

The issue of compensating youth for their involvement in activities, such as for participating in focus groups or serving as "youth mobilizers," is contentious, and the inconsistency has led to problems. Some organizations provide young people with a "sitting fee" or small incentive for participating in activities while other organizations have a policy of not paying "volunteers." The primary issue appears to be a lack of clarity of the nature of the "volunteer" work; are young people gathering to perform some civic duty and volunteer their time or are they expected to conduct a specific task that should include remuneration? Without clear and defined roles and expectations, the ambiguity and challenges around payment for young people's participation will persist.

There are some promising approaches to engaging youth in active decision-making roles. For example, some organizations are training young people to monitor and support activities as people begin to return home. NGOs will not be



Case study: Watwero

The 12-year history of the youth organization "Watwero Rights Focus Initiative" (Watwero), based in Kitgum, serves as a powerful example of the commitment of the young people to support each other and their communities. Watwero ("We are Able" or "We Can Do It" in Luo, the local language) was founded in 1995 by two friends who had been forced to discontinue their schooling and were unable to find work. Their goal was to find a way to earn some income and learn some useful skills for future work. The organization's first initiative was a small pig-rearing project, founded with the support of Oxfam, which donated two pigs to establish the farm. In subsequent years, Watwero added other projects, including additional livestock rearing, farming, fishing and bricklaying.

As Watwero expanded its membership, it also diversified its activities, adding HIV/AIDS sensitization, a peace club and a human rights awareness program for children. Other organizations, such as the American Jewish World Service, provided Watwero with funding for the start-up costs of new projects and technical support as members took on roles requiring new skills. Watwero also collaborated with the Women's Commission's Participatory Research Project in 2001 in an initiative that turned out to be mutually beneficial—Watwero provided support by coordinating youth researchers and its members learned research techniques and developed new approaches to serve young people.

Watwero's ongoing service speaks to the determination of its members. The setbacks the organization has faced reflect the many challenges confronting those who live and work in northern Uganda. As the organization grew and expanded, Watwero's leaders, who lacked formal education or training in administration, had to learn on the job as they managed multiple projects and grants. In 2005, the organization faced its greatest challenge when the chairman and founder passed away unexpectedly and the members were forced to manage a change in leadership while coping with a personal loss. Watwero's members confronted these obstacles with resilience and creativity—adding new projects, learning new skills, stepping into new roles and reaching out to supporters for funding and training.

In Watwero's office near the center of Kitgum town, the shelves are full of reports documenting the organization's long history of service to the community. However, members of Watwero relaxing on the couch believe that they may have been the organization's greatest beneficiaries. Jennifer has found that "by working with the community I learn from those around me." Sarah said that fellow group members provide her with advice, and build up her confidence. "Joining Watwero has opened me a lot," she adds. For Churchill, an orphan, spending time with the group helps him to cope with his grief. "When I am in a group I am not thinking about my parents," he explains. Robert, who has been a member of Watwero for more than 10 years, said that from other members he can continue to learn valuable skills such as how to speak English, even though he was unable to continue his schooling. Robert's 10 years with the organization have also reinforced his belief that young people working together are more empowered to advocate for themselves. "If I were alone, no one would hear me," he says.



able to closely follow up on projects as people become more dispersed; therefore, training young people to monitor NGO activities may help to facilitate an eventual return home, as they have a unique capacity to identify challenges of particular relevance to young people in areas of return. There are also some interesting child protection community-based mechanisms to monitor and report on violations, some involving children and youth. Child Protection Committees, for example, are forming at the parish level to identify vulnerable children and provide referrals. Another example of good youth participation is the International Rescue Committee, which includes youth representatives on visits to areas of return to determine if and when they would like to return home.

Youth groups

Young people are forming youth groups to provide social services and support to communities, such as HIV/AIDS awareness, recreational and income generation activities. Some groups receive funding from local and international agencies; others operate without any external support. In Gulu, more than 200 youth groups are registered with the Gulu District NGO Forum.

