

# Unfulfilled promises, unsettled youth: the aftermath of conflict for former child soldiers in Yumbe District, north western Uganda

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*This article addresses the long term impact of having been a child soldier in Yumbe District, Uganda. Within this district, a group of former child soldiers fell beyond the scope of almost all reintegration initiatives from the time a peace agreement was signed in 2002. Ten years after the youths' return from the bush, the authors used a qualitative approach to understand their present situation. It was found that serious grievances were still expressed by the former child soldiers towards organisations that had promised them some form of support, but did not fulfil these promises. The effect of these promises being broken and renewed, repeatedly, over an extended period of time has provoked a sense of helplessness and anger. The authors show how this group of youth try to navigate these emotions within their daily lives. The findings also point to the importance of taking historical, cultural and political contexts into account in order to fully understand the effects of post conflict experiences of former child soldiers.*

**Keywords:** former child soldiers, grievances, Uganda

## **Introduction**

Over the past three decades, children and youth affected by war have received a lot of attention from humanitarian agencies and researchers, with the aim of addressing their mental health needs. Next to focussing on immediate support, this attention usually related to the fear that, should their perceived traumas remain unaddressed, these

generations might perpetuate cycles of violence in the future (Blattman & Annan, 2008; Summerfield, 1999). Over the past decade, researchers have increasingly aimed to empirically assess the longer term impact of having been a child soldier (Boothby et al., 2006; Betancourt et al., 2010a,b. Many of these studies confirm that young people are resilient and report no return to violent behaviour in the long term aftermath of conflict. In other words, longitudinal studies have shown that earlier concerns about so-called 'lost generations' are unwarranted (Blattman & Annan, 2008; Munive, 2010). On the other hand, researchers do report specific forms of psychological distress that remain prevalent, despite the passage of time, such as recurring thoughts of traumatic events, developing distrust as a coping strategy or transferring trauma through parenting practices (Boothby et al., 2006; Song & De Jong, 2013; Song et al., 2014, respectively). Post conflict experiences, such as stigmatisation of demobilised child soldiers, in addition to war exposure, are shown to influence the long term mental health outcomes of children's participation in armed conflict (Betancourt et al., 2010a, b). More and more attention is now being paid to the fact that post conflict settings bring highly challenging sources of adversity of their own, e.g. increased domestic violence, unemployment, difficult access to food or other resources, poverty, etc. (Miller & Rasmussen, 2010). What happens after

war seems, therefore, to be equally as important as events during the conflict in terms of understanding mental health outcomes.

With this article, the authors contribute to this field of study of the long term impact of having been a child soldier through focussing on the experiences of a groups of former child soldiers (FCSs) in Yumbe District, 10 years after disarmament. The article argues that an inductive (reasoned) approach is needed to come to locally relevant perspectives of what is at stake (Vindevoegel et al., 2013). Therefore, pre identified sets of questions were not used to seek understanding (cf. Bayer et al., 2007), but rather ethnographic methods that pay attention to the lived experiences of FCSs in the aftermath of conflict. Such an approach aligns with research that aims to take into account the social context when trying to make sense of the challenges faced by children affected by war (cf. Derluyn et al., 2013). By broadening the scope of investigation, beyond individual psychopathology or the psychosocial field, more complex realities emerge. They touch, amongst others, on political and economic realms, fields that are much harder for the humanitarian community to address (Branch, 2011; Summerfield, 1999).

## Context

### Background: rebel groups and abduction

The Uganda National Rescue Front II (UNRF II) was formed in 1996 (Alio, 1996) out of another rebel group active in the West Nile region; the West Nile Bank Front (WNBF). The WNBF were officially defeated in 1997, in South Sudan, where they had been based. Both rebel groups were formed by Idi Amin's former army personnel who had not been successfully reintegrated into the army after Museveni came to power in Uganda (Refugee Law Project (RLP), 2004). The WNBF held a strong grip on the region in the mid 1990s, and were

responsible for atrocities, abductions<sup>1</sup> and a heightened sense of general fear. Some of this study's informants had been abducted under WNBF, but later moved with the split to the UNRF II and their new base.

