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**A MICRO LEVEL ANALYSIS
OF VIOLENT CONFLICT**

The importance of post-conflict socio-cultural community education programmes: a case study from northern Uganda

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Colette Harris**

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For further information, please contact:
MICROCON: A Micro Level Analysis of Violent Conflict, Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex, Brighton BN1 9RE
Tel: +44 (0) 01273 915706
Email: info@microconflict.eu
Web: www.microconflict.eu

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The importance of post-conflict socio-cultural community education programmes: a case study from northern Uganda¹

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Abstract

Using data from a programme in northern Uganda, this article argues psycho-social education supports post-conflict reconstruction better than humanitarian aid or materialistically-focused projects. The programme used post-Freirian, discovery-based pedagogies focusing on topics chosen by participants: family and community relations, gender power relations, education, forced sex, and reintegration of rebel fighters. It worked for a year with groups of men, women, male and female youths, its major focus being on deconstructing local gender identities. The programme's impact was considerable: greater egalitarianism within families along with warmer relationships, increased community integration, significantly reduced levels of violence, and greater responsibility in sexual relations. Improved economic well-being was a tangential additional benefit. I suggest this approach can significantly reduce the likelihood of future conflict. This has important implications for the international community to consider when drawing up policies for support in post-conflict settings. More attention needs to be given to grass-roots work rather than macro-level interventions as the former can be far more efficacious and even prevent populations following radical leaders. Thus in the long-term it is also more cost-effective, although this clashes with contemporary neoliberal ideology.

¹ Thanks to George Openjuru and Liesbeth Inberg for their useful comments on previous drafts. I should also like to thank Isabella Amony and Benard Kasozi Okot, who played a very significant role in the success of the education project, and I offer especial thanks to the late Charles Komakech who played an important role in the fieldwork preceding the education project.

Introduction

In conflict and early post-conflict settings, the policy of the international community has, for some time, been to prioritise humanitarian aid rather than development projects, placing a rigid boundary between the two (Macrae, 1999). When they eventually move on to the latter, donors generally demonstrate a preference for funding projects focusing on economic output and material infrastructure (Akello, 2010: 213; Macrae, 2010). This relates in part to the current international policy emphasis on security issues.

In part this seems to derive from the overall treatment of post-conflict settings as 'blank slates' to which a formulaic model can easily be applied to bring them into line with current ideology, that is, with neoliberal thinking. The fashion is to implant a minimal form of state governance that focuses largely on producing the conditions for free market capitalism and foreign direct investment, along with multi-party elections (optimistically considered the most important element of democracy) and substituting economic growth for armed struggle (Cramer, 2006: 245ff).

This approach appears to suggest that all that is necessary to produce the desired transformation is economic development – improved physical infrastructure, in the form, for instance, of roads and the provision of electricity, as well as business opportunities, formal education, and skills training for income generation. Hurts inflicted during the conflict can supposedly be healed with relative ease via a truth commission (South Africa, Liberia) or traditional methods of justice (northern Uganda). This either implies that economic improvement will automatically be accompanied by corresponding psychological and emotional benefits or fails even to regard these last as relevant, hereby excluding the populations concerned from the kinds of psycho-social support routinely offered to inhabitants of the west. Not only is inadequate assistance provided to those suffering from war-related traumas; in the post-conflict situation support is rarely provided for the development of peaceful co-existence either. Considering the enormous long-term psychological harm that experiences of violence inflict upon those involved on both sides, after armed conflict some kind of mental and emotional rehabilitation may in fact be their most important, most urgent need (Nordstrom, 2004).

The remedy is not necessarily psychological or psycho-social treatment at the individual level. Community interventions such as education or mutual self-help programmes can support the development of the kinds of elements singled out in the post-traumatic growth literature as permitting individuals and communities to rebuild their lives after crisis

(Bloom, 1998). Among the most relevant of these are resilience, a sense of coherence, self-reliance, increased emotional expressiveness and compassion towards others (Tedeschi *et al*, 1998).

While some organisations do work at this level, the majority of donors as well as international implementing agencies show a preference for projects that can be quickly and efficiently completed, leaving a visible residue, such as a building that can be clearly labelled as having been constructed with their support. It is therefore very often difficult to find funding that supports long-term rehabilitation of local populations, since income-generation projects tend to be prioritised over social development as this fits with neoliberal concepts of the economic as the only meaningful kind of development, irrespective of actual needs (Pirrotte *et al*, 1999).

It has frequently been pointed out that the signing of a peace accord at the end of an internal conflict does not produce instantaneous cessation of hostilities on the ground (Cramer, 2006: 245; Pankhurst, 2008). First, an accord rarely includes all factions concerned, and those at the lowest levels of command may not even hear about it at the time, let alone be party to it. Thus, it may well not address the reasons why many foot soldiers participated in the first place. Secondly, it is unlikely to deal with intra-community grudges, irrespective of whether they were one of the causes of the war or one of its consequences. Truth commissions and other forms of reconciliation may work in some respects but are similarly unlikely to tackle small local clashes. Nor do the DDR² processes that form part of the formal post-conflict institutions established by the international community fully address such issues or deal adequately with returning fighters to their communities (Theidon, 2009). After all, each group will have undergone traumas that need addressing at multiple levels and integration will need tackling not just among fighters but also within the communities into which they will be reinserted. Finally, none of this deals with one of the most crucial issues – that of gender relations.

