

*Listening to Youth:  
The Experiences of Young People  
in Northern Uganda*

**Contribution to Machel 10-Year Strategic Review**



**Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children  
with support from UNICEF**

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## **Mission Statement**

The Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children works to improve the lives and defend the rights of refugee and internally displaced women, children and adolescents. We advocate for their inclusion and participation in programs of humanitarian assistance and protection. We provide technical expertise and policy advice to donors and organizations that work with refugees and the displaced. We make recommendations to policy makers based on rigorous research and information gathered on fact-finding missions. We join with refugee women, children and adolescents to ensure that their voices are heard from the community level to the highest levels of governments and international organizations. We do this in the conviction that their empowerment is the surest route to the greater well-being of all forcibly displaced people.

## **Acknowledgements**

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Cover photograph by Juliet Young

## Contents

Map of Uganda	i
Acronyms	ii
Executive Summary	1
Introduction	5
Methodology	6
Background on the Conflict and Current Situation	6
<i>Current situation</i>	7
Challenges	8
<i>Education</i>	8
<i>Lack of economic opportunities</i>	9
<i>Sexual abuse and exploitation</i>	10
<i>Health threats, including HIV/AIDS</i>	11
<i>Food insecurity</i>	11
<i>Stigmatization</i>	11
<i>Dependency</i>	12
<i>Loss of traditional culture</i>	13
<i>Vulnerable groups</i>	13
Emerging Concerns	13
Recent Progress	15
Coping Strategies	17
Peace and Reconciliation	18
Youth Participation	19
<i>Youth groups</i>	21
<i>Women's Commission 2001 Participatory Research</i>	22
Recommendations	23
Annex I: Questionnaire	28
Annex II: Groups interviewed and consulted	30
Endnotes	31

# Map of Uganda



UN OCHA/IRIN (2004)

## Acronyms

CBO	Community-based organization
CPC	Child Protection Committee
GBV	Gender-based violence
GoU	Government of Uganda
GYAN	Global Youth Action Network
GYC	Gulu Youth Center
ICC	International Criminal Court
IDP	Internally displaced persons
IGA	Income generating activities
LRA	Lord's Resistance Army
NGO	Nongovernmental organization
NRC	Norwegian Refugee Council
PTA	Parent-Teacher Association
SRSR/CAAC	Special Representative of the Secretary General on Children and Armed Conflict
UDHS	Uganda Demographic and Health Survey
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UPDF	Uganda People's Defense Force
UXO	Unexploded ordnance
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organization

## **Executive Summary**

In May 2007, the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children (Women's Commission) visited northern Uganda to meet young people and gather their opinions and ideas with respect to the five themes of the Machel Study 10-year Strategic Review:

- consequences of the conflict;
- coping strategies;
- participation in decision-making;
- peace and reconciliation; and
- recommendations for the local, national and international community.

The following report is based on focus groups with more than 200 young women and men, and interviews with representatives from the Government of Uganda, UN agencies and international and local non-governmental organizations in the Gulu and Kitgum districts.

## ***Findings***

### **(1) Consequences of the conflict**

Young people shared the following concerns about issues that have characterized their experience during the conflict:

- Education is their priority concern, and the solution to the many challenges they face.
- The lack of opportunities to earn a safe and dignified income to support themselves and their families is also a high priority concern. Many identified exploitation and abuse, poor health and hygiene and lack of food as a direct result of their inability to earn any income.
- Sexual abuse and exploitation are widespread.
- Food rations are inadequate.
- Some formerly abducted children experience stigmatization by other community members.
- Traditional cultural norms have been undermined by more than two decades of conflict and displacement, and young people wish to restore their Acholi culture. In particular, a "culture of dependency" has emerged among people in the north, which contrasts with the traditional value of self sufficiency.

### ***Emerging concerns***

Young people stated that while the transition to peace is promising, they are concerned about the following challenges:

- With the population movement out of camps, children are increasingly being left alone in the original internally displaced persons (IDP) camps to continue accessing services, such as schools, while older family members return home to prepare the land.

- They, and their families, may face challenges or conflicts in acquiring or reclaiming land and reintegrating into their families' villages of origin.
- The possible transition from relief to development may precipitate a drop in international funding and support at a critical juncture when it is greatly needed.

## **(2) Recent Progress**

Young people noted the following improvements in their lives:

- Security in the region has improved significantly. Of particular relevance to the lives of young people is the dramatic reduction in abductions by the rebel forces known as the Lord's Resistance Army.
- Families are exploring the possibility of returning home, although there are associated risks.
- "Night commuting" has all but ceased; previously an estimated 40,000 children and youth were "commuting" from IDP camps to town centers each night to avoid abduction.
- Young people participating in programs aimed at reintegration appear to be adjusting well.

Interviews with young people and other stakeholders also indicated that the following positive developments have occurred:

- Sensitization campaigns, for example, those on good health and hygiene practices, appear to have been effective.
- Young men and women are active in addressing community problems.
- NGOs, UN and government agencies appear to recognize and value the importance of youth participation.
- The humanitarian community in northern Uganda is also learning from past experience of "targeting" returnees or other categories of people for services, which contributed to stigmatization. Today, organizations are moving toward more inclusive programming to reduce tension and discrimination in local communities.

## **(3) Coping strategies**

Young people described the following strategies they, and their families, employ to cope with the challenges they face. Some of these strategies are more constructive while others may result in additional risks.

- Forming and belonging to youth groups help them to address multiple needs, including companionship and support, and the opportunity to develop new skills.
- Religion plays an important role in the lives of many. Young people often referenced God and religious institutions as a source of comfort and strength.
- Young people who participated in the Women's Commission's 2001 participatory research<sup>1</sup> on the needs and potential contributions of young people developed

critical thinking, research and advocacy skills, and increased confidence and commitment to their communities.

- Young people preserve their cultural heritage by learning and performing traditional music, dance and drama. These activities are also used as vehicles to raise awareness and address challenges such as HIV/AIDS prevention and conflict resolution.
- Parents or relatives encourage some young girls to get married for the dowry payment and to reduce the household's expenses.
- Transactional sex among girls appears to be rampant and spans the spectrum from prostitution or payment for services to sex for favors, such as material possessions.
- Alcohol abuse is prevalent and drug abuse was also mentioned.
- Some families use defilement (rape of girls under 18) cases as an economic strategy to elicit a "bride price" from the families of boys convicted under this law.
- Parents voluntarily leave younger family members unattended for extended periods of time as a strategy for preparing for resettlement in a period when prospects for sustainable peace and land reclamation are uncertain.

#### **(4) Peace and Reconciliation**

Young people demonstrated awareness of the peace talks between the Lord's Resistance Army and the Government of Uganda underway in Juba, Southern Sudan at the time of this study. They expressed the following opinions about the peace process:

- They have had little opportunity to participate in the proceedings or to express their preferences for its outcome.
- Displaced and formerly abducted young people felt that they should be represented in the negotiations, as they have been most directly affected by the conflict.

#### **(5) Participation**

Interviews with young people and other stakeholders indicated that:

- International and local NGOs, UN and government agencies are involving youth in their programs in a variety of ways, not only as beneficiaries of their services, but also in roles such as youth counselors and peer educators.
- What is clear is that young people are participating in *activities*; what isn't clear is the extent to which young people are participating in *decision-making*.
- There are significant discrepancies in how young people participate, who participates and to what end across agencies, organizations and programs.
- The significant potential of youth organizations as a venue for young people's empowerment and inclusion in community decision-making is not fully realized.



Youth organizations appear to represent the most prevalent forms of participation. However, most organizations lack adequate funding and capacity for innovative, appropriate planning.

### ***Recommendations***

Young people recommended that national and international stakeholders:

- **Increase and sustain support to their communities**, even and especially if a transition to peace begins.
- **Support them in achieving the highest level of formal education possible**, which will require catch-up classes and bridging programs for young people who have missed years of school.
- **Support them in obtaining safe, dignified and sufficient sources of income.** All economic programs should build on affected populations' existing assets, match local market needs and lead to sustainable income. Careful planning is needed to ensure that young women have access to training and learning opportunities, such as providing child care and flexible hours.
- **Take immediate action to prevent and appropriately respond to sexual exploitation and abuse.** This includes ensuring that women and girls have safe access to water, food, fuel, sanitation and income generation opportunities. Health care workers should be trained to provide comprehensive clinical care to survivors of rape and sexual abuse.
- **Support youth-friendly health services in IDP camps and home villages.**
- **Provide more financial and technical support to youth organizations**, as the institutions that most effectively and comprehensively address their priority needs. One way is to contribute to the MacArthur Foundation's *Trust Fund for War-Affected Children and Youth in Northern Uganda*, which provides small, flexible grants for local projects with an emphasis on education and skills building for youth.
- **Provide young people with more opportunities to participate in decision-making about issues that affect their lives.**

## Introduction

The purpose of this study was to gather the insights of young people<sup>2</sup> living in northern Uganda, a region that has been mired in conflict for more than 20 years. Young people in northern Uganda have been, perhaps, the group most deeply affected by the conflict between the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the Government of Uganda, a struggle that has been characterized by a brutal civil war and a protracted humanitarian crisis. Thousands of young people have seen their communities attacked and destroyed, have lost parents and relatives to violence and disease and have been separated from their families and displaced from their homes. Thousands of young men and women have been abducted by the LRA and forced to participate in violence, or serve as porters, cooks and sex slaves, resulting in many young women becoming mothers at a young age.

