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Civil Society Organizations and Local-Level Peacebuilding in Northern Uganda

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Abstract

This paper examines the contribution of civil society, notably religious and faith-based groups, traditional institutions, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), human rights groups, and community-based self-help groups, in promoting local-level peacebuilding in northern Uganda. Civil society groups in northern Uganda provided alternative narratives of the conflict, exposed brutalities against civilians, and ideas of peacebuilding. They lobbied, facilitated negotiations, engaged in building cultures of peace, promoted reconciliation, sustained livelihoods at the local level, and influenced outside peacebuilding interventions. However, the national context constrained their activities. This article is based on research and consultancy materials, personal observation, official and unofficial documents from the government, international organizations, intergovernmental agencies, and NGOs, newspaper reports, and scholarly publications.

Keywords

Conflict, security, DDR, peacebuilding, Uganda, civil society

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to examine the nature and contribution of civil society organizations (CSOs) in promoting local level peacebuilding in northern Uganda. The experience of northern Uganda highlights the challenge of peacebuilding in a situation of multiple conflicts at various levels, national and local. Civil society peacebuilding activities at the local level highlight Boulding's assertion that cultures of peace survive in small pockets and spaces even in the most violent of conflicts (Ramsbotham et al., 2005: 217). CSOs in northern Uganda provided a link between the local, national, and international actors and ideas. They provided alternative local narratives of the conflict, emphasizing brutalities against civilians and community demands for peace. CSOs provided leadership, championed popular mobilization for peace, and influenced outside peacebuilding intervention in northern Uganda. However, national context constrained civil society peacebuilding activities.

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The conflict in northern Uganda involved successive insurgent groups who fought against the government of Uganda from 1986 to 2006. The insurgents comprised soldiers and supporters of the previous regimes the National Resistance Army (NRA) led by Yoweri Museveni, had fought against and defeated during the five years of insurgency before coming to power. At the time the NRA came to power, the Ugandan state had collapsed. State-inspired violence, human rights abuses, and lawlessness were endemic, especially in southern Uganda, where the NRA derived its support. The legitimacy of the NRA government therefore rested on its promise and commitment to restore peace and provide security of life and property, the rule of law, and democratic governance (National Resistance Movement, 1986).

The leadership of the NRA constructed a narrative of the conflict in northern Uganda to suit the interests of legitimizing its rule and military approach to conflicts. It presented the conflict in northern Uganda as an attempt by 'criminals' and people responsible for human rights abuses, and collapse of the Ugandan state, to regain power. These 'criminals' must be defeated using military means, the narrative ran. In contrast, the leadership presented the NRA as a 'disciplined', 'pro-people army', which has restored security, rule of law, and respect for human rights, has reversed state collapse, and has made Uganda an attractive haven for foreign investment (Museveni, 1987a). Western donor states, multilateral agencies, and scholarly works recycled this narrative, and supported the military approach adopted by the government (Dolan, 2006: 28). They were content on treating the conflict as an 'isolated situation of political instability' (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2000, para. 10). International NGOs also accepted the government's narrative and were careful not to 'overstep their boundary' by engaging in Uganda's domestic politics (Dolan and Hovil, 2006: 6). International NGOs, such as *Associzione Voluntary per il Servizio International* (AVSI), the Norwegian Refugee Council, Oxfam, CARE, and World Vision, which intervened in northern Uganda, restricted their activities to 'working in conflict' delivering humanitarian assistance. They supported local civil society groups in sustaining livelihoods and rebuilding local economies.

National CSOs were polarized, reflecting the regional north–south and ethnic divides and lack of national integration that are at the root of the conflict. The national media for instance recycled the argument that insurgent groups in northern Uganda lack a political agenda, while religious and faith-based organizations, NGOs, human rights organizations outside northern Uganda maintained a conspicuous silence and in some cases openly supported the government's military approach. Alternative narratives emphasizing humanitarian consequences of the military approaches and popular demands for a peaceful approach were ignored, or suppressed.

Civil society groups in northern Uganda comprising religious organizations such as the Justice and Peace Commission of the Catholic Church, the Anglican Church of Uganda, the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI), traditional authorities, especially through the institution of *Ker Kal Kwaro Acholi*, and community based organizations courageously advanced the cause of peacebuilding. They turned around the perceptions of the conflict towards peace, leading to increased engagement in peacebuilding in northern Uganda by multilateral agencies, international and national NGOs (Dolan and Hovil, 2006). In May 2002, the Civil Society Organization for Peace in Northern Uganda (CSOPNU), a 'loose' coalition of national and international civil society advocating for 'just and lasting peace' in northern Uganda, was established.

This article is an analysis of the role of civil society in local-level peacebuilding in northern Uganda. It offers an in-depth study on civil society peacebuilding activities in the Acholi sub-region, the epicenter of the conflict and civil society peacebuilding activities. The article relies on official reports and newsletters from CSOs, the district local government, government of Uganda, and intergovernmental agencies. These reports offer information on the conflict situation and peacebuilding interventions. The author has also used information on various aspects of the

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conflict in northern Uganda, which was personally collected during earlier research as well as personal observation of the conflict over the years. The study has also relied on secondary material from scholarly articles in journals and books.

CSOs and peacebuilding

Civil society is a historically variable concept whose appeal Kumar (1993) observes, is its many levels and layers of meaning. In classical usage, civil society was synonymous with the state. The modern idea of civil society is of a sphere distinct from the state (Carothers, 1999–2000; Kaldor, 2003; Kumar, 1993). For the purpose of this study, civil society constitutes the arena or sphere of un-coerced collective action around shared interests, purposes, and values. It is an intermediate arena between the state, private sector, or market and the family (Paffenholf and Spurk 2006). Civil society is an arena that provides space for diverse societal values and interests to interact, debate, and seek to influence society and the political process. CSOs consist of the wide array of non-governmental and not for profit organizations and groups that exist within the civil society arena. They include non-governmental organizations (NGOs), faith-based groups, human rights groups, trade unions, and ethnic based associations, among others. CSOs and groups express the interests and values of their members and respect for some ethical considerations. They recognize the importance of respecting human rights and promoting compromise, dialogue, and economic and social integration. They promote social and political spaces for dialogue and constrain arbitrary exercise of state power. They interact with and the environment defined by the state shapes them.

