

The State of Youth and Youth Protection in Northern Uganda

Findings from the Survey for War Affected Youth

A Report for UNICEF Uganda
Draft Executive Summary

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NOTICE: This document is draft and incomplete. All figures are preliminary, as a small handful of respondents are still outstanding, and the data have yet to be re-weighted to reflect attrition from the survey sample. Please do not cite without the authors' permission. Updates findings and figures will be provided upon request.

Youth are simultaneously the primary victims and the primary actors in the two-decade long war in northern Uganda. Yet, while we know that youth have suffered (and continue to do so), we have not been able to answer with confidence or precision some crucial questions, namely: who is suffering, how much, and in what ways? Moreover, while we know that youth have made up the bulk of the armed rebel group, almost always forcibly, we have little sense of the magnitude, incidence, and nature of the violence and trauma.

One consequence of this state of affairs is that programming is often based on immediate and observable needs, easily defined categories, and assumptions about what sort of help ought to be provided. With only rough measures of well-being at our disposal, a second consequence is unavoidably basic targeting of services.

This is not to say that the assistance delivered has been ineffective; on the contrary, millions of people have received food and supplies, thousands of undeniably needy youth have received training and equipment, hundreds of communities have been sensitized to the plight of returned youth combatants, and thousands of these returnees have been healed of their physical wounds, received counseling, and been reunited with their families. Those working on the ground are the first to lament, however, that they do not know if they are meeting the most urgent needs or reaching the most needy and vulnerable individuals. Unable to conduct the kind of evidence-based programming they would all like to see done, they wonder to what extent their programs have helped. They are certain, moreover, that the services provided, while substantial, fall far short of the enormous need.

The purpose of SWAY is to work with such field professionals to generate new and better programming based on in-depth data and investigation.

The evidence cited in this report argues for significant changes in humanitarian aid and protection services in northern Uganda. Current programming is overwhelmingly focused on two activities: meeting the humanitarian needs of the internally displaced population, and “reintegrating” children returning from abduction by the rebel force. New survey and interview evidence, however, make the case for several important shifts in program design and targeting:

- A broadening in focus from children to youth;
- A shift from reception of former abductees to decentralized follow-up and monitoring of vulnerable youth;
- A shift from targeting based on simple and potentially stigmatizing categories (i.e. formerly abducted) to more salient measures of need and vulnerability;

- A shift from prioritizing psychosocial care to prioritizing large-scale, age-appropriate education and income-generating activities;
- A shift from general psychosocial programming to more targeted and specific interventions for those with the most severe challenges; and, finally,
- A shift from small-scale income generation towards actively promoting ways to safely return youth to their land.

The evidence not only argues for a change in emphasis, but also a change in scale. What is clearly needed is both a major increase in the follow-up and monitoring of vulnerable and needy youth, as well as a vast expansion of the health-related, educational, and income-generating assistance available to them. Child protection specialists in the north are the first to admit that the monitoring and follow-up of displaced youth, while on the rise, is completely inadequate. The response to cases needing immediate attention, moreover, has been virtually negligent. During one NGO and UN coordination meeting in Kitgum, a senior child protection officer concluded from SWAY evidence and his own personal observation that, “by any standard, there is effectively no functioning child or youth protection system in the IDP camps” – a comment met with general agreement by the rest of the group.

Finally, the evidence argues for humanitarian organizations to continue to maintain the difficult and delicate balance between emergency services and a long-term development program. Such a hybrid response is, we argue, the only effective response to what is essentially a hybrid problem: a prolonged emergency. The contradiction in terms is obvious most of all to those living it—an emergency situation stretched over years or even decades, where inattention to food and sanitation risks losing their lives, while inattention to schooling and economic activity risks losing a whole generation to poverty.

Objectives, Scope, and Approach

The Survey for War Affected Youth (SWAY) is a research program dedicated to bringing new data, tools, and analysis to the task of improving the design and targeting of youth protection, assistance, and reintegration programs in northern Uganda.

Between September 2005 and March 2006, SWAY surveyed 1000 households and approximately 750 male youth. Households were randomly drawn from 2002 camp household lists, and youth were selected for interview *based on whether they were living in the household in 1996*—allowing us to capture in the survey youth that had migrated, died, or been abducted and not returned. Those youth that migrated were tracked over the entire country, with 85% tracking success, which ensures that our data are not biased because we are missing a specific group of people. Finally, more than 30 of the 750 youth were selected for in-depth interviews on wide-ranging topics.

