

CHAPTER 3

RECEPTION, REINTEGRATION AND RECONCILIATION

The first point of reception after their one week debriefing in the UPDF barracks for many returnees, is a psychosocial reception centre. Psychosocial rehabilitation and reintegration programmes for youth escaped or released from the LRA have been established since 1994, and are reasonably well integrated locally both with communities and as part of the Government's overall demobilisation and amnesty programme. While some former abductees return directly to communities, the majority pass through one of three non-government rehabilitation and reintegration programmes. Those from Kitgum province are referred to the Kitgum (KICWA) psychosocial support programme. Those from Gulu, Lira and other provinces may be referred to the Gulu Support the Children Organisation (GUSCO) psychosocial programme or World Vision War-Affected Children's Programme, both based in Gulu town. Presently supported by various international non-governmental and donor organisations, all have their roots in local initiatives aimed at responding to the sense of desperation and needs resulting from the effects of conflict, abductions and internal displacement. They have grown in size and stature and their combined influence is now established as part of the support structures for reintegrated children within protected settlements/displacement camps and to some extent, in urban and rural communities.

Reintegration: the role of psychosocial interventions

Within Gulu, where the research was conducted, there are two main psychosocial rehabilitation and reintegration programmes for war affected and formerly abducted children. These are World Vision War-Affected Children's Programme and GUSCO, which is an indigenous local organisation formed mainly by a group of local women who sought to respond to the needs of abducted children who escaped from the LRA. Both programmes have reception centres to receive children and youth once they come out of the LRA and have group and individual counselling programmes, skills training and family support programmes central to their rehabilitation and reintegration strategies. However, the focus between the two centres differs slightly. The World Vision

programme works intensively with children in centres for a number of months before supporting their reintegration to communities. Although the GUSCO programme also uses centres, they move children to communities and identify themselves as a community-based programme.

It may be useful to give an indication of the psychosocial tasks identified as integral to rehabilitation and reintegration by outlining in brief, the activities of the centres. GUSCO, for example, was established in 1994 and has developed as a community-based programme, with a reception centre to receive and rehabilitate abducted children and then reintegrate them in communities. Over time, the programme broadened its mandate to establish an education programme for war-affected children in communities. This was because in their experience, when the programme narrowly focused on former abductees, reintegration into the community became problematic due to local envy. The programme has trained community volunteer counsellors at a parish level, supported by community development assistants at a sub-county level. This team works together with a district psychosocial team, consisting of the heads of Government Departments from Health, Education, Social Work and Planning. At a national level, there is a national core team for all agencies working on psychosocial programmes for war affected children under the Ministry of Gender, including UNICEF, Save the Children Norway and Denmark, the International Red Cross (IRC) and other agencies.

The GUSCO compound is located in Gulu town and during the time of our field visits, the centre had recently received a number of young women with their children, released by the LRA. This was unusual, for the current group of ex-abductees fell outside the recent norm. Project staff at the Gulu centres noted that the profile of abductees and youth received in the centres has changed over time. In 1997, centres were predominantly receiving 15–18 year olds, but by 1998 and onwards, as the LRA began abducting younger and younger children, the age profile decreased. Moreover, the recent release of young mothers with their children has resulted in a new profile of youth to be reintegrated; those of young female headed family groups.

During one of the visits to the centre, about eight women sat outside their tented accommodation on mats, playing or nursing their infants or toddlers. A few of their children were older, about 4 or 5 years old. Of the 63 children and youth under the care of the programme at the time, 24 were under 6 years. In another part of the compound, a group of youths were in a classroom engaged in group-work where they had the chance to talk about their

time in captivity, discuss the things they did and experienced. Four others helped out in the kitchen, as part of the rehabilitation is communal work and to have something to do.

An intrinsic part of the rehabilitation programme is the creation of a normative routine, since waking and sleeping patterns of youth were completely disrupted through frequent moves, forced marching and operations at night. The project's primary aim is to facilitate social reintegration, so the stay at the centre is usually between 4 and 6 weeks. Young women who are pregnant are not reintegrated until after the birth of their baby. This is because the staff needs to monitor the attitude of the mother to the child and assess the support the new mother may need once she has settled in a community. The project staff is aware of the fact that young women with children may not want to return home or may not be accepted at home. As such, they focus on helping the young women, if they so wish, to live independent lives in Gulu town, while trying to secure their physical and financial security.