Despite these and countless other challenges, young people have been a source of resilience in their communities, supporting their families and working to restore social cohesion and development in their communities. As Uganda moves forward in an uncertain peace process and faces the challenges of rebuilding, young people will continue to play a key role in shaping their country's future. As the international community strives to better understand, support and uphold the rights of youth affected by armed conflict, young people's own voices, opinions, perspectives and recommendations are a necessary and critical resource.

This study, undertaken by a research team from the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children (Women's Commission) and supported by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), contributes to the 10-year Strategic Review of the "Machel Study" on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children, initiated by the Special Representative of the Secretary General on Children and Armed Conflict (SRSG/CAAC) and UNICEF in November 2006. The research provides a vehicle for young people to voice their opinions and ideas with respect to the five themes of the Machel Study 10-year Strategic Review:

- consequences of the conflict;
- coping strategies;
- participation in decision-making;
- peace and reconciliation; and
- recommendations for the local, national and international community.

This study also contributes to the Women's Commission's ongoing advocacy to increase attention and support for youth in northern Uganda. It includes a follow-up examination the Women's Commission's 2001 participatory research study with 54 adolescent researchers in Kitgum, Gulu and Pader, which culminated with the report, *Against All Odds: Surviving the War on Adolescents*.<sup>3</sup> After the 2001 study, the Women's Commission continued to partner with four youth groups in the region, three of which formed as a direct result of the participatory research. Several members of those youth groups supported and participated in this current initiative. This study provides an opportunity to learn more about the long-term impact of participatory research as a method for engaging young people in research, organization and decision-making.

## **Methodology**

The study was conducted in partnership with UNICEF and the Graça Machel Secretariat in New York, with financial and logistical support from UNICEF-New York and UNICEF-Uganda. It was undertaken by the Women's Commission's protection program officer, Jenny Perlman Robinson and consultant, Juliet Young. The team visited the conflict-affected districts of Kitgum and Gulu from May 3-17, 2007. The team visited Labuje, Amida and Ogili camps in Kitgum with populations of 14,188<sup>4</sup>, 28,982<sup>5</sup> and 4,082<sup>6</sup>, respectively, and Coo-pee and Palenga camps in Gulu with populations of 10,980<sup>7</sup> and 10,449<sup>8</sup>, respectively.

The team conducted a total of 16 focus group discussions in camps<sup>9</sup> and town centers, with a total of 101 young women and 90 young men ranging from approximately 10 to 30 years old. The focus groups were primarily conducted in Luo with English translation. The young people included those in school and out of school; those who are involved with youth groups; both those who are, and those who are not, accessing any services; formerly abducted child soldiers and child mothers. All of the 16 focus groups used structured questionnaires developed in advance by a team from the Graça Machel Secretariat in New York, UNICEF-New York and the Global Youth Action Network (GYAN) (see Annex 1 for questionnaire). Eight of the focus groups were co-facilitated with local young women and men. The youth facilitators were requested in advance of the team's arrival to organize the voluntary nonrandom selection of female and male youth participants from camps and town. They were asked to keep each group to 10-12 participants, and to separate the groups by sex and age (10-14 and 15-30). Additional focus groups were organized by international and local NGOs upon arrival.

In addition to the focus groups, the team conducted structured interviews with representatives of 11 international NGOs, five local NGOs, four UN agencies, two academic research institutions and three local government offices in and around Kitgum and Gulu. The research team conducted seven in-depth interviews (four females and three males), primarily with young women and men who had participated in the Women's Commission's 2001 participatory research project.

As focus group participants were not randomly selected, the findings cannot be construed to represent the youth population as a whole in the locations visited. The assessment is therefore best read as a "snapshot" of young people's perspectives in the two localities in which research was conducted. Time constraints prevented visits to additional districts and camps.

## **Background on the Conflict and Current Situation**

Uganda, with a population of 27.4 million, has been embroiled in a civil war in the north for over 20 years.<sup>10</sup> The conflict began in 1986, when the Acholi ethnic group of northern Uganda formed an anti-government movement against the Government of Uganda (GoU) and President Museveni. The rebel group, the Lord's Resistance Army

(LRA), led by Joseph Kony, seeks to overthrow the government and institute a rule of law based on the Biblical Ten Commandments. The LRA frequently targets civilians with mutilation, rape, murder, looting and burning villages, as well as the abduction of women, children and youth to serve as fighters, porters and sex slaves.<sup>11</sup> An estimated 66,000 children and youth have been abducted by the LRA since the conflict began.<sup>12</sup> The government forces, the Ugandan People's Defense Forces (UPDF), have also committed abuses against civilians such as rape and murder, especially within the internally displaced persons (IDP) camps under their protection.<sup>13</sup>

An estimated 90 percent of the population in northern Uganda has been displaced.<sup>14</sup> In an effort to isolate the LRA, the government forcibly relocated many people to IDP camps, called "protected villages," which are guarded by the UPDF. The insecurity and policy of forced relocation has resulted in 1.6 million IDPs living in over 200 camps throughout the region.<sup>15</sup> Life in the camps is difficult, with IDPs suffering from chronic poverty, inadequate nutrition, poor sanitation and limited access to health care services and education. In mid-2005, a multi-agency health and mortality survey led by the World Health Organization (WHO) found that nearly 1,000 people die each week in IDP camps in northern Uganda due to preventable diseases.<sup>16</sup> An estimated 80 percent of IDPs are women and children.<sup>17</sup>

### **Current Situation**

In August of 2006, a cessation of hostilities agreement was signed by the GoU and the LRA. Since then, security has increased for travel of both humanitarian workers and IDPs. The LRA has frequently stalled progress towards achieving peace, including withdrawing from talks in January 2007. In February 2007, the LRA and the GoU agreed to extend the cessation of hostilities through June, and peace talks resumed between the LRA and the GoU in April 2007. Few LRA security-related incidents have been reported since the start of the peace process.<sup>18</sup>

In October 2005, the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued warrants for Kony and four of the LRA top leaders. Some have credited the threat of the ICC indictments with pressuring the LRA to resume peace talks in April 2007. Kony and his commanders are seeking immunity from prosecution by the ICC, in favor of local traditional justice.<sup>19</sup>

Since August 2006, many people in northern Uganda are considering returning home. A large scale return has not yet occurred in part due to the lack of infrastructure in rural areas throughout the north. This includes poor roads and lack of access to safe water, sanitation, primary health care and education.<sup>20</sup> As of May 2007, 409,253 people<sup>21</sup> have returned to their villages of origin, with the overwhelming majority of returnees occurring in the Lango region (Lira, Apac and Oyam districts), where the conflict and displacement was among the shortest in northern Uganda. An additional 395,492 people have relocated to "satellite camps" or decongestion areas where they have better access to their land but still are afforded some protection by UPDF forces, with the majority of those returnees being from the Acholi region (Gulu, Amuru, Kitgum and Pader districts).<sup>22</sup> It is estimated that one million people will remain in IDP camps in 2007.<sup>23</sup>

Despite the return of almost 800 children from the LRA in 2006, an estimated 3,000 women and children still remain with the rebels and recent negotiations have failed to secure their release.<sup>24</sup>

## **Challenges**

### **Education**

Across the board, young women and men in northern Uganda identify education as their priority concern—and the solution to the many challenges they face.

Despite the GoU's Universal Primary Education policy enacted in 1996, many children in the north do not attend school. According to the 2006 Uganda Demographic and Health Survey (UDHS), while the national completion rate of primary school is 48 percent,<sup>25</sup> only 20 percent complete primary school in the north.<sup>26</sup> There are a number of economic, security-related and cultural barriers keeping children out of school. Many families cannot afford the costs of sending their children to school, such as Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) fees, uniforms, school materials, etc.

Very few young people in the north who attended primary school are able to enter secondary school. The primary obstacle cited was school fees and related costs—expenses that are impossible for the vast majority of families who have spent many years living in camps with little opportunity to earn an income. According to UDHS, only five percent of secondary school-age children in the north are in secondary school.<sup>27</sup> In 2007, the Government of Uganda adopted a new policy of Universal Secondary Education. However, to be eligible, children must have completed primary school in 2006 and it only partially covers fees. In practice, therefore, it provides little opportunity for young people in northern Uganda who were forced to drop out of school due to extreme poverty, poor health, household responsibilities or abduction.

Youth mentioned additional barriers to continuing school, including traditional beliefs that favor sending boys over girls to school, early marriage and pregnancy and security concerns about traveling to and from school. Many youth who lost their parents and are responsible for caring for younger siblings are unable to continue their studies. Young people who were abducted and missed school while in captivity<sup>28</sup> are unable to re-enter the school system. Few, if any, “catch-up” or bridging programs were in evidence to support young people who wish to re-enter the formal education system. Meanwhile, some displaced youth living in IDP camps said that a lack of access to schools in their villages prevented them from going home.

