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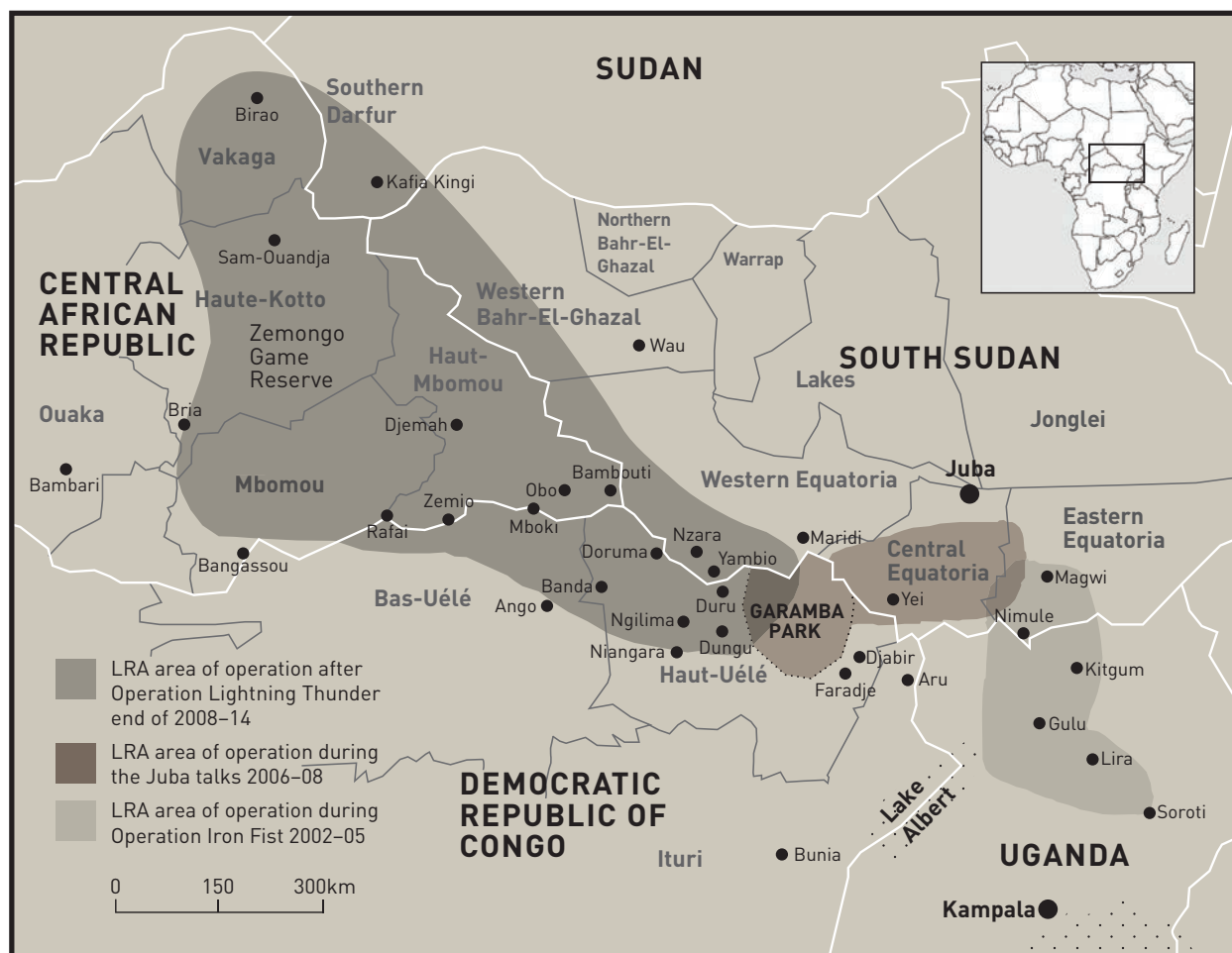
Policy Brief

Safe paths home: protecting civilians and supporting reintegration in LRA affected communities

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This map is intended for illustrative purposes only. Borders, names and other features are presented according to common practice in the region. Conciliation Resources take no position on whether this representation is legally or politically valid. © Conciliation Resources.

Methodology

This brief summarises the findings of a research project into the interconnected challenges of civilian protection and reintegration in LRA affected areas. An initial workshop was held in Kampala, Uganda in late January 2014 involving participants from LRA affected areas and external actors. Subsequent field research was carried out on protection and reintegration in the DRC (Aru, Faradje, Djabir, Dungu, Duru and Ngilima) in January and February 2014 and on reintegration in South Sudan (Yambio, Ezo, Asanza, Nzara, Gangura and Naybimo) in April and May 2014. The research comprised focus group discussions, workshops and interviews with a range of stakeholders including LRA returnees, community members, religious and traditional leaders, security sector actors and international agencies. The constraints of time and logistics prevented researchers from accessing all LRA affected communities.