When former abductees first arrive at the centre their immediate physical needs are taken care of. Most return in very poor physical health, suffering from malnutrition, injuries or stress and trauma related physical illnesses. Thereafter, individual and group counselling, recreational activities and communal work form part of an integrated programme of rehabilitation. Family tracing, assessment, preparation and counselling are done at the centre to prepare families and youth for reunification and reintegration. The need for tracing is rare for as soon as families hear that new children have arrived, they come to check for their own children.

Follow-up support is regarded as an important component of the reintegration work and is provided in communities through community volunteer counsellors or caregivers. Volunteers receive a bicycle to facilitate their work but are not paid. Follow-up is usually provided two weeks after their return to the family and community, then again at three months, six months and a year later if necessary. For follow-up purposes, a risk assessment procedure is carried out, which categorises youth according to low risk or high risk. Criteria associated with low risk include having stayed in rebel capacity for a short period, such as a few weeks, not having been involved in serious atrocities, lack of serious health problems and having one or both parents still alive. High-risk criteria include girls who were mothers who have come out with or without their children and abductees with very serious health problems such as HIV, or are injured or disabled as a result of conflict.

Former abductees are encouraged to return to school and teachers have been trained to provide psychosocial support within the schools in order to ensure educational reintegration. Others receive skills training, such as tailoring, bicycle repair, carpentry or joinery. A micro-finance scheme operates for young mothers, and youth that want to start some micro-enterprise. Advocacy and information raising is an important component in mobilising communities to accept youth back and they encourage the promotion and strengthening of traditional means of conflict resolution.

According to one project staff member, the aim is to promote the message of peace and reconciliation. Community development is engaged through “action plans”, which is a new development in the programme. The aim of the action plans is to bring the community together to define their needs and problems and mobilise resources to address these. Recent work emanating from action plans has been the re-generation of some schools and health units, with international donor support. The evolution of the programme has been more and more towards incorporating a community development focus as a way of facilitating understanding, acceptance and reintegration of individual abductees. The model of reception centre care, with education or skills training, family reintegration, community advocacy, community volunteers and follow-up support are similar in the World Vision programme.

Across various war zones, there has been consistent debate about the role of centres in the reintegration of war-affected children to communities.⁴⁷ Some of the staff in centres in Gulu reflected on this. One argued that some form of medical screening is crucial before reunifying children with families, and centres are good for this, particularly for diagnosing STDs that would otherwise go undetected and untreated, as well as injuries resulting from bullet wounds. The staff also felt that centres were important in “re-orienting the child’s mind”, especially re-establishing normative routines, sleeping and waking patterns and dealing with overt aggressiveness. Issues still under review concerned the best manner in which to conduct follow-up visits. Some reports from children indicated that follow-up visits from social workers attracted attention to children in the community as being ‘different’. Their experience was that community volunteers were able to move among families with more ease. They also reported that reintegrated youth should play a greater role in supporting new arrivals to the community.

Available evidence emerging with respect to the impact of centres on children’s rehabilitation and reintegration in Northern Uganda, suggest that children who spent time in centres have better mental health and psychosocial well being,

compared to children that are returned directly to communities.⁴⁸ Former abductees interviewed told us of the distress they experienced after they had escaped. Many had nightmares, were disturbed, felt anxious and afraid, and were not settled in their minds. One youth said he found the counselling helped, in particular to reduce the nightmares. Another said, “World Vision cared for me and gave me everything I needed. The most positive thing was it helped me how to live in the community. I don’t incite other people, I am obedient to my parents, I don’t mix with other bad boys, I live a good life. The counselling was good, they taught us about child rights and that people should love one another.”

One counselling programme promotes the notion of collective forgiveness, and this was a theme in some youth’s accounts of their own coping strategies. For example, one youth, asked if he feels angry if someone refers to him as a rebel responded, “No, because they have been counselling me to forgive, to forget about the past, think about what we are doing today”.