The UNRF II was largely made up of Aringa officers and recruits from Aringa county in what is currently Yumbe District. The general position of former UNRF II combatants is that they were supported by the local population in Yumbe, did not prey on them and could draw on their voluntary support (RLP, 2004, pp 16–17). This official discourse has obscured UNRF II's involvement in atrocities in Yumbe itself, and silence on this topic prevails among survivors of atrocities in the region (Bogner & Neubert, 2013, field notes JB). Our sample shows that 50% of our informants were abducted, whereas others joined for a variety of reasons, including; either their parents had been killed or were repeatedly tortured by either the UNRF II or the Ugandan Peoples Defence Force (UPDF) at home for information or suspected collaboration with the enemy. The latter informants report great tension at home and stated that it was better to join one of the camps in order to be able to protect oneself and ideally one's family. Others joined because they were upset about not receiving support from their parents to continue education, whereas the rebels promised them an income.

### With the rebels

Informants referred to the fact that while they felt they were not treated badly in the rebel camps in South Sudan, running away was impossible: *'we had no problems with the leaders but if you want to escape they kill you. Many times I witnessed it.'* Our informants also confirmed that the UNRF II fought next to the Sudanese army in South Sudan against the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA) in the late 1990s and often reported that younger children were not forced to engage in battles, but some chose

to fight. At the same time, they reported having lost peers in battles with the SPLA, meaning that many child soldiers did not make it home. Three informants referred to having lost *a lot* of friends in the bush, many of whom were young, for example when a landmine exploded during training in the rebel camp and many people were killed, or when there was intensive fighting with the SPLA in South Sudan. Some informants reported having enjoyed *'holding the gun'*. While few mention having fought in Yumbe District, some of them referred to it, saying:

*'they wouldn't take us [to Uganda] for fear we would run home;'  
'we only went there for food, when we would meet the SPLA or the [Ugandan] army on the way, we fought;'  
'one time we were supposed to go [to Uganda] but then a helicopter came and the thing was cancelled.*

After a long process of negotiations, on 24 December 2002, a historical peace agreement was signed between the government of Uganda and the UNRF II rebels in Yumbe District. By that time, the rebels were already based in Yumbe District. Earlier, on 13 May 2002, 135 children had been removed from the rebel camp and handed over to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) by the rebel leaders.

### **The aftermath of conflict: unfulfilled promises**

According to the FCSs, in May 2002 UNICEF left them in the hands of the local NGO Participatory Rural Action for Development (PRAFORD), while UNICEF would look into possibilities to sending them to school. PRAFORD had earlier played an important role in the efforts of bringing the rebels out of the bush (Mischnick 2009 RLP, 2004). Together with TPO (Transcultural Psychosocial

Organisation) Uganda, they organised training to prepare the FCSs for reintegration with their families. After this two weeks training, confusion arose. PRAFORD communicated that they were going to organise vocational training, but 75 of the 135 FCSs indicated they were not interested and preferred to continue with formal education. PRAFORD told them they could not help and advised the FCSs to seek support from their parents. The boys went home, expecting to hear more from UNICEF about the possibility of attending formal education. Meanwhile, the remaining boys were also sent home by PRAFORD to spend some time with their families before being called back for vocational training. However, neither UNICEF nor PRAFORD ever called the boys back.<sup>2</sup> In December 2002, in the final peace agreement, it was agreed that the Ugandan government would *facilitate the One Hundred and Thirty-Five (135) Child Soldiers who are interested in going back to school* (Article III, point 8, Peace Agreement, 2002). This raised the expectation that their return to school would now be possible. In reality, it took the government of Uganda five years (2007<sup>3</sup>), to communicate to the FCSs that they could register in schools and their school fees would be paid. However, as they enrolled in Secondary Schools in Yumbe, they had to withdraw before sitting for their exams as their school fees appeared not to have been paid. The FCSs suspect mismanagement of the funds meant for their education.

### **Amnesty cards**

Adding to the stress caused by the failure to access education, the FCSs also never received an amnesty card. These were distributed in the rebel camp (under the Uganda Amnesty Act of 2000, cf. Finnegan & Flew, 2008) after the FCSs had been removed by UNICEF. Along with these cards, came an amnesty package of 263,000

Ugandan Shillings and various items to facilitate the reintegration of ex-combatants at home. In February 2010, the FCSs voiced their concerns in a letter to the Amnesty Commission<sup>4</sup> about not having received their amnesty cards. In May 2010, they were visited by the Amnesty Commission and had their photos taken. However, by February 2014 (almost four years later), the cards had still not been processed, nor have the FCSs received any form of amnesty package.