These groups serve many purposes, sometimes beyond those identified in their stated missions. Indeed, the primary benefit of group membership, according to the young people interviewed for this study, was the relationships the groups foster. Youth group members told the Women's Commission that the groups have become their families, which is particularly significant for the many youth who have lost parents and relatives.

There is some concern over small youth organizations' tendency to implement various activities that focus on issues ranging from HIV/AIDS awareness to economic empowerment to peace building to good health and hygiene promotion with limited funding and support. Attempts to address myriad problems are appropriate to some extent, given the interconnectedness of many challenges young people face that require a holistic response. However, in practice, many youth groups are attempting to address each problem through individual and disconnected interventions or replicating those already in practice by other agencies, rather than engaging in a strategic analysis of what actors are already involved and where there are gaps that need to be filled.

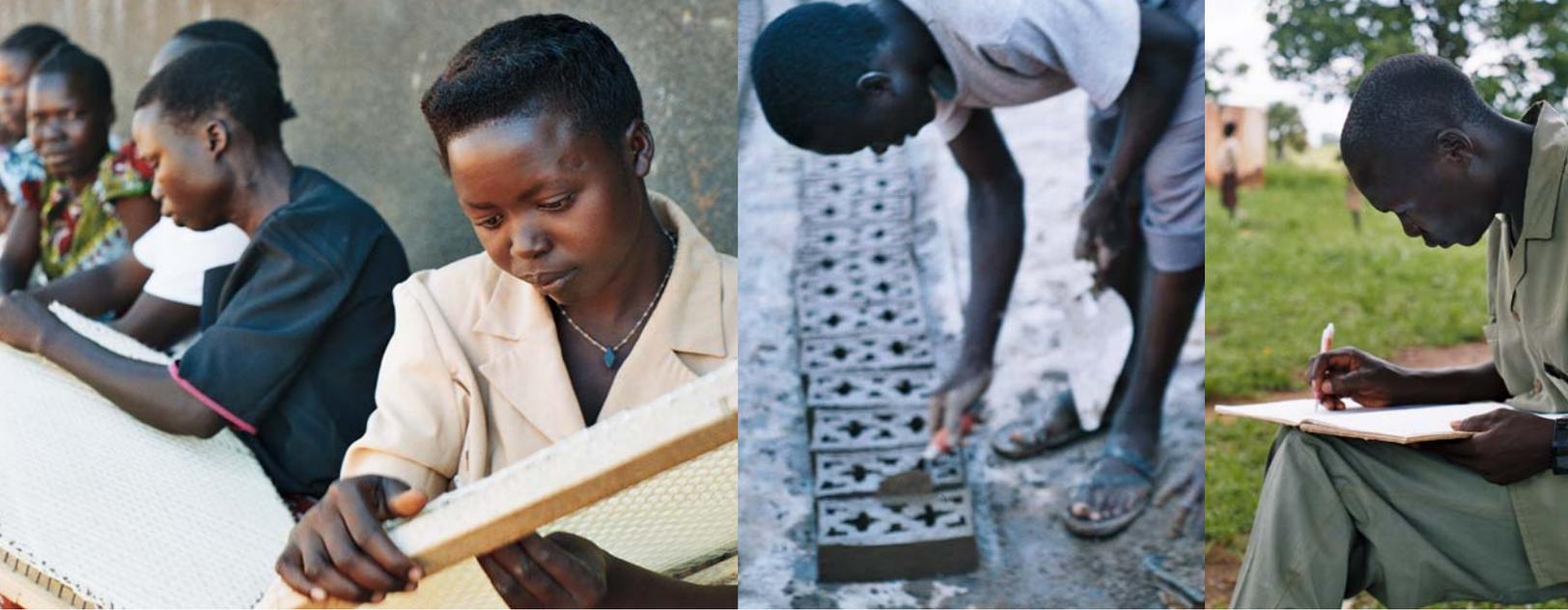
While funding for youth groups remains a perennial challenge, some groups also discussed the detrimental impact of short funding cycles. Groups stated that there is often a significant delay between reporting on activities and receiving the next cycle of funds. The delays require groups to temporarily cease activities, which negatively affects programming and community trust.