From the accounts of staff and former abductees, it seems that trauma symptoms such as nightmares only become pronounced once abductees return to the community, and over time, due to counselling or traditional ceremonies, the dreams lessen. There is a recognition in the community that children who have been through the psychosocial programmes are less ‘rude’, have more respect for people and elders (except if they are provoked), are less disturbed in their minds, and that in the centre, their character is changed so they can fit into community, unlike those who did not go to a centre.

One of the boys who had never been through a centre felt that it was easier for former abductees to readjust if they had been to a centre. He indicated that they had been cared for, given things such as resettlement kits and received education. For youth who had been through the centres, the one thing they most appreciated was education and skills training, since this facilitated their transition into the labour market.

Return to the Community: a changed environment

If you are under 20 and living here, you have known virtually nothing else in your whole life but what it is like to live in a community enduring armed conflict—conflict in which you are a prime target.⁴⁹

Community reintegration implies a removal from a community of origin and then a physical and psychological reinsertion back into that social and

psychological space. Continuously, in the process of the fieldwork, the question that kept re-emerging for the formerly abducted youth, the community, and for us as researchers was 'reintegration into what'? There is no community, in terms of what was. In addition to the abductions of thousands of children and the deaths of children and adults, sixteen years of conflict has resulted in the destruction of homes and villages, forced the overwhelming majority into IDPs or other forms of displacements and destroyed essential services, such as health units and schools. In essence, the conflict has broken down the very fabric of Acholi society.

People are living in constant fear, which has undermined traditional customs around which the rural Acholis built their value, ethical and normative base and are no longer followed. Safe protective family environments within which family's function and children should be developing no longer exist. In addition to the forced witnessing and participation in atrocities against their own communities the repeated insecurity in the region has led to wanton destruction of property and social infrastructure, such as schools, community centres, churches, markets, and homes. This in turn undermines the economic base upon which Acholi society has functioned on. All the major sources of income in the region have crumbled due to the destruction and looting. The cattle population in the district of Arua and Kitgum in 1985 were about 285,000, but by 1997 the combined herd for both districts was estimated at just 5,000 head. The total number of cattle is less than 10% of the pre-insurgency herd size, and there has been almost 100% loss in four years.

The insecurity has had many effects on family structures, frequently resulting in family separation. From time to time, when the rebels are raiding, people are frequently displaced or dislocated temporarily. During such times, families live on the run, many of them sleeping in the bush, with no time for cultivation or normal life. These hidden sleeping places in the bush are referred to as 'aloofs'. Some displaced people have migrated to towns and stay there; others oscillate between the towns and their homesteads. The usual, non-displacement size of Gulu municipality was about 38,000 people. During periods of insecurity, between 12 to 16,000 people mainly women and children, commute to and from Gulu town, between 5:30 a.m. and 8:30 a.m. daily. These shifts have also affected parental care, since parents do not sleep with their children. Family members disperse and are frequently left to fend for themselves.

One outcome of the conflict has been the establishment of large IDP camps, which has led to overcrowding and the breaking down of important cultural

traditions. Some of the IDP camps are quite substantial in size, for example, Pabbo camp in Gulu had up to 33,000 residents, while Pajule camp in Kitgum had 24,000. Such numbers are particularly significant when one considers that, culturally; individuals are accustomed to residing in dispersed rural homesteads or small villages of 100 households or less. Furthermore, none of these new settings are based on clanships and family structures, thus the alienation from traditional cultures is further increased. Few families regard their migration into urban centres as permanent and do not construct sturdy houses or good sanitation. Yet the reality is many have been living in such conditions for several years. The conditions for children and youth in these conditions are grim. The majority of youth do not attend school. Traditional livelihoods of land cultivation are not possible, and employment prospects for youth mainly consist of marginal labour such as charcoal burning, street vending, smuggling, vehicle washing, wheelbarrow pushing and boda-boda. Rape and 'defilement' of girls is commonplace, and there is increased domestic violence, child abuse and sexual and gender-based violence.⁵⁰

Within the IDP camps, but also in towns, many people with different cultural backgrounds and different values are being mixed together leading to disruption of cultural norms. An immediate implication of this is that children and youth are neither versed in the traditions of their society and in many instances, lack the support and adequate care of both their parents and extended family. It is in the context of this already highly disrupted socialisation environment, which offers extremely limited opportunities for young people, that children and youth must negotiate their resettlement and reintegration.

