

Protecting and Meeting Rights of Children during Conflict? Reflections on the Activities of Three Indigenous Social Work Agencies in Northern Uganda

Eric Awich Ochen

Eric Awich Ochen completed his Doctoral studies at the Centre for Applied Childhood Studies in the School of Human and Health Sciences, University of Huddersfield. His Ph.D. explores the narratives of young women's experiences of the conflict and reintegration process in northern Uganda. Eric graduated with an MSc. in Development and Project Planning (distinction) from the University of Bradford in 2002 and also possesses an upper second bachelor's degree in Social Work and Social Administration (Makerere, 1999). Mr Ochen currently lectures at Makerere University's Department of Social Work and Social Administration. His main interests revolve around social work practice with children, youth, families and communities as well as project development and evaluation.

Correspondence to Dr Eric Awich Ochen, Makerere University—Social Work and Social Administration, PO Box 7062, Kampala, Uganda. E-mail: eaochen@ss.mak.ac.ug

Abstract

The complex humanitarian emergency in northern Uganda was occasioned by the two decades of conflict. As a result, several development organisations (local and international) responded to the support needs of children and communities affected by the armed conflict in northern Uganda. Some interventions were developed to meet the psycho-social needs of the children at the reception and rehabilitation centres (RRCs) and in the community. Others were designed to respond to the psycho-social challenges of their families and of the returning children. Interventions have also been developed to address the children's resettlement and reintegration needs. In this paper, I make a critical analysis of the activities of three indigenous organisations, namely CARITAS Gulu archdiocese; Gulu Support the Children Organisation (GUSCO); and Concerned Parents Association (CPA), as they carry out support activities for children associated with fighting forces. I utilise a child rights discourse in analysing the interventions and their overall implications to social work practice in a complex context. I argue that, while these interventions were relevant to the circumstances of the children and young people, they in many cases fell short of fully empowering them to engage more proactively with their communities.

Keywords: child rights discourse, reintegration, conflict, agency

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Introduction

Social work interventions in situations of crisis have often brought much-needed relief to people in great distress. Conflict presents significant contextual challenges to both agencies and individuals within communities. Programming for children and young people affected by armed conflict has thus generated controversies, posed challenges and also opened new possibilities for the meeting of rights and interests of children and young people. While there is no doubt that development agencies meant well for the children and communities within the region, rights-based interventions in northern Uganda have met significant challenges. This has been occasioned in part by the differences in the definition of rights, conceptualisation of childhood, issues pertaining to socio-cultural variables, and the complexity arising from the context of implementation. The Acholi socio-cultural organisations, norms and regulations present both a milieu of strengths and complexity in child protection work. While the traditional socio-cultural systems with their norms and regulations have been emphatically considered as a strong custodian of children's rights, there has been significant disagreement within the community and among actors over what constitutes children's rights, who is entitled to such rights and what degree of rights should be given to children and young people.

Moreover, the implementation of a child protection programme has also been constrained by application of a rigid definition of rights informed by global conceptualisation and parameters within the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and donor agencies obsessed with short-term and quantifiable outputs (Ochen, 2011). Yet this conceptualisation many times varies from local realities and in some cases leads to a promotion of messages of rights (by intervening agencies), which portrays local culture negatively. Such approaches breed conflict and do not aid the acceptability of the messages of children's rights. Recent scholarship has increasingly paid attention to the potentials within the traditional African knowledge and child protection system and how it can be utilised to enhance the acceptability of the message of rights and reintegration of children (see, e.g. Ochen *et al.*, 2012; Acirokop, 2010; Bissell *et al.*, forthcoming). The rich diversity of the African (in this case Acholi) cultural system is at times, however, bypassed in favour of untried Western (European) models and ideas that are difficult to apply locally. All these have had a direct bearing on the interventions developed and activities implemented.

Building on the above analysis, this paper questions the degree and extent to which interventions implemented by psycho-social support (PSS) agencies

within northern Uganda have been empowering, sustainable and relevant for the formerly abducted child mothers (FACM) in preparing them for a positive role within society. I have argued that most of the interventions have been too paternalistic, portraying the FACM as problem beings, with little focus on their strengths, agency and aspirations. As such, the involvement of young people as agents in the process of change and engagement with their communities has been given minimal attention in the programmes carried out. Other than the by-products of services (mainly vocational training) and materials received from the support agencies, there is little in the community to show for agencies' support over the years, in terms of youth engagement with their communities in the change process.

Description of case study agencies

CARITAS Gulu Archdiocese

CARITAS Gulu Archdiocese is the Emergency Relief and Development wing of the Catholic Church in the Archdiocese of Gulu. It is an institution within the Catholic Church with a pastoral obligation to offer charity and hope to the most disadvantaged members of society. CARITAS Gulu has been in operation for over twenty years since its founding as the Social Services Department of the diocese. Through its focus on peaceful ways of solving conflicts in co-operation with local government and traditional leaders, the intervention intends to reduce structural gaps within the informally existing system of justice and therefore aims at supporting the national framework of justice. In other words, the focus is to identify relevant structures within the community, nurture them and improve their efficacy in addressing challenges facing the community and in promoting socially accepted solutions to community issues.