As Paris (2004) observes, from Alexis de Tocqueville to the present, scholars have emphasized the role of civil society in consolidating democracy. The legacy of democratic struggles in Eastern Europe and Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s enhanced this benign view of civil society. Civil society nurtures trust and reciprocity and fosters tolerance for diversity (Diamond, 1999; Putman, 1993). These are important for preventing conflict. Civil society monitors and checks the state in the exercise of power, promotes political participation, creates alternative channels for the articulation of and representation of interests, and promotes favorable conditions for market economic reforms. Harberson (1994: 2) and colleagues, in the edited volume *Civil Society and the State in Africa*, reflect this thinking: 'We consider the possibility that civil society holds a key to understanding and addressing effectively the political and socio-economic crises in Africa and elsewhere', they wrote. Lewis (2002), however, questioned the usefulness of the concept civil society to Africa. Lewis argued that civil society is a western concept bounded by cultural and political setting.

In the 1990s, scholarly and policy works have emphasized the positive contribution of civil society in democratization and peacebuilding (Paffenholf and Spurk, 2006; World Bank, 2006). Civil societies increase trust and social cohesion, fill the void left by the state, and carry out functions such as providing services, protection of citizens, reintegration of ex-combatants and displaced persons, advocacy, and creating awareness and promoting reconciliation. Much of the interest in civil society is a result of the dominance of the neo-liberal paradigm and its emphasis on limited role for the state, and privatized delivery of social services (Lewis, 2002).

Other scholarly works caution against an overly positive view of the role of civil society in promoting democracy and peacebuilding (Bayart, 1986). Carothers (1999–2000) dismisses the notion that civil society 'consists only of noble causes and earnest, well-intentioned actors.' Carothers observes that 'civil society everywhere is a bewildering array of the good, the bad, and the outright bizarre'. Carothers therefore dismisses the views that a strong civil society ensures democracy and that democracy ensures a strong civil society, as well as the notion that civil society is crucial for economic success. Similarly, Chambers and Kopstein (2001) raise the need to ask the

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question, what type of civil society promotes democracy. They argue that there are both ‘good and bad civil society’. Bad civil society is particularistic. It contains the elements of good civil society but only between members of a particular group. Bad civil society spreads the opposite of the virtues of good civil society, prejudice, hatred and extremism to members of outside group. Belloni (2008: 186–187) argues that even in consolidated democracies, ‘civil society is a vague and general concept, which can be filled with different contents – ranging from democratic to undemocratic actors and from peaceful to violent agents’.

Paris (2004), drawing on Chambers and Kopstein, decries the focus of liberal peace approach to peacebuilding on ‘quantity’ rather than the ‘specific qualities of civil society’. Paris (2004: 151–178) argues that the liberal approach to peacebuilding under looks the ‘pathologies of liberalization’: the problem of ‘bad’ civil society, the ‘behavior of opportunistic “conflict entrepreneurs”’, the ‘destructive societal competitions’ elections might generate, the role of saboteurs disguised as democrats, and ‘the disruptive and conflict-inducing effects of economic liberalization’. In neo-patrimonial and ethnically fragmented societies with strong national and group identities, some groups may condone human rights violations, and even accept neo-patrimonial relations. Conflict-torn societies are often highly polarized. CSOs are likely to reflect such polarization. They may differ in response to conflict. Some are likely to be sectarian, ignore human rights violations, support violent pursuit of conflict or be complicit in maintaining silence. Orjuela (2005) presented the case of a struggle by geographically and ethnically divided civil society in Sri Lanka, in favor of and against negotiated settlement to the violent conflict.

Donais (2009) criticizes the liberal peacebuilding approach for requiring local actors to ‘take ownership over a largely predetermined vision’. The liberal peace approach, Donais argues, is full of tension between external imposition and local ownership. Donais contrasts this with the ‘communitarian’ approaches in which local actors design, manage and implement peacebuilding processes. The communitarian approach emphasizes the roles of tradition and social context in determining particular visions of peacebuilding. It favors peacebuilding from below based on the conflict transformation approach that takes a positive view on the role of civil society in peacebuilding (Lederach, 1995).

Peacebuilding from below is linked to Lederach’s idea of indigenous empowerment, which suggests that conflict transformation must include respect for and promotion of cultural resources in a given setting, and seeing the setting and people not as the ‘problem’ but as the ‘answer’ (Lederach, 1995: 212). The idea ‘echoes Elise Boulding’s insight that cultures of peace can survive in small pockets and spaces even in the most violent of conflicts’(Ramsbotham et al., 2005: 217).

The conflict transformation approach to peacebuilding views states as multidimensional, comprising multiple political arenas at different levels, local, regional, and central (Manning, 2003: 26). The approach describes conflict-affected societies as a triangle with three levels. At the apex is the top military and political leadership, the middle leadership comprising political, religious, business sectors; the third level is the grassroots. At this level are the majority of the population, internally displaced persons, local leaders, community-based organizations, and local NGOs. The conflict transformation approach requires coordination of peacebuilding at all levels. Most intra-state conflicts have roots in local issues and play out in local settings. Embedded cultures and economies of violence at the local level often provide serious challenges to settlements reached at the national level. Most often, local conflicts and issues are left unresolved by settlements arrived at the center, requiring a reworking of the settlements at the local level. Neglect of the local level undermines consolidation of peace (Manning, 2003). Understanding of structures, attitudes, relationships, and behaviors that will erode cultures of violence and promote peace at the local level needs to underpin settlements reached at national level. This requires involvement of local actors and identifying and cultivating knowledge, cultures, and resources that promote peace. Put differently, effective

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and sustainable peace entails empowering communities torn by conflict. While acknowledging the importance of local understandings and cultural practices in peacebuilding, Schaefer (2010) cautions that local practices are heterogeneous and some local practices are not 'necessarily compatible with the aims of working towards a less violent society'.

The conflict transformation approach to peacebuilding has opened the space for CSOs in peacebuilding. CSOs have emerged to fill the gap left by weak and collapsed states. Multilateral and bilateral agencies have turned to CSOs in supporting peacebuilding. The Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflicts (1997) underlined the importance of CSOs. Likewise, in 2005, the United Nations outlined the political contribution of a vibrant civil society in conflict prevention as well as in peaceful settlement of disputes. The local level approach to peacebuilding has however gone beyond looking at the role of CSOs as merely filling gaps left by weak states by implementing externally designed peacebuilding programs. It emphasizes respect for local norms and practices of which local CSOs represent.

