

Supporting Women as Peace Builders: The Southern Sudan Experience¹

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Background

The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) conflict, now going on 25 years, is among the longest in modern African history. After the breakdown of the Juba peace process in 2008, the conflict spread to the Central African Republic (CAR), the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and Southern Sudan, with grave humanitarian consequences. As of July 2010 more than 600,000 people had been displaced, and an estimated 1,000-2,000 people, including women and children, remained captive to the LRA. Joint military operations launched by the Ugandan army in collaboration with its neighbors neither delivered civilian protection nor contained the LRA's movements and atrocities. Where the LRA operates in the CAR, DRC, and Southern Sudan, there is limited government presence or information about LRA activities. In Northern Uganda, past grievances remain unresolved.

Yet, amid these challenges, there are opportunities for constructive intervention. The foundations laid by the Juba peace process, the Ugandan Amnesty Act, and the region's nascent civil society networks offer opportunities for dialogue, cross-border reconciliation, and the reintegration of returnees.

Introduction and Objectives

Given the regional nature of the LRA conflict and the limited government presence in affected areas, peace-building issues cannot be addressed solely by governments or within a single country. Organized civil society groups in each affected country, working in concert with one another, play an essential role in responding to the conflict, reducing the threat of the LRA to the general population, and improving regional knowledge of LRA movements and tactics. This involves interventions that—recognizing the limits of international and national influence—stay close to the ground, in step with the social interactions and changes ongoing in conflict-affected communities.

An initiative implemented by Conciliation Resources is supporting grassroots organizations and influential community figures to help them better articulate their knowledge and viewpoints to policy makers and practitioners. Such organi-

zations and figures vary in scope and kind. For example, the nascent work of religious and cultural leaders in LRA-affected areas has increasingly promoted cross-border conflict transformation. Initiatives that support the involvement of such civil society actors are promoting regional transformation through experience-based response to conflict, complemented by high-quality analysis. Meanwhile, a critical gap has been identified in this process: the limited channels of communication among women in LRA-affected areas, and the resulting underrepresentation of women's perspectives and experiences in local, national, and international forums on the conflict.

To close that gap, Conciliation Resources established a specific initiative to support women as peace builders in the LRA conflict by providing a channel for their voices to be heard by key stakeholders. Workshops across the CAR, DRC, and Uganda were convened to provide a space for a diverse set of women to share their perspectives on issues pertaining to the conflict. Workshop activities and discussions sought to address the specific needs of women affected by the LRA and to foster coordination, communication, and synergy among women's groups and organizations across the region. The outputs of the workshops provided initial inputs for the elaboration of experience-based analysis and preliminary recommendations reflecting women's issues and needs in the context of the LRA conflict.

The Learning on Gender and Conflict in Africa (LOGiCA) Program partnered with Conciliation Resources to extend the initiative into Southern Sudan, complementing the work already being conducted in the CAR, DRC, and Uganda.³ The initiative was being implemented in areas recently attacked by the LRA, and so Yambio was selected in Southern Sudan. Participants represented a cross-section of women from the community identified by Conciliation Resources' partners,

1 **Editor's note:** The initiative to which this note refers took place prior to the establishment of the Republic of South Sudan on July 9, 2011. This area is therefore referred to as Southern Sudan throughout the document.

2 Conciliation Resources is a UK-based peacebuilding NGO <http://www.c-r.org/>

3 Funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs through their embassy in Kampala, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Authority (SIDA), the U.K. government's Department for International Development (DFID), and the Belgian Government.

JUPEDEC (*Jeunesse Unie pour la Protection de l'Environnement et le Développement Communautaire – Youth United for the Protection of the Environment and Community Development*) and the Totto Chan Centre for Child Trauma, both of which have extensive experience and networks within the local community.

The sessions were tailored specifically to the Southern Sudan context and the specific needs of the women identified. Topics included: (i) contextualized conflict analysis tools—“the human knot game” and the “cassava plant analogy”; (ii) LRA conflict analysis—a ranking of key issues affecting women; (iii) a discussion of the LRA’s impact on the Western Equatoria State (WES) and of the unique role women might play in finding solutions to the conflict; (iv) Security Council Resolution 1325—on women, peace and security: an introduction; and (v) an action plan for the future.

Women’s Perspectives, Issues, and Needs: Key Findings

The following topics were raised by participants in the course of the three-day workshop in Yambio. Findings are purely qualitative and anecdotal, and the generalizations that follow were made by participants themselves during workshop activities and consultations.

Women as observers rather than actors. Women of the WES are generally marginalized from dialogues on security in the region and specifically in relation to the LRA. In Southern Sudan in general, little attention has been given to the role that women can play in peace-building initiatives.

“It is the first time that we are meeting as women in WES to talk about the problems caused by LRA and what we can do as women.” “I have heard of new things that I have never heard about . . . UNSCR 1325 . . . how I wish that these discussions could be extended to other women in the state.”

The mysteries of LRA violence. The LRA entered the WES in 2004. They employed tactics consistent with other LRA-affected areas: abducting young people, indoctrinating them, and sending them back to fight their own communities. Workshop participants observed that the tactics, strate-

gies, and the LRA’s mode of operation were all new to the local population, who found them difficult to comprehend. They could not understand how individuals once so close to them were the perpetrators of such violence.

Discussions highlighted a range of views on the LRA conflict’s root causes and possible solutions. Some participants strongly advocated for the reinforcement of the Arrow Boys, a loose-knit, lightly armed local defense force that had taken community security into their own hands. Others felt that the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) or the Uganda People’s

Defense Force (UPDF) should strengthen their response. Others had hope only in nonviolent approaches. Another group stated that none of the aforementioned approaches would work and that the situation was rather hopeless. Such different (and sometimes conflicting) narratives indeed reflect key perspectives of the ongoing dialogue.

