

**Planting the Seeds of Peace Ambassadors:
Post-conflict Recovery Through Vocational Training of Children Affected by War in Northern Uganda
Nellie Trenga-Schein, Max Clary, Seren Villwock
Lewis & Clark College
May-July 2017**

An entire generation in Uganda has missed out on both formal and traditional education due to armed conflict and regional displacement. While this generation is now the most vulnerable, we believe future peace depends on them. We plan to use agricultural vocational training supplemented with education in nutrition, small business practices, and conflict resolution to empower this generation towards peaceful self-reliance. After two years of research and direct collaboration in the Lira community, our project will draw on resources available to these young adults, encouraging a return to the traditional ways of life disrupted due to the war while promoting economic empowerment for families and villages. The content of the program curriculum has been designed in collaboration with local specialists in both child soldier rehabilitation and agriculture. It is our mission to combine the Western privilege of access to resources with local Ugandan knowledge and ideas. Ultimately, our project will initiate a new program with Children of Peace Uganda (CPU) that will contribute to our shared vision to provide psychosocial trauma counseling, vocational education, and leadership training to hundreds of children affected by war.

Northern Uganda is still trying to recover from a complicated and painful civil war rooted in a history of antagonism between Acholi people in the North and other Ugandan ethnic groups in the South that began during colonial times. In 1992, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) lost regional support and began abducting children as soldiers and raiding local villages for supplies. Children were victimized on all sides. Child soldiers were subjected to psychological torture and forced to commit violent acts, while those remaining faced horrible living conditions as refugees within their own country and were in constant danger of abduction or mutilation by the LRA. As a result of the war, about 25,000 people were abducted into captivity and nearly 2 million were displaced into internally displaced person (IDP) camps where they were dependent on the World Food Programme¹.

Consequently, an entire generation of northern Ugandans, many of whom are orphans and are now raising their own children, lack any formal or vocational education. These young adults and their children lack educational opportunities, suffer from food insecurity, lack access to mental and physical health care, and have limited means of earning a secure livelihood. There is no cohesive regional recovery program, and long-term rehabilitation assistance is being carried out largely by NGOs across the region, the context within which our project is situated.

Our team has been preparing to initiate this project over the past two years through research and networking with NGOs in central Africa. The entire team spent the summer of 2016 in northern Uganda to engage in experiential learning and study the dynamics of post-conflict recovery in the region. Seren took a field-based course in peace and conflict studies based in Gulu while Nellie and Max worked on the ground in Lira with our local partner organization, CPU. During the summer, we made connections in Lira, interviewed stakeholders, worked in collaboration with CPU and other local partners to establish a long-term plan to aid in post-conflict recovery for former child soldiers and the surrounding community, and planned our first steps.

In Lira, we asked children in CPU's programs about their biggest daily challenges, and repeatedly, we heard that they were unsure where their next meal would come from. Food scarcity and insecurity is a problem affecting over a quarter of the population in Uganda, and is disproportionately concentrated in the north after decades of conflict in the region². The creation of an agricultural education program will increase productivity within traditional ways of life, empowering these individuals to obtain food security. Additionally, the agricultural curriculum will include skills in money management and seed saving, proliferating the benefits with each new harvest.

We plan to initiate a two-month vocational training program for vulnerable teenagers and young adults in Ogur sub-county in northern Uganda. Participants for the training will be selected based on community input and a vulnerability assessment. We will have two groups of 20 participants each that will meet on alternate days of the week. CPU staff are assisting our team in selecting a local teacher from candidates with degrees in agriculture or agronomy who will provide local wisdom and expertise within the cultural context of the region. The program will

¹ Kitara Lagoro, David. "Resettlement and Rebuilding." School for International Training, Uganda and Rwanda: Peace and Conflict Studies in the Lake Victoria Basin. Gulu, Uganda. 13 July 2016. Lecture.

² "The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2015." Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2015. Web. 09 Nov. 2016.

be conducted in Langi, the local language. While our team is learning basic Langi, CPU staff speak both English and Langi fluently and will serve as translators.