The nature of CSOs in Uganda

CSOs in Uganda are a diverse category. The Development Network of Indigenous Associations (DENIVA), a national apex organization for CSOs in Uganda, defines CSOs in the Ugandan context as 'organizations, organized groups, and individuals that come together voluntarily to pursue those interests, values, and purposes usually termed the "common group"'. These include NGOs, community groups, labor unions, professional associations, faith-based organizations, parts of the academia, and the media (DENIVA, 2006: 22). There is a long tradition of associational life in rural communities in Uganda. Grassroots organizations, mostly rural or village community-based mutual self-help groups, have historically been involved in livelihood-promoting activities such as improving agricultural production, operating rotating credit and loan schemes facilities, and offering funeral services. However, most grassroots groups emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as a response to the economic crises and state failure. They emerged to fill the void left by the state in the provision of social services. Grassroots associations include ethnic associations and faith-based groups, which were already in place during colonial rule. These categories of civil society are mainly involved in social services delivery. Their non-engagement in political advocacy is partly due to the country's history of authoritarianism and repressive rule (DENIVA, 2006). Another category comprising trade unions and cooperative associations were weakened through cooptation by the state and subsequently liberalization of the economy under structural adjustment programs of the 1980s and 1990s (Bazaara, 2004).

The more formal and recent category of CSOs are NGOs, network organizations, and professional associations. These have proliferated since the late 1980s and 1990s with structural adjustment and good governance programs. Through a process of social engineering, international donors have sought to create NGOs as part of civil society development (Dicklitch, 2001: 31; Hearn, 1999). International donors viewed NGOs as alternatives to the state to fill the void in the delivery of social services. From the 1990s, donors and governments assigned NGOs the role of ensuring accountability in implementation of poverty reduction policies and programs. The role of CSOs became that of 'partnership' with the state (Hearn, 2001; Muhumuza, 2010).

The context of authoritarian rule and economic crisis has had a bearing on the functioning of CSOs in Uganda. It has resulted in a situation whereby most CSOs focus on service delivery and limit their activities to specific geographical areas. This is the case with self-help and community-based associations that were in existence before independence and the various civil society groups that emerged in response to the economic crisis of the 1970s and 1980s, and those of the 1990s. CSOs which emerged in the 1990s 'are urban-based', with headquarters in the capital Kampala

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(Dicklitch, 2001). They were formed by elites who discovered CSOs as a lucrative source of income from donors. These CSOs are influenced by donor agenda and ideology. This partly explains why civil society groups in Uganda began to change their orientation towards peace toward the end of the 1990s, when donor policy on the conflict was changing towards peaceful approaches. In addition, Ugandan elite tend to be influenced by ethnic and political divisions that are endemic in Uganda. Activities of organizations run by elite are susceptible to effects of political and ethnic divisions. Such a factor cannot be ruled-out in explaining initial responses of national CSOs to the conflict in northern Uganda. Comparisons exist in Sri Lanka (Orjuela, 2005)

In addition, few CSOs in Uganda engage in political activism and advocacy because the government of Uganda is intolerant of involvement of CSOs in 'political' activities. CSOs perceived to be engaging in political activities are often threatened with de-registration (Bazaara, 2004; Dicklitch, 1998: 4; Muhumuza, 2010: 11). Most CSOs in Uganda are regulated by the NGO Act. Since 1989, it has been a legal requirement for all NGOs operating in Uganda to register with the NGO Registration Board in the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The initial registration is renewable after one year (NGO Registration Act 1989; NGO Registration (Amendment Act, 2006). The law is authoritarian and aims to control CSOs. Intolerance by the government of involvement of CSOs in 'political' activities has constrained advocacy work of human rights organizations. CSOs which have civic orientation prefer to play safe, through self-censorship or toeing the government line. This political context has influenced the role of civil society in peacebuilding.

The context and NRA government narrative of the conflict

The conflict in northern Uganda erupted in 1986, a few months after the National Resistance Army (NRA) led by Yoweri Museveni came to power after five years of guerrilla war against the government of Uganda. At the heart of the conflict is 'lack of sufficient national integration' between the constituent ethnic, religious, and regional elements of the country (Omara-Otunnu, 1995). Since independence, continual struggles for political control and violent conflicts have bedeviled Uganda. State violence, coercion, and use security forces have been a dominant means of political control and retaining power. This was manifested in 1966 when Prime Minister Milton Obote suspended the constitution and replaced it with an interim one that centralized power in the presidency, which he ascended to, after deposing and exiling his predecessor Edward Mutesa. Obote's reliance on the military gave the army a taste of power. In 1971, the army under the leadership of Idi Amin assumed direct political power. Amin's rule was characterized by state violence, intimidation, and coercion. It resulted in social dislocation, institutional decay, and collapse.

When Amin was overthrown in April 1979, by a combined force of Tanzanian Peoples Defense Force and Ugandan guerrillas, violence and disorder escalated, as different groups struggled for political control (Decalo, 1990). The controversial elections of December 1980 that returned Milton Obote to power and the decision by Yoweri Museveni to launch a guerrilla war against the government compounded the situation. In July 1985, Milton Obote was ousted in a military coup led by General Tito Okello. Six months later in January 1986, NRA guerrillas led by Yoweri Museveni ousted the military government of Tito Okello. At the time, violence, lawlessness, banditry, and insecurity were rampant. The military government had lost control and rival armed groups controlled the capital city and other spaces.

To legitimize its insurgency and rule, the leadership of the NRA constructed a narrative of Uganda's political history portraying Ugandans as victims of the state. The leadership of the NRA argued that it is legitimate for Ugandans to use armed force to resist and overthrow the state. They presented the NRA as an ally of the people of Uganda in their struggle against the state, and the NRA insurgency as a 'second liberation' aimed at dismantling the state and reconstructing it along

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democratic and national framework'. President Yoweri Museveni referred to capture of power by the NRA as a 'fundamental change' in the politics of the country (Museveni, 1992: 21; National Resistance Movement, 1986).

However, the NRA narrative did not find resonance throughout the country. The NRA insurgency had polarized the country along the regional and ethnic north–south or Nilotic–Bantu divide (Low, 1988; Omara-Otunnu, 1995). The NRA and the other rebel armies allied to it drew their support from among Bantu ethnic groups from the south, while people from northern Uganda dominated the government army the NRA deposed from power. The capture of state power by the NRA in January 1986 generated fear in northern Uganda.