Gender plays a major role in grass-roots post-conflict violence, which often affects communities as seriously if not more so than during the internationally recognised conflict phase (Galtung, 1985; Meintjes *et al*, 2002; Pankhurst, 2008; Theidon, 2009: 21). Here I refer less to politically related gender-based violence carried out by warring factions as a deliberate prolonging of the conflict situation (*cf.* Steenkamp, 2011) than to everyday incidences that

² Disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration.

reflect the overall violent environment that people become accustomed to during wartime, including domestic as well as community-level violence.

This paper will argue that the most effective way of dealing with a post-conflict situation is to tackle psycho-social issues along with, if not earlier than, material development such as improving agricultural yields or providing income-related skills training, and to do this at grass-roots level through education programmes tailored to those concerned. It will suggest that communities that have achieved social development are more capable of continuing development processes for themselves than those exposed only to more instrumental material support (*cf.* Kuenzi, 2006). It will further insist that a one-size-fits-all approach will be far less effective than basing interventions on a deep understanding of the cultural background plus the current situation among the particular group involved that only ethnographic studies can provide. Thus, merely following mainstream development models is likely to fall far short of what is required and failing to understand the context will have a negative impact on a project's chances of success. For the most part, ethnographic studies will already exist. However, they will need to be supplemented by studying the specific setting where the intervention will take place.

This paper describes the approach used in one such post-conflict project in northern Uganda carried out in two resettlement villages in Gulu District among the local ethnic group, the Acholi, at the end of some twenty years of warfare and over a decade living in camps. The project was executed in partnership with the Refugee Law Project and in the framework of MICROCON, an EU-funded programme that explored micro-levels of violent conflict.³

The data the paper is based on were collected between 2007 and 2011 in part by myself but also by local fieldworkers and facilitators. In 2007, along with a group of researchers from Makerere University, Kampala, I visited several camps where we carried out individual interviews and held focus-group discussions. From 2008-2009 fieldworkers carried out an ethnographic study in two villages that I shall call Kwor Ber and Kwiri,⁴ where from 2009 to 2010 the education project ran with the help of local facilitators. Finally, we carried out two qualitative evaluation sessions, the first in 2010 immediately at the end of the education project and the second a year later in mid 2011.

³ See www.microconflict.eu for details of this programme and www.refugeelawproject.org for details of that organisation.

⁴ To protect people's privacy, these names have been changed.

The paper starts by situating the project within the framework of non-formal education. It goes on to describe the pedagogic principles it was based on. Next it outlines the project methodology and shows how an understanding of the cultural context and local history as well as the environment of the resettlement villages is crucial to supporting the population to solve the psycho-social problems they identified. Finally, it explains how the project tackled these problems and the impact. I end by showing not only the psycho-social improvements resulting from the project but also the collateral gains in terms of improved economic development. I suggest this is an important approach to reducing the likelihood of future conflict in the areas concerned.

The educational approach

The education project belongs to the genus of community-education or non-formal education projects that have proliferated in recent decades in the global south, as a result of the participatory learning and action (PLA) movement.⁵ They generally start out from Freirian principles that focus on learning as group empowerment rather than using the ‘banking method’ of education in which facts are fed to passive students (Shor and Freire, 1987).

Such programmes have long played an important role in out-of-school education for children as well as adults. They are said to increase participants’ efficacy, improve self-esteem, and raise their participation in civic organisations as well as boosting overall collaboration among community members, and thus developing group solidarity. People who have gone through such a programme have been found to be more likely to identify problems within their own villages and collaborate to deal with them. Moreover, since these programmes are carried out in local languages, as opposed to the colonial language of formal schooling, and valorise participants’ own knowledge, they have the additional positive function of strengthening people’s belief in the worth of their own cultures, unlike formal education, which tends to promote western values (Kuenzi, 2006). All this can significantly improve the ability of both individuals and communities to manage their lives effectively.

One of the most widespread of such programmes is Reflect, developed by the international NGO, Action Aid. This is a participatory literacy training programme that simultaneously supports wider community development, particularly helping its participants gain political awareness and an understanding of (local) power relations (Archer and

⁵ For more information see Rogers (2004) and the PLA journal published by IIED (<http://www.iied.org/natural-resources/key-issues/empowerment-and-land-rights/participatory-learning-and-action>), particularly the special edition for the 50th number (2004) - *Critical reflections, future directions*.

Nandago, 2004). In a new phase in which elements of the Stepping Stones programme were included,⁶ some Reflect circles started to pay attention to aspects of personal development as well (Bhattacharjee and Renton, 2001).

Many other community-education programmes have been established in the global south. Some of these focus on literacy, others on health and still others mainly on gender, while more commonly programmes combine elements of all of these (*e.g.* Welbourn, 1995; Archer and Nandango, 2004; Robinson-Pant, 2004; Kuenzi, 2006).

One thing these programmes have in common is their use of participatory rather than top-down pedagogies and many have developed highly innovative approaches. They all place an emphasis on empowerment, acting as catalysts for their participants to become active in improving their own communities. Very often the mere coming together for discussion on a regular basis over long periods of time has in itself been sufficient for the members of these learning communities to carry out actions inconceivable without this opportunity to raise group awareness and develop cohesion among members (Khandekar, 2004).