Acknowledgements

The findings in this policy brief are drawn from research conducted by Philip Lancaster and Dr Emilie Medeiros. Their complete analysis and policy recommendations are presented in two companion reports. For full details of the research project and to download the reports please visit: www.c-r.org

Cover image: Grace with family in Ezo, South Sudan. © Dr Emilie Medeiros

Overview

The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) continues to threaten the lives and livelihoods of thousands of civilians in the border areas of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the Central African Republic (CAR) and South Sudan. Unpredictable attacks and the awful memory of past atrocities prevent local communities from pursuing their traditional means of subsistence. They struggle to cope with severe individual and collective trauma and to accept family members and neighbours whom the LRA kidnapped and forced to kill.

In response to this chronic insecurity, deep social and economic impact and inadequate responses from national and international actors, Conciliation Resources and partners conducted a thorough appraisal of current approaches to civilian protection and reintegration. The following analysis and policy recommendations are grounded in field research conducted in the DRC and South Sudan in consultation with directly affected communities.

Military pressure applied by the African Union Regional Task Force (AU-RTF), the vigilance of local self-defence groups in South Sudan and more effective strategies to encourage defections have seen the number and ferocity of LRA attacks fall in recent years. But LRA

members still have a dangerous level of operational initiative; moving quickly they attack villagers on roads and in their homes mainly to steal supplies. In addition to the LRA threat, cross-border criminals, poachers and armed Mbororo cattle herders (especially the Uda sub-group) grazing their stock in the forest instil constant fear among locals, trapping them in villages and towns and preventing them from farming, fishing or hunting as they used to. A more comprehensive approach to civilian protection is required, one that guarantees both immediate safety and the freedom of movement needed to access sustainable sources of income.

Reintegrating former LRA members into the social and economic fabric of local communities is also critical to their collective long-term prospects for a peaceful and productive life. Analysis of past and current initiatives and tensions within communities argues for reintegration that is driven by local state and community leaders. Their active support is key to garnering community buy-in and external backing. Reintegration initiatives should involve and benefit the whole community so that families and neighbours welcome returnees. The process should be recognised as a long-term project and a core strand of overall socio-economic recovery.

Main findings

- **A comprehensive approach to civilian protection is needed**, one that seeks to protect civilians from immediate security threats and guarantee them the freedom of movement needed for sustainable livelihoods.
- **Strong and collaborative local leadership is essential for effective protection and reintegration**; local state authorities working in close partnership with traditional and religious leaders and civil society.
- **Reintegration efforts should adopt a community-based and culturally-specific approach** that prioritises initiatives that involve and benefit whole communities and thus is better able to foster reconciliation between hosts and returnees.
- **Effective reintegration requires long-term commitment from all stakeholders** so that through education and employment returnees can play a productive and sustainable role in their communities.



*Puppet in full military combat uniform, erected to ward off threat in the absence of a state security presence, Congo (DRC).
© Aubrey Wade*

Findings and recommendations

1. A comprehensive approach to civilian protection is needed, one that seeks to protect civilians from immediate security threats and guarantee them the freedom of movement needed for sustainable livelihoods.

Daily life for communities living in LRA affected areas of the DRC, the CAR and along the border in South Sudan is dominated by the fear of attack by the LRA and other armed groups. That fear is fed by memories of the horrifying brutality of past LRA attacks. The group's terror tactics emptied much of the countryside, as inhabitants fled to population centres in search of protection. Despite a drop in LRA attacks, villagers do not feel safe enough to return and do not enjoy the freedom of movement needed to farm, fish, hunt and trade. The growing presence of armed Mbororo cattle herders intensifies this sense of entrapment.

The whole population suffers, as those already living in towns and villages must share access to land with displaced populations and those areas they can access to farm, hunt and fish are not enough to support both host communities and the displaced. Without sufficient space to generate small surpluses from rudimentary agriculture, residents' ability to raise money to cover school fees and medical expenses has been severely inhibited. Unable to return home, they remain dispossessed and disempowered.