When the NRA reached northern Uganda, the behavior of NRA soldiers, who acted more like conquerors than the liberators they claimed to be, compounded existing fear and mistrust of intentions of the NRA. Units within the NRA engaged in harassment, robberies, and cold-blooded murders. The NRA rounded up former soldiers and took them to 'politicization camps'. They tortured and tied those they arrested during operations to round-up former soldiers in the notorious 'three piece' or *Kandoya* fashion (ACORD-Gulu, 1997; Legum, 1986–1987; Pirouet, 1991; Republic of Uganda, 1997). The *Kandoya* fashion entails tying a person's arms tightly at the elbows behind the back. The method paralyses the limbs and damages internal organs. The government blamed this on undisciplined elements integrated into the NRA from UFM and FEDEMO (Amaza, 1998: 150; Behrend, 1998: 108–109; Republic of Uganda, 1997).

Relations between the army and the population deteriorated, as did security. People began to take up arms and to attack NRA soldiers. When in August 1986 former government soldiers who had reorganized under the banner of the Uganda Peoples Democratic Army (UPDA) attacked NRA positions in Gulu and Kitgum districts in Acholi, they found a receptive environment in which to operate. The attack provided organizational coherence to a hitherto uncoordinated resistance. Within a few months, the conflict spread to Lango and Teso. The conflict has gone through different phases, involving various rebel groups. The most devastating phase of the conflict was between 1988 and 2006, when the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) emerged as the main rebel group (Behrend, 1998; Gersony, 1997).

Given the factionalism in the country, narrative of the conflict in northern Uganda became a major political tool. The leadership of the NRA portrayed the conflict as the result of 'rear-guard actions of the defeated, moribund, sectarian, and neo-colonial elements' (Museveni, 1987a). NRA leader Yoweri Museveni criminalized insurgents, presenting them as 'elements that have caused untold suffering to the people of Uganda, violated human rights, murdered people, destroyed the economy, and violated the sovereignty of the people of Uganda' (Museveni, 1987a). He argued that insurgents were fighting due to the fear of prosecution for crimes they committed during the tenure of past regimes, and the desire to regain power in order to enjoy the concomitant benefits that go with it. He declared: 'Fighting and annihilating these elements is a justified cause'. The government variously portrayed the conflict in northern Uganda as the manifestation of 'primitivism', 'backwardness', and inability to cope with 'modern times' (Gingyera-Pinycwa, 1993: 130–131).

The NRA dismissed criticism of human rights abuses arising from the military approach. It labeled advocates for peaceful approaches to the conflict as 'proponents of Uganda's backwardness and misery' (Museveni, 1987b). President Yoweri Museveni referred to exiled Bishop Benoni Ogwal of the Anglican Diocese of northern Uganda who had criticized the NRA of committing atrocities against civilians, as a liar 'before man and God'; a person 'whose past are tainted with crime or with collaboration with crime' (Legum, 1986-87; B468–469). Critics of the government's military approach and human rights violations were threatened and intimidated.

In the 1990s, the conduct of the LRA, which had emerged as the main rebel group, gave some credence to the official narrative of the NRA government of portraying rebels as criminals and

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terrorists who lack a political agenda, and should be defeated using a military approach. By the time the LRA emerged as the main rebel group, support among the civilian population had diminished (Branch, 2007). The LRA interpreted this to mean the civilian population in Acholi had switched support to the government. It turned its violence against suspected collaborators and supporters of the government, attacking communities, destroying homes, abduction, murders, mutilation, and rape and looting. The organization relied on abduction and forcibly recruitment especially of children and the youth to fill its rank. UNICEF (2004) put the number of children abducted at 25,000. The LRA initiated abductees into its ranks by forcing them to kill their own relatives, family members and other abductees, especially those it caught trying to escape. LRA commanders forced abducted girls into sexual slavery, turning them into 'wives' (Human Rights Watch, 2003). Besides, violence targeted against civilians, the LRA did not present a credible political agenda.

The government further portrayed the LRA as a proxy of the Islamist fundamentalist regime in Sudan, and presented itself as a victim of Islamic fundamentalism and international terrorism. By 1994, the LRA was receiving support from Sudan, in retaliation for Uganda's support for the Sudan Peoples' Liberation Army (SPLA), which had been fighting against Sudan since 1983. By presenting itself as a victim of Islamic fundamentalism, Uganda sought to count on support of the United States, which considered Sudan a 'rogue' state and the Islamist regime in Sudan an international threat. The United States provided military support to Uganda and in December 2001 branded the LRA a terrorist group (US Department of State, 2001). Western academics such as Gersony (1997), Van Acker (2004), and Prunier (2004), among others, recycled the narrative of the LRA as a proxy, lacking a political agenda.

Civil society response differed, reflecting polarization of Ugandan society, geographic, regional, and ethnic. Other than local CSOs in northern Uganda who championed the cause of peace, others ignored, were indifferent, or openly supported the government's military approaches. The minister for pacification of northern Uganda observed that a 'let them suffer' attitude prevailed amongst those who viewed the conflict as a 'God-given opportunity to repay the devil its due' (Bigombe, 1994). The national media, for instance, recycled the narrative that rebels had no political agenda.

The dubious moral standing of the LRA aside, criminalization of the group delegitimized and painted them as a group without any merit, and not worthy to engage in dialogue with, and contributed to militarizing the conflict. Criminalization of rebel groups is based on the dubious distinction between 'old' and 'new civil wars', where new wars are viewed as criminal, depoliticized, and predatory, while old civil wars are political, even noble (Kalyvas, 2001).

CSOs and peacebuilding in northern Uganda

Civil society groups in northern Uganda played an important role in turning the perceptions of the conflict in northern Uganda towards peace. They championed the cause of human rights, provided leadership, and mobilized local constituency around demands for peaceful resolution of the conflict. They engaged in advocacy for peaceful resolution of the conflict, facilitated contacts between rebel fighters and the government, and promoted reconciliation between rebels and the community. They organized workshops, issued statements, and facilitated formation of peace clubs to change community attitudes, build a culture of peace, and foster reconciliation.

The most notable civil society groups involved in peacebuilding in the Acholi sub-region were the ARLPI, an interdenominational peace initiative comprising the Anglican Church of Uganda, Catholic Church, and Moslems, and Justice and Peace Commission of the Catholic Church. *Ker Kal Kwaro Acholi*, the cultural institution of traditional leaders and Human Rights Focus, a local NGO based in Gulu district. Others included local NGOs such as Gulu Save the Children Organization (GUSCO), Kitgum Concerned Women's Association (KICWA), and Gulu

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Hope for Peace, which carried out counseling and facilitated reintegration of abducted persons who escaped from rebel captivity. Community-based and self-help associations engaged in socio-economic activities to alleviate human suffering and rebuild local economies and livelihoods. International NGOs, including those that were not present in the north, provided support to the local civil society groups.