For the purposes of this initial phase, we have limited our study to males between the ages of 14 and 30, based roughly on the Acholi definition of youth. For logistical and security reasons, the study was also limited to 8 sub-counties in the districts of Kitgum and Pader. We believe, however, that the results are relevant to male Acholi youth throughout the region. A study of women and girls is forthcoming.

Specifically, this report aims to accomplish the following three objectives:

- Assess the dimensions of vulnerability and resilience of male youth in IDP camps by developing specific measures of youth well-being including economic success, physical health, psychological health, and social and family support;
- Assess what individual, family, and community characteristics are most closely associated with resilience and vulnerability; and
- Assess whether the most deprived and vulnerable are being successfully targeted with aid and programs;

The report first assesses the state of youth (in terms of psychosocial well-being, education, livelihoods, health, war violence, and abduction and reintegration), and second develops recommendations surrounding the design and targeting of youth programming in northern Uganda.

Part A: The State of Youth

Part A of the report details the state of youth: their psychosocial well-being, their education, their economic activities, their health, the war violence they have faced, and the reintegration challenges they return to.

The state of psychosocial well-being

- The majority of male youth show remarkable resilience. Three quarters of youth report low to medium amounts of emotional distress—remarkable in a population with an average of 11 traumatic experiences. Over ninety percent reported fairly high levels of positive social functioning and low levels of aggression. Family connectedness is also quite high.
- On average, formerly abducted youth show only slightly higher emotional distress, although those with the highest symptoms of emotional distress are twice as likely to be formerly abducted.
- While those who experience moderate to high levels of emotional distress or low social functioning clearly suffer from their symptoms, on average these symptoms are not directly related to their educational and occupational functioning.
- The Acholi cosmology and spiritual world is key to understanding and aiding adversely psychologically-affected youth. Five percent of youth reported being haunted by spirits (*cen*), with the vast majority of those being formerly abducted. Roughly one-third of those who are haunted report ceremonies or going to the witch doctor as the solution, with another third reporting prayers or becoming a born-again Christian as the way to rid themselves of *cen*.
- Family connectedness and social support are key protective factors for the psychological well-being of youth.
- Peer support is highly valued by youth and seen as important for dealing with their stress. Youth groups are seen as one of the only enjoyable parts of camp life.

The state of education

- The primary school system is effective in at least the most basic sense, achieving high enrolment and literacy among adolescents. Yet a significant minority of youth, primarily those over 18, are functionally illiterate, in part because many could not afford primary schooling as children, and because remedial adult education programs are unavailable.
- In particular, while primary school completion is relatively high, few youth make the transition from primary to secondary school, principally it seems because they cannot afford school fees.
- The struggle to pay school and exam fees has led to a widespread pattern of episodic schooling, where enrolment and exam-taking are interrupted frequently by periods of idleness, typically when a student's financial support disappears or dries up. With continuation in schooling so dependent on the ability to raise fees, those youth engaging in 'child labor' have attained a higher level of education when family networks fail.
- Formerly abducted youth have significantly lower levels of schooling, not simply because of the time away from school and the difficulty of returning to school as a young adult, but also because of the impact of abduction on the resources available for paying fees.
- University education is rare, although self- and family-funded (but not NGO-funded) vocational training is relatively common.

- Not only are the economic returns to education substantial, but higher levels of education seems to be associated with less risky and vulnerable income-generating activities for youth.
- Education and vocational training are by no means a cure-all, however, and further study should be taken before a scaling-up of such programs.

The state of livelihoods and the economy

- The economic options open to youth in and out of the camps are, in a word, abysmal. Few youth have access to land, and the principal forms of economic activity are *leje leje*, essentially casual labor and small projects. Such work is generally sporadic and unprofitable, and at the median youth have just 10 days of work per month at wages lower than 75 cents per day.
- The local labor market can be best characterized as an occupational ladder increasing in the skills and capital required. Activities higher on the ladder appear to raise earnings more because of higher employment (rather than higher wages). Activities low on the ladder are not only irregular and poorly paid, but also more risky.
- Military service, while a risky activity, nevertheless appears to be a reasonable (if unfortunate) economic strategy for many young males—it is far better paid than most activities in the camps. It is also a protective strategy—many join to avoid abduction, especially those with low family support.
- Labor market success is closely associated with higher levels of education and vocational training, while labor market failure is associated with poor health and injuries, and poor family relations. In terms of root causes of labor market failure, abduction and orphaning have strong predictive power, while parent's wealth and education are surprisingly of little or no significance.
- In spite of the labor market challenges outlined herein, few youth leave the region to look for work—primarily, it seems, because of few contacts, fewer resources, no language skills, and an emotional tie to their homes rather than (as sometimes argued) because of active discrimination against the Acholi outside of the north.