The efforts of security sector actors tasked with protecting civilians have proved inadequate. In the DRC, the approach of the army and United Nations (UN) peacekeepers of attempting to guard population centres through passive presence is ineffective since the LRA consistently chooses to avoid military installations and attack undefended civilian

targets. Security actors' lack of response to security incidents also fails to deter future attacks. The African Union Regional Task Force (AU-RTF), now severely depleted, concentrates on aggressive missions rather than civilian protection.

"The state is almost non-existent, the NGOs have gone, but the LRA is still there."

Civil society member, Dungu, DRC

Civilians expressed feelings of abandonment by state authorities and dismay at the departure of many NGOs and UN agencies that helped

fill the void in service delivery. In Dungu, an employment boom brought on by the arrival of these NGOs has now gone bust, leaving a legacy of unemployment and inflation.

The root problem in all LRA affected areas, of which the LRA and Mbororo are but symptoms, is the near absence of state authority and the poor governance of those institutions that do exist. Local officials have reportedly done deals with Mbororo herders, regardless of the hardship they cause for local inhabitants. In the long-term, the protection of lives and livelihoods will depend on strengthened and responsible local state institutions that act alongside and in response to an active civil society.

Recommendations

- A shift in focus of security sector actors' operations (Congolese army, UN peacekeepers, AU-RTF) towards the needs of local inhabitants, and the proactive pursuit of LRA groups following sightings and incidents, would provide civilians with greater protection from violent attack and give them the freedom of movement to pursue traditional livelihoods.
- To address the Mbororo problem, the interior and defence ministries in close collaboration with the governor of Province Orientale, local leaders, Mbororo representatives and relevant international actors including the African Union should begin to develop a comprehensive policy on the Mbororo issue by initiating a thorough investigation of the causes of tension between local inhabitants and herders.
- To strengthen local governance and the role of local communities in their own protection, local state, traditional and religious leaders should together:
 - Strengthen systems to gather information on security incidents and conflict issues and use it to support advocacy efforts.
 - Foster public participation in community dialogue on conflict issues including the LRA, Mbororo, displacement, land and good governance.
- To revive much needed development efforts in LRA affected areas, donors should put out calls for international NGOs to provide development services in LRA affected areas and support church-based development programming.



A clan elder speaks at a community meeting in Zemio, CAR, on the LRA threat in southern CAR. © JUPEDDEC

2. Strong and collaborative local leadership is essential for effective protection and reintegration; local state authorities working in close partnership with traditional and religious leaders and civil society.

To date the institutional response to the LRA has been dominated by national governments (Uganda, the DRC) and international actors (US, AU, UN, European Union). But these actors often lack a deep understanding of the situation on the ground. In addition, as is already becoming clear, competing domestic and international priorities are drawing their attention and political influence away from the LRA affected area.

The proximity of local leaders – state authorities, traditional chiefs and church ministers – to affected communities allows them a more nuanced understanding of everyday challenges. But they have not yet realised their potential as mobilisers, advocates and coordinators. In

Congo, officials at the province and territory levels typically defer to Kinshasa on matters of security while customary chiefs often lack the know-how needed to play a proactive role in their communities. The UN's repatriation and reintegration work in the LRA area has also largely bypassed local leaders.

In the CAR, the collapse of the state has deprived local authorities of financial means, direction and legitimacy. In South Sudan, Juba's focus on other parts of the country prompted local officials and traditional chiefs in LRA affected areas to endorse and mobilise support for self-defence groups, the Home Guard, which have kept the LRA at bay. These opinion leaders have been slower, though, to support reintegration initiatives.

In all three countries local leaders are well placed to play more prominent roles in meeting the needs and defending the interests of the communities they represent. Their energy would be valuable in three areas in

particular: community mobilisation, advocacy and coordination.

Their positions in the state apparatus, traditional chieftaincy or church hierarchy give them the credibility and influence to spur community participation in efforts to protect civilians and encourage defections. This political backing is also needed to smooth the return of displaced people and help reconcile local residents with those returning from the LRA.

Local leaders are uniquely placed to design and drive advocacy campaigns in the interests of local communities and to speak on their behalf in public fora with governments, military

actors and international donors. Their access to communities means they can spearhead efforts to gather data on security incidents and other socio-economic indicators essential to reinforce advocacy messages.

Finally, local leaders can play pivotal roles in improving coordination at the local, national and regional levels. State authorities could use their lines of communication with local counterparts, national capitals and international actors to ensure fluid information exchange and that the multiple initiatives to encourage defection, protect civilians and promote reintegration reinforce rather than duplicate each other.