Political advocacy and mobilization

As early as 1987, Acholi elders, chiefs, and civil and religious leaders had begun to make efforts to promote negotiated end to the conflict. At the time, Acholi elders, chiefs, and civil leaders operated under a loosely organized association known as 'Council of Elders'. Religious leaders engaged in peacebuilding through the dioceses and organizations of the different denominations: Gulu diocese in the case of the Catholic Church and the diocese of Northern Uganda in the case of the Anglican Church of Uganda. These groups acted as intermediaries, facilitating negotiations and surrender of rebels. By then, disenchantment with disruption caused by the conflict had begun to develop, leading to the emergence of a peace constituency. Between 1987 and 1988, Acholi elders and civil and religious leaders appealed to and facilitated surrender of rebels. A council of elders established a reception and transit center at the presidential lodge in Gulu town and received rebels who surrendered (Simonse, 1998). The role of elders was vital in instilling confidence in rebels who were distrustful of the NRA. At the time, the government had put in place a presidential pardon to encourage rebels to surrender and an amnesty offering immunity from prosecution for treason, theft, and torture to rebels who surrendered and renounced insurgency. Acholi elders and civil leaders facilitated negotiations between the fighting forces by acting as intermediaries. The negotiations resulted in the 1988 UPDA–NRA peace agreement that Lieutenant Colonel Angelo Okello of the UPDA and President Museveni signed and the Catholic bishop of Gulu diocese, Cypriano Kihangire, witnessed (Lamwaka, 1996; Omach, 2011: 284–285). A section of the UPDA, about 3000 soldiers with 80 percent of the leadership, surrendered and the government integrated them into the army and resettled others into civilian life. A section loyal to the overall leader of the group, Brigadier Odong Latek, refused to surrender (Woodward, 1991: 182–183). The group loyal to Brigadier Odong Latek joined Joseph Kony's rebel group and formed the Uganda Christian Democratic Army, later renamed the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) (Lamwaka, 1996; Omach, 2011).

Despite the setback, Acholi elders did not give up efforts at facilitating contacts between rebels of the LRA and the government. In 1993, they were instrumental in facilitating contacts between the minister of state in charge of the 'pacification of the north', Betty Bigombe and LRA commanders. The military command in the northern town of Gulu offered safe passage for peace emissaries to deliver messages to and from the LRA. A ceasefire was agreed upon, and negotiations were held between LRA representatives and a delegation from Uganda government comprising Betty Bigombe and commanders from the army's 4th division in Gulu. Clan elder and religious leaders from Acholi attended the negotiations. The negotiations raised hopes for a peaceful end to the conflict. The hope for peace was shattered when President Museveni gave an ultimatum to the LRA to surrender within seven days or face military action. The president accused the LRA of dishonesty and lack of good faith. He argued that the LRA was using the negotiations to replenish its fighters through recruitment and that it was negotiating with the government of Sudan for military assistance. The president ruled out further talks with the LRA (Omach, 2011; Pain, 1997: 20–21). In April 1995, Uganda broke off diplomatic relations with Sudan, alleging that Sudan was supporting dissident groups in Uganda including the LRA (Prunier, 2004).

The Ugandan army renewed military operations against the LRA. The LRA retaliated by attacking, abducting, mutilating, and killing civilians. The LRA massacred civilians in Atiak in April

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1995, Sudanese refugees in Acol-pii camp in 1996, and civilians in Palabek in January 1997 (Amnesty International, 1997; Gersony, 1997; Republic of Uganda, 1997). The government army responded by forcing the population into camps, ostensibly to protect them (Amnesty International, 1999; Gersony, 1997). The United States, which had declared Sudan a rogue state and a threat to security by sponsoring Islamist fundamentalism, provided military assistance to the Ugandan government (*Africa Confidential* 1996: 1).

The government's inclination towards military approaches to the conflict did not destroy the resolve of CSOs to change perceptions towards peace. In February 1996, Acholi elders and chiefs constituted a cultural institution, *Ker Kal Kwaro Acholi*, to offer leadership in Acholi and effect popular mobilization. This was aimed at reversing the destruction of political organization and leadership in Acholi, which had been brought about by LRA violence and the government's repression, intimidation, and arrests. Lack of political organization and destruction of leadership has been a contributory factor in prolonging the conflict (Branch, 2005: 5). *Ker Kal Kwaro Acholi* worked closely with religious leaders in Acholi, who in February 1998 formally inaugurated the ARLPI, an interdenominational peace initiative comprising the Anglican Church, Catholic Church, and Moslems. The formal inauguration of ARLPI was a significant development, which manifested inter-religious coexistence in a country where religion has been politically divisive and a source of conflict. The ARLPI is an example of what Carothers (1999–2000) and Chambers and Kopstein (2001) refer to as 'good civil society'. The inauguration of ARLPI was equally significant because religious groups have influence within Ugandan society. They are trusted and confided in, especially in times of crisis, when trust in the state has eroded. Religious groups operate as a 'trust'. Unlike NGOs, religious organizations are not controlled by the authoritarian NGO Act, which affords them greater freedom of action, without fear of threats of deregistration. They are in a better position to act as the voice of the voiceless.

Together with NGOs such as Human Rights Focus, the ARLPI and *Ker Kal Kwaro Acholi* carried out mobilization to build consensus for peace at the local, national, and international levels. They organized peace rallies and training workshops, and produced newsletters and research publications highlighting the plight of civilians in the conflict zones. In 1996, an interfaith group of the Anglican Church of Uganda, the Catholic Church, and Moslems in Gulu organized peace-training workshops and the first public prayer for peace. In August 1997, an interdenominational group comprising officials of the Anglican Church of Uganda, Catholics, and Muslim leaders organized a peace rally in Kitgum during which they asked the LRA to stop violence against civilians and called on the government to seek a peaceful end to the conflict (Rodriguez, 2002: 58–59).

By 1997, the call by civil society groups in northern Uganda for peaceful resolution of the conflict began to have resonance among groups in other parts of Uganda. A national consensus for peaceful resolution of conflicts began to emerge. Civil society groups and individuals outside northern Uganda began calling on the government to initiate dialogue to resolve conflicts in the country. In October 1997, religious leaders organized a peace rally in Kampala, while the president of the Uganda Law Society, when addressing judicial officials at the opening of the 1998 law year, reiterated the call for a peaceful end to conflicts in Uganda (Kimuli, 1998: 8).