In the interviews, our informants expressed serious concerns that various actors had tried to intervene in the registration process by the Amnesty Commission in 2010, later erasing the FCSs' names and photos and inserting their own relatives on the list to benefit from the amnesty packages. Whether true or not, the prevailing uncertainty about their access to these cards and lack of proper communication between the various actors involved (Amnesty Commission, former rebel leaders and FCSs) has given rise to further suspicion of corruption and rumours.

Accessing the amnesty card is very important to the FCSs. This is not, in general, due to exemption from legal prosecution for acts committed under the UNRF II that the card affords, something only two informants expressed reference to,<sup>5</sup> but the belief that without it, they will never access the 4,2 billion Ugandan Shillings the government promised for the resettlement of *all* ex-combatants (Article III, point 3, Peace Agreement, 2002). The focus of the FCSs on this money is clearly in line with what has been referred to as an *'environment of rewards'* that exists in Yumbe, and in Uganda at large, where ex-combatants are often co-opted by promise of compensation. In the case of Yumbe this allowed the former rebels to preserve a heroic (instead of perpetrator) image of themselves (cf. Mischnick, 2009; RLP, 2004; Bogner & Neubert, 2013).

In reality, this money has been distributed long ago, with payments beginning in 2004 (RLP, 2004) by former rebel leaders to their clientèle. In fact, many adult UNRF II ex-combatants also claim never to have received their share. Yet, in the eyes of the FCSs, receiving an amnesty card will acknowledge their right to a share of this sum, and a possible belated payment.<sup>6</sup>

## Methodology

### Project background

Data for this article was gathered in Yumbe District, by the first author, during 13 months of ethnographic fieldwork between 2010 and 2013. The data gathering formed part of a larger research project that focussed on youths from Yumbe District in the aftermath of a period of recurring violent conflict, occurring from 1979 to 2002. Aware of the disproportional attention to child soldiers in Africa, in comparison to youth who had not been former child soldiers, the research did not specifically target FCSs. However, the first author encountered this group in one of the first exploratory focus group discussions (FGD) held in 2010, in which a group of UNRF II former child soldiers, supported by their non former soldier peers, emphasised strong grievances related to their experiences in the aftermath of the peace agreement signed in 2002. These grievances kept re-emerging in interactions and conversations with FCSs, to such an extent that the authors decided to orient a part of their research specifically to this group.

### Research design and data collection

From the official peace agreement document (2002), it was known that there were 135 UNRF II FCSs at that time, in the district, but by 10 years later they were quite dispersed. Some FCSs had joined the Ugandan army (UPDF) and many others had left for Kampala or other towns in Uganda and South Sudan to look for work. A total of 26 UNRF II FCSs from the original

135 were reached through snowball sampling, starting with key informants in different sub-counties including Yumbe Town Council and Arua Town. With these 26 FCSs, semi-structured interviews were undertaken, after obtaining oral informed consent and assuring confidentiality.<sup>7</sup> The researcher's contact with a local social worker, and other local structures, allowed for referral of research participants in need of psychosocial support. The interview guide was based on exploratory interviews and participant observation with four FCS and addressed: (1) circumstances under which the youth came to join the UNRF II rebel group; (2) levels of education obtained (before joining and after coming home); (3) reintegration experiences (e.g. family and community reception); (4) livelihoods; (5) current challenges; and (6) overall reflections of the peace agreement of 2002. Twenty-one informants were interviewed only once, with five other key informant relationships developed further. These informants were extensively followed over the course of the fieldwork, between 2010 and 2013. In this period, time was spent regularly at their homes with their families, conducting informal conversations and engaging in participant observation. This, in turn, led to an in-depth understanding of their lived experiences. The method was aimed at triangulating inferences about the extent the reported grievances and hardship informed their daily experiences, and in which domains of their daily lives these played a part.

