

Community based volunteers as partners for agencies working with formerly abducted children and youth: experiences from northern Uganda

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The 20 year conflict in northern Uganda between the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the Government of Uganda has resulted in a severe humanitarian crisis. Agencies working in the sector of psychosocial support over the years have developed a concept to work closely with community members who are made responsible for many of the community based activities. This article describes the experiences of these community volunteer counsellors (CVCs).

Keywords: abducted children, community volunteer counsellors (CVCs), counselling

This article describes the experiences of 104 community volunteer counsellors (CVCs) in the Kitgum district in northern Uganda¹. CVCs are community members who within their own communities have a status as leaders and helpers before being elected as CVCs by the community. They undergo training after the election and work on voluntary terms. This voluntarism is based on the assumption of agencies that the CVCs 'have a natural obligation to assist their community, confirmed by the fact that the community itself chose them'. The volunteers are rewarded with some signs of recognition, like stationery, a T-shirt or a bag. From the view of agencies, 'their presence as volunteers [is found] very useful to the scope of strengthening a social network and keeping the community based orientation' (Castelli, 2000).

These CVCs are also closely connected to the Psycho Social Support Programme (PSSP), which was initiated in 1997. This programme departs from the assumption that children who experience traumatic events in the context of insecurity and conflict can be significantly affected in their psychological and physical growth. The PSSP recognizes that a child is not an isolated individual, but belongs to the community. For this reason, the programme takes a community based approach (AVSI Uganda, 2002).

The PSSP was created as a response to the needs of the people in northern Uganda who suffered from attacks of the LRA (Lord's Resistance Army) rebels. The programme aims to support individuals and communities dealing with past traumas to enable them to live a productive and peaceful life. The approach of the PSSP is designed as community based. Its focus is to strengthen the social support networks in the local communities, as well as the cultural traditions and coping mechanisms. The skills and capacities of community members who are key actors (CVCs, teachers, traditional leaders) are to be rebuilt and promoted through training programmes and follow-up visits in the field. These key actors are supposed to sensitize, mobilize and help their community.

Between 2002 and 2005, the programme supported over 2000 war affected people in

the Kitgum and Pader districts. Of these beneficiaries 75% were formerly abducted children and youth (Castelli, Locatelli, & Canavera, 2005)

The CVCs are working on two levels. They work with community members, carrying out activities such as counselling, data collection, home visits and community sensitization. In addition, they cooperate with 'higher offices'; the CVCs often function as the link between the community members, the agencies and district authorities².

The agencies working in the areas of psychosocial support initially had the expectation that CVCs would be able to work as volunteers indefinitely (Canavera, 2005). Ongoing discussions among the agencies however show that there is a great need for a better understanding of what the CVCs are supposed to do in the communities, what they actually do, how they are doing it, what they need to do it and for how long. A harmonization of the use of volunteers is called for from various stakeholders. For example, Williamson advises that *'Agencies that use volunteers [should discuss] the advantages and disadvantages of different approaches to service delivery, what is realistic to expect community volunteers to do, and under what circumstances it is appropriate to provide incentives in cash or kind. The aim of such a series of discussions should be collaborative development of operational guidelines on these issues. Currently, some programs have unrealistic expectations regarding what volunteers can be expected to do without any compensation'* (Williamson, 2005)

Becoming a CVC

Election. CVCs are intended to be chosen by their communities. The election process however has been described as sometimes being dubious and weak. It has been observed that communities did not participate in CVC elections, and one consequence

is that community members do not feel that they have ownership of the CVC network (Canavera, 2005). Many CVCs think that they have been elected because the community members appreciated their social competence. In the words of one CVC, *'Community members elect someone after seeing that this person is trusted and is good and knows how to work with people'*. Having knowledge and skills also seems to be a crucial factor for someone to become a CVC. Such qualities include doing good work, being experienced, or being educated. A volunteer from Kitgum Matidi, for example, says: *'People elected me because they saw the way I have been working for so long with them and my capability as I work without discriminating'*.

Motivation to become a CVC. The most common motivation to be elected and to work as a CVC is the desire to help people in the communities. Many volunteers initially were also motivated by the fact that their community members put their trust in them to do the work of a CVC. One volunteer said: *'What made me become a CVC was because my people trusted me because I love them. I like volunteering for doing good work. I like teaching people and giving them good advice. Furthermore, I had some knowledge through training to help those who have lost trust and confidence in themselves.'*

CVCs frequently ask for payment. It is not unlikely that the anticipation of material reward could be a main motivation for people to become a CVC, but most volunteers don't mention this as a motivation. One volunteer admitted a different kind of personal motivation; *'I got interested because I wanted to console myself when in problems before consoling someone else'*.