Community responses: reintegration and reconciliation – cultural tools in violence resistance

In Nordstrom's writing about post-conflict community relations in Mozambique, she puts forward a cultural definition of violence as "the destruction of home and humanity, of hope and future, of valued traditions and the integrity of the community" as violence insinuated itself into society and culture.⁵¹ It is in this changed and changing social landscape that reintegration occurs. What this implies is that there is no simple 'going back,' because the identity of the returnee and the community to each other, has been charged and is still changing through violence. Yet, in Uganda, as in many conflict zones, the individual is also of the community. The desire of the community and the individual in many cases is for reclamation.

Nordstrom's powerful observation from Mozambique is that reintegration has to be understood as a process that is situated in this culture of violence, but that, in reintegration, there is an opportunity for resisting the generative qualities of violence through creative reintegration resolution strategies. In Northern Uganda, communities' traditional means of survival have been massively impacted upon by the conflict, yet at the level of civil society, resistance to the destructive impact of violence is expressed in the community push for strategies for peace, a discourse of forgiveness, and local, community based strategies to promote the reintegration of returnees from the rebel forces.

In travelling through Northern Uganda and from talking to people from community leaders, LCs, teachers, elders, business people, mothers and youth in centres and in communities, there emerges a consistent sense of tiredness of violence and a strong desire, at the level of civil society, for a peaceful resolution to the present conflict. This has been systematically commented upon in virtually all reports that have emerged from Northern Uganda since 1997, which have strongly emphasised the existence of "a culture of peace" in Acholiland.⁵² Even in our interviews, a desire for peace and the concept of forgiveness emerged again and again. The response of the abducted teacher in our sample was not untypical. When asked how he would feel if he met the rebels again, he responded:

Teacher: I have no grudge. I don't feel anything because I know, I understand we are in the same boat so I can definitely forgive.

Interviewer: So if you see the rebels, you won't feel angry?

Teacher: I can't simply just forgive...as I've passed all these stages, I simply know how to bear the hardship, so I can forgive.

The sense is people have already experienced too much hardship, almost more than they can bear. It is estimated that over 90% of people are currently displaced in Gulu and Kitgum, and there exists approximately 30 protected villages.⁵³

Within civil society, the issue of reintegration of former abductees has been linked with issues of reconciliation and forgiveness. Influential groups such as the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative and the Concerned Parent's Association have articulated this as a necessary part of a movement towards peace. Rather than being a top down process taken by religious leaders, mobilising reintegration and reconciliation seems to stem from individuals and

communities themselves. Its roots lie in a Christian doctrine of forgiveness, in traditional Acholi cultural beliefs around spirituality, cleansing and social healing and in a political will to move beyond the personal and cultural destruction caused by conflict.

The reintegration process will also force abductees and community members to face their deeply painful personal histories. Pain reports an LRA spokesman saying, "The Acholi must be given the chance to amend the wounds among themselves. This must be done traditionally by the community."⁵⁴ From the position of civil society, a report by the Women's Commission notes, "in general, communities are willing to offer forgiveness and support the amnesty for LRA. Adults try to remember that the young people abducted by the LRA are not there by choice but on the threat of death."⁵⁵

How do communities reconcile the positions held by the individual returnee? Pain discusses early peace talks in 1994, in which an LRA commander acknowledged the "cutting of lips, hands and deforming people" as revenge by fighters who felt isolated and disowned in the bush. He noted "It is the commission of these 'personal' offences and the guilt associated with them which is at the heart of the continuing conflict in Acholi. No resolution which will hold can avoid addressing these offences."⁵⁶ He reports on a meeting of the Rwodi-mo in which the discussion articulated how internally damaging the current war is, and their belief "there is no precedence in the history of Acholi for the current situation." It was mentioned what "the rebels are doing is so strange – it is never known in Acholi experience."⁵⁷ On this basis, he concluded that the assumption is that all clans and sub-clans are both victims and perpetrators, thus acknowledging it is not just individual returnees that have to be reintegrated with the community, but relations between families, sub-clans and clans are integrally tied up in the reintegration and reconciliation process. This sets out the highly complex task that communities are attempting when engaging in reintegration.