The program will teach peaceful livelihood through the optimization of agricultural land, which is the primary resource available to these young adults, to promote food security as well as post-conflict recovery. Our plan is to provide educational resources that utilize traditional lifestyles as a foundation for economic empowerment and food security. The curriculum will incorporate preventative nutritional education that addresses deficiencies and nutrition-related diseases while considering local dietary customs. Education will focus on diabetes prevention, vitamin A deficiency, kwashiorkor (protein deficiency), and anemia (focused on post-pubescent and pregnant women). During the program, participants will be supplied with basic tools and seed starter packages using local varieties of nutritious crops high in protein. We will begin in mid-May with instruction on land preparation, planting techniques, and seedling care. During the middle of the season, while crops are growing, we will incorporate lessons on pest and disease management, soil and water conservation measures, seed saving, peaceful conflict resolution, and basic small business practices. By the end of the program, participants will collect seeds from the harvest of the demonstration garden to establish a community seed bank at a CPU facility in Ngeta. This will facilitate the exchange of seeds and serve as an emergency resource in times of shortage. Our team will facilitate the overall program logistics and teach the nutrition component of the workshop, while the local specialist will teach the specific agricultural knowledge. CPU staff will be involved in transportation, selecting participants, and facilitating the peacebuilding sessions following the model they currently use.

Discussions with our partners in Uganda over the past two years have revealed an important narrative; before the war, intense poverty contributed to the animosity of rebel groups towards the southern government, and during the war, it motivated many children to join the LRA as soldiers. Regardless of the situation individuals were in during the war, the majority of people living in northern Uganda are unified through the experience of suffering from the intense poverty and food scarcity that the war left behind. For these communities in a position of loss, new agricultural skills will provide unity and promote a future of peaceful collaboration.

Together with our local partners, we have developed a first step towards future peace and stability for vulnerable youth. Through education related to improved farming techniques, war-affected individuals will be able to produce crops that will improve food security, address malnutrition, and promote economic empowerment. In addition, the project will work to build a sense of community between former child soldiers and other members of the community with a peace education component, a mentorship program, and a leadership development component. The program expands on CPU's peace ambassador empowerment program, which regularly gathers groups of war-affected youth for group counseling and peaceful reconciliation training sessions. Greater community involvement during the program is promoted through the inclusion of community leaders and representatives in the planning process, modeled after the engagement program used by the Tanzanian nonprofit Africa Bridge.

Stigmatization of former child soldiers will be addressed by involving them with other vulnerable community members in all aspects of planning and implementation of the program. They will be working with village leaders, and together they will encourage unification, trust and inclusion as they pursue the educational goals of the program. Training sessions will focus on teaching peaceful conflict resolution using collaborative discussion to appropriately express perspectives and resolve conflict. Trust and communication will be developed throughout the program as students learn to rely on each other to maintain their collective demonstration garden. Participants will also be paired in mentor relationships to provide a support system that fosters learning in the community and encourages leadership development. We will leave behind all of the educational materials, and more importantly, educated and empowered teachers to spread the knowledge to others in the community.

The project's sustainability will be ensured through a mentorship program, a course feedback system, the establishment of a community seed bank to pass on the harvest, and logistical support through CPU. Throughout the course, participants will engage in dialogues about their progress, and upon termination of the course, we will conduct a program evaluation session to ensure learning objectives were met. In future seasons, the community seed bank established in Ngeta will give out seed loans so that with each new harvest, the resources that program participants receive will be spread to others in need. After the conclusion of the project, the program will be expanded upon and continued under CPU's leadership, including future follow-up courses in small business management. This project is a step in the middle of a long journey towards recovery for northern Uganda. Investment in these young adults will impact not only individuals, but also their families and villages as the economic benefits and knowledge is shared. Instituting these workshops will help create meaningful change and move forward towards peace and the long-term recovery of children affected by war.