Recommendations

For a comprehensive list of recommendations, see full report available at http://www.womenscommission.org/pdf/ug_machel.pdf.

Young people recommend that the Government of Uganda, with support from donors, UN agencies, academia, international and local NGOs and community members:

- **Increase and sustain support to their communities**, especially as the transition to peace begins. Of particular importance at this juncture is ensuring that the UN Consolidated Appeal for Uganda is fully funded.
- **Support them in achieving the highest level of education possible**, which will require catch-up classes and bridging programs to prepare young people to enter/re-enter the formal education system. As the vast majority of youth in northern Uganda have missed out on years of schooling, it is critical to develop programs that combine basic literacy and numeracy with practical training in productive, marketable skills.
- **Support them in obtaining safe, dignified and sufficient sources of income**. All economic programs should build on affected populations' existing skills, match local market needs and lead to sustainable income. Careful planning is needed to ensure that young women have access to training and learning opportunities, such as through the provision of child care and flexible program hours.
- **Take immediate action to prevent and appropriately respond to sexual exploitation and abuse**. This



includes ensuring that women and girls have safe access to water, food, fuel, sanitation and income generation opportunities. Health care workers should be trained to provide comprehensive clinical care to survivors of rape and sexual abuse.

- **Support youth-friendly health services in IDP camps and home villages**, which could include the provision of special hours, peer counselors and recreational activities.
- **Provide more financial and technical support to youth organizations as institutions that can effectively and comprehensively address the priority needs of youth.** One way is for donors to contribute to the Fund for War-Affected Children and Youth in Northern Uganda, started by the MacArthur Foundation to provide small, flexible grants for local projects with an emphasis on education and skills building for youth.
- **Provide young people with more opportunities to participate in decision-making about issues that affect their lives.** Particular attention should be given to further developing and disseminating comprehensive guidelines for appropriate, effective, ethical approaches to youth participation in decision-making.

Next Steps for the Women's Commission

The Women's Commission is sharing these findings and recommendations with governments, donors, the United Nations and international aid agencies. We encourage them to use these recommendations as they make decisions about funding and develop programs to support young people in northern Uganda and other conflict-affected areas.

We have already taken the following steps:

- We submitted a report of findings and recommendations to the United Nations Machel Strategic Review Committee. As a result, the experiences and opinions of youth in northern Uganda are included in the report that Secretary General Ban Ki-moon will submit to the UN General Assembly in October 2007 and in discussions on how to better serve all young people in conflict-affected areas.
- We presented our research to donors and agencies in Uganda and the United States to promote our recommendations as they allocate their funds and improve their programs for young people in northern Uganda and other conflict-affected areas.
- We have met with individual international aid agencies to discuss how they can use our findings and recommendations to make their education and income generating programs in northern Uganda even more effective.
- We have met with grant-making foundations to encourage them to provide technical and financial support to youth organizations in northern Uganda.
- At a conference in New York on internally displaced persons in peace and reconciliation, we shared our recommendation that youth should be included in peace negotiations. Uganda's ambassador to the United Nations

- and other political leaders participated in this discussion.
- We participated in a briefing with the in-coming UN Senior Humanitarian Advisor to the Humanitarian Coordinator in Uganda to share young people's concerns and suggestions highlighted in this report.
 - We published a “Report to Contributors” in response to requests from young people interviewed who wanted to know how the information they shared would be used and what impact it would have. We disseminated copies of the report, in English and Luo, directly to contributors in Kitgum and Gulu. The report is available at: <http://www.womenscommission.org/pdf/uganda%20cap%208-pager%202007.pdf> (English) and http://www.womenscommission.org/pdf/ug_youth_luo.pdf (Luo).