### **Participant profile**

The group of 26 FCSs formed a mixed group, of whom half (50%) reported to have been abducted, and 50% reported to have joined the rebels for other reasons, mentioned in the context section above. They spent different periods of time in the bush, varying from nine months to five years. The youngest ones reported having joined the rebels at age 11, while the oldest

reported to have been age 17. During the time of the interviews, 19 informants lived in their respective home communities, while seven had moved into urban areas. The largest group was married, or had been married ( $n=21$ ). These 21 informants had, on average, 2.6 children in 2011. Four informants reported no source of income, the largest group ( $n=14$ ) reported that farming provided their main source of (meagre) income, and the remaining youth ( $n=8$ ) held minimal jobs (such as barber or riding a bicycle-taxi) and reported erratic income.

### **Analysis**

All data (from both the interviews and cases studies) were transcribed, anonymised and analysed through a process of open coding. In the process of data collection, a constant comparative approach (cf. Barnes, 1996) was used, allowing important concepts to emerge from the data and then selecting appropriate research methods (e.g. in-depth case studies) to further investigate these concepts. This process led to the emergence of the most important themes, which are presented as findings below.

## **Findings and analysis**

### **A cycle of raising and shattering hope: helplessness and anger**

From the handing over of the UNRF II child soldiers to UNICEF in 2002, through to 2014, many FCSs remained hopeful for education, access to an amnesty card and package, and for financial compensation, as discussed above.<sup>8</sup> Several times over the course of the past years, their hopes were shattered, renewed and shattered again. Hope was renewed was when they were sent to school in 2007, and again in May 2010, when the Amnesty Commission held a hearing on their request to register. However, the outcome of this exercise still remains unclear in 2014. This process of hope being raised and shattered again and again has caused a sense of indeterminacy

and helplessness in our informants. While in their social lives, they have ‘moved on’, (i.e. got married and became parents), this social progress is not reflected in how they feel about themselves. They consistently expressed feelings of being stuck and abandoned:

*‘It is like I am still in there in the bush. While others went to school or developed a business over the past years, I don’t know where to start. I have nothing. Life is taking me in the wrong way.’* (FCS, 31-10-2011)

*‘In February 2010 we met with the Amnesty Commission, up to now there has not been any response. It has left us suffocating. Where to go and what to do is a problem.’* (FCS 28-10-2011)

*‘Sometimes I reflect about what happened in the bush and when we were abandoned here but there is no way [out]. We would have taken a step but we have no power.’* (FCS, 31-10-2011)

What is clearly expressed is an awareness of, in sociological terms, a lack of agency; they feel incapacitated to act and are painfully aware of the resulting stagnation. Similarly, in psychological terms we can read a loss of hope and a perceived lack of control. Their repetitive exposure to unpredictable outcomes has led to a sense of learned helplessness: *‘the learned expectation of having no capacity to control the environment, leading to a generalized passivity response’* (Reis, 2011, p177 referring to Lask, 2004, p156)<sup>9</sup>.

Some caution must be taken, however, in labelling the FCSs response as passive. On the one hand, the FCSs have learned that they could not change their situation through prolonged interactions with unpredictable institutional actors over whom they had no control, and found themselves continuously on the losing side of unfulfilled reintegration and compensation promises. On the other, they feel they have been intentionally made powerless

and left empty handed, and therefore, this sense of helplessness engenders frustration and anger. It does not, however, lead to complete passivity, resignation or defeat as the model of learned helplessness would have it (Reis, 2011). In the following citation Salim clearly exemplifies the mix of feelings that emerged from our analysis:

*‘Last year our photos were snapped by the Amnesty Commission, later we found different faces. How? We have nowhere to follow up. This is the anger we have most, because we don’t have any direction to follow. No office in the district can be found to direct us.’* First author: *‘why is that?’* Salim: *‘They [people at the district] collaborate with our [former] officers, that is why we are left. . . there is too much corruption.’* (FCS, 19-11-2011)

Our findings suggest it is precisely this combination of dependent waiting (a constant renewal and shattering of hope by outsiders) and feeling anger (towards the attributed cause) that cause an enduring, unsettled state among the FCSs in our study.