Our project in northern Uganda similarly used pedagogy heavily influenced by Freirian ideology. No literacy skills were required making the project accessible to all; ideas were elicited from the participants rather than a teacher providing most of the information (*cf.* Shor and Freire, 1987). The approach was discovery-based and used exercises or discussions organised in such a way as to encourage the opening up of ‘spaces for critical reflection’ (Harris, 2007: 30). The idea was that this would support participants to make use of what they learned, based on the principle that what people discover for themselves they are likely to make their own (*cf.* Werner and Bower, 1982). This generally worked well since here, as elsewhere I have worked, it was less that people did not have the relevant information than that, perhaps because of a lack of conviction of its importance or of an understanding of its import, they often failed to use it to inform their actions. Thus, our approach was aimed at producing self-empowerment and developing critical thinking (Shor and Freire, 1987: 39ff).

The other vital element in our pedagogy was gender. By this, I do not mean a focus on women or on women’s rights, which is the common interpretation of gender used in community-development work, but rather on the pressures exerted on members of both sexes to behave in ways coherent with their communities’ expectations (Harris, 2004: 14ff). Eliciting the chief characteristics attributed to males and females in the setting concerned and using these for participatory analysis has proved to be extraordinarily productive in producing

⁶ Alice Welbourn’s programme, Stepping Stones, deals primarily with issues around HIV and AIDS and to this end focuses largely on gender relations and sexuality (Welbourn 1995).

real social change both in our project and in those other projects, such as Stepping Stones, that similarly focus on masculinities and femininities (Jewkes *et al* 2007). I am not suggesting that such projects produce instant or total transformation of gender structures but rather that very significant changes frequently take place even without radical changes in gender identities (*cf.* Harris, 2012).

Non-formal education programmes permit those involved with them a level of flexibility unavailable in more formal settings. Therefore, rather than arriving with a pre-packaged syllabus, my approach has been to ensure that the project is based on issues important to those participating in it by encouraging each group to start by identifying their most salient problems, which then form the basis of their curriculum. As a result, no manual has been developed. Rather, the process used is to carry out specific exercises during the course of which facilitators respond to participants' comments rather than following set procedures. In this respect it resembles Reflect circles, although in its emphasis on personal and familial (gender) development it is more like Stepping Stones (*cf.* Bhattacharjee and Renton, 2001).

One significant difference in approach is the prior ethnographic study of the cultural group concerned. It was felt to be important for facilitators to have a good knowledge of the history of this population, as well as the capacity to analyse relevant cultural elements in such a way as to support project participants to adopt a critical stance. This is most crucial at those moments (central to such projects) when participants need to unravel hegemonic power relations,⁷ especially those based on gender. Considerable support may be needed for them to understand that what appear to be traits that follow 'naturally' from biological distinctions between the sexes are actually very largely socio-politically constructed and therefore available for deconstruction and subsequent transformation. The most important task of such an education project then, is to support participants to analyse their own situations and decide what to change and how.

A knowledge of the historical background is particularly important when working in war zones such as that in northern Uganda. Here the communities were returning after a long period of absence to a very different situation from the one they had left a decade or more before, while in their minds, or at least in those of many of the older men, the past appeared as a (mythical) golden age they desired to recapture. It is important to understand enough

⁷ By which I mean relations around which the powerful are able to manipulate ideology to make them appear naturalised so that their constructed character becomes invisible to the underdogs (Gramsci, 1971: 80 note 69, 170 note 71).

about the previous situation to be able to challenge those attempting to use it to establish highly asymmetrical power relations to the detriment of other community members.

The community education project in Kwor Ber and Kwiri

The education project was put into place in mid 2009 following a year of ethnographic study in the two villages concerned.⁸ In each village, those interested in participating were divided into four groups by age and sex, each group meeting for some ninety minutes a week over the course of a year. Each village chose the day on which they would meet, with the individual groups deciding on the specific time. The entire village population was eligible to participate; nobody was turned away, including visitors. The sessions were mainly held out of doors under a tree. At the end of the separate sessions, all the groups would come together to present their conclusions to one another and draw up an action plan for following up on them.

During each group's first session they were asked to identify what they considered their most pressing problems. The ones they all came up with fall into three categories – social, health-related, and material. Among these last were the lack of boreholes to provide clean water, food insecurity, a lack of nursery schools, poor teaching in government schools, the inability of families to pay school fees, and the need for vocational training for youths. A further set of issues related to the lack of programmes to care for the most vulnerable, such as war and AIDS orphans, those who had lost their families, the disabled, and child-headed families. All these were compounded by the residue of the war in terms of ongoing violence, for instance, by robbers who often appeared during the night, and worst of all, by land grabbers. This last has been one of the most serious and intractable of all post-conflict issues in northern Uganda (RLP, 2011). All agreed that in the framework of the education project, little could be done directly to tackle these concerns so they were left aside.