A core factor in meaningful reintegration is in trying to understand what the meaning of children and youth's involvement in the LRA, the impact this may have had on the children, and as a result, what measures are needed in order to reclaim their children, has for the community. According to one account, in 1986 when Museveni seized power and Acholi soldiers returned to their homelands, the community perceived the returnees as "internal strangers".⁵⁸ The notion captures the sense that these returnees were of the community, but had become alien to those who had remained at home. They were not trusted, because it was believed by the community that they were carrying

bad *cen* or evil spirits. Behrand argues that the Holy Spirit Movement in part, evolved as a result of a failed reintegration process of these ex-soldiers. The HSM served to reintegrate and rehabilitate a large number of these soldiers and offered them purification and redemption through the spiritual rituals and military actions of the HSM.

As illustrated in the above analysis, for formerly abducted children, there is a risk that their communities of origin could perceive the returning youth as 'internal strangers.' While families are joyous that their children have survived, they are filled with apprehension because their children's experiences in the bush have been so opposed and cut off from them and their community. A former abductee recalls his homecoming as follows:

The reception was so good for me because they had no hope that I was alive. They welcomed me but us seemed they had some fears I had done atrocities so they kept asking all these questions. I was not forced to kill anybody so I told them everything that had happened...I didn't like it because they wanted to know in detail all that had happened and I was not free about it. It made me sad.

Another explained:

(My family) were happy when I reached home, they were very happy to see me, they said 'Welcome back, you have been in the bush'. In the village, they treat me like a brother. But some people do not like seeing you. They call me rebel.

A community leader explained the dilemma facing parents as follows:

You have to understand the fear factor that people live with. The fear is so high. First, when children are abducted and taken into captivity, what they are forced to do is terrible. They are forced to kill, they are trained to shoot, so mentally they get problems. So as a result of the mental affects, you find when children come back home, parents are afraid to interact with these children for their own safety. Parents find it difficult to control such kid's behaviour.

In spite of the difficulties and conflicts raised by returnee youth, in interviews with youth, parents, teachers and groups of ordinary men and women, there seemed to be a consistent sense of a constructive and dynamic approach to the task of reintegration. It appears to be underpinned by the responsibility of

the clan and community to actively reclaim their children and youth. According to the Acholi belief systems, the dreams and nightmares children experience were bad *cen* or spirits that disturb the child and these should be dealt with accordingly. One youth told the following story, which captures a sense of how *cen* or bad spirits work.

I saw a boy who was forced to kill his sister-in-law. He tried to plead with these people- said this is my sister-in-law, I know this lady, but the commanders told him to kill the sister in law or if he didn't, he would be killed. So he killed the sister-in-law. So when he came back and was reintegrated in the community, he started having nightmares like the lady was speaking in his mind; 'You have killed me for no reason, I even knew you'; that was what happened.

Communities have a number of rituals, which can rid the child of the *cen* and restore peace to him or her. These ceremonies are intertwined with the language of forgiveness, healing and restoration. One specific ritual, referred to locally as 'the breaking of eggs', communities and youth frequently referred to is utilised to acknowledge children's physical and spiritual absence, return and cleansing. In this ceremony, the child walks on a path and is required to step on and break some eggs. Towards the end of the ceremony, the child walks through the door of the house, at which point water is poured over his or her head. By the time the child has completed the ritual process, the broken eggs are left behind and the child emerges as cleansed. One youth who had such a ceremony performed for him described it as "You step on the eggs to make you a member of the family".