Recommendations

- Local authorities could draw up comprehensive plans for the protection of civilians and the reintegration of returnees in their areas. Budgeted and framed within long-term stabilisation and recovery strategies, these plans could be used to garner support from national capitals and form the basis of a subsequent donor conference initiated by local authorities with external support.
- Local authorities in the DRC, South Sudan and the CAR should maintain strong lines of communication with community leaders (priests, chiefs, local protection committee presidents, NGOs) through which to gather information related to security incidents and socio-economic development.
- State and community leaders can play a greater role in the design and coordination of institutional responses, in regional meetings and at strategic meetings with donors.
- Increased contact by state and traditional leaders with isolated communities to canvas their concerns and ensure their voices are heard at higher level policy fora is needed:
 - In the DRC, territorial, provincial and national authorities should hold regular discussions with community level actors.
 - In South Sudan, Western Equatoria State officials should seek to strengthen their relationships with national authorities in Juba.
- An advocacy and communications strategy devised by local leaders could serve to pressure national and international bodies to enhance responses to the LRA problem. Valuable activities could include:
 - Establishing a centralised database on LRA violence that includes qualitative information on abductions, deaths and returns.
 - Empowering LRA returnees and affected communities to share their views of the impact of the conflict through small videos and photo documentaries.
 - Engaging with local, national and international media (TV, newspapers, radio).



Community re-enactment in Obo, CAR, showing the journey of LRA returnees, from kidnap, to combat, to return, aimed at strengthening community cohesion through better understanding and better reintegration practices. © Carlos Rodriguez

3. Reintegration efforts should adopt a community-based and culturally-specific approach that prioritises initiatives that involve and benefit whole communities and is thus better able to foster reconciliation between hosts and returnees.

When LRA abductees return home, their communities and families tend to welcome them warmly at first but after some time, they start fearing and bullying them. They become marginalised in daily social life, at family or church events, at school and work. This pushes many to leave their home communities for new ones where their LRA background might remain unknown. For some returnees in South Sudan, despite the horror of their life in the bush, their suffering upon return was such that returning to the LRA looked like a preferable alternative.

“They [the community] treat us as if we were not normal people, but

it’s not our fault if our head does not work properly! It’s because they [the LRA] intoxicated us and the work of these medicines lasts a long time.”

Clémentine (19) from Djabir, DRC

Tensions build up between returnees and community members because the former see themselves as victims while their families and wider communities often remember them as perpetrators of violence. Communities’ attempts to ostracise returnees and their failure to acknowledge their suffering provokes resentment. In addition, since the few initiatives designed to help returnees cater only for their individual needs, not those of the community, community members sometimes feel that former abductees are being rewarded, whilst they themselves are passed over despite their own severe suffering.

The wellbeing of communities is fundamentally intertwined with the successful reintegration of abductees. The greater the challenges communities face (economic deprivation, displacement, insecurity, psychological trauma), the more members are concerned with their own survival and, therefore, the less they support the reintegration of LRA returnees. Initiatives should therefore address the needs of both LRA victims and the most vulnerable community members.

Traditional reconciliation mechanisms exist that can help returnees and their families address the psychosocial impact of LRA violence on children, women and men. But they are often not used openly since the church strongly condemns traditional belief-systems and rituals. This position has confused communities, who are reluctant to perform these ceremonies for fear of reprisals.

Welcoming rituals, group healing workshops and peer or self-help groups can also ease reintegration. Finding a balance between customary and religious practices is crucial to

setting up an adequate support system. The fact that regional governments and international actors do not recognise communities' plight also exacerbates their sorrow. Documentation of the history of LRA violence and activities of commemoration would therefore help communities come to terms with past atrocities.

Current reintegration practices are limited and fall far short of best practice. There is no programme for adult returnees, even those abducted when they were children. Current programmes reunite children returnees with their families, provide medical treatment in transit centres and the church and NGOs organise ad hoc trauma healing workshops. There is no systematic follow-up or any help for families on how to cope with children's problems.

Whether or not returnees reintegrate successfully depends on their intertwined economic, political, social, psychological and medical state. Thus initiatives aiming at consolidating reintegration should adopt a holistic approach from the time of defection to the longer-term return to their communities.

Recommendations

- Policies and services aimed at reintegration of LRA victims should also be available to other vulnerable groups.
- There is an urgent need for state authorities, local and international NGOs to encourage community members and LRA returnees to be actively involved in devising culturally appropriate reintegration initiatives. These could include:
 - Training local authorities and focal points to perform interventions in conflict-resolution and family mediation.
 - Conducting culturally sensitive awareness campaigns to shift the blame away from LRA victims.
 - Encouraging the performance of culturally specific and case-by-case reconciliation ceremonies between the returnees and the affected parties.
- Local leaders should start initiatives to document and commemorate the history of LRA violence in their communities thereby helping them to come to terms with the past.