Notes

¹ There is increasing consensus within the international humanitarian community for greater attention to the needs of youth. The age range of people considered youth varies across cultures and from setting to setting. For the purpose of this study, the Women’s Commission interviewed individuals between the ages of 10 and 30, inclusive of the UN’s definition of young people age 10-24 and the National Youth Policy of Uganda, which defines youth as age 12-30 years old. We use the terms of youth and young people interchangeably.

² As an objective was to examine youth involvement in programs and decision-making, the team visited camps close to towns where there is greater access to services and information.

³ For more information about the Women’s Commission’s new displaced, out-of-school youth initiative, visit <http://www.womenscommission.org/projects/children/untapped.php>

⁴ Report available at: <http://www.womenscommission.org/pdf/ug.pdf>

⁵ Government of Uganda Ministry of Education and Sport. *Annual PEAP Implementation Review Report for the Education Sector*. March 2007.

⁶ UNICEF-Kampala compiled statistics, 2007. p. 116.

⁷ Government of Uganda Ministry of Education and Sport. *Annual PEAP Implementation Review Report for the Education Sector*. March 2007.

⁸ The scale of abduction is enormous. According to the *Survey of War Affected Youth* (Annan, J; Blattman, C; Horton, R; September 2006), in the areas of Kitgum and Pader surveyed, more than one third of all male youth and one sixth of all female youth have been abducted for at least a day. Roughly half of these escaped or were released within two weeks.

⁹ Staff member, local NGO, interview by Jenny Perlman Robinson and Juliet Young, Gulu, Uganda, May 11, 2007.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Maghild Norgaard, Project Manager, Odong Laurence, Project Officer, and Ochora Ochitti, Education Officer, Norwegian Refugee Council, interview by Jenny Perlman Robinson and Juliet Young, Gulu, Uganda, May 14, 2007.

¹² Kibula Dennis, Director, Gulu Youth Center, interview by Jenny Perlman Robinson and Juliet Young, Gulu, Uganda, May 14, 2007.

¹³ Government of Uganda Ministry of Education and Sport. *Annual PEAP Implementation Review Report for the Education Sector*. March 2007.

¹⁴ Kibula Dennis, Director, Gulu Youth Center, interview by Jenny Perlman Robinson and Juliet Young, Gulu, Uganda, May 14, 2007.

¹⁵ Young woman, interview by Jenny Perlman Robinson and Juliet Young, Gulu, Uganda, May 14, 2007.

¹⁶ Due to increased donor support, food rations are expected to resume to the 60 percent level in June 2007.

¹⁷ Term refers to young women and girls who were forced to become the sexual partners of members of the LRA.

¹⁸ Giovanni Bosco, Deputy Head of Office, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, interview by Jenny Perlman Robinson and Juliet Young, Kampala, Uganda, May 4, 2007.

¹⁹ Female member, Empowering Hands, interview by Jenny Perlman Robinson and Juliet Young, Gulu District, Uganda, May 12, 2007.

²⁰ Inter-Agency Standing Committee Working Group in Uganda: Update on IDP Movements, May 2007.

²¹ Human Rights Watch, *The “Night Commuters”: Uganda’s Forgotten Children of War*. 2006. <<http://hrw.org/photos/2005/uganda>>

²² Stephanie Schwarz, Child Protection Officer, Mid-North Region, UNICEF. Kampala, Uganda. Email June 11, 2007.

²³ Staff member, local NGO, interview by Jenny Perlman Robinson and Juliet Young, Gulu, Uganda, May 11, 2007.

²⁴ Man, age 40, focus group facilitated by Jenny Perlman Robinson and Juliet Young, Coo-pee camp, Gulu district, May 13, 2007.

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