Another ritual performed to rid a person of bad *cen* or spirits, is called *yubo kom* ('cleansing the body) and involves working with an *adjoc* or local healer. When a child has killed another person, that person's spirit comes back to haunt him or her. The *adjoc* facilitates the transference of the bad *cen* from the child to the *adjoc*. Once the *cen* has entered the *adjoc*'s body he comes to understand what has happened, and the reason for the disturbance, and communicates this experience with the individual. After that the spirit may be placed in a goat and then the goat is killed, thus effectively killing the spirit and restoring peace. Given the cost of a goat, *yubo kom* involves the whole clan, both in organising the ceremony and taking responsibility for it. This also gives the child a sense of being valued by the collective family. The ritual killing of the goat or ram is traditionally "accompanied by an *abila* presentation to ask the ancestors to forgive and protect the child or person. Without this cleansing process, it is feared that the victim's spirit will continue to haunt

the person, leading to delinquent behaviour and possibly even a tendency to kill again".⁵⁹

Community members also referred to *mato oput*, a reconciliation ceremony performed when conflict exists between two families. This ceremony involves bringing the families of a victim and accused together. Elders are required to investigate the conflict. During the performance of the ceremony there is a clan or group acceptance of responsibility for wrongdoing, repentance, compensation, and finally reconciliation. This is marked by both sides drinking a bitter root extract, which restores relationships between the two sides.⁶⁰

The concept integral to these rituals is that bad *cen* enters a person as a result of evil or bad deeds. Through performing specific rituals the bad *cen* can be cast out by acknowledging, the community witnessing, accepting and forgiving. In this way the acts of violence or 'badness' become external to the child and thus the child can be reclaimed. They serve as a cultural strategy to deal with the internal/external conflict outlined earlier, of abducted children both as victims and perpetrators of violence. These cultural rituals and beliefs acknowledge how internally damaging the impact of violence has been on both individuals and their communities, and work towards restoring personal and collective peace.

At a social and cultural level, discourses of forgiveness promoted by the Religious leaders, the Concerned Parents Association and psychosocial programmes are supportive and not in conflict with these cultural beliefs. Acholi cultural beliefs are essentially strongly anti-violence.⁶¹ As such, these beliefs and rituals, when used in reintegration, can be viewed as violence-resistance in a culture now being simultaneously constituted and destroyed by violence.

Yet one wonders whether these rituals represent traditional belief systems, given that they were also appropriated by Alice's Holy Spirit Movement and later Kony's Lord's Resistance Army. It is difficult to get a sense of how former abductees relate to them and in our interviews, the attitudes expressed by youth with respect to traditional ceremonies was not consistent. Some viewed them as important in having helped them reintegrate, while others dismissed them with a shrug as not offering anything of relevance to them.

In a survey of 183 returnee respondents, about 50% performed traditional ceremonies in reintegration.⁶² The study examined the fears of returnees, which bring home the fact that returnees are not being reintegrated to a post-conflict situation, but to a society still caught up in and experiencing ongoing

violence. Of their sample, 40% feared re-abduction; 21% feared they would be killed by the LRA – with those who stayed in the bush for longer the fear of being killed was greater; 11% feared the general insecurity. A further 4% worried about the trouble of starting a new life in the community; (4%) were concerned that the Government was not being serious about the amnesty; and (4%) worried about disease and poverty. Only 12% had no fears, of whom three quarters were with the LRA for one year or less.⁶³

These fears were evident in our interviews and the impact of these on families often caused further dislocation. Once a child of the family returned home, it brought fear to the whole family that the LRA would come to the house of the family to re-abduct the child or punish the whole family by murdering the parents. This had been the experience of one of our respondents, who was orphaned by the LRA after his return home. Some parents reported they moved to 'protected settlements' after their child returned, because they feared they would be killed, or their child re-abducted. One camp leader explained the dilemma facing families and youth on reintegration as follows:

The problem in the Acholi region is that when the children have been abducted, then again when the children have been returned, and passed through reintegration, and reintegrated into communities, they can come back and re-abduct them again. That is the major problem.