### **Ambiguously relating to an externally imposed identity category: becoming and remaining ‘former child soldiers’**

The moment the adolescents were taken from the rebel camp, they became *‘former child soldiers’*. Their encounter with this external and universal label, used predominantly in the circles of international development, trauma specialists and peacebuilding has had far reaching consequences for their perception of self. The label identifies them mostly as helpless victims (cf. Akello et al., 2006; Branch, 2011) and refers to the notion of having been wronged, bereft of their childhood and concomitant opportunities. Even in the more remote places in the world, the label of *‘former child soldier’* raises more or less universal expectations of assistance, yet these are expectations that remain hard to live

up to in various localities (cf. Shepler, 2014; Angucia, 2010). Over the past 10 years, our informants have gradually come to understand the care that the international community attaches to this label, and internalise it, yet at the same time experiencing an inability to access this care. Coming from Yumbe, they compare themselves with FCSs in other parts of Uganda (National Resistance Army (NRA) bush war child soldiers and Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) child soldiers), who they believe have received a lot of assistance, especially with regard to education.<sup>10</sup> Based on such assessments, the FCSs in Yumbe feel particularly marginalised. The label FCSs has become a painful identity marker, reminding them foremost of a feeling of neglect:

*'The peace is just bad to us, those who were not compensated. It means the peace was not part of us. Why would we be called UNRFII child soldiers? It was a way of damaging us.'* (FCS 16-09-2011)

In this fragment, we see that our informant feels hurt with regards to the label attached to him during the peace negotiations, because it has become meaningless. Ironically, despite this *'hurt'*, many youths hold on to this label because elsewhere it has earned *'compensation'*.<sup>11</sup>

That these youths are not inclined to let go of the FCSs label, ten years down the road, can also be attributed to the aforementioned general *'environment of rewards'* in Yumbe. Our interlocutors identification with an identity as an ex-combatant, implied in the label *'UNRF II (former) child soldier'*, needs to be preserved into the future if they want to remain entitled to any form of belated government compensation.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, contrary to what Boothby et al. (2006, p97) describe for Mozambique, in Yumbe, there is no *'successful transformation of self-image from being a 'child soldier' to becoming 'like everyone else'*. Additionally, the former rebel leaders and Ugandan

government play a role in preserving this ambiguous, but prominent, part of the identity of the youths in this study through ongoing delaying fulfilment of their promises.

### **Navigating between anger and avoidance in the aftermath of conflict**

Considering the poor and unpromising conditions of life after returning from the bush and the feelings of neglect and abandonment, it is not strange that some of the former child-soldiers mention *'going back to the bush'* as an option they consider. Feeling powerless in the face of corruption and unable to access their rights under the Amnesty Act, ten years after coming home, aggravates the grievances:

*'... Life has become hard, so I now think it was better in the bush, as much as we did not have money, at least food was free. . . . [...] if it is possible again to join the bush, I will do it, not to fight against the government, but against the former leadership of the UNRF II, because they are not taking care of us.'* (FCS, 16-09-2011)

Going back to the bush was sometimes mentioned as a form of desperate revenge for unjust treatment in the aftermath of the peace agreement. Such statements were occasionally meant to be provocative, and are a well known threat in post conflict areas by dissatisfied ex-combatants (cf. Branch, 2011; Finnstrom, 2006; Mergelsberg, 2010). More often, however, it seemed to be an expression of deep grievances. Other informants were explicit about the fact that it was the desperate situation of their families at home, the hunger<sup>13</sup> and poverty faced, that would motivate them to rejoin a rebel group if such an opportunity would occur. These motivations should be understood from a cultural perspective, where men in Yumbe are traditionally supposed to be providers for their families

and attitudes of a military type of fearlessness and bravery are influential orientations. Joining a rebel group was seen as an act of living up to the notion of fearlessness, while at the same time escaping the confrontation with their sometimes dramatic failure to provide for the family at home. Furthermore, in Yumbe, joining a rebel group is associated, through historical example, with 'remuneration' and thus could be imagined as solution to economic despair and the problem of 'providing' for their wives and children. The remuneration referred to here, can be: the ability to loot food or live from wild animals and fruits in the bush, 'living for free'; the financial support of rebel groups by foreign governments,<sup>14</sup> or the compensation expected from the Ugandan government in case rebels engage in peace negotiations.