Poor quality of education is also a significant concern cited by young people and local organizations and agencies consulted for this study. There are too few teachers, and low salaries result in absenteeism and/or lack of motivation. Classes, especially at the lower-primary level, are overcrowded (a teacher described teaching a primary class of over 100 students) and few scholastic materials are available. One leader of a large local organization expressed concern that he is “afraid that we are producing the worst

generation of students.”<sup>29</sup> Another group of female high school students noted insufficient supervision at the dorms in the boarding schools where some girls engaged in dangerous, risky activities such as unprotected sex. In one week, 11 girls from their school had tested positive for pregnancy at the local health clinic.<sup>30</sup>

### **Lack of economic opportunities**

The other concern most widely voiced by young people was the lack of opportunities to earn a safe and dignified income to support themselves and their families. This problem is compounded for youth who are the heads of their household and responsible for providing for younger siblings. Young women and men shared how exploitation and abuse, poor health and hygiene and lack of food were all a direct result of their inability to earn income. Transactional sex appears to be widespread—many youth related that girls and young women are trading sex for money or favors. This occurs despite the fact that many are concerned about the spread of HIV/AIDS. In Kitgum Town Council, young women told the Women’s Commission how it was a common, accepted practice for girls to “give themselves” to men in order to be hired for a job. As one young woman said, “I say no each time as it is better to be healthy without any money than have a big job and be sick.”<sup>31</sup> Meanwhile, international and local agencies expressed concern for boys under the age of 18 who are susceptible to UPDF recruitment, as it provides one of the few opportunities to earn some money in the north.

Many young people called for more vocational training and income generating projects. There are various definitions and objectives for these livelihood and income generating activities (IGAs)—many of which do not appear to result in increased income. Meanwhile, there does not appear to be sufficient market analysis to identify what vocational training in which circumstances (camps, towns, areas of return) are most appropriate. While community members are routinely consulted to identify the specific activities, without adequate analysis and space for creative, innovative discussions, the programs appear to be the same, one-size-fits-all models. Some youth organizations showed little knowledge of the need to develop IGAs that meet market demand, and instead developed plans that mirror existing program models.

Some programs have not ensured a smooth transition from training to paid employment. As one youth participant in a vocational training program remarked, “If [the organization] doesn’t provide machines after training, [the training] is as good as useless. It’s like teaching someone to hunt without giving them a spear.”<sup>32</sup> Participants also requested resources that would help to market their services, such as T-shirts or uniforms certifying their participation in training programs and advertising their skills.<sup>33</sup> One of the most impressive projects the Women’s Commission visited, the Norwegian Refugee Council’s (NRC) Youth Education Pack, helps graduates form cooperatives where they share tools and receive continued support. NRC experiences challenges with the cohesion of the cooperatives now that people are returning home.<sup>34</sup> In addition to skills building programs, the Women’s Commission heard about savings and loan schemes where youth are accessing credit. Few included a business training component.

The majority of young people, both male and female, expressed a wish to return to their home communities and begin to farm their land. However, there are specific challenges in reestablishing an agricultural livelihood. For example, one young man explained that if he did return home to farm, he would not earn any profits for several months. He would not have any money in the event of an emergency, such as a sudden illness or injury of a family member.<sup>35</sup> The short-term strategy of remaining in town and seeking work as a day laborer provided a rational alternative, even if an undesirable one, over the long term.

### **Sexual abuse and exploitation**

Sexual abuse and exploitation were huge concerns repeatedly raised by young women and men as a distressing outcome of the conflict and ensuing poverty. The Women's Commission was told that sexual violence is widespread, with child-headed households most vulnerable to attacks by men at night. Sexual violence is occurring in communities by a range of perpetrators, including by UPDF soldiers. As discussed above, many young people reported that it was common practice for girls to engage in sex for money, gifts or employment. We were told that some girls, who could not afford school fees or wanted material things, would have sex with a man, oftentimes much older, even if they suspected he may be HIV positive.

A heated discussion in the humanitarian community is the government's "defilement law," which prohibits sexual relations with a girl under 18 and is punishable by death. Many argued that it has been applied more often to cases of consensual sexual relations and is often settled with payment to the girl's family. Young men who cannot afford to settle out of court end up in detention centers where they wait months, if not years, for their case to be heard. Many in the humanitarian community said that the defilement law is being abused by families using it as an opportunity for economic gain. One agency expressed concern that young people returning after many years in captivity may not be aware of the defilement law.<sup>36</sup> In general, it appears that young people need to be more aware of their human rights.

Meanwhile, despite this legal restriction against sexual relations involving minors, young people face high sexual and reproductive health risks in northern Uganda. On average, young people in northern Uganda experience early sexual debut (eight to 21 years) with the mean age between 15 and 16 years; more than one-third of girls have experienced their sexual debut as a result of rape.<sup>37</sup> More than half of young women and men report multiple partners, putting them at even greater risk of contracting sexually transmitted infectious diseases, notably HIV/AIDS (see below).<sup>38</sup>

### **Health threats, including HIV/AIDS**

Health is a major concern, in particular the lack of facilities and distance to health clinics. Overcrowding at camps is a cause for the spread of diseases, such as cholera. While general clinics and hospitals exist in some urban centers and camps, some agencies expressed a concern that these centers are not necessarily "youth-friendly."<sup>39</sup> This may account for the dearth of young people accessing health services, specifically for

HIV/AIDS testing and family planning services. To address this challenge, the Gulu Youth Center (GYC) is providing comprehensive reproductive health care aimed specifically at youth. It employs a number of strategies to help get young people to the clinic and feel comfortable using the services. For example, young men and women are trained to serve as youth counselors to other young people who come to the center. As the director of GYC explained, “If their own people come and talk to them, it carries more weight.”<sup>40</sup> In addition, the center offers a variety of other activities, including a library for reading or quiet study, and sports activities such as volleyball. By offering additional activities, young people can visit the center and receive health services without creating speculation as to their health status.

Despite the fact that Uganda has been the poster-child of fighting AIDS in Africa, HIV/AIDS remains a serious issue in the north, and many of the young people consulted identified the disease as a major concern in their communities. While there is a nationwide prevalence rate of 6.4 percent (8 percent for women and 5 percent for men), it is estimated at 9 percent in the north.<sup>41</sup> The vast majority of young people the Women’s Commission met knew about HIV/AIDS and were aware of how to protect themselves. Condoms, however, were not readily available and girls expressed concern about their ability to negotiate condom use with men. Many organizations raised alarms that the HIV/AIDS situation has the potential to get much worse with the prospect of people returning home and increased population movement. As one local community leader said, “Soon we may be holding more funerals [due to HIV/AIDS] than raising a serious productive workforce.”<sup>42</sup>

### **Food insecurity**

Many young women and men expressed concern about not having enough food. Those interviewed in Gulu and Kitgum cited the recent cuts in the World Food Programme (WFP) food rations from 60 percent to 40 percent of the daily standard food ration as the cause.<sup>43</sup> We were told this was due to financial constraints that WFP is facing as well as a response to people beginning to return home. Many expressed concern about the poor timing of the cuts as people require strength now for plowing their fields and food will not be harvested for another few months. There was also criticism of the decision to cut WFP’s school feeding program, which has been credited with getting many more children into school, especially girls.

### **Stigmatization**

Stigmatization of formerly abducted children (“returnees”) was a significant concern voiced by both returnees themselves, and by others concerned on their behalf. Many returnees mentioned that when they first returned home, they did not feel comfortable leaving their houses as people would point at them and call them rebels. Some young people said they did not want to go back to school after escaping abduction for fear of being teased. Others stated that young people suspected of being collaborators were at risk of being tortured by local officials. Still others stated that Acholis traveling outside the north were stereotyped by other Ugandans as LRA members or sympathizers.



Some young people stated that traditional rituals could be performed by parents or relatives of returnees to reconcile with their families and communities. Others expressed that such rituals were ineffective at resolving all of the difficulties related to return. In addition, because some rituals are traditionally performed by parents, children who have been orphaned or separated from their parents may not have an opportunity to participate in this practice. The Women’s Commission was told that there was a lot of tension in the communities with returnees—with parents who reject their children, with parents whose children did not return home and with the families of victims.

## **Dependency**

Those in the humanitarian community expressed a strong concern that a “culture of dependency” had emerged among people in the north, due to years of living in squalid conditions in camps without opportunities to earn a living. Some attributed this to the “unintended consequences” of the humanitarian community’s activities in the region over the years, which has undermined traditional structures and crowded out community systems. It was also noted that the donor community has supported quick impact projects rather than investing in longer-term projects that increase self-reliance. As the director of a local NGO stated, “it is high-time that donors start focusing more on development programs rather than creating more dependency.”<sup>44</sup>

A related finding was young people’s proclivity to describe their situation, needs and aspirations by using humanitarian terminology. In particular, when asked to provide their own programmatic recommendations, young people often used “buzz words” commonly associated with humanitarian interventions, such as “sensitization,” “mobilization,” “psycho-social support” or “income generating activities.”

While not necessarily a problem in and of itself, it was not clear if young people could explain the concepts behind the terms. This pattern may reflect young people’s tendency to rely on the international humanitarian community to frame their own priorities and objectives—which may constitute another manifestation of dependency. This may be the unintended consequence of program design and implementation. First, young people may be consulted *after* a project has already been designed. We heard of few opportunities for young people to participate in the planning process. Moreover, young people’s tendency to propose certain models may reflect perceived donor objectives, regardless of whether those objectives correspond to young people’s priorities. This pattern may also reflect a lack of formal or informal educational opportunities for young people to explore and articulate their priorities.