Training for CVCs. The elected volunteers are not supposed to start their work before the training. Afterwards, they get a certificate, which they are supposed to present to the sub-county officials so that they are officially

confirmed as a CVC and then start their work in the community. Many agencies in the communities in Kitgum district depend on cooperation with community volunteers. Therefore, it is a common approach among the agencies to train and then to use certain groups of community members in the various fields, such as health education, construction of pit latrines, etc. (Castelli, 2000). Very often, among the group of people to be trained for various aspects of the work, agencies chose CVCs among other representatives such as sub-county chiefs, local councillors (LCs) and women and youth representatives. The result of this approach can be that some CVCs undergo a variety of training courses that go beyond psychosocial work, such as utilization of borehole pumps; landmine awareness; sanitation; HIV/AIDS prevention; and gender issues (Canavera, 2005)³. This indicates that CVCs are not only involved in the PSSP but are mobilized by a variety of agencies for various tasks that are markedly different from what they were initially expected to do in the communities. Therefore, there is a risk that the CVCs are overwhelmed by the wide range of activities they are expected to do on a voluntary basis.

Most of the CVCs find the PSSP training helpful because they acquire new knowledge and skills, mainly in counselling. One CVC said: *'I received training which encouraged me and I can now console people how to endure and cope with their problems. Being a CVC has also given me courage and now I know how to talk to those with problems. The fact that I have been trained creates trust and confidence in our work, it shows that our work as CVCs is considered important.'*

However, CVCs not only gain knowledge and skills in the training that help them to carry out their voluntary work. Often, they also benefit in a personal way. One CVC who

received training in HIV/AIDS awareness in addition to the PSSP programme said: *'I have knowledge and skills to help people with problems. I am controlling myself from HIV infection.'*

The daily work of a CVC. Voluntary work that was carried out before the election is often given up after starting to work as a CVC. This is especially true for leadership positions; only a few CVCs continue to hold the same leadership position that they had before the election. Often, involvement in community based organizations also decreases. Usually, only work that is connected to physical survival, either in the form of acquiring food (e.g. being a peasant farmer) or receiving an income (e.g. being employed as a civil servant), is still carried out after the election.

Most CVCs see their main responsibilities and activities in the provision of counselling and guidance services. Counselling and guidance include activities such as giving advice to formerly abducted children and youth, and talking to their parents. For the CVCs counselling mainly means sharing ideas and problems, giving advice and encouragement, teaching, consoling, listening to people's problems, and making people *'forget'* their worries or their past.

Alongside these activities, they work with community members, for example during community sensitization programmes. As one CVC put it; *'The work of a CVC is to encourage people to stay together and to try settling conflicts among people.'*

CVCs also refer individual community members to agencies, write reports and keep records, for example on the number of children abducted from their community. A typical CVC record says: *'I write a report on a child who has returned from the bush. I link such a child to the office of the community development officer (CDO). I ask children their worries and*

concerns and I look at their mental situation. I give advice to such children and I visit them frequently until I see them settled in their minds. If there is no change, I then write a report about them and then send them back again to the reception centre for formerly abducted children and youth.

Problems. This self-image of CVCs being workers for agencies or authorities is one of the most profound challenges in the work between the 'higher offices' and the CVCs. It creates differences in expectations on both sides. It also appears that the CVCs do not necessarily consider themselves to be part of a support network in the community. There is often widespread disappointment and frustration among the CVCs because the 'higher offices' do not provide them with enough support. The offices often expect the CVCs to mobilize more support from the community members in order to reduce the stigmatization of returnees. Some CVCs keep a low profile in their community because they are afraid of becoming overwhelmed with requests from the community for support. Many CVCs are frustrated that the 'higher offices' usually don't react to reports or referrals. CVCs often feel left alone when no action is taken to help vulnerable community members after they send a report requesting material support. The community members, in turn, therefore often hold the volunteers responsible when nothing happens after a report has been sent.

Another problem CVCs often mention is the 'bad' behaviour of formerly abducted children and youth.