However, it is important to note that references about 'going back to the bush' are not shared by all FCSs. Three informants, for example, referred to the counselling by TPO Uganda as having helped them not to feel vengeful.<sup>15</sup> Rather, they, emphasised peaceful ways of conflict resolution or 'forgetting'. Other informants mentioned different reasons for not believing in violent solutions:

*'Despite being unhappy with the neglect by the government, and although I feel uncomfortable, I cannot make any mistake'. (FCS, 16-09-2010)*

*'When they are looking for people like us now, I cannot join, because they (the UNRF II rebels) have already deceived us'. (FCS, 19-11-2011)*

Thus, many informants also have their own reasons not to join any armed opposition. At the same time, their disappointment and distrust in the various institutions remains profound. Quite a few youths in Yumbe address their grievances by using khat (a mild stimulant) to suppress a feeling of frustration and achieve a peaceful state

of mind. Others, during the course of research, moved away from Yumbe arguing that being away from the government officials, ex-rebel leaders and the process of expectant waiting helps them to avoid feelings of revenge and aggression. These examples point to the fact that many of our informants have found avoidance strategies to deal with their anger and frustration.

## Discussion

In this article, the authors aimed to provide in-depth insight in the long term impact of having been a child soldier in Yumbe District. This research was undertaken because initial interaction with some of the informants pointed towards ongoing stress factors in the aftermath of armed conflict that compromised these young people's wellbeing up to ten years after a peace agreement was expected to have brought stability to the region.

Our findings portray how a sense of helplessness and anger seem to be the outcomes of a cumulative experience, with hopes being shattered and renewed over the stretch of more than 10 years, by a variety of actors. While feelings of disappointment and deception among former child soldiers after ceasefires or peace treaties are not uncommon (cf. Hoffman, 2003; Utas, 2005; Song & de Jong, 2013), it has not often been acknowledged that NGO's sometimes also play a role in the experience of deception (Branch, 2011), nor has such a cumulative process of deception over time been extensively described and analysed for its impact.

We have shown that, in combination with the 'environment of rewards' in Yumbe for ex-combatants, and the failure of educational opportunities that could foster reintegration (cf. Betancourt et al., 2008), FCSs in Yumbe display an inability to see themselves as 'normal' youths ten years after demobilisation. Rather, they keep falling back on an identity as FCSs, still expecting

this label to entitle them to support after more than ten years of peace. Yet, falling back on this label, constantly makes them aware of the neglect they feel. We believe it is these enduring and ambiguous cycles that create and perpetuate their feelings of helplessness and anger. Some informants refer to not seeing a way out other than revenge and/or going *'back to the bush'* as a (locally meaningful) solution, and some speak explicitly of feelings of revenge. Such feelings among FCSs have been earlier associated with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) by Bayer et al. (2007), but here the picture is more complicated and political, and cannot be attributed to PTSD alone. A labelling of their anger as a mental health problems resulting from their experiences in the bush could lead to a medicalisation and de-politicisation of their socio-political problems (cf, Branch, 2011).

Our findings confirm then, that identifying local post conflict sources of distress can make an important contribution to our understanding of the long term outcomes of having been a child soldier, within a particular (historical) context, and our case draws attention to what can perhaps best be labelled as *'political post conflict stressors'*. In line with the orientations by Miller & Rasmussen (2010) and Fernando et al. (2010), these refer to specific *political* dynamics that may have a negative impact on FCSs well-being in the aftermath of conflict. However, we should be cautious with just adding new labels to mental health models; there is a risk that this obscures a collective political problem into an individual and medical problem. While young people appear resourceful in managing *political stressors*, and they develop ways of dealing with their grievances other than responding in violent modes, it seems that the prolonged state of hope and disappointment prevents *'closure'*, which raises questions about what the future looks like for these youths, and their social environments.

## **Conclusion**

Intervening in the field of former child soldiers is likely to have *'unexpected effects'* (Shepler, 2014). By applying only a selective approach to individual mental wellbeing in the aftermath of conflict, complex interactions in the daily lives of FCSs that are shown to be important stress factors become invisible or distorted, and de-politicised. In reality, interventions engage with highly complex local realities and become part of new realities that influence the daily lives of their recipients of aid. Different institutions should, therefore, be more concerned about accountability with regards to the promises they make to so called *'vulnerable'* groups. This also includes better collaboration and follow-up when institutions work together, or hand over projects to partners. A non-timely handling of grievances that emerge, in relation to promises made but not kept, seems to lead to potentially volatile situations and new forms of psychological harm. Efforts towards *'closure'* and reconciliation, between all parties affected, is recommended.