More significant, in 1997 the parliament of Uganda extracted a concession from the government to discuss the conflict in northern Uganda. A new parliament had been elected in 1996. During the campaign preceding the election, voters in conflict-riddled north expressed their frustration with the continuing conflict. Paul Ssemegerere, the presidential candidate who expressed intention to end the conflict through peaceful means, received massive endorsement from voters in the region (Gingyera-Pinycwa and Obong-Oula, 2003). Although Museveni, who favored a military approach to the conflict, won the elections and was sworn in as president, the election generated optimism of transition to democracy. A progressive and democratic constitution had come into force in 1995.

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The constitution granted greater autonomy for the legislature. Among others, the new constitution granted the legislature power, with a two-thirds majority, to override the president's refusal to assent to legislation. The constitution also entrenched standing committees, and gave the committees powers to discuss bills, oversee government activities and to compel testimony from the government and the public. Committees and individuals were given powers to introduce legislation. Of particular interests, the constitution granted parliament power to appoint select committees to investigate specific problems. The sixth parliament exploited this provision to set-up a committee to investigate the conflict in northern Uganda. The provision that the president could only dissolve parliament when its five- year term is complete provided parliament the autonomy and protection to act (Constitution of Republic of Uganda 1995, Chapter 6). There was thus euphoria of the dawn of a new and democratic era. However, the Parliamentary Sessional Committee on Defense and Internal Affairs charged with looking into the insurgency ruled out peace talks with the rebels, and instead recommended a military solution. A minority report of two members recommended peace talks. The report was a bluff to the emerging peace movement (Republic of Uganda, 1997).

CSOs refocused their activities towards the international arena. The ARLPI lobbied the international community to put pressure on the government to negotiate with the LRA and to make concessions for peace. This was important because of the influence of western donors on the political leadership in Uganda. In April 1997, representatives of NGOs operating in northern Uganda, civil leaders, *Ker Kal Kwaro Acholi*, and religious leaders attended a civic forum, *Kacoke Madit* in London. The forum called on the government to initiate dialogue with all parties concerned to produce a lasting and durable peace (Pain, 1997). Civil society lobbied the United Nations, governments, and civil society groups in the United States, United Kingdom, the European Union, and Scandinavian countries. They highlighted the plight of children in northern Uganda such as those who walk long distances in search of safety and spend the night in the streets of Gulu town. In July 2003, religious leaders and other members of CSOs held overnight prayers and slept in the streets with the children.

In 2001, the ARLPI released a report, *Let My People Go: The Forgotten Plight of People in the Displaced Camps in Acholi*, and in 2002 Human Rights Focus published *Between Two Fires: The Plight of Internally Displaced Persons in northern Uganda*. In 2003, ARLPI published, *War of Words* (ARLPI, 2003), which criticized the role of the national media in the conflict. The ARLPI criticized the national media for presenting the LRA as an organization not worth talking to and thereby supporting a military solution. The ARLPI argued that the national media, like the military were engaged in the war in northern Uganda.

The emerging consensus towards peace was manifested in the formation in May 2002, of a 'loose' alliance of Civil Society Organization for Peace in Northern Uganda (COSPNU). The alliance was instrumental in drawing international attention to the conflict and humanitarian crisis in northern Uganda and in convincing the government of Uganda to pass the Amnesty Act (2000) and developing a policy on internal displacement. In April 2004, the UN Under-secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Jan Egeland briefed the Security Council on the humanitarian situation in northern Uganda. Among other things, the Security Council stressed the importance of 'exploring all peaceful avenues to resolve the conflict, including through creating a climate in which solutions based on dialogue might be found' (United Nations Security Council, 2004). Protection activities by international NGOs increased dramatically thereafter (Dolan, 2008). The lobbying by civil society also contributed to peace talks in Juba between the government of Uganda and the LRA in July 2006. In August 2008, the two sides signed a landmark Cessation of Hostilities Agreement. Since then, there has been stability in northern Uganda.

By insisting on the government to negotiate with and offer an amnesty for the LRA, civil society in northern Uganda, especially community groups, elders, chiefs, clan leaders, and religious groups

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in effect rejected the official narratives of the conflict. The official narrative portrays the LRA as a group without merit and makes it immoral to engage with them in any way. Civil society understood the complexity of the conflict. They viewed LRA combatants as victims and perpetrators, or 'complex political perpetrators' (Baines, 2009), who society failed to protect from abduction and conscription into the rebel group. Even those who joined 'voluntarily' might have done so because of lack of alternatives because of the socio-economic situation they found themselves living under. The ARLPI and elders made it clear that 'no one went to the bush willingly'. This is a view one develops after 'seeing the suffering', and transcending government propaganda on the reality in northern Uganda (Armstrong, 2008).

Peace education and mediation

Even as ARLPI, *Ker Kal Kwaro Acholi*, and COSPNU lobbied government to offer amnesty for rebels and negotiate a peaceful end to the conflict, these civil society groups were also aware of the challenges of implementing amnesty and peace settlement at the local level. The conflict was so violent and was waged largely at the local level. Civilians suffered massive injuries at the hands of the LRA. The LRA mutilated, abducted, raped, and tortured (Branch, 2005; Human Rights Watch, 2005). This generated bitterness, tensions, and multiple conflicts at the local level. This is reflected in abuses using such labels as '*dwog paco'* meaning 'returnees', and 'killers' that formerly abducted persons are called and refusal to associate with them (Justice and Reconciliation Project, 2008: 5–6). This posed real dangers that any peace reached at the national level would falter when it came to implementation at the local level.

To address these challenges, the ARLPI, Justice and Peace Commission, Human Rights Focus, and *Ker Kal Kwaro Acholi* carried out peace education and conflict mediation activities. Human Rights Focus particularly carries out peacebuilding through promoting a culture of respect for human rights. It carries out human rights awareness to change the culture of violence. The organization established human rights clubs and programs in post primary schools in the Acholi subregion. Likewise, ARPLI together with Justice and Peace Commission recruited and trained volunteer peace animators. The volunteer peace animators are based at the sub-counties where they work with local religious leaders, council leader, NGOs and other civil groups to promote and facilitate participatory dialogue and promote the culture of non-violence (Justice and Peace Commission of Archdiocese of Gulu, July 2007). *Ker Kal Kwaro Acholi* and the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative have been involved in mediating conflicts within communities, between ex-combatants and the community, formerly abducted persons, and clans. With increasing cases on land conflicts since the beginning of return of displaced persons to the villages, clan leaders and chiefs have been playing vital role in resolving land conflicts.