Students participating in class at a primary school for teenagers returning to school, Congo (DRC). © Aubrey Wade

4. Effective reintegration requires long-term commitment from all stakeholders so that through education and employment returnees can play a productive and sustainable role in their communities.

The reintegration of LRA returnees has received very little support from national and international agencies in the DRC, South Sudan and the CAR. Adult returnees have been largely ignored with the exception of the repatriation of non-nationals. While these agencies have reunited some child returnees with their families, in the DRC and South Sudan there has been little community-based support for their reintegration and rehabilitation. The few existing initiatives are not part of an overall vision providing integrated support from the time of defection to individuals' longer-term reintegration into civilian society.

Education is an invaluable resource to successful reintegration. It gives children an

opportunity for socialisation, positive role modelling and emotional support through peers and protective adults. Schools suffer greatly from the ongoing threat of LRA attack and the lack of appropriate buildings, adequately trained teaching staff and capacity to support pupils in difficulty. Many child returnees drop out due to stigmatisation, educational delays and mental health disturbances. Children from deprived or neglectful families often leave because they are unable to pay school fees. Access to and quality of education could be strengthened through initiatives such as the life-skills programme that addresses psychosocial and peacebuilding issues in the schools of Western Equatoria State, South Sudan.

General insecurity in the region has undermined the social mechanisms that would have normally helped communities to heal their wounds. Destruction of property by the LRA, displacement and the inability to pursue their usual means of livelihoods intensify the traumatic effects of LRA violence on communities and returnees.

“We beg our families and communities to forgive us for our iniquities.”

Open letter by LRA returnees, Nzara county, Western Equatoria State, South Sudan

The interdependence of social, psychological and economic wellbeing is magnified for LRA

returnees since their social marginalisation greatly affects their access to livelihoods. Abductees return with much diminished social and economic capital in comparison with others of their age. There is, however, scope for identifying economic opportunities in the local market that could be explored through the provision of vocational training.

Recommendations

- Consistent, long-term funding from donors for reintegration strategies for children and adults is vital. These strategies should:
 - Consider the full range of needs of children and adults and ensure that comprehensive services are provided.
 - Invest in building the capacity of the local workforce whilst ensuring access to self-care and supervision.
- The approach of regional governments, international NGOs and local groups to reintegration should promote holistic care of the individual (clothing, hygiene, medical and gynaecological, psychological, educational and family reunification activities) including access to specialised services for those suffering from severe psychological disturbances.
- Local (child) protection committees are effective in offering basic social welfare to vulnerable children in certain areas. Local leaders and community members could use this model to monitor and support long-term reintegration.
- State social welfare authorities and NGOs should make social workers available to provide longer-term monitoring and support of overall community reintegration under the supervision of local protection committees.
- Governments, Ministries of Education, donors and UN agencies need to ensure LRA abductees together with other vulnerable groups access an education that is adapted to their needs.
 - Teachers and school managers should be well versed in the code of conduct, pedagogical methods and psychosocial approaches, and receive adequate institutional help to support pupils in difficulty.
 - The most vulnerable children should have free schooling and school materials.
 - Access to and the quality of education could be strengthened through initiatives such as the life-skills programme that addresses psychosocial and peacebuilding issues currently piloted in some schools in Western Equatoria State, South Sudan.
- Donors and governments, the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and local and international organisations should strengthen community-specific livelihoods based on a local market analysis that benefits the whole community. They should:
 - Acknowledge publicly the need for long-term socio-economic support for communities affected by the LRA.
 - Endorse and support financially local and wider socio-economic recovery plans that include the reintegration needs of LRA returnees.
 - Equip and update state-sponsored vocational training centres with vocations that are suited to market needs.

Case study

Grace, 20, came back to Ezo, South Sudan, in 2013 after five years with the LRA as a commander's wife. Her two children of 4 and 3 years, formerly named Kony and Odhiambo after LRA generals, are extremely physically neglected; malnourished, under-developed and poorly clothed.

Grace appears completely disconnected from her emotions and sometimes from reality. She behaves with others like a little girl and has difficulty functioning intellectually. Her gaze often drifts during conversation. Her youngest son is very clingy and as she puts down her child, it becomes clear she is pregnant.



She explains that she conceived during a relationship she had when she first arrived in Ezo. However, the father rejected her and does not acknowledge responsibility for the pregnancy. "He said that it was because I was an LRA woman and that the child carries LRA blood."

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