The chief health-related problems identified included malnutrition, diarrhoeal diseases in part due to lack of clean water sources, malaria, HIV/AIDS and other reproductive health-related issues (such as, infertility, the need for better ante-natal and obstetric care, and a lack of contraceptives), sickle-cell anaemia, tuberculosis, hepatitis, and high-blood pressure. Here we were able to provide some support - for instance, by helping participants grasp the importance of hygiene and sanitation, and to learn enough about diseases to work out prevention strategies, and/or realise when they needed to consult medical professionals.

⁸ This consisted of a weekly visit to each village by one male and one female fieldworker during which they carried out participant observation to study the context and note changes in inter-personal relations and attitudes as people adapted to their new circumstances.

The focus of this paper, however, is on our approach to social problems. The following list is an amalgamation of the main ones identified:

1. Lack of overall village cohesion;
2. Interpersonal friction and violence, including domestic violence;
3. Other problems with family relationships, both marital and parent-child, including men's attempts to impose their authority on other family members;
4. Other gender-related problems, including forcing sex on (underage) girls;
5. The necessity for parents to accept the importance of education for girls as well as boys;
6. Obstacles to the reintegration of LRA returnees;
7. Loss of trust in themselves (self respect) and each other.

Underlying all of these was the expressed wish of older participants, most especially older men, to restore as far as possible their pre-war position - that is, to return to a golden past, in which they firmly held the upper power positions, and when both youths and older women willingly obeyed them (Harris 2012). The problem was this was no longer the case, which created considerable friction, both inside and outside the family, experienced as a keenly felt generation gap as well as conflictual male-female relationships.

In order for me to understand enough about the context to provide appropriate support to help the population deal with these issues, I drew both on our own fieldwork and on written sources in the form of cultural studies of the Acholi and histories of the population's experiences during the war years. I summarise the findings here and show how vital understanding these issues was to dealing with the problems the communities raised.

*The context*⁹

A century ago the Acholi were a rural society, living in villages where most household heads were agnatically related and there was an intimate relationship between traditional rituals, gender ideology, and material context (Girling 1960; Kitching 1912; *cf.* Silberschmidt, 1999).

The Acholi were organised into clans, with political power and the disbursement of justice generally in the hands of clan and village heads, the latter presiding over networks of male elders (Atkinson, 2010). In turn these last controlled their own households, consisting of unmarried children plus married sons, daughters-in-law and grandchildren, sometimes including younger brothers and their descendants too.

⁹ In this section, except where otherwise indicated, the pre-independence history is based on Girling (1960) and Atkinson (2010). Later history is based on Sverker Finnström (2008), Chris Dolan (2009), Chris Blattman and Jeannie Annan (2010), and Adam Branch (2011).

Marriage was exogamous, with women marrying outside their clan, and thus never able to feel true insiders in their husbands' homes and villages. Men measured their wealth in terms of cattle, numbers of wives, children, crops, spears, pots, and huts but land seems to have been so plentiful it was not considered an asset since in that sparsely populated region, a man could have usufruct rights over as much land as he and his family could farm. As far as it accumulated at all, wealth was invested in livestock and wives, the last supplying both labour and reproductive power. Bride price was paid in cattle, goats, hoes, or during colonial times, cash, and a sisters' bride price was used to pay for her favourite brother's marriage. By this means wealth circulated within communities rather than accumulating in a few households, and women could call upon the support of this brother and his wife, thus increasing her power position. The system meant that as long as a family was hard working and harvests did not fail, there would always be sufficient food but it was not organised for the purpose of acquiring consumer goods or accumulating wealth.

Productive labour was shared between the sexes, with men carrying out heavy farm labour, such as clearing the fields and ploughing, as well as herding and hunting, and women doing the lighter, more repetitive tasks such as weeding and post-harvest processing, as also fishing and brewing beer for rituals, in addition to domestic duties and child care.

Male household heads managed all common resources, which positioned them in a superior power position that gave them overall control. Sons started their married lives in their fathers' compounds, only later separating from the paternal homestead (Girling, 1960).

A small proportion of the male population, mainly the poorest, converted early to Christianity, gained an education, and interacted with the colonial state; a high proportion of these became government clerks or teachers, the less educated joining the army or the police, these last being the trades most commonly assigned to the Acholi by the British. After independence in 1962, the Acholi started to play a significant role in national politics, while their numbers in the national army increased until they formed a significant percentage of it (Branch, 2011).

The cash wages received by these men put them in an advantageous position vis-à-vis their fathers and obliged them to depend on others, frequently their wives, to take charge of their farms in their absence. This upset the balance of power within families, challenging the authority of both fathers and husbands.¹⁰

¹⁰ Personal communication from the Acholi academic George Openjuru of Makerere University.

This state of affairs was disturbed in the 1970s by Idi Amin, who lethally attacked the Acholi, destroyed their political power, and removed them from the armed forces. However, by the time in the mid 1980s the Ugandan army fought Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Army/Movement (NRA/M) for control of the state, the Acholi had recovered their superior position in the military. In 1986, after the NRA's victory, several thousand Acholi soldiers fled home. However, they found it difficult to fit back into life in their homesteads and to cope with their weaker power position especially when the elders kept insisting on the importance of traditions for the Acholi culture, essentially referring to their desire to restore elder male superiority. All this caused considerable friction and bad feeling.