Psychosocial support/counseling

To promote reintegration of former combatants and abducted persons, CSOs such as GUSCO, the Kitgum Concerned Women's Association (KICWA), Caritas Gulu, and World Vision International offered psychosocial support. The conflict in northern Uganda traumatized both victims and perpetrators of violence. Those abducted by LRA rebels either participated in killings or witnessed it. According to Acholi tradition, the vengeful spirits of the dead or *cen* are likely to possess people who participate in killings, witness it, or encounter murder scenes. Those possessed by vengeful spirits of the dead are likely to be disturbed. They may be aggressive or show signs of withdrawal. Society shuns contact with such persons. Thus, they need cleansing to free them from evil spell and facilitate their acceptance into the community (Harlacher et al., 2006).

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The CSOs mentioned above undertook measures to offer counselling services to people who escaped from captivity and LRA combatants who surrendered. In 1996, GUSCO, an initiative of civil leaders started to counsel and give psychosocial care to abducted children who escaped from the LRA or are rescued by the army. The children were kept in a reception center for a period of between one and three months depending on their trauma experience. Caritas initiated similar program to provide psychological support in 1999. Other NGOs like World Vision International, Kitgum Concerned Women's Association (KICWA) operated reception centers providing counselling from trauma. In 2002, it created a reception center for formerly abducted persons in Pajule, Pader district, to promote rehabilitation and reintegration into community.

Those the community received direct from captivity underwent elaborate traditional rituals to address psychological effects of killing and facilitate reintegration into the community. To promote individual and community healing and to facilitate reintegration, Caritas provided support to local communities to carry out traditional cleansing rituals. Caritas conducted research to get a better understanding of cultural processes and documented its findings: *Traditional Ways of Coping in Acholi* (2006).

Demobilization and reintegration

In the absence of formal demobilization and reintegration process, traditional leaders, chiefs, elders and clan leaders under their umbrella group *Ker Kal Kwaro* and the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative promoted the reintegration of former LRA combatants. They made sustained efforts to fight stigmatization of former LRA and facilitate their reintegration into society by promoting traditional and religious reconciliation processes at the grassroots and community levels. They discouraged society from using terms like 'returnees', 'formerly abducted children', and 'child mothers' because of the negative connotation and because it traumatizes. They encouraged the community to forgive and reconcile with those who have returned from the LRA and now live amongst them. On their part, former LRA combatants were encouraged to confess to their clan elders whatever crimes they might have committed while they were engaged in the LRA insurgency, ask for forgiveness and undergo traditional cleansing rituals (Baines, 2009). They considered this as vital for encouraging other members of the LRA to surrender, thereby contributing to ending the conflict.

Clan and family heads also initiated traditional reintegration and reconciliation processes on their own accord. These ceremonies are initiated within clans after processes of counselling, truth telling, acknowledgement and symbolic compensation and rituals. *Ker Kal Kwaro Acholi* has also performed reconciliation and reintegration rites on a larger scale. International donors such as United States Agency for International Development (USAID) facilitated some of these processes. The rituals include the ceremony of welcoming and cleansing returnees, which entail stepping on egg ('*nyono tong gweno*'), washing away tears ('*lwoko pig wang*') and cleansing ('*moyo kum*'). The ritual of re-establishing relations and reconciliation is '*mato oput'*. The ritual of cleansing areas where killing took place is '*moyo piny*'. The ritual involves burial of the bones and remains of those dead left unburied. The aim of this is to make peace with the dead and to facilitate reintegration of communities back to the villages after many years of displacement in camps.

Socio-economic and livelihood support

To address socio-economic problems and poverty, NGOs, community-based organizations, and self-help groups stepped in to fill the gaps created by weak state capacity and neglect. Some community-based organizations and self-help groups emerged spontaneously in response to the dire

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socio-economic situation while others were established at the instigation of NGOs, the local and civil leadership to serve as implementing partners for donor, NGOs and government programs. As Omona (2008) observed, the names of these grassroots organizations are so much value laden reflecting the socio-economic contexts. Example includes among others names such as *Lacan makwo twero toko lalonyo*, meaning a poor person who is alive has the potential to become rich; *Can deg nyap*, meaning poverty does not entertain laziness; and *Bedo dano tek*, meaning it is difficult to be a human being. These civil society groups engaged in promoting economic empowerment, income generation and food security. For example, ACORD in partnership with a local NGO, Peoples Voices for Peace set-up micro-finance projects, to support adults who escaped from LRA captivity, female victims of rape, widows and single mothers (Oywa, 1998). Another local NGO, Gulu Hope for Peace with the assistance of *Jamii Ya Kupatanisha (JYAK)*, a Kampala-based NGO, provided vocational training for formerly abducted persons. The ARLPI lobbied and mobilized funding to establish the Acholi Education Initiative (AEI) to cater for education needs of children (Ochola, 2004).

Civil society groups also supported the district health services in responding to health issues such as the problem of HIV/AIDS. Gulu Catholic diocese, the protestant church, ACORD, Gulu Community Based Health Care Association, and youth groups, among others, supported in providing testing and counseling services, support, and care services for persons living with HIV/AIDS and health education (Republic of Uganda, 2002: 25).

District local governments coordinated peacebuilding activities carried out by civil society actors, international donor and humanitarian agencies. This is vital to streamline civil society activities within district plans. The Joint Forum for Peace (JFP) in Kitgum district and the District Reconciliation and Peace Team (DRPT) in Gulu district were a result of such coordination efforts. These bodies provided opportunity for peacebuilding actors to share experience and coordinate their efforts at a higher level. They have been vital in coordination of local reconciliation and rehabilitation as well as mediation efforts to resolve land conflicts, which have become endemic with resettlement into villages since the closure of camps (Interview with Clerk to Council Gulu, 2011).

Criticism of CSO intervention

Despite the noble intentions, CSOs had shortcomings. Their psychosocial support programs raised ethical concerns. Keeping those who returned from LRA captivity at reception centers for some months was a traumatic experience. At the centers, counsellors, some with questionable skills, added injury to traumatized children by asking questions like ‘while you were in the bush, did you kill anybody’ (Interview with Community Development Officer Gulu, 2011). The centers were akin to a zoo, visited by researchers and humanitarian workers interested in learning about the LRA. Ironically, the centers not only served to draw international attention to the humanitarian crisis in the north, the government of Uganda found them useful for demonizing the LRA (Dolan, 2002). In this way, civil society was complicit in the use of children as pawns in the politics of the conflict.