The state of health

- While roughly twenty percent of youth report less than good health, more than ten percent overall suffer from a serious injury or illness that inhibits their ability to work and attend. Nearly a third of these injuries were inflicted by the LRA.
- Three percent of youth still have serious war wounds, suggesting that there are thousands of returnees in urgent need of treatment.
- Nutrition is poor, with two-fifths of youth eating just once per day.
- Alcohol abuse is disruptive but limited to a small number of youth.
- Reproductive health and condom usage is high.

The state of war violence and abduction

- War violence and abduction are essentially the chief concern of the youth we interviewed. Quite simply, the scale of violence is immense. On average, the youth in our sample reported experiencing 11 of the 31 traumatic events about which we asked. Only 3 youth experienced none of these traumatic events at all;
- While the perpetrators are not always the LRA, and the victims not solely abductees, we show that the worst violence has indeed been experienced by the formerly abducted, largely from the LRA.

- The scale of abduction is immense—a third of all male youth and a sixth of all female youth taken for at least a day. Two thirds of these abductees remained for at least two weeks. 70% of youth abductions were children or adolescents, with the LRA especially focused on abducting boys aged 13 to 17.
- While the abducted youth experience the most violence overall, the violence experienced by the non-abducted is still tremendously grave. In particular, both abductees and non-abductees seem to face a non-negligible risk of forcible recruitment not only into the LRA, but into the Ugandan army as well. Four of the 44 youth we interviewed ever in the military reported they were pressed involuntarily into service.
- The number of abductions and the average age of abduction has been rising, and the average length of abduction has been falling, suggesting that abduction may have become as much a terror tactic as a means of finding recruits.
- Not all abductees become fighters, and relatively few are forced to kill. Moreover, a surprising number of abducted youth, including a third of the children, say there was a time they felt like staying with the LRA. More than a tenth admits to having felt loyalty to Kony, and having ambitions to become a commander.
- Of those who return, the vast majority of abducted males have escaped (rather than been rescued or released). Some report attempting to escape right away, but many report a moment of “awakening” when they suddenly decided staying was no longer worthwhile.

The state of return and reintegration of the formerly abducted

- Much of the focus of child and youth protection in northern Uganda has been centered on the formerly abducted, and the majority of the funding and interventions for this group seems to have been through the reception centers. These centers provide a place to physically heal, trace family members, and receive advice and information from center staff.
- It is remarkable, therefore, to note that less than half of the youth abducted reported passing through a reception center, and less than half reported receiving any other direct assistance from an NGO or the government. Short-term abductees are the least likely to pass through any center, even though they have on average been exposed to fairly substantial violence in their short time away.
- Most youth that pass through the UPDF child protection unit leave after two days unscathed, but a tenth report long detentions and a tenth report beatings or other abuse—a trend that has been on the rise since the late-1990s.
- The reception at home by family and community is generally strong, and relatively few former abductees report any difficulties;
- Where community persecution does occur, it follows several common patterns, including: (i) persecution by the grieving parents of abducted youth that have not returned; (ii) persecution by individuals who were specifically aggrieved by the former abductee in question (e.g. livestock stolen by the abductee when with the rebels); (iii) persecution of spiritually- or psychologically-affected youth; and (iv) augmentation of existing persecution by outbreaks of LRA violence and by alcohol consumption among neighbors.
- We observe mild to moderate psychosocial consequences of abduction, focused primarily on those persecuted by the community, who have high-level of self-blame, and (perhaps at a more root level) who experienced the most violence.

Part B: Implications and Recommendations for Youth Protection

Part B of the report discusses the implications of these findings for the design and targeting of services for youth, especially the need to maintain a delicate balance between emergency-response and longer-term development.