Rather than taking advantage of the split within the Acholi to get the elders on their side the NRA treated the entire ethnic group as hostile aliens, eventually resulting in the establishment by an Acholi, Joseph Kony, of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and their subsequent war against the state that lasted from 1988 to 2006 (Branch, 2011). Although the majority of Acholi did not support the LRA, in large part because it carried out atrocities against its own people, some 60,000 people, mainly adolescent males, were forced to participate through abduction and subsequent incorporation into the rebel army (Blattman and Annan, 2010).

In the late 1980s the vast majority of Acholi cattle were looted, allegedly mainly by government soldiers with some help from the Karimojong, a nearby pastoral group. Starting in 1996, the government forced almost the entire rural population of Acholiland into camps, on the pretext that this was the only way to protect them. In fact, they were grossly mistreated by the Ugandan army (UPDF¹¹), soldiers from which raped men as well as women (Dolan, 2002: 74-75). To add insult to injury the UPDF did nothing to protect the people from LRA attacks, rather using them as a shield and often lobbing grenades into the camps during raids (Finnström, 2006: 13). Nevertheless, the majority of Acholi people had no option but to remain in the camps.

In the meantime, camp life was inflicting serious damage on men's self-esteem. Their treatment by the international community who were in charge of provisioning the camps made Acholi men feel largely redundant while raising the status of women and youths. This especially occurred through the distribution of rations directly to women and the provision of income-generation skills and rights training to women, youths and children. The result was that older men seem convinced that the international community was complicit with the

¹¹ The Ugandan People's Defence Force.

Ugandan government and the UPDF in targeting their masculinity in a deliberate attempt to commit cultural genocide against the Acholi people (Dolan, 2009). A clear sign of their malaise was the heightened level of domestic violence remarked upon by all the women I spoke with (*cf.* Human Rights Focus, 2007: 26, 30).

In mid 2008 when we started our research in the two villages, the population had only recently returned from the camps. Squabbles and bad feelings originating during the war kept community friction high, exacerbated by quarrels over land and reintegration problems for LRA returnees. These last were abductees who had fled the LRA, sometimes after years of fighting with them. Many villagers expressed hostility towards the returnees and found it hard not to blame them for the wartime violence (*cf.* Human Rights Focus, 2007).

Our study suggested a major cause of intra-familial friction was gender relations, particularly due to the efforts of older men to restore their damaged sense of masculinity, that is, their notions of Acholi traditions based on elder male domination summarised above (*cf.* Human Rights Focus, 2007; 34ff). There were many obstacles to doing this, however. The main one was lack of access to, and control over, the kinds of material resources that in the past had facilitated the dependence of junior family members on male elders.

In the first place, the men were unable to cultivate anything like as much land as before. One reason was that most families no longer had access to such large areas, in part because of land grabbing by the state and other entities. Another reason was the lack of ploughs and animals to pull them, due to looting during the war. This forced household heads to demand that all family members strong enough help with preparing the land, work previously carried out by men alone. Women were thus taken away from their own productive work and young people either removed from education altogether or deprived of the chance to earn sufficient money to pay their school fees. Despite this, the older men did not seem to see any reason to compensate these family members for their time and efforts, for instance by giving them a say in how the profits from those crops sold in the market would be spent. Attempts to display male pride were also responsible for a certain level of hostile interaction among community members and even between neighbouring communities.

All in all, the war years had attacked the population's sense of what it meant to have a culture of peace and to live in harmony with family members and neighbours and left people feeling insecure - uncertain of how to deal with the present and fearful of what the future might hold. The damage to gender identities had resulted in older men feeling vulnerable and attempting to overcompensate for this, often through the use of violence, whether verbal, physical, or both.

Tackling the psycho-social problems

The problems articulated above are obviously highly complex and difficult to tackle. The education programme tried to do so by supporting the community to uncover the fundamental issues involved, and especially to tackle the concealed power relations that underpinned their problems.¹² Fundamental to these is gender, which everywhere I have worked has been the foundation of inter-personal relations. In the present case, it was patently clear that it was a major cause of friction too.

However, it was also the case that in this gerontocratic society we were not simply talking about male-female relations; age was as important as sex in determining positioning within the gender-power hierarchy. In other words, as with most African societies, the Acholi are organised in what elsewhere I have called a gender-age system, where there is an explicit and well understood distinction between the expected behaviour patterns (identities) and roles of young adults around the age of marriage and of older ones – identified by the participants as roughly age thirty-five and above. Much of the friction among family members concerned differing gender and generational views on the kinds of power that should adhere to older and younger men and women (see Harris, 2012).

Older people claimed a right to a superior power position merely on the grounds of age and blamed life in the camps for young people's refusal to accept this. Older men were upset that youths seemed to believe that in return for retaining their former levels of power the elders should, as in the past, provide appropriate levels of resources. In addition to the daily necessities of life, these should include payments for traditional rites of passage, most especially the giving of bride price at marriage, as well as for modern obligations, of which the most important were school fees to improve young people's future earning capacity.

Similar clashes occurred between older men and their wives. The latter insisted it was unfair they had to work for many hours on traditionally male agricultural tasks while the men refused to cede any privileges in return. Moreover, women complained bitterly that their husbands would secretly sell family crops and use the profits for their own personal benefit, even enhancing their status among their peers by spending on frivolities such as alcohol or sex workers, when the entire family was in dire need.