“These are all our children,” one elderly woman remarked, “we do not like violence, but at the same time we have nowhere to hide.” Another woman added, “This is a new challenge. These are our own children, brothers, and sisters doing it to us. Violence is perpetrated by someone who comes to your door step in the small hours of the night and calls you by name . . . and in most cases, you even recognize the voice.”

Civilian Protection

The protracted nature of the conflict, with its severe humanitarian and developmental consequences, poses new challenges to the region. The systematic targeting of children, the use of fear and abduction as tools of war, and the displacement of populations create a self-perpetuating cycle of loss, resentment, and hopelessness that feeds the conflict. Workshop participants expressed their belief that security forces, the SPLA, UPDF, and the United Nations Mission in Sudan (UNMIS) could better protect civilians. Without adequate protection, communities have taken to self-armament, and the Arrow Boys are considered to be local heroes. Such sentiments have widened the gap between the government and local population. This is a particular challenge in the WES, an area that felt few of the effects of Sudan’s civil war but that now in “peacetime” is suffering armed conflict.

Female-Specific Impact of the LRA

Women and youth are the principal targets of the abduction and sexual enslavement practiced by the LRA. Former female abductees face social exclusion and its attendant economic implications, as well as the psychological trauma linked to acts of violence—whether experienced as victims, perpetrators, or witnesses. Women returnees are often feared and rejected by their communities, their families, and their spouses, particularly if they return with a child of an unknown father born in captivity. Returnees—especially survivors of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV)—face a rather bleak future, lightened by only limited rehabilitation services.

Programmatic Response

Participants discussed the key challenges that they believe women and girls are likely to face: illiteracy, formal and informal barriers to education, family conflict, and health problems—with specific reference to SGBV and reintegration. Participants underscored the limited availability of economic opportunities for women in the WES and pointed to better access to formal and informal education for women and girls as a significant source of hope among the population. Partici-

pants specifically referred to women's lack of business skills and access to capital as impediments to success in income-generating activities; they also noted significant barriers, such as diploma requirements, for women hoping to access civil service jobs.

Workshop participants noted the need to overcome gender obstacles in the following areas: education, livelihoods, health, relationships, access to justice and disarmament, and demobilization and reintegration programming. Current programming is for the most part short term and humanitarian focused; longer-term support of formal and informal education, economic opportunities, and psychosocial well-being is scant. That such long-term initiatives should grow and begin to target women directly is vital to community well-being. Such initiatives might enjoy better outcomes if they helped local women to develop their own solutions and to express their own ideas and aspirations.

Civil Society Engagement

Participants reported limited civil society engagement due to low capacity and poor coordinating structures within civil society organizations, women's associations, and donor agencies. This is in contrast to Uganda, where civil society is highly engaged and there is dialogue between the government, civil society, and donors on the issue of the LRA. Indeed, more broadly, communication between women and women's groups is limited. In the WES, women's level of contact outside of the region is minimal. This lack of exposure to other women's experiences contributes to individual isolation and constrains the valuable lessons to be learned from shared experience.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The following recommendations were made by participants themselves during the workshop exercise in Yambio. Overall, the need to strengthen the capacity of women and the organizations that support them emerged as a key finding. In addition, there is a need for training and sensitization efforts targeting gender-specific issues. Such efforts might support women—both as individuals and in groups—in addressing the effects of the LRA conflict and regaining a sense of agency over their lives, as opposed to being seen and treated as victims. To ensure women's participation in the peace-building process, they need support. Such support might take the form of information on women's rights, applicable legal frameworks, and examples of what other women have done in similar circumstances in the region. Specific recommendations for future programming include the following.

Strengthening Women's Groups and Networks

- Support the creation of women's groups and networks in the WES, in LRA-affected areas, and beyond, with

particular focus on enhancing organizational management capacity.

- Establish mechanisms for regular consultations with women and women's groups on existing peace-building initiatives and identify entry points for women to engage in the overall dialogue.
- Promote cross-border exchange among women in LRA-affected regions, allowing them to share knowledge and develop regional strategies for their productive engagement. In particular, facilitate exchange visits to learn from the successes of positive civil society engagement, such as that of women's organizations in Uganda.

Capacity Building

- *Women's groups.* Develop and disseminate tools to understand and address the conflict, tailored to the WES context. Communicate women's needs and aspirations to the leaders of national, regional, and international efforts to address the LRA conflict.

Strengthen the capacity of women's organizations in the areas of peace building, human rights education, leadership, and communication and advocacy to promote the inclusion of women's issues and perspectives in local, national, and international dialogues on the LRA conflict.

- *Individual beneficiaries.* Consider women and girls as a special target group of education and training programming. Bolster economic opportunities for women by promoting their formal and informal education and vocational training. Complement such efforts by ongoing community-wide training in human rights, women's issues, and peace building.
- Local and national development actors. Build the capacity of actors focused on the reintegration of LRA returnees to integrate gender-specific issues into demobilization and reintegration programming. In particular, help such actors administer appropriate and comprehensive support for those experiencing trauma—especially those dealing with SGBV issues.

Public Information and Sensitization

- Increase the outreach of public information on the LRA conflict through various traditional and nontraditional media, with a focus on issues specific to women and their human rights.
- Support increased radio coverage and strengthen the programming capacity of existing radio stations in the WES.