The Women’s Commission heard from many young people that dependency is an unfortunate result of the past 21 years of conflict rather than a part of the Acholi culture. Young people said that if there is peace, the community will be able to address their challenges. As one young man at an IDP camp outside of Gulu told us, “Most of the challenges we have discussed we can do ourselves, but what we need is for peace to return.”<sup>45</sup>

## **Loss of traditional culture**

Young women and men expressed distress over the loss of traditional values and talked about a desire to restore the Acholi culture. Young men, in particular, longed for their ancestral “fireplace” gatherings despite the fact that the vast majority had never participated in one. There appears to be a very strong, symbolic pull to these rituals and how they represent life before the conflict. As noted above, many young people also expressed a confidence in the healing power of traditional rituals, and a frustration or apprehension that in their absence, reconciliation between estranged family members would be even more challenging. Returnees who had lost their parents expressed concern about returning home without an elder family member to perform the necessary traditional cleansing ceremonies. Many youth and local organizations are involved in organizing and practicing traditional cultural activities, such as singing and dancing, as important interventions to restore returnees’ confidence and pride. Many young people cited traditional song and dance as one of the most popular and effective activities to “take their mind off of problems and not feel alone.”<sup>46</sup>

## **Vulnerable groups**

While all young people are directly affected by the 21 years of conflict, certain youth are more vulnerable or less likely to access services or participate in existing programs. This includes young people who are physically, mentally or severely emotionally disabled. Some young people explained that many programs designed to support young people focus on physical activities such as sports, theater or cultural dance, which are less accessible to youth with physical disabilities. In addition, humanitarian organizations expressed a concern at the significant lack of professional expertise and requisite resources for disabled children and youth, especially those with severe emotional or psychological disorders.

Both young people and others identified young, married mothers (referred to as “child mothers”) as the most vulnerable group of young people. Young, unmarried mothers are oftentimes formerly abducted girls and young women who were raped by the LRA or given to members as “bush” wives.<sup>47</sup> Humanitarian organizations are concerned about young men who are in conflict with the law over defilement cases that were based on consensual sexual activity. Some argued that legal consequences for those who had become “child fathers” as a result of sexual activity not only put them at risk, but prevented them from becoming a resource of support to their children.

## **Emerging Concerns**

Young women and men in Gulu and Kitgum identified emerging concerns and potential threats. With the increased population movement out of camps to return sites and decongestion camps, children are increasingly being left alone in the original IDP camps to continue accessing services, such as schools, while older family members return home to prepare the land. Child- and youth-headed households are more vulnerable to abuse

and exploitation; some young women cited the occurrence of rape of girls who are left in homes without older family members. The Women's Commission also heard reports of fires in camps, many of which are believed to have been started by children cooking without supervision.

Young women and men also expressed apprehension regarding land ownership and their prospects for reintegration into their families' villages of origin. Many young people have spent their entire lives in camps and have never been to their ancestral land or learned how to farm. Those who have lost their parents may encounter difficulties in locating and gaining legal claim to their families' land. In addition, many young people are members of groups who do not have a legal right under Ugandan law to inherit land, such as widows, unmarried women, girls and young women who are orphans and children born out of officially recognized marriages.

Community leaders and other local organizations expressed concern about the population that will remain in the camps as the services currently provided become unavailable. Those who remain will likely be the most vulnerable—the elderly, disabled, orphans, etc. Many also expressed concern about the potential of revenge killings by victims' families against former LRA members, including former abductees, as communities begin to return home.

Among all the stakeholders consulted for this study, especially young people themselves, there was widespread anxiety over the possible transition from relief to development. Individuals and organizations expressed concern that donors will abruptly stop funding humanitarian activities before peace has taken hold and development activities are up and running. In fact, as of May 2007, the Inter-Agency Humanitarian Consolidated Appeal for Uganda for 2007 was only funded at 47 percent.<sup>48</sup> This is believed to be a direct result of donors prematurely assuming that development and reconstruction activities are underway. It was emphasized repeatedly that there is a need to gradually plan for the transition while recognizing that northern Uganda is still a protracted emergency. Approximately one million people remain in the camps and the most optimistic projections do not see people returning home for another 12-18 months at best. As the leader of a local women's organization told us, "The war is not yet over. It is still expected that there will be casualties."<sup>49</sup>

The problems will not end once people return home and serious challenges remain to be addressed. In addition, many people and agencies anticipate that a sizable population will remain in the camps either by choice or because they will be unable to return home (e.g., elderly, disabled, women and children without access to land, etc.) As a senior official with the UN said, "This is a very critical moment for northern Uganda and there are discrepancies between the political, public discourse and the reality on the ground."<sup>50</sup> Notably, while most young people consulted for this study could speak at length about the current situation and events in the north, few described concrete plans for their own futures, nor did they make predictions about the outcomes of peace negotiations currently underway.

Many young people voiced concerns about the challenges they would face in building shelters in areas of return. Some young people told the Women's Commission that the Government of Uganda had promised iron sheets to each family to construct their homes, and expressed frustration that these had not been received to date. The policy requires families to construct three walls of brick before receiving the iron sheets. It appears that more information sharing on the new policy is required.

Landmines pose concern to some youth and humanitarian agencies operating in the region. Currently, the extent of landmines is unknown and it is believed that unexploded ordnance (UXO) pose a much greater threat. The Italian NGO AVSI received reports of more than 200 bombs and landmines in northern Uganda in 2006.<sup>51</sup> Even under the best of circumstances, the uncertainty of landmines and UXO raises additional anxiety and a potential obstacle for returns.

## **Recent Progress**

Many young women and men cited recent improvements in some aspects of their lives, the most important of which was the significant improvement of the security situation in the north over the past few months. There have been few recent reports of abduction and people can now move safely within and between town centers, even after dark. This has allowed increased movement outside of camps and in and around Gulu and Kitgum towns. The UN estimates that in the Acholi region (Gulu, Amuru, Kitgum and Pader districts), approximately 21,150 people have returned home and an additional 367,985 are "commuting" to satellite camps or decongestion sites.<sup>52</sup> Humanitarian agencies also have greater access to affected communities, which is noted by the absence of a curfew or the requirement of armed escorts.

While people are beginning to move to satellite camps closer to home, the vast majority of youth the Women's Commission met did not have any specific plans to return home or any prediction of where they may be in the coming year. It appears that many families are hedging their bets, with some members remaining in camps and others traveling to possible relocation sites. This "voluntary separation" serves as a protection mechanism for families to return to camps if the current peace does not last. Many expressed residual fear of returning home due to their recent memories of abductions.

Another improvement was that night commuting was no longer happening. In June 2005, it was estimated that 40,000 children and youth were "commuting" to city centers each night to escape the possibility of abduction;<sup>53</sup> as of March 2007, only 979 continued to commute to official shelters in Kitgum, Gulu and Pader.<sup>54</sup> This development can be seen as positive on two levels. First, it is an indication of the improvement in security, as thousands of young people are now able to remain at home with their families without fearing abduction. Second, it is a positive example of the humanitarian community's successful efforts to shift their interventions in support of the changing needs of the community. As the security situation improved and children were still commuting, agencies recognized that the shelters may encourage young people to travel to the towns each evening. Working in collaboration, they identified the underlying socio-economic

factors that were responsible for the remaining night commuters' use of shelter services and shifted resources to carry out targeted community outreach activities and support local structures in preventing and addressing causes of night commuting.

A positive development observed by the Women's Commission delegation was young people's awareness and knowledge of good health and hygiene practices. It was very apparent that young people had been "sensitized" on the importance of washing their hands, safe food preparation, sanitation and methods of protection against HIV/AIDS. There are reported problems, however, when it comes to the availability of condoms or the ability of young women to negotiate safe sex.

An additional positive finding was the extent to which young women and men are active in addressing community problems. The research team met with a number of youth groups in Gulu and Kitgum that were helping other children and young people living in the IDP camps. As one young man from Kitgum Town Council, himself an orphan supporting his younger siblings, explained, "I volunteer my time because I want the [IDP] community to know someone cares about them."<sup>55</sup> Some youth are also hired by local and international NGOs to work in IDP camps in more formal roles or capacities.

On a related note, NGOs, UN and government agencies the team met appeared to recognize and value the importance of youth participation. Among several local and international organizations, there were attempts to engage young people in activities. However, as will be discussed in the following section, it is unclear if appropriate forms and methods are used to engage young people in a meaningful way.

While formerly abducted youth resoundingly expressed concern about stigmatization upon return, those who were participating in programs aimed at reintegration appear to be re-adjusting well. Members of "child mothers clubs" expressed confidence that they are now recognized as capable and legitimate members of the community. Community-based efforts, such as conflict mediation and traditional healing practices, have reportedly reduced tensions in some communities, resulting in greater acceptance of returnees. As one young woman from Empowering Hands, a local community-based organization (CBO) in Gulu, which includes formerly abducted women, explained, "Because most of us are formerly abducted children, people thought we couldn't do anything, but now they recognize that we have a contribution to make."<sup>56</sup>

The humanitarian community in northern Uganda is also learning from past experiences of "targeting" returnees or other categories of people for services which contributed to stigmatization. Today, organizations are moving toward more inclusive programming to reduce discrimination in local communities and ensure more vulnerable people are reached. Staff of several humanitarian organizations explained that they now attempt to develop programs that will address causes of vulnerability rather than focusing on one particular group of people assumed to be at risk. Despite these attempts to improve services, the criteria used to identify vulnerabilities were not always clear. Meanwhile, young people expressed apprehension that community leaders may take advantage of this

new approach and select family or friends to receive support who would not ordinarily qualify as the most vulnerable.