The education project started working on these issues with the population by the use of exercises focusing on gender. The first of these consisted of asking the members of each

¹² These were obviously embedded in global and national power relations too but since we could not help the communities to deal with these directly, we concentrated mainly on intra-community issues.

group to identify what it meant to be a man and a woman or a girl and a boy in their society. The answers were much the same as in other African contexts and indeed differed little from what Girling had described – older men are the decision makers and control household resources including human resources as well as (the sale of) crops, while older women run the household, and along with younger women carry out domestic labour, child-care, and the majority of agricultural tasks. Men's farming work is mainly limited to clearing the land and ploughing. In the past men hunted but now there is little game available. They also herded cattle, but most of this had been stolen, so that men were deprived of these traditional status-giving activities. Women carry out most of the remaining farming tasks, post-harvest processing of food, and cooking. They may also earn money through additional activities, such as beer brewing, and retain this for their own use since they are not obliged to support their families financially. Men, on the other hand, control the income from joint family labour and have the power to make all household decisions.

In a further exercise, all participant groups completed 24-hour calendars, showing the activities carried out during the dry and the rainy seasons separately. The results showed women doing far more work than men, even on the land, despite the fact that the latter have control of the crops as they own the land they are grown on. Women cannot own land as they marry outside their clan and their natal village. This fact was emphasised in a third exercise in which men and women identified the assets customarily owned by different family members. The upshot of all this was to make it clear that women carried out far more labour than men while having access to very little in the way of decision-making power or assets they could take with them if the marriage broke down or retain if they were widowed. It was also acknowledged that before the war the imbalance had been smaller, with men spending more time on family labour leaving women and youths more time to fulfil their own needs.

This conclusion sparked off vigorous debates as to whether men's efforts to restore former cultural practices should continue or whether changes should be made to accommodate contemporary realities, since it was clear that a significant proportion of older men could no longer command enough resources even to feed their families adequately, let alone provide for all their wives' needs, or pay bride price or school fees for their sons. Space was made for the older men's groups to hold discussions specifically focusing on how to move forward in regard to this issue. This activity was particularly fruitful in Kwor Ber, where during one very long session some hours were spent wrestling with the question of whether older men should cede some measure of power to other family members or continue to endeavour to keep as much in their own hands as possible. In many ways this session

turned out to be the most significant of the year. It absorbed not only men from Kwor Ber but passers-by from neighbouring villages too. Starting from the conservative position articulated above that by definition older men had the absolute right to occupy uncontested the top power position within their families, the session ended with the hard-won conclusion that this was unsustainable in the present situation. Young people and wives would have to be granted greater participation in decision-making, especially in regard to those issues directly affecting them, such as schooling, marriage, or the allocation of profits from crops farmed jointly. This was a spectacular volte-face and one that had enormous implications for the well-being of the specific families concerned as well as of the communities at large.

The most significant session for the teenage boys/young men, was one in which they listened to young women explaining how being raped or forced into a relationship by a boy had wrecked their lives. What the young men had seen as simple attempts to prove their masculinity, turned out to have been devastating for the girls concerned, especially if they became pregnant as a result. It had simply not occurred to the boys before that girls might have a subjectivity similar to that of their own. Moreover, they had apparently believed that when girls refused boys pressing them for sex, it was just a game in which the girls were giving conventional answers, while actually wanting the boys to overpower them. After listening to the testimony of several unhappy young women who felt their lives had been ruined by rape, many young men became upset and as a result substantially changed their attitudes. From constituting a major part of the problem, a considerable number of young men started to position themselves as part of the solution by making it known they would henceforth renounce all violence towards girls and protect them from attempts at violence by others.

This was just one step on a much longer path from violence towards peace, since this meeting occurred after months of discussion during which the youths had already made many changes in attitude and behaviour. Such changes may seem extreme but they are not unique to our programme. Nikki Kandirikirira reported a similar outcome from an analogous exercise in a programme run by ACORD in Namibia after the end of apartheid when again the boys changed their attitudes after being confronted by girls upset by the impact of the young men's violent behaviour towards them (2002).

Once changes in both older and younger masculinities were underway, it was considerably easier for community members to address other points of friction. This included rethinking attitudes towards the LRA returnees and those known to be HIV positive, as well as men deciding to drop plans to exact revenge on those they had seen as having slighted

them during the war. Discussions on the consequences of alcoholism and the importance of good parenting resulted in the adoption of more responsible attitudes towards both. Similarly, discussions on the future of young people and the importance of education brought the inhabitants of Kwor Ber, at least, to start their own kindergarten as well as to try harder to ensure all their children of both sexes attended school. I am certainly not trying to claim here that all or even most villagers changed their attitudes or behaviour nor that the pain of wartime suffering had disappeared but rather that a significant section of the population had begun to take a new approach to such issues and that this was slowly mitigating some of the worst of the psychological residue of the war.