The type of 'bad' behaviours and attitudes of returnees varies. CVCs report, for example, 'aggressive', 'rude' or 'wild' behaviour. Some CVCs say that the formerly abducted children and youth are 'mad', 'mentally disturbed', 'traumatized' and 'selfish' and often engage in fights with other people. The 'bad' behaviour of returnees and the negative attitudes of

community members towards them are obviously related. CVCs most frequently mention abuse, insults, intimidation and enmity as negative attitudes of community members towards formerly abducted children and youth. Fear of community members is mentioned frequently as the cause. For example, community members often fear that the LRA rebels could follow returnees who escaped from captivity in order to take revenge. There is fear that they might target the returnees' families or the whole community by committing atrocities such as lootings, abductions, and killings.

Another reason for the negative relationship between community members and formerly abducted children and youth might be a result of atrocities allegedly committed by individual returnees while they had been in captivity. A feeling of helplessness to know how to handle formerly abducted children and youth properly is also mentioned as a possible reason for negative attitudes and behaviours towards returnees by the community.

Lessons learnt

Many CVCs find it difficult to work on a voluntary basis with little assistance given to them. The volunteers' expectation of being compensated for their work is often not fulfilled by the 'higher offices'. Some CVCs suspect that the officials are corrupt and using the support for themselves that is intended to be given to the community members and to the CVCs. One CVC said: *'I hate it when I make referrals and when they [formerly abducted children and youth] later come to check on the outcome of the help. I hate not being paid and have to talk to them about the problems they face, they come immediately to inquire while saying that I have benefited from the problems, and I cannot go up to the office of the [district officials]?'.*

Even if the CVCs initially were purely motivated to carry out voluntary community work out of a sense of 'charity' and a desire to help improve the life of the most vulnerable community members, it seems appropriate to rethink the philosophy that the volunteers have a 'natural obligation to assist their community, confirmed by the fact that the community itself chose them' (Castelli, 2000). This is especially true if the election process has been dubious. It also has to be considered that since the CVC system has been put in place, the situation in northern Uganda has changed drastically. After the conflict started, initially most people were still living in their homes. Later, when the insecurity increased, they were displaced into Camps for Internally Displaced Persons. Since the peace talks have been underway, they are planning to leave the IDP Camps again. The motivation of people to become a volunteer may therefore have changed considerably.

The biggest problem in terms of negative attitudes of community members towards CVCs is that CVCs often have to endure accusations of corruption, or of not helping people. According to one CVC, this could be related to a lack of uniform clothing for all CVCs: *'We lack a uniform to show that we are workers. We lack presentable clothing to wear, at least, to be presentable to the community.'*

CVCs often feel pressure from community members to be supported materially. For instance, one volunteer explained that: *'People feel that once assistance is being given to the children who have returned, there also should be assistance if someone else falls into problems.'*

CVCs may not be well enough prepared to work with formerly abducted children and their family members, who ask for material help instead of psychosocial support.

Many community members and local leaders may not be well informed about what CVCs are supposed to do and what they

cannot do. As one CVC said: *'The higher offices should organize workshops to update the community on the work of CVCs.'*

Agencies working with community based volunteers should be very clear and realistic in their expectations, and they should be consistent in their approaches towards volunteers. A big problem in northern Uganda has been that many agencies have 'used' the CVCs for a multitude of activities, trained them in whatever they wanted the CVCs to do and compensated them in different ways: some agencies provided money, some gave bicycles, some gave stationery or soap or sugar, and some believe in the purely voluntary motivation the CVCs should work with, and do not provide them with anything. When different agencies are interested in working with community volunteers, they must harmonize their approaches.

Conclusion

Despite all the problems mentioned above, working with volunteers in the communities still appears necessary to implement community based programmes. However, the quality, impact and sustainability of these programmes should be reconsidered. Even now, while people are trying to move out of the Camps, most of the community members have to struggle daily, and sometimes don't succeed in satisfying their own basic needs. This has to be taken into consideration when agencies discuss working with resource persons in the communities who are supposed to work on a voluntary basis.

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² Complaints were raised by some CVCs that they feel overlooked or ignored when community members, especially local leaders, consult agencies or authorities for any kind of support without including the CVC in this process. For example, a CVC from Kitgum Matidi said: *'Some people bypass us and take their problems directly to some offices and they are received and attended to. But we as CVCs are not informed, even when they are coming from our area of work.'*

³ Canavera points out another problem related to the use of volunteers by agencies which are not operating under the PSSP: *'NGO and CBO workers see CVCs primarily as their point of entry into the community. They perceive the CVCs as community based resource people for them. . . Some organizations use the CVCs as their only community point of reference while others use the CVCs in addition to other community resources'* (Canavera, 2005).

¹ Ninety-six CVCs participated in 10 focus group discussions and were interviewed as part of a research project focused on community based aspects of the reintegration of formerly abducted children and youth.

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