## **Coping Strategies**

After more than two decades of appalling poverty, insecurity and violence, young people in northern Uganda have demonstrated extraordinary resilience in their ability to survive. Young people that the Women's Commission met shared a number of strategies used to address the myriad problems they confront. Some of these strategies appear to be positive, while others approaches may make them more vulnerable or lead to new threats. Regardless, it is important for the humanitarian community to identify and learn from these strategies as a way to build on existing community mechanisms rather than bringing in external approaches.

Some young women and men are coping with the daily struggles they face by forming youth groups, which often take the place of the families they lost. As one young man who lost his parents and participates in the local youth group, Watwero Rights First Initiative, explained, "When I am with Watwero, I don't think about my parents."<sup>57</sup> The research team was also told numerous times how recreational activities, such as football and netball, made young people feel better. Young women talked about how they enjoyed recreational activities and social interaction with their peers. Some also mentioned that it keeps them out of trouble and "safe from HIV/AIDS."<sup>58</sup> Recreational activities are also being used as an entry point to encourage more young people to access services, such as health services at the Gulu Youth Center. Young people said that traditional activities, such as dance and song, are another way that young people address challenges and feel better.

Religion plays an important role in the lives of many youth in northern Uganda. As citizens of a predominantly Catholic and Protestant country in which there is extensive activity by foreign, Christian organizations (including many active evangelical groups), young people often referred to God and religion as a source of comfort and strength. Sometimes religion was mentioned in a more fatalistic "if-this-is-God's-will" way. In other instances, young people discussed specific activities and support that their church provides as beneficial to their well-being. One young woman who had recently returned from captivity to a village where there were very few services explained that the "Born Again Church" was the best—and only—support she has received since returning from captivity with her son. She explained that the Born Again Church made her feel better because she was told that they will wash away her sins. She also emphasized that, unlike the majority of her village, the congregation accepts her.<sup>59</sup>

Many young people request financial support from foreigners visiting and working in the region, particularly to pay for school fees. After many years of living in a region characterized by extensive interventions by the humanitarian community, young people have observed that many of their most successful peers were those who receive support for their school fees and other expenses from foreign organizations and benefactors. Some of the young people who participated in the Women's Commission's 2001 research

stated that the most important outcome of their experience in that project—above the opportunity to develop new organizational skills, collaborate with peers or engage in advocacy efforts with national and international leaders—was that it indirectly enabled them to connect with foreigners who volunteered to support their educational expenses. While the practice of requesting financial support can lead to beneficial effects for some young people, it also puts young people at risk of exploitation, and may perpetuate a dependency on some models of foreign aid.

Some coping mechanisms clearly appear to be detrimental or may result in increased risks for youth. For example, some organizations expressed concern that defilement cases may be used by some families as an economic strategy; in order to settle outside of court, the boy's family will often pay the girl's family a "bride price." A related approach that young women identified was that parents or relatives may encourage young girls to get married for the dowry payment or as a way to reduce household responsibilities of caring for the young girls. Transactional sex also appears to be quite widespread and spans the spectrum from prostitution or payment for services to sex for favors, such as material possessions. Young people stated that alcohol abuse is prevalent and drug abuse was also mentioned. A group of young girls from an IDP camp outside of Kitgum said that girls are brewing alcohol or working in hotels or bars to pay for school fees.<sup>60</sup> As noted above, voluntary separation from younger family members is a coping practice employed by parents and other heads of households as a strategy for preparing for resettlement in a period when prospects for sustainable peace and land reclamation are uncertain. When such separation results in children remaining unattended in camps, they are more vulnerable to exploitation and accidents.

## **Peace and Reconciliation**

Northern Uganda is at a critical juncture with the best chance for peace in over two decades. At the time of research, young people around Gulu and Kitgum appear to be hopeful that the negotiations underway between the GoU and the LRA will result in peace and stability. They see peace as paramount to addressing the numerous challenges they face. At the same time, they remain guarded as they have been seen peace talks fail previously. Indeed, no young person interviewed for this study stated a prediction for the outcome (positive or negative) of the current talks.

Young women and men in and around Gulu and Kitgum were aware of the peace negotiations and familiar with the names of the actors involved. It appeared that the youth heard about the peace process from parents/relatives or on the radio. Despite their caution in speculating about the future, many young people engaged enthusiastically in discussion around the national controversy over the ICC indictments against the LRA leadership and what they perceived as the choice between peace and accountability. Some young people view the ICC indictments as an obstacle to peace and called for their immediate removal. They expressed concern that the ICC indictments were being imposed from outside while those who are living through the conflict just want peace. At the same time, many felt that the ICC was partially responsible for getting the LRA to the table, but now see it as a stumbling block.

While young people are aware of the current talks, they also stated that have had little opportunity to participate in the process. At one camp, young people mentioned that a national leader had convened a meeting to gather their opinions and ideas in preparation for the peace talks in Juba. Those who had participated in the meeting felt that the leader had earnestly listened to their perspectives and would represent their views. However, most did not feel that this one opportunity was a sufficient mechanism for representation. When asked how they could contribute, young people shared ideas of creative ways to increase their involvement in the discussions. For example, at Coo-Pe IDP camp, a group of young men explored other ways to contribute, such as recording tapes and sending them to the talks in Juba and inviting journalists to interview the youth at the camps for newspaper articles. Several young people stated the strong opinion that the young people who have been most affected by conflict—such as former abductees and the displaced—should be present at the negotiating table to represent their needs. As one young woman said, those negotiating in Juba should “feel and see the problems of people who live here.”<sup>61</sup>

## Youth Participation

International and local NGOs, UN and government agencies are involving youth in their programs in a variety of ways, not only as beneficiaries of their services, but also in other roles. It appears that more organizations and agencies recognize the value of youth participation—at least in their rhetoric. Definitions of “participation” vary significantly between organizations; in some instances, organizations referred to youth participation as the beneficiaries of programs such as theater or sports, whereas youth participation in other organizations included services as a community representative or as a facilitator of activities. A few organizations also expressed a concern that there was not a clear or widespread understanding of how young people should be selected and engaged to participate in programs, particularly when their roles contribute to program design, implementation or leadership.

In short, what is clear is that young people are participating *in activities*; what isn’t clear is the extent to which young people are participating *in decision-making*. Less clear still was the extent to which young people’s participation in any form has shaped program design and implementation.

Many individuals and organizations called for more tools to assist with enhancing youth participation. Encouragingly, the GoU has already taken steps to develop guidelines for child participation. The Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, the Uganda Child Rights NGO Network and UNICEF are developing a *National Child Participation Guide for Uganda*. However, it appears that more dissemination and discussion of the guidelines is required.

Several organizations cited the challenge of ensuring that young people’s participation is meaningful and beneficial for all. Roles must be appropriate to the age and capacity of the young people who fill them. Moreover, not all young people should be in leadership



roles, and activities still require the oversight and support from more experienced adults. Another concern was the potential “unintended consequences” of youth participation, such as youth missing school to participate in meetings. A local NGO leader was concerned that young people invited to contribute to policy meetings convened by adult leaders may not have their ideas taken seriously, and this can have a demoralizing effect on them.<sup>62</sup>

Which young people are participating and the method of selection are not always clear. It was suggested that youth leaders are sometimes selected by community leaders based on perceived capacity. As one community member of an IDP camp outside Gulu said, “The community leaders and elders select the youth who are intelligent and capable of representing the views of others.”<sup>63</sup> The Women’s Commission was told that due to chores and other household responsibilities, fewer girls participate in activities than boys.

The issue of compensating youth for their involvement in groups and activities is contentious. Some organizations provide young people with a “sitting fee” or small incentive for participating in activities while other organizations have a policy of not paying “volunteers.” Some organizations provide training to volunteers in lieu of financial compensation; however, some groups also stated that the more training young people receive, the more inclined they are to believe that they are offering a service and should be paid. The inconsistency among agencies has led to problems. It has become increasingly difficult to organize an event or activity without the expectation that young people will receive something for their time. Concerns were also expressed by some in the humanitarian community that if youth are not adequately compensated for their work, it could be considered exploitation or abuse. The primary issue appears to be a lack of clarity of the nature of the “volunteer” work; are young people gathering to perform some civic duty and volunteer their time or are they expected to conduct a specific task that should include remuneration? Without clear and defined roles and expectations, the ambiguity and challenges around payment for young people’s participation will persist.