These changes resulted from participation in exercises and discussions specifically aimed at challenging current attitudes and practices but others occurred more gradually through the general process of the education project itself, from the mere fact of meeting in groups weekly over the course of a year (*cf.* Khandekar 2004). The clear tensions that had at first been visible among the men slowly disappeared. After some time, the groups started to arrange additional meetings during which they engaged in other kinds of activities, especially agricultural work groups. Thus, in Kwor Ber for instance, the older women's group clubbed together to buy themselves a plough and trained themselves to act as draught animals. The result was they were able to plough large plots of land relatively painlessly compared with doing the work manually. The older and younger men's groups also decided to form separate agricultural work groups, with a particularly interesting outcome. The pace was set by the most hard-working men in each group, with those men who had previously worked relatively short hours now starting and finishing each day at the same time as their more industrious colleagues, apparently mainly to avoid the stigma of being labelled lazy.

One result of these changes was a substantial increase in produce harvested. An additional effect of the young men's work groups in Kwor Ber was that they incorporated LRA returnees on the same terms as everyone else, to the point that by 2011 distinctions between the two groups were no longer visible.¹³ This was a very different situation from that at the start of the education project when the LRA returnees always sat apart from the others, with little communication between them. Again, this does not mean that all resentments had vanished but rather that they no longer seemed as significant.

The young women's group was unable to hold meetings outside the formal project sessions. Nevertheless, attendance at the weekly meetings also helped raise their self-esteem

¹³ There were virtually no returnees in Kwiri.

as well as integrating the female returnees to a certain extent, although those who returned with children born during their time with the LRA struggled more with this than the rest.

The practice at the end of each formal education session of having all groups report to one another was apparently the first time men had ever listened to the opinions of women, or older people to youths. The general consensus had previously been that the more powerful had nothing to learn from lesser mortals. Over the course of a year during which all participants listened to one another on a weekly basis, this notion radically changed, something that bore fruit not just during the weekly meetings but also within families and the communities at large. The result was that women, girls, and young men too started to value themselves more highly and to be valued more highly by others. Improved respect from older men for other family members translated into a reduction in domestic violence as well as greater respect from the other family members for older men, now based on their personal qualities rather than as before on an (often unwilling) acknowledgement of their higher power position.

The further practice at the close of each session of asking people to make a plan for operationalising what they had learned that week greatly encouraged the adoption of the ideas developed during the sessions and so helped increase project impact.

Further impacts

Thus, often in roundabout ways, all seven psycho-social problems identified above were tackled in the project and for the most part, if not solved then greatly diminished, for the majority of participants, at least. Beyond the effects already noted above, an overall increase in general well-being was reported by those in both upper and lower power positions, said mainly to be due to better inter-personal relationships within families and the community at large.

The majority of LRA returnees demonstrated a very significant improvement in overall mood and claimed a lessening of post-traumatic stress, even if the bad dreams had not entirely disappeared. Those who had undergone the formal DDR processes and those who had bypassed these and come straight back to the village had showed much the same lack of integration at the start of our programme and seemed to have benefited equally from it by the end.

The two project villages have become local centres for gatherings with the surrounding villages, as well as for other purposes, such as vaccination programmes, since local government officials have started using project members to help support their activities

in the communities. They say they find them more responsible and responsive than the population at large. On their own initiative, in both the two project villages, committees were formed to support different aspects of development, including one to prevent violence at community as well as household levels, committees composed of all social groups, not only of older men.

The fact that attendance in the project was open to all and that most sessions were held in the open air meant that people from other places were very often present. The result was the project was able to influence the inhabitants of nearby villages, some of whom made changes in their lives corresponding to the topics of the sessions they attended, and a few even convinced fellow villagers to form their own committees, against domestic violence, for instance. Three older men from a small cluster of villages several kilometres from Kwor Ber, who had participated in the seminal session reported above on whether to change traditional ideals of masculinity, had been so excited by it, they held a similar discussion back home, which they claimed made a significant difference in family relationships there as well. The improvement was apparently so obvious that these men were asked by members of the surrounding communities to facilitate a similar discussion for them so they too could benefit from it.

This was discovered during the evaluation of summer 2011 when I travelled along the main track from Kwor Ber asking everyone I met if they knew anything about the project. Extraordinarily, over a distance of some four kilometres everyone had heard of it and most reported some level of influence in their own villages, culminating with the three men in the farthest village mentioned above. In other words, the project was having a snowballing effect, and even after its official close was continuing to grow organically without input from project staff.

Besides the psycho-social impacts, there have been interesting material effects too, over and above those reported above. Health has improved, particularly among children, as a result of the approach to teaching hygiene and sanitation, which reduced water-borne diseases and diarrhoea. A large number of couples accepted contraceptive services. The work on HIV resulted in men reporting less extra-marital sexual activity and more care to practise safe sex when they do indulge; this cannot be checked, of course, but the local reproductive-health service provider recorded increased sales of condoms to men from these two villages.

There has also been an increase in incomes in the project villages. This is obviously mainly due to the number of farming seasons that have passed since the return from the camps. However, the project has made a considerable contribution to changes in overall

knowledge, attitudes and behaviour as well. Collaborative working practices, improved family relations, better health and improved community cohesion have not only positively affected inter-personal relationships but also resulted in greater economic efficacy.

With minimal material support and without the direct aim of doing so, the project has in fact helped to alleviate poverty and has arguably done so in a more sustainable manner than merely through providing skills training or microcredit. A number of the material needs identified at the start have thus been at least partially met through addressing non-material problems.