The counseling centers treated former LRA rebels as if they were a group of people with uniform ‘bush experience’ (Justice and Reconciliation Project, 2008). The centers overlooked the fact that former LRA returnees occupied different roles and ranks, and that some joined ‘voluntarily’ while LRA rebels abducted others. The centers also did not address the unique needs of boys and girls. The centers provided western or ‘modern’ methods of counseling, which are inadequate in a situation where children who receive counseling later settle in a dislocated and traumatized society. Thus, on leaving counseling centers former LRA combatants and abductees undergo traditional cleansing once they returned to their families. The centers did not cater for the large number of

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formerly abducted persons and former LRA combatants returned direct to the community without going through trauma centers.

There have also been concerns about commercialization of traditional rituals by NGOs and donors. The reconciliation program of *Mato oput* for instance, was in a number of cases conducted with funding from donors and western media widely covered it. It was more or less like acting 'traditional' justice rituals for the western media. It is questionable whether members of the community attached meaning to processes carried out by NGOs. Additionally, traditional institutions are weak. They were re-established with the support of the government and donors during the 1990s to provide leadership, but also as an instrument to control the population. The youth especially do not take them seriously. Their dependence on the government for assistance such as the role of the government in constructing houses for them as part of the resettlement program under the Peace, Recovery and Development Plan for northern Uganda (PRDP) has raised concern over their independence. Some people in Acholi cynically refer to them as 'the government's chiefs' (Interview with an Administrative Officer Gulu, 2011).

Promotion of reconciliation at the local level has also been done in isolation of national processes. This is not in conformity with the conflict transformation approach, which emphasizes coordination of national and local level peacebuilding. The conflict in northern Uganda is rooted in national politics. It is not a 'northern' or 'Acholi' problem as it has sometimes been presented in 'official discourse'.

Socio-economic and livelihood support intervention, have also been localized and micro in nature. These interventions only focused on symptoms not structural roots of socio-economic problems of poverty. They do not address the broad issue of governance and the situation that creates poverty, deprivation and conflicts in Uganda. Local level peacebuilding activities by CSOs need to complement rather than substitute national processes.

Challenges faced by CSOs

The national context provided the most immediate and formidable challenge to civil society involvement in peacebuilding. Civil society groups have had to contend with the government's intolerance of their involvement in political activism and advocacy. Government officials regarded groups advocating for negotiated solution to conflict with intense suspicion (Rodriguez, 2002: 58–59). It accused CSOs of engaging in activism and advocacy of overstepping their boundary by involving in politics and threatened to ban their activities. The brutal nature of the LRA rebels and inability to present a coherent political agenda worsened the situation. It made it very difficult to advocate for negotiation with then. According to Carlos Rodriguez, a renowned peace activist in northern Uganda, the government nearly banned the first interfaith public prayer for peace which was held in Gulu town in 1996. Political activism and advocacy for peace was risky and at times the consequences were tragic. In June 1996, two elders Okot Ogony and Olanya Lagony were killed while on a mission to meet LRA leaders (Gersony, 1997: 53–54). In August 2002 the Ugandan army attacked and held captive three priests, Fr. Carlos Rodriguez Locormoi of the Justice Peace Commission/Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative, Fr. Tarcisio Pazzaglia and Fr. Julius Albanese of the Missionary News agency, who was on a visit to the north. The priests were meeting LRA rebels (Justice and Peace Commission of Archdiocese of Gulu, 5 August 2002). The army accused the priests of not obtaining permission from the relevant authorities. A charge the chairperson of the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative Archbishop John Baptist Odama denied (Justice and Peace Commission of Archdiocese of Gulu, 5 August 2002; ARLPI *Monitor* (Kampala), 3 September 2002:4). These incidences highlight the challenges civil society actors operating in a repressive environment face.

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Inclination towards a military approach to the conflict, on the part of the government and rebel groups, especially the LRA, provided an obstacle to peaceful resolution of the conflict. There was little trust between the government and rebels. Each side wanted the other to surrender at the negotiating table. Consequently, peace negotiations tended to be accompanied by intense military campaigns and inflammatory statements. Peace processes tended to falter, and where agreements have been signed, there was little effort at implementation. Unfortunately, CSOs often lacked capacity to guarantee implementation, as was evidenced in 1988 with the agreement between government and UPDA rebels, which the Catholic diocese of Gulu had mediated.

Conclusion

Civil society actors have contributed to peacebuilding at the local level though a number of interrelated measures. Civil society actors have carried out advocacy and lobbying of fighting forces to negotiate and the international community to put pressure on fighting forces to negotiate. They carried out activities aimed at creating awareness about the plight of civilians, changing public opinion and building culture of peace, promoting reconciliation, sustaining livelihoods and rebuilding local economies. These measures target peacebuilding at the both upper or national level, and local level. This is because the national and local levels are interlinked. Peace at either level has effects on the other.

They engaged in peacebuilding in a challenging context of a state that does not accept alternative political views. The Ugandan state favors a military approach to conflict and is intolerant of any opinion to the contrary. The violent and brutal nature of the LRA and its failure to present a coherent political agenda led to their criminalization by the governments of Uganda and the United States and labelling them a 'terrorist' organization. This made it morally repugnant and politically unacceptable to engage them through peacebuilding activities. Civil society in northern Uganda defied this label and pursued the cause of peace. Their decision was based on the realization that conflicts are complex and even the worst perpetrators of violence may at the same time be victims. To criminalize and preclude any peaceful engagement with them is not a useful option. Engagement with the LRA has contributed to a measure of peace since 2006, something a military option has failed to bring.

Civil society contribution to peace is important, but is not a substitute for the role of the state. The two must complement each other. Civil society peacebuilding activities such as those aimed at building local economies and improving livelihoods are merely sedative, unless efforts are made to redress the structural roots. Engagement by the state is therefore vital. Lack of commitment and repression by the state constrains and undermines civil society activities. To counter repressive environment, civil society actors must employ collective advocacy to mobilize consensus for peacebuilding. Lobbying international actors contributes to putting pressure on the state to negotiate and compromise to build peace. Civil society activities require popular support and legitimacy from the grassroots. By its nature, many civil society groups in Uganda are organizations of the urban and educated elite.

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