



AFRICA POLICY BRIEF

FORCED TO FIGHT: AN INTEGRATED APPROACH TO FORMER CHILD SOLDIERS IN NORTHERN UGANDA

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According to the United Nations, over 115,000 child soldiers have been demobilized since 2000.¹ Today, the use of child soldiers remains a prominent issue across the globe as children remain in the crossfire of warfare. African rebel groups such as the Ugandan Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in Sierra Leone made use of a significant number of child soldiers with estimates reaching as high as 70,000 children for the two groups.² In 1987, the LRA emerged in Uganda as a Christian extremist insurgency group to fight against the marginalization of the Acholi people in northern Uganda by the central government.³ By 2004, the LRA was responsible for killing over 100,000 civilians, displacing over 1.6 million people, and kidnapping upwards of 30,000⁴ children to serve as child soldiers. While the LRA has not been operational in Uganda since peace talks were held with the Ugandan government in 2006, the group remains active on a small scale in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Central African Republic.⁵ After the LRA's departure from Uganda, thousands of child soldiers and abductees struggled with reintegration into their communities.

Many former child soldiers (FCS) emerged from their war experiences with physical and mental health challenges, serious deficiencies in education, and a lack of vocational skills required for financial self-sufficiency. FCS tend to isolate and ostracize themselves from their communities, and their personal conditions worsen over time. FCS may experience "nightmares, insomnia, bedwetting, eating disorders, and difficulty concentrating, and exhibited behavioral problems when interacting with others. Some...resort[ed] to violence to solve problems,

while others became depressed and suicidal.”⁶ A 2009 study of 2,875 Ugandans found that of the 946 formerly abducted individuals in their sample, over two-thirds of them demonstrated signs of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).⁷

Given the prevalence of such conditions among FCS, it is important to account for these challenges when considering reintegration efforts. Consequently, a vocational program for FCS could be structured to provide psychosocial benefits or programs to provide a more holistic approach to reintegration that accounts for the various challenges facing FCS. Today, there are hundreds of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) operating in the region that provide education and other basic health services. Existing services, while in many ways beneficial, fall short of achieving full reintegration of former child soldiers.⁸ Furthermore, a growing body of literature raises questions about the effectiveness of FCS reintegration efforts, suggesting that it is insufficient to focus solely on psychological trauma. Rather, setbacks to FCS’ education and economic livelihoods are also detrimental to their reintegration. Proper implementation of programs to address the fuller range of challenges would not only be a response to the self-sufficiency challenges confronting FCS, but could also “contribute enormously to community healing and cohesiveness to outshine the social divides resulting from the war.”⁹

Former Child Soldier Reintegration: Lessons Learned from Northern Uganda

The Global Livingston Institute (GLI) and the Cornell Institute for Public Affairs (CIPA) have partnered for the past three years to better understand what happens to FCS as they reintegrate into their communities and what resources and systems are necessary to support them and their social networks to enable successful transitions. Focusing on Lira and the surrounding region in northern Uganda, this research initiative suggests that providing workforce development programs and job placement opportunities in addition to psychosocial support is an essential and more holistic approach. The participants from this particular case study include 27 males and 10 females with a mean age of 23 years old.

The sample was almost three-quarters male and one-third reported being married. Average education was under nine years of schooling and a majority of the sample reported being in fair or poor health. Almost half of those interviewed perceived that they were unwelcome in their communities and all subjects identified jobs training and skills as a necessary resource, above health care, to reintegrate back into their communities.

Policy Options & Recommendations:

Successful transition for an FCS back into the community is driven by their effort to be an independent, self-sufficient adult. CIPA and GLI are working with funders and Ugandan government officials to encourage local investment in Ugandan-run social impact initiatives, revenue generation, and job creation. Such efforts have the capacity to provide targeted opportunities for former child soldiers to facilitate their successful transition back into their respective communities and into the workplace. It is important to implement policies that can help properly support these goals. The policy options are intended for local governments, NGOs, international organizations, and policymakers operating in Northern Uganda. While the following options may apply outside of this region, context and cultural variations must be taken into consideration.

- 1. Create targeted educational programs that are in close proximity to the FCS:** These programs should focus on improving basic literacy and numeracy and provide core skills necessary for the workplace and job opportunities specific to the region. Physical proximity will increase accessibility.

2. **Make services available to the entire community:** It is critical that workforce development training not be provided exclusively to FCS to avoid creating any additional division between them and other members of the community in need of the same services.
3. **Provide vocational training programs geared toward professional reintegration of FCS:**
The majority of former child soldiers surveyed had fewer than 11 full years of education, with the average being approximately 9 years. Half of the participants were not working, and the other half reported to be working in agriculture, the service industry, or as a skilled worker. The majority of participants (97.22 percent) live with other people, and about one-third are living with their parents. Above access to health care, all FCS interviewed stated that they desired additional job training in order to better prepare themselves for reintegration into the community and workforce. While the particular types of training varied, there were several common areas of interest that could be focused on: seven FCS stated interest in mechanical skills training, six in tailoring and sewing skills training, five in agriculture skills training, four in engineering skills training, and four in general business skills training.
4. **Combine education, workforce development, job training, and job placement with psychosocial support to provide a more holistic approach to reintegration:** Due to the breadth of complex issues that FCS experience, combining psychosocial and social approaches will help to properly address their emotional and social reintegration.¹⁰
5. **Invest in local agricultural businesses and other industries relevant to the region to create jobs for FCS and other members of the community:** Increasing demand for crop production and the growing food insecurity in East Africa can create employment opportunities for FCS if effective investments are made in the development of the agricultural industry. Investment and development should begin in Lira and Gulu where the agricultural industry is the most concentrated and developed in the region. Social impact initiatives should be coordinated between the private sector, the local government, and local NGOs to address existing gaps and create a more sustainable community development approach.

Conclusions

Ultimately, a more integrated and holistic approach should be employed through strategic partnerships involving the academy, the private sector, the government, and the nonprofit sector to reintegrate FCS back into their communities. Such approaches could positively impact not only the quality of life of the FCS, but that of the community as a whole.

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