Conclusion

Education projects of the kind discussed here have an important role to play in community development generally, as well as in (post-)conflict zones (PLA 50, 2004). Since no material aid was provided, those who participated in the project clearly did so because the education sessions met their needs. The most important sessions, that is the ones that seemed to have created the greatest impact and have been most taken up outside as well as inside the target villages, were the ones on masculinity, particularly that of the older men. I suggest that this was because their attempts to restore former levels of power had become a major obstacle to general well-being. The change was produced because the men had been encouraged to tackle this issue head on and had been able to discuss this at length and with the support of a male facilitator from their own cultural group. In this respect, Kwor Ber has made more significant changes than Kwiri, most probably because the former had more older men and women willing to act as leaders and who strongly supported the project's work in their community.

A good grasp of the cultural and historical background as well as of gender analysis was crucial for providing an understanding of how to focus discussions and exercises in order to maximise impact, especially regarding challenging participants to analyse existing power structures as a vital step in producing change. Improved community and family relations that still allow men to feel respected and secure in having a meaningful role to play in their society have been influential in reducing overall levels of violence. This is true for both older and younger men. For a positive future, however, it is particularly important that young men feel well integrated into and appropriately acknowledged in both public and private life.

To sum up - those aspects of the project that appeared most responsible for its impact were the discovery-based pedagogy coupled with the focus on gender-age structures and the

overall design whereby groups came together at frequent intervals over a long period. In respect of the social analysis participants were encouraged to engage in, it was the focus on gender identities that produced the greatest impact. This is not surprising since before the project started, the gender-age power differential that was the foundation of Acholi socio-cultural relations was clearly particularly responsible for friction within both the family and the community at large. This friction, especially in the context of the war and its aftermath, placed the population in what Mezirow terms 'a disorienting dilemma' (), throwing them sufficiently off balance that they sought support to restore their equilibrium, support that was provided in the form of encouragement towards critical thinking. This situation significantly contributed towards the success of the project.

I should make it clear that I am not claiming that the project completely transformed the villages. In the first place, not all the inhabitants participated in the project and of those that did, not everyone made significant changes. Moreover, the changes in behaviour should not be read as implying complete shifts in underlying attitudes. Above all, I do not wish to give the impression that the project produced gender equality. The traditional norms were not transformed but rather moderated, leaving both age and gender hierarchies essentially intact but even this level of moderation produced significant benefits for those concerned.

The overall outcome has been that those involved in the project have managed to achieve a large part of those elements identified at the start of this paper as necessary for achieving emotional and psychological growth and well-being after trauma. Among the most relevant of these are resilience, a sense of coherence, self-reliance, increased emotional expressiveness and compassion for others (Tedeschi *et al*, 1998). While this represents a considerable improvement, it does not mean that now all is completely well; those who experienced the deepest traumas could still benefit from additional psychological support (Nordstrom, 2004) but at least they can now manage much better without it.

While the inhabitants of the villages concerned have still far from reached their pre-war levels of prosperity, they have come a long way from their situation in 2009, when the education project started. This has significantly enhanced the capacity of the vast majority of participants to deal with their circumstances, both as a result of the particular topics tackled and through improvements in their capacity for (critical) thinking.

I chose not to focus on literacy or other skills training in part because there are other programmes that teach these and in part because I felt the psycho-social and health issues were more pressing. It is clear not just from this project but from the very real gains produced in post-conflict settings by other education programmes focussing on social issues, such as

the Reflect Circles (Archer and Nandango, 2004), or ACORD's programme in Namibia (Kandirikirira, 2002) that this kind of approach is critical for reducing violence at both community and domestic levels. I have myself used it to good effect in other settings in which feelings of hostility between former warring groups were much greater than in northern Uganda – most especially in Tajikistan and northern Nigeria (Harris, 2007, 2009).

I suggest this kind of programme can make very real contributions to post-conflict recovery, significantly reduce violence, improve community cohesion, and strengthen self reliance and mutual support. Giving priority to such programmes as soon as possible after the formal end of a conflict could make all the difference between a situation of prolonged disarray and a fast return to a situation of peaceful co-existence. Thus, they are far more likely to make a substantial contribution to meaningful development than projects concentrating solely on the rebuilding of material infrastructure and considerably more likely than simply focusing on humanitarian aid.

On their own, such programmes cannot tackle the deeper problems of structural violence at the global or national level that may affect conflict settings, including the lack of resources and attention from national governments that often exist in former rebel areas. However, by reducing levels of post-conflict violence at community level they can make a meaningful contribution to producing positive peace. This is the peace that results not from the signing of treaties but from a general shift in interpersonal relationships on the ground (Galtung 1985).

Thus, the kind of development project described here could become an important element of a larger project of context-sensitive post-conflict reconstruction. This needs to be taken into account in the international community's formulation of policies for providing support to countries in a post-conflict situation. In particular, attention needs to be focused on the provision of grass-roots education work that in the long-term has the capacity to be both more efficacious and cost-effective than the more visible monuments to international generosity that are more frequently the focus of international aid. This also has the advantage of helping restore equilibrium through improving critical thinking rather than drawing the population into following radical leaders. In order to do this, however, some rolling back of the current minimalist approach to post-conflict settings would have to occur, since grass-roots work of this kind clashes with the overall philosophy behind neoliberalism.

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