Although some youth said they dealt with the past by 'forgetting' and not talking about it, the ongoing insecurity continues to make psychological recovery difficult. One youth explained:

I continued to have dreams, nightmares, sometimes I'm very sad. It still comes, most of the dreams I dream, I am still in the bush...dreams of moving with the rebels, beating people, all those activities I used do. When I first came out, I dreamed nightly, almost all of the time. I feel anxious now that the rebels will come.

Furthermore, and not surprisingly, in spite of the culture of peace and discourses of forgiveness and reconciliation, there are real tensions around reintegration and reconciliation at a community level. Teachers described some of the tensions that sometimes emerged in schools, where other children would refer to returnees as 'rebels', and their strategies to deal with this. One young woman explained, "If there is a misunderstanding, they would say, 'you have been in the bush, that is how your character is.' Even in the village, they sometimes say that".

Teachers and community leaders noted that returned youth tended to be more aggressive than those that had not been abducted – one explained it as “those children are bitter.” This bitterness was linked to what he perceived in some youth as their difficulty in forgiving their family and community for allowing them to be abducted, for somehow failing to protect them adequately. This dimension to the concept of ‘forgiveness’ shows how complex the dynamics between those abducted and other community members are.

In general, Rodriguez et al., found that longer periods spent in the bush were associated with former abductees experiencing more problems on reintegration. They found that the extent to which a returnee was welcomed was linked to gender and duration in the LRA. According to this study, 70% of females claimed that they felt welcomed on their return, compared to 57% of the males. In addition, they found “Exactly half of those who reported feeling welcomed had been inducted for four months or less, and only 5% were inducted for four or more years”. In total, 64% felt welcomed on their return, 22% initially felt welcomed, but later had bad experiences and 14% had some problems, but also some positive experiences. They found only 8% of those inducted less than five months reported bad experiences, whereas induction of six years or more represented 63% of the bad experiences, such as abusive language, being avoided or isolated, or feeling intimidated or threatened. “The final negative experience that returnees reported from the community is jealousy from those who are still missing family members and struggle openly with accepting those that have returned”. Interestingly, with respect to our observations based on group discussions with community members, they concluded, “There is clearly a difference between how the community perceived how they are welcoming returnees and how returnees feel they are being welcomed...it is also hard to find examples of forgiveness”.⁶⁴

In spite of this conclusion, our interviews (in at least some if not most cases of youth we talked to) did indicate that reintegration was reasonably successful, in the sense of restoring social relations, in the immediate to short terms. One of the factors, which really promotes acceptance of former abductees, is the ongoing and constant awareness that “it can happen to any of us” and the collective meaning of the experience of abduction described earlier – that it is within everyone’s imagination and understanding. The collective impact of multiple abductions in villages also gives people a common point of reference and understanding, and some children mentioned how this impacted on their acceptance and reintegration.

Interviewer: How did other people react?

Youth: They accepted me. They didn't disturb me. People said 'Welcome back, we thank God for you'. They were not asking many questions. I told (friends) not to go to the water. By telling them, they should know keep themselves safe, not to be attacked

Interviewer: Did people ever call you names?

Youth: No, in my village, 9 children were abducted and three came back. The others remained in the bush or maybe they are dead.

Interviewer: Have you met any of the six families?

Youth: Yes, I have met them. They live very close. It was so difficult because one of the 6, he was the one who helped me in the bush when I was sick".

Youth (2): "I told them whatever they asked but I was scared to talk of everything that happened.

Although based on a small sample, the shared insights of youth into their experiences of abduction and reintegration indicate how complex an experience it is for individuals and their communities.

Overall, it seemed that factors that contributed to successful reintegration were participation in the psychosocial programmes (in general, as it is difficult to be clear what element of programme activities contributed most to reintegration), the opportunity to return to education, skills training and support to become economically active or independent. The loss experienced by returnees as a result of their abduction is not just about the impact of their experiences, but also about lost opportunities and, as one youth expressed it, a loss of a future. When asked what of his experiences makes him most sad, the formerly abducted teacher replied, "The stage I am now in. I would have developed into something (in the community, in his work), now I have no chance." One of the most valued components of the psychosocial interventions was the skills training, for it restored some of this sense of a future with opportunity.