The research team observed organizations implementing some promising approaches to engaging youth in active decision-making roles. For example, some organizations are training young people to monitor and support activities as people begin to return home. There is recognition that NGOs will not be able to closely follow up on projects as people become more dispersed. Therefore, training young people to monitor NGO activities may help to facilitate an eventual return home. There are also some interesting child protection community-based mechanisms to monitor and report on violations, some involving children and youth. Child Protection Committees (CPC), for example, are forming at the parish level to identify vulnerable children and provide referrals. The majority are currently supported by international and national NGOs and CBOs, and some solely by the District authorities. A comprehensive review into the functionality of CPCs as a community model of child protection is underway. A possible outcome may be their standardization and modalities for including youth representatives and children’s voices and concerns. It will be important to monitor the development of the CPCs and identify ways to continue strengthening their work. Additional examples of good youth participation include the International Rescue Committee including youth representatives

on visits to areas of return to determine if and when they would like to return home. This involves young people directly in decision-making and contributes to informed returns.

### **Youth groups**

In addition to young people participating in activities, increasingly they are forming youth groups to provide social services and support to communities, such as HIV/AIDS awareness, recreational and income generating activities. Some groups receive funding from local and international agencies, others operate without any external support. In Gulu, there are more than 200 youth groups registered with the Gulu District NGO Forum. These groups serve many purposes, sometimes beyond those encoded in their stated missions and objectives. Indeed, the primary benefit of group membership, according to the young people interviewed for this study, was the relationships the groups foster. Youth group members with whom the Women's Commission spoke explained that the groups have become their families, which is particularly significant for the many youth who have lost parents and relatives. Fellow members provide each other with advice, support and encouragement. Some stated that through group membership and activities, they learn new skills, such as English, an important opportunity for those unable to continue their formal schooling.

There is some concern over youth organizations' tendency towards "kitchen-sink" programming, in which multiple objectives are incorporated without any clear design for integration. For examples, small youth organizations with limited budgets may attempt to implement various activities that focus on issues ranging from HIV/AIDS awareness to economic empowerment to peace building to good health and hygiene promotion. Attempts to address the myriad problems are appropriate to some extent, given the interconnectedness of many challenges young people face that require a holistic response. However, in practice, many youth groups are attempting to address each problem through individual and disconnected interventions or replicating those already in practice by other agencies, rather than engaging in a strategic analysis of what actors are already involved and where there are gaps that need to be filled.

While funding for youth groups remains a perennial challenge, some groups also discussed the detrimental impact of short periods of funding. Groups stated that there is often a significant delay between reporting on activities and receiving the next cycle of funds. The long delays in funding require groups to temporarily cease activities, which negatively affects programming and trust within the communities where they work.

### **The Women's Commission's 2001 participatory research with youth**

This research builds on a participatory research project undertaken by the Women's Commission in Kitgum, Gulu and Pader from May to July 2001. As part of that project, the Women's Commission trained 54 young people living in those three districts in qualitative research methods, including techniques for conducting focus groups and for data collection and analysis. Young people designed and carried out the research study, which explored the priorities, needs and recommendations of youth living in those regions. They subsequently compiled and reported their findings, which they presented to national leaders at a press conference in Kampala in August 2001. A few individuals were also selected to present the findings at the UN Special Session on Children in September 2001, a meeting that was cancelled due to the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11<sup>th</sup>.

The researchers had the opportunity to meet with a number of young people who had participated in the Women's Commission participatory research project six years ago. Each of the young women and men spoke positively about their experience with the project; they mentioned how it taught them research, leadership, analytical and advocacy skills. They also shared how being part of the project instilled them with confidence. As one young man said, "It gave me a voice and people now listen to me."<sup>1</sup> A number also spoke about meeting other youth who were experiencing similar problems, making them feel better about their own situations. Young people's involvement in the project also created or reinforced a sense of commitment to their communities. It helped some of them understand the experiences of youth living in the camps. Despite the various skills acquired through their involvement, each young person stated that the best thing to come out of the project was connecting with a foreigner to sponsor his or her education.

One of the challenges, they said, was the difficulty in addressing the expectations of the young people they were interviewing. The youth researchers found it difficult to respond to questions about what could be immediately done for communities. One young man who participated in the research shared how disappointing it was when adults dismissed their work. As the youth researcher recalled, one adult told him, "What are you able to do as young people, because you can't even make decisions; after you collect the data, that will mark the end of your work."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Young man, age 25, interview by Juliet Young, audio recording, Kitgum Town Council, Uganda, May 8, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Young man, age 22, interview by Jenny Perlman Robinson and Juliet Young, Gulu, Uganda, May 15, 2007.

## Recommendations

In keeping with the overarching objectives of this study, young people were asked for their own recommendations to local, national and international agencies and decision-makers. Their recommendations reflect their capacity to think creatively, to engage with government institutions as thoughtful and responsible citizens and to take responsibility for their own lives and futures. Indeed, many young people interviewed for this study expressed a strong desire for the Women's Commission to deliver their recommendations directly to leaders, donors and policy makers.

The young people's recommendations require action from all stakeholders and are directed at the Government of Uganda, donors, international and local NGOs, UN agencies and other researchers.

**Young people recommend that national and international stakeholders increase and sustain support to their communities, even and especially if a transition to peace begins.**

**To ensure that this recommendation is enacted effectively, *donors* should:**

- **Ensure the highest funding level possible to support humanitarian activities and the transition to recovery and reconstruction of the north.** Donors must continue to support relief efforts in the north while scaling up efforts to support longer-term development needs. Of particular relevance at this juncture is ensuring the 2007 UN Consolidated Appeal for Uganda is fully funded.
- **Improve communication, coordination and harmonization among donor agencies involved in relief and development activities.** Development actors should improve coordination with donors that currently provide humanitarian assistance to ensure a smooth transition to the post-conflict reconstruction of the north.

**To ensure that this recommendation is enacted effectively, the *Government of Uganda* should:**

- **Increase socially oriented spending in the north, including not only immediate survival needs but also needs for education and livelihood generation, with a focus on programs that target youth.**

**To ensure that this recommendation is enacted effectively, the *international community, in partnership with Government of Uganda and local communities* should:**

- **Strengthen the early recovery process.** An early recovery team should be on the ground from the outset of an emergency to ensure a smooth transition from relief to development. An external evaluation should document lessons from Uganda's experience with the early recovery cluster approach to inform future emergencies.

**Young people recommend that national and international stakeholders should support them in achieving the highest level of formal education possible.**

**To ensure that this recommendation is enacted effectively, the *Government of Uganda in partnership with youth and with support from donors, UN, international and local NGOs*, should:**

- **Increase access to quality and appropriate education, including secondary school for young women and men.** Ensure more children get into school, and *complete* primary school, in the north. Launch an information dissemination campaign on Universal Secondary Education with details on plan implementation and eligibility. Expand the policy to those young women and men who were forced to drop out of school. This will require the Government of Uganda to continue to prioritize secondary education, and full support from donors.
- **Increase support for accelerated learning programs.** Additional bridging programs and catch-up classes are required with the explicit aim to prepare youth to enter/re-enter the formal education system.
- **Develop more integrated education, vocational training and life-skills programs to serve youth who missed out on the opportunity for formal education.** As the vast majority of youth in northern Uganda have missed out on years of schooling, it is critical to develop programs that combine basic literacy and numeracy with practical training in productive, marketable skills. Upon completion of a program, government-recognized certificates should be provided.
- **Improve the safety and security of schools.** Improved measures must be put into place to enhance the safety and security of children and youth traveling to—and attending—school. This includes the need to conduct school safety audits and strengthen and enforce the teacher’s code of conduct.

**To ensure that this recommendation is enacted effectively, *donors* should:**

- **Reinstate the World Food Programme’s school feeding program.** Donors should work with local and international organizations to ensure that those schools that do not currently meet WFP requirements (e.g., separate latrines, clean water, food storage) receive assistance and support to meet the necessary criteria.

**Young people recommend that national and international stakeholders should support them in obtaining safe, dignified and sufficient sources of livelihood.**

**To ensure that this recommendation is enacted effectively, the *Government of Uganda, donors, UN, international and local NGOs* should:**

- **Ensure that vocational training programs and income generating activities train young people in services that are needed.** Skills developed must match current and emerging market needs. Market surveys for both towns and areas of return are urgently required, with special consideration for youth. Local organizations should be trained to conduct their own market analysis, which should be included as part of the regular practice of developing an income generating activity. Economists should be included in project design if the stated aim is to generate income. Economists from Makerere University in Kampala or other local institutions in Uganda could be consulted.
- **Evaluate and share lessons from current livelihood programs to identify what works.**
- **Ensure that vocational training programs are girl-friendly, including the provision of child care so young mothers can participate.**
- **Provide ongoing support to income generating projects, including tools and business training.** In addition to training in the specific vocational skill, livelihood projects should include training on business planning, market analysis, financial record keeping, etc. Organizations should also provide tools and support for job placement and/or starting cooperatives.
- **Develop a strategy to assist IDPs and support the agricultural sector to promote food production and food preservation to reduce reliance on food distribution.**

**Young people, especially young women, recommend that all actors take immediate action to prevent and appropriately respond to sexual exploitation and abuse.**

**To ensure that this recommendation is enacted effectively, the *Government of Uganda, in partnership with youth and with support from donors, UN, international and local NGOs*, should:**

- **Address the underlying causes that increase youth's vulnerability, particularly to sexual and gender-based violence.** This requires more attention to preventive measures as well as action that addresses more immediate risks, such as poverty. Viable and appropriate income generating activities for young women and girls should be increased to alleviate acute poverty and women's vulnerability to sexual abuse and exploitation.
- **Raise awareness in communities about the harmful effects of practices such as early marriage.** Maintain an open dialogue with communities, especially girls,

to identify factors that result in early marriage and other harmful practices. The promotion of education, particularly at the secondary level, has proven to be an effective way to address early marriage.