## **Limitations**

This research builds strongly on extended participant observation and semi structured interviews with a small group of FCSs that were once part of the UNRF II. While we found references suggesting that their experiences reflect those of a larger dispersed group, more research is needed for confirmation.

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<sup>1</sup> Two FCSs reported that when they were abducted from school, *some girls were also taken*. These two informants were abducted in 1995 and 1997, respectively. It seems possible that both these informants were abducted by what was then still WNBF, as one of them suggested, while for UNRF II the FCSs mentioned that girls and women were not abducted and that there were no girls nor women in the barracks in South Sudan with them. The official number of returnee child soldiers from the UNRF II (135) also consisted of boys only. Community members confirmed that girls had not been recruited into the UNRF II. Women and girls, however, did bear the brunt of rape during the long stretch of rebellions (field notes JB). Aware of the danger of ignoring the gender dimension of war, there seems to be consensus among community members in Yumbe that girls and women were not targeted for recruitment nor abduction by the UNRF II.

<sup>2</sup> In 2006, a large skills and vocational training by PRAFORD was established under UNIDO, a program meant to train around 3000 people, yet none of the interviewees were able to access this programme. Even though the programme explicitly aimed to target veterans and ex-combatants and their relatives, it is not clear why the former UNRF II child soldiers were not selected for any of the trainings. Possibly this was related to the

fact that there was a pending promise from the government that it would send the FCS to school. The program ended in 2008 when funding was over.

<sup>3</sup> *Voice of the Former Child Soldiers of the Defunct UNRF II*: Letter to the Chairman of the Amnesty Commission, dated 23 February 2010 (copy in the author's possession). Different informants contradict each other when it comes to the year in which the FCSs were invited to enrol in school. Some mention the year 2004 or 2005.

<sup>4</sup> *Voice of the Former Child Soldiers of the Defunct UNRF II*.

<sup>5</sup> The FCSs, as mentioned earlier, probably hardly fought in Uganda which allowed for the fact that most of the FCSs reported to be 'received well' when they came home from the bush. Only three of our 26 informants reported a more difficult reception due to accusations of being involved in atrocities in Yumbe. Two informants out of these three therefore felt they needed access to the amnesty card. The remainder of our informants explained they needed amnesty card for material compensation and stated they were not worried about prosecution.

<sup>6</sup> As suggested, ex-combatants nationwide have come to rely strongly on this perception of entitlement, a development nourished by the Ugandan Government under former rebel leader president Museveni. It is widely accepted that such a payment might take ages, but precedents have fostered hope that eventually, they will be 'recognised' and paid.

<sup>7</sup> One potential informant had mental problems and it was too difficult to converse with him. His friends attributed his condition to marijuana use. Another potential informant refused to participate in the interview after explaining what the interview was about. All informants were told that the survey was part of a larger research that focused on youths in Yumbe District and that first

author was a student from the University of Amsterdam and not working with an NGO.

<sup>8</sup> This narrative about the unfolding of events was confirmed by certain parents and (former) NGO workers. Political sensitivity prevented further inquiry by the authors at other levels.

<sup>9</sup> For an elaboration on Seligman's development of learned helplessness theory, see Nunn & Thompson, 1996.

<sup>10</sup> *Voice of the Former Child Soldiers of the Defunct UNRF II*.

<sup>11</sup> See endnote 7.

<sup>12</sup> It is important to note here that ex-combatants in Yumbe tend to preserve a heroic image of themselves (cf. Bogner & Neubert, 2013), which makes it plausible that to use the FCS label is not considered stigmatising as other studies report (cf. Akello, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> References were often made to the painful experience of *seeing your children cry of hunger*.

<sup>14</sup> For example Omar al Bashir, president of Sudan supported the UNRF II with arms and money to fight the SPLA.

<sup>15</sup> While the author was introduced to Yumbe initially through the help of TPO Uganda, the research participants, by the time of the semi structured interviews were not aware of that and referred to TPO occasionally themselves, they were not asked explicitly about the impact of the TPO training they had received.

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