Implications for the focus and design of services for youth

- Programming should be more inclusive of young adults, treating them as a central category of concern, rather than an addendum to child support and protection programs.
- Current programming focuses primarily on humanitarian needs and psychosocial support (broadly-defined) with less emphasis on education and economic interventions (especially the large-scale ones that are required). As a consequence, agencies risk saving the lives of millions of youth, but condemning them to decades of poverty.
- In general, we advocate a two-pronged strategy: broad-based education and economic support, combined with targeted interventions to the youth facing the greatest social, psychological, and material challenges.
- In particular, there is an urgent and immediate need to support broad-based secondary and tertiary schooling, support which should target the most able as well as the most vulnerable.
- Further, we argue for an increased focus on (and funding for) youth economic programs. However, the only real economic solution is to return youth and their households to their land and traditional livelihoods. Thus economic programs must include innovative strategies for increasing access to land in addition to the current attention on other income-generating activities.
- In terms of “high-deprivation” youth, one of our most surprising findings was the prevalence of serious war wounds. Such injuries, which have received little attention, should be addressed immediately through emergency medical services.
- We also note the significant number of illiterate young adults, who should be targeted through alternative *age-appropriate* literacy and numeracy programs.
- We argue that psychosocial programming also needs to be more targeted and specific. In northern Uganda the term ‘psychosocial’ is applied extremely broadly, incorporating assistance that is psychological, economic, educational, and social in nature. While this integrated approach has many positive aspects, the drawbacks are at least twofold: (i) income-generating and educational programs tend to be evaluated on their psychological and social results rather than on their economic and educational outcomes; (ii) psychosocial interventions are almost by definition small-scale in an environment where large-scale interventions are sorely needed.
- In particular, psychosocial programming ought to: (i) shift from broad-based support programs to targeting highly psychologically-affected individuals and individuals estranged from their families and communities; (ii) shift from community sensitization to conflict resolution; and (iii) focus on encouraging family support and connectedness.
- Finally, we make a case for more evidence-based programming, in particular the formal and informal evaluation of programs.

Implications for the targeting and delivery of services for youth

- First, we note that traditional categories of vulnerability—orphans, child-headed households, and the formerly abducted—are only partially successful in capturing the most vulnerable youth.
- We also stress the problems with such categorizations, not least of which is stigmatization. Following some post-survey interviews and meetings in several camps, we are particularly concerned

about the impact of amnesty packages on the stigmatization and resentment of the formerly abducted.

- Broad-based, inclusive support, as we have advocated for education and economic programs, need not create categories or stigmatization, especially when they are both merit- and need-based.
- Targeting is nevertheless important and unavoidable. Targeting based on identifiable, obvious needs, such as illiteracy, war wounds, extreme psychosocial challenges, or an absence of caregivers, may minimize stigmatization.
- Perceived equity and information in service delivery will also limit the negative impacts of unavoidable targeting.
- Improved targeting is meaningless unless follow-up is increased. Follow-up and monitoring, while on the increase, is universally acknowledged to be inadequate. Central coordination is still being developed and refined, and most organizations appear to lack the systems and incentives to perform follow-up systematically and effectively. Furthermore, the organizations tasked with large-scale follow-up, the reception centers, seem to lack the resources and capacity to do so on the necessary scale.
- The use of reception centers as the primary instrument for follow-up and monitoring of vulnerable youth (as is presently the case) is inadequate and possibly inadvisable for at least three reasons: (i) they potentially miss the one half of returnees that did not pass through a reception center; (ii) it limits attention to formerly abducted youth rather than vulnerable and needy youth more generally; and (iii) it potentially adds to the stigmatization of formerly abducted in the community.
- Finally, the report argues that these goals—improved targeting, increased follow-up, and expanded service delivery—will be impossible to achieve unless those who deliver the services are able increase their time and presence in the camps. Aid is not effectively delivered if it is delivered by outsiders between the hours of 11am and 2pm alone. In the absence of an ability to open offices in individual camps, we argue for more overnight stays and permanent workers based in major trading centers.

As a final note, it deserves mention that, in our experience so far, few of these findings and conclusions truly come as a surprise to those working in the field. The relative inattention to youth, the importance of land access, the dearth of educational opportunities, the overemphasis on the formerly abducted, the inadequacy of follow-up activities—all of these conclusions have been to some extent anticipated or suspected by those on the ground. Many agencies have already begun to shift their programming in the direction suggested by this report. We hope that this report serves to confirm their suspicions and bolster their efforts to change course. We also hope it spurs funding and attention to youth, land access, education, and the non-abducted youth with desperate needs.