- **Create accessible and child-friendly reporting systems and services.** There is an urgent need to establish safe, well-publicized and confidential mechanisms for young women and men to report violence, harassment, and exploitation. Ensure prompt investigation, support for and protection of victims. Health care workers should be trained to provide comprehensive clinical care to survivors of rape and sexual abuse.
- **Support the continuation and expansion of youth-friendly health services to more IDP camps,** such as those provided by the Gulu Youth Center. Replicate the Gulu Youth Center model in Kitgum and Pader districts.
- **Prioritize HIV/AIDS programming in the north,** including education, preventive services, voluntary counseling, testing and treatment, with attention to the particular needs and vulnerabilities of girls and young women.

**Young people recommend that national and international stakeholders provide more support to youth organizations, as the institutions that most effectively and comprehensively address their priority needs.**

**To ensure that this recommendation is enacted effectively, the *Government of Uganda, donors, UN, international and local NGOs,* should:**

- **Increase financial and technical support for youth groups.** More flexible grants are needed to support the work of youth groups. In addition to critical financial support, youth groups need technical support in terms of strategic planning, organizational management, proposal writing, budgeting and financial planning and oversight. Umbrella organizations can also perform these functions for Community-Based Organizations. Training and capacity building should encourage youth to be innovative in project design so that they are not just replicating existing models.

**To ensure that this recommendation is enacted effectively, *donors* should:**

- **Contribute to the MacArthur Foundation's *Trust Fund for War-Affected Children and Youth in Northern Uganda,*** a new fund that provides small, flexible grants to community-based projects with an emphasis on education and vocational training for youth. Lessons from the fund should be documented and shared as the fund could serve as a model to support youth groups in other conflict-affected regions.

**Young people recommend that they be given more opportunities to participate in decision-making in humanitarian programs and government policies.**

**To ensure that this recommendation is enacted effectively, the *Government of Uganda in partnership with youth and with support from donors, UN, international and local NGOs*, should:**

- **Increase opportunities for young women and men’s voices to be heard in decision-making processes.** As more information and guidance is needed on meaningful youth participation in policies and programs, there is a need to develop, test and disseminate different models for increasing youth participation in programs and policies.
- **Develop dedicated training programs to increase youth participation in decision-making.** Additional training programs are needed to prepare young women and men—particularly those who are harder to reach—to participate in decision-making in a meaningful way. Training programs should include working with adults to create an enabling environment for young people to participate.
- **Expand opportunities for young people to develop problem-solving, decision-making and advocacy skills, to improve their capacity to participate productively in NGO programs and civic institutions.** Primary and secondary curricula should include activities that allow students to use and develop critical thinking skills. Programs focused on non-formal education should provide young people with opportunities to further develop and practice these skills through their engagement with the planning and decision-making process.
- **Further develop and disseminate comprehensive guidelines for appropriate, effective, ethical approaches to youth participation in decision-making.** Particular attention should be given to the challenging issues of selection and compensation of youth participants. Ensure that young women and men review any government policies or guidelines that directly impact youth prior to finalization.
- **Improve mechanisms for sharing the outcomes of research and advocacy with the young people who contributed as respondents.** Ensure that participants are aware of how information they shared was used and its impact. Ensure young people’s comments and feedback inform future programs and policies.



## **Annex I: Questionnaire**

### **Women's Commission Northern Uganda Youth Assessment Questions for Young People**

#### **Consequences of war**

What are the greatest challenges you face as a result of this conflict?

Are these challenges different for boys and girls, and for different ages of children and youth?

From your perspective, which young people in your community face the greatest challenges?

Have any of the problems you used to face improved?

Have any challenges become more important or difficult?

Are there any new problems in your life or in your community?

#### **Coping with war**

How do you deal with the challenges or risks you have identified? Does it make these problems better in the short run? Does it help to resolve these problems in the long run?

Are there differences in how girls and boys handle the challenges they face, and for different ages of young people?

What is the best action someone in your community has taken to help with the problems young people face because of conflict?

What has your government done to protect the rights of war-affected children and youth? How effective do you think these efforts are?

How about humanitarian agencies like the UN and NGOs?

#### **Peace and reconciliation**

What opportunities are there for young people to participate in the peace and reconciliation process?

What could be done to include young people's voices and needs to a greater extent?

#### **Participation opportunities and challenges**

Do young people in your community participate in making decisions? If so, how?

Which young people are most likely to participate in organizations and/or in decision-making?

Which young people do not participate? Why?

If participate in a youth group:

What has been rewarding for you about working with your [youth] organization? What has been frustrating or disappointing?

If participated in WCRWC 2001 research:

Have there been any changes in your life as a result of your participation in the research study with the Women's Commission?

What was the most rewarding part of working on the study? What was the most frustrating or disappointing?

If you could change one thing about the research study, what would it be?

**Recommendations**

Are there any issues that are left out or missing from existing programs?

Are there any groups of children and young people that are left out or missing from existing programs?

What would you recommend be done – and by who – so that all children affected by conflict have their rights respected, protected and fulfilled?

Do you have a specific message you would like us to bring back to the UN and international community?

## **Annex 2: Groups interviewed and consulted**

### KAMPALA

#### GoU

- Ministry of Youth and Sports

#### INGOs

- International Rescue Committee

#### UN Agencies:

- United Nations Children's Fund
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
- United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
- United Nations Population Fund

### KITGUM

#### Local NGOs

- Concerned Parents Association
- Kitgum Concerned Women's Association
- Watwero Rights First Initiative
- Youth Social Work Association

#### GoU

- Community Development Office

#### INGOS

- Food for the Hungry International
- International Rescue Committee
- Jesuit Refugee Services
- War Child Holland
- World Vision

#### UN Agencies

- United Nations Children's Fund

#### Academics

- Survey of War Affected Youth
- Tulane University – MacArthur Trust Fund

### GULU

#### Local NGOs

- Empowering Hands
- Gulu District NGO Forum
- Gulu Support the Children Organization
- Gulu Youth Center

#### GoU

- Chief Administrative Officer

#### INGOs

- American Refugee Committee
- Caritas
- International Committee of the Red Cross
- Norwegian Refugee Council
- Quaker Peace and Social Witness
- War Child Canada
- World Vision

#### UN Agencies

- United Nations Children's Fund
- United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See the Women's Commission's report, *Against All Odds: Surviving the War Against Adolescents*, 2001, <http://www.womenscommission.org/pdf/ug.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> While there is increasing consensus within the international humanitarian community for greater attention to the needs of youth, the age range of people considered youth varies across cultures and from setting to setting. For the purpose of this study, the Women's Commission interviewed individuals between the ages of 10 and 30, inclusive of the UN's definition of young people age 10-24 and the National Youth Policy of Uganda, which defines youth as age 12-30 years old. We use the terms of youth and young people interchangeably.

<sup>3</sup> Report available at: <http://www.womenscommission.org/pdf/ug.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> United States Agency for International Development, *Visit to Internally Displaced Persons Camp and Hospital*, June 2005,

<[http://www.usaid.gov/locations/subsaharan\\_africa/countries/uganda/visits/day3a.html](http://www.usaid.gov/locations/subsaharan_africa/countries/uganda/visits/day3a.html)>

<sup>5</sup> United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, *Kitgum: IDP Camps Population as of February 2006*, February 2006, <[http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004BE3B1/\(httpInfoFiles\)/642259B5FEC88AC2C125714700386903/\\$file/IDP%20Camps%20and%20population\\_Kitgum%20-%20Feb2006.pdf](http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004BE3B1/(httpInfoFiles)/642259B5FEC88AC2C125714700386903/$file/IDP%20Camps%20and%20population_Kitgum%20-%20Feb2006.pdf)>

<sup>6</sup> United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, *Kitgum: IDP Camps Population as of February 2006*, February 2006, <[http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004BE3B1/\(httpInfoFiles\)/642259B5FEC88AC2C125714700386903/\\$file/IDP%20Camps%20and%20population\\_Kitgum%20-%20Feb2006.pdf](http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004BE3B1/(httpInfoFiles)/642259B5FEC88AC2C125714700386903/$file/IDP%20Camps%20and%20population_Kitgum%20-%20Feb2006.pdf)>

<sup>7</sup> United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, *Kitgum: IDP Camps Population as of February 2006*, February 2006, <[http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004BE3B1/\(httpInfoFiles\)/642259B5FEC88AC2C125714700386903/\\$file/IDP%20Camps%20and%20population\\_Kitgum%20-%20Feb2006.pdf](http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004BE3B1/(httpInfoFiles)/642259B5FEC88AC2C125714700386903/$file/IDP%20Camps%20and%20population_Kitgum%20-%20Feb2006.pdf)>

<sup>8</sup> United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, *Kitgum: IDP Camps Population as of February 2006*, February 2006, <[http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004BE3B1/\(httpInfoFiles\)/642259B5FEC88AC2C125714700386903/\\$file/IDP%20Camps%20and%20population\\_Kitgum%20-%20Feb2006.pdf](http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004BE3B1/(httpInfoFiles)/642259B5FEC88AC2C125714700386903/$file/IDP%20Camps%20and%20population_Kitgum%20-%20Feb2006.pdf)>

<sup>9</sup> As an objective was to examine youth involvement in programs and decision-making, the team visited camps close to towns where there is greater access to services and information.

<sup>10</sup> UNICEF, *Uganda Annual Report 2006, 2007*,

<[http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/files/Uganda\\_2006\\_AR\\_final.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/files/Uganda_2006_AR_final.pdf)>

<sup>11</sup> International Crisis Group, *Northern Uganda: Seizing the Opportunity for Peace*, 2007,

<<http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=4791>>

<sup>12</sup> The World Bank, *World Development Report 2007: Development and the next Generation*, September 2006,

<<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/EXTDEC/EXTRESEARCH/EXTWDRS/EXTWDR2007/0,,menuPK:1489865~pagePK:64167702~piPK:64167676~theSitePK:1489834,00.html>>

<sup>13</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Human Rights Overview: Uganda*, 2004,

<<http://hrw.org/english/docs/2006/01/18/uganda12284.htm>>

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> UNICEF, *Uganda Annual Report 2006, 2007*

<[http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/files/Uganda\\_2006\\_AR\\_final.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/files/Uganda_2006_AR_final.pdf)>

<sup>16</sup> The Republic of Uganda Ministry of Health, The World Health Organization, UNICEF, The United Nations World Food Programme, United Nations Fund for Population and Health, and the International Rescue Committee, *Health and mortality survey among internally displaced persons in Gulu, Kitgum and Pader districts, northern Uganda*, July 2005.

<sup>17</sup> UNICEF, *Uganda Annual Report 2006, 2007*,

<[http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/files/Uganda\\_2006\\_AR\\_final.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/files/Uganda_2006_AR_final.pdf)>

<sup>18</sup> The International Crisis Group, *Northern Uganda: Seizing the Opportunity for Peace*, 2007,

<<http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=4791>>

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- <sup>19</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>20</sup> UNICEF, *Uganda Annual Report 2006*, 2007  
<[http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/files/Uganda\\_2006\\_AR\\_final.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/files/Uganda_2006_AR_final.pdf)>
- <sup>21</sup> Inter-Agency Standing Committee Working Group in Uganda: Update on IDP Movements, May 2007.
- <sup>22</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Update on IDP Movements*, May 2007.
- <sup>23</sup> United Nations Inter-Agency Standing Committee Consolidated Appeals Process Mid-Year Review of the Humanitarian Appeal 2007.
- <sup>24</sup> UNICEF, *Uganda Annual Report 2006*, 2007,  
<[http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/files/Uganda\\_2006\\_AR\\_final.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/files/Uganda_2006_AR_final.pdf)>; International Crisis Group, *Northern Uganda: Seizing the Opportunity for Peace*, 2007,  
<<http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=4791>>
- <sup>25</sup> Government of Uganda Ministry of Education and Sport. *Annual PEAP Implementation Review Report for the Education Sector*. March 2007.
- <sup>26</sup> UNICEF-Kampala compiled statistics, 2007. pg 116.
- <sup>27</sup> Government of Uganda Ministry of Education and Sport. *Annual PEAP Implementation Review Report for the Education Sector*. March 2007.
- <sup>28</sup> The scale of abduction is enormous. According to the Survey of War Affected Youth (Annan, J; Blattman, C; Horton, R; September 2006), in the areas of Kitgum and Pader surveyed, more than a third of all male youth and a sixth of all female youth have been abducted for at least a day. Roughly half of these escaped or were released within two weeks.
- <sup>29</sup> Staff member, local NGO, interview by Jenny Perlman Robinson and Juliet Young, Gulu, Uganda, May 11, 2007.
- <sup>30</sup> Staff member, local health clinic, interview by Jenny Perlman Robinson and Juliet Young, Gulu, Uganda, May 14, 2007.
- <sup>31</sup> Young woman, age 24, interview by Jenny Perlman Robinson, Kitgum Town Council, Uganda, May 8, 2007.
- <sup>32</sup> Young male participant in a vocational training program, age 18-22, interview by Jenny Perlman Robinson and Juliet Young, focus group, Ogili IDP Camp, Kitgum, Uganda, May 10, 2007.
- <sup>33</sup> Young male participant in a vocational training program 18-22, interview by Jenny Perlman Robinson and Juliet Young, focus group, Ogili IDP Camp, Kitgum, Uganda, May 10, 2007.
- <sup>34</sup> Maghild Norgaard, Project Manager, Odong Laurence, Project Officer, and Ochora Ochitti, Education Officer, Norwegian Refugee Council, interview by Jenny Perlman Robinson and Juliet Young, Gulu, Uganda, May 14, 2007.
- <sup>35</sup> Young man, age 16-18, focus group facilitated by Juliet Young, Kitgum Town Council, Uganda, May 9, 2007.
- <sup>36</sup> Female member, Empowering Hands, interview by Jenny Perlman Robinson and Juliet Young, Gulu, Uganda, May 12, 2007.
- <sup>37</sup> Straight Talk Foundation, PowerPoint Service Delivery: A National Field Experience Youth Friendly Services in Emergency Setting.
- <sup>38</sup> Straight Talk Foundation, PowerPoint Service Delivery: A National Field Experience Youth Friendly Services in Emergency Setting.
- <sup>39</sup> Kibula Dennis, Director, Gulu Youth Center, interview by Jenny Perlman Robinson and Juliet Young, Gulu, Uganda, May 14, 2007.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>41</sup> Government of Uganda Ministry of Education and Sport. *Annual PEAP Implementation Review Report for the Education Sector*. March 2007.
- <sup>42</sup> Otim Michael, Programme Coordinator, Gulu District NGO Forum, interview by Jenny Perlman Robinson and Juliet Young, Gulu, Uganda, May 11, 2007.
- <sup>43</sup> Due to increased donor support, food rations are expected to resume to the 60 percent level in June 2007.
- <sup>44</sup> Staff member, local NGO, interview by Jenny Perlman Robinson and Juliet Young, Gulu, Uganda, May 11, 2007.
- <sup>45</sup> Young man age 16-18, focus group facilitated by Jenny Perlman Robinson and Juliet Young, Coo-pee IDP Camp, Gulu, Uganda, May 13, 2007.

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- <sup>46</sup> Young girl age 15-19, focus group facilitated by Jenny Perlman Robinson, Labuje IDP Camp, Kitgum, Uganda, May 5, 2007.
- <sup>47</sup> Term refers to young women and girls who were forced to become the sexual partners of members of the LRA.
- <sup>48</sup> Giovanni Bosco, Deputy Head of Office, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, interview by Jenny Perlman Robinson and Juliet Young, Kampala, Uganda May 4, 2007.
- <sup>49</sup> Female member, Empowering Hands, interview by Jenny Perlman Robinson and Juliet Young, Gulu District, Uganda, May 12, 2007.
- <sup>50</sup> Senior Official, United Nations, interview by Jenny Perlman Robinson and Juliet Young, Kampala, Uganda, May 4, 2007.
- <sup>51</sup> Vincent Mayanja, "Return to pre-war homes still distant dream for northern Ugandans," Agence-France Presse, (June 6, 2007)
- <sup>52</sup> Inter-Agency Standing Committee Working Group in Uganda: Update on IDP Movements, May 2007.
- <sup>53</sup> Human Rights Watch, *The "Night Commuters": Uganda's Forgotten Children of War*, 2006, <<http://hrw.org/photos/2005/uganda>>
- <sup>54</sup> Stephanie Schwarz, Child Protection Officer, Mid-North Region, UNICEF. Kampala, Uganda. Email June 11, 2007.
- <sup>55</sup> Young man, age 36, interview by Jenny Perlman Robinson, Kitgum Town Council, Uganda, May 9, 2007.
- <sup>56</sup> Female member, Empowering Hands, interview by Jenny Perlman Robinson and Juliet Young, Gulu District, Uganda, May 12, 2007.
- <sup>57</sup> Young male member of Watwero, age 18-22, interview by Jennie Perlman Robinson and Juliet Young, Kitgum Town Council, May 6, 2007.
- <sup>58</sup> Young girl age 15-19, focus group facilitated by Jenny Perlman Robinson, Labuje IDP Camp, Kitgum, Uganda, May 5, 2007.
- <sup>59</sup> Young mother, age 21, interview by Jenny Perlman Robinson, Kitgum Town Council, Uganda, May 8, 2007.
- <sup>60</sup> Young girl age 15-19, focus group facilitated by Jenny Perlman Robinson, Labuje IDP Camp, Kitgum, Uganda, May 5, 2007.
- <sup>61</sup> Young woman age 18-22, focus group facilitated by Jenny Perlman Robinson and Juliet Young, Coop-pee IDP Camp, Gulu, Uganda, May 13, 2007.
- <sup>62</sup> Staff member, local NGO, interview by Jenny Perlman Robinson and Juliet Young, Gulu, Uganda, May 11, 2007.
- <sup>63</sup> Man, age 40, focus group facilitated by Jenny Perlman Robinson and Juliet Young, Coop-pee camp, Gulu district, May 13, 2007.