Gulu Support the Children Organization (GUSCO)

GUSCO was formed by local children's rights actors in 1994 to respond to the physical, health and psycho-social needs of children returning from rebel captivity (formerly abducted children). Initially, the needs of children returning from rebel captivity were not being systematically addressed, creating room for an intervention that can provide support for formerly abducted children (FAC). While significant achievements have been made, these efforts have not been without drawbacks. This is because GUSCO's efforts in northern Uganda were the first for any organisation attempting PSS, often using models developed in the Western world or areas outside Uganda. Application of non-indigenous intervention models raises issues pertaining to relevance, ethical standards, adaptability and appropriateness

in a given context, with concomitant implications on the acceptability and sustainability of such actions among the target community.

Concerned Parents Association (CPA)

The Concerned Parents Association (CPA) is an indigenous independent NGO targeting the plight of children affected by armed conflict in northern Uganda. The organisation has been active in PSS, especially focusing on child-centred psycho-social interventions. CPA's approach to child-centred PSS is building the capacity of the already existing Parent Support Groups (PSGs) to effectively manage the various psycho-social challenges of their children and families. CPA builds the PSG capacity through training, supervisory field visits, entrusting them with increased responsibility of project management, mentoring and community-wide sensitisation campaigns.

These three case study agencies are among the most conspicuous local non-governmental organisations operational in Gulu and Amuru districts, and utilised similar (though at times varied) strategies in supporting children affected by armed conflict and their communities. This paper specifically addresses the situation of FACM, who are female children who returned with children fathered by rebel soldiers in the bush.

Background and literature

Northern Uganda's socio-political context

Northern Uganda is emerging from the prolonged period of conflict in which it has been engulfed since 1986. The conflict largely involved hostilities between the national army (Uganda People's Defence Forces) and the Lord's Resistance Army. Over the period of the conflict, some 20,000 people have been killed and over two million displaced (US Institute of Peace, 2010), many of whom found themselves relocated to internally displaced person camps (IDPC).

During the conflict, thousands of children, both boys and girls, have been deliberately targeted by the rebels to work as fighters, porters, sex-slaves and performing other activities. Carlson and Mazurana (2010) estimate that over 60,000 children and youth have been abducted over the twenty-year period. They also add that up to one in six females in northern Uganda have been abducted by the rebels. Of those abducted, half have delivered babies within the bush. Other studies such as McKay and Mazurana's (2004) put the proportion of girls abducted at 30 per cent of the total number of abducted children and youth, while Annan *et al.* (2006) indicate a figure of 15 per cent. Many of these abducted children and young women have returned home to face an uncertain future within a community

significantly affected by the conflict. Over the years, many children have escaped or been rescued by the army. However, thousands more remain in rebel captivity.

Children and armed conflict

The recruitment and abduction of children (including girls) into armed forces have become a defining characteristic of most contemporary intra-state conflicts (*Achvarina et al.*, 2008). *Rosen* (2005) takes a critical look at the child soldier phenomenon and argues that the phenomenon is much more complex than is understood. He notes that children are used by third parties in the global search for power and superiority among state parties and geo-political institutions. In his own words, 'the child soldier crisis is part of the contested domain of international politics in which childhood serves as a proxy for other political interest' (*Rosen*, 2005, p. 2). Within the last two decades, there have been increased research interests into the effects of armed conflict on female children and women (*Mazurana et al.*, 2008; *Annan et al.*, 2007; *Frerks et al.*, 2005). In almost all civil conflict in developing countries, women and girls have suffered as either direct or passive participants in the conflict.

De Berry (2004) writes that girls in Teso, eastern Uganda, were at risk of being sexually exploited by both the rebels and the government forces. *De Berry* identifies a number of factors that increase vulnerability for girls, including militarisation, displacement, soldiers dictating movements within the camps and commodification of sex. *Machel* (1996) discusses some of the key threats to women in armed conflict such as rape, prostitution, sexual humiliation, trafficking and domestic violence. Importantly, the *Machel* study also acknowledges that, while girls tend to suffer more from sexual abuse and violence during war situations, boys are equally affected, although in most cases their exposure to abuse is not reported. Like other studies on children affected by conflict, the *Machel* study stresses the importance of paying attention to the psycho-social needs of women and girls and the necessity of programmes and intervention to incorporate these key issues. Girls and young women in northern Uganda have suffered various forms of sexual and gender-based violence and been exposed to varied traumatic events which has significantly affected their psycho-social well-being. Different agencies have experimented with various methods in order to redress the situation. Questions, however, remain on the effectiveness of these approaches (see *Ochen and Okeny*, 2011; *Allen and Schomerus*, 2006).

Recent literature has, however, questioned the presentation of women and girls only as victims in situations of conflict. It has been suggested that girls have played an active part in many conflicts, not only as victims of aggression, but as fighters and perpetrators of violence (*Haeri and*

Puechguirbal, 2010; Francis, 2007). In situations in which the FACM are perceived as victims and their full role in the conflict is not factored, local agencies might also fail to isolate their strengths and agency that could be built upon in any intervention. Francis, however, suggests that, while the participation of children and young people in conflict has been both voluntary and involuntary, in most cases the young people do not have a choice at all and joining fighting groups is perceived as giving the best option for survival in a difficult context.

Programmatic responses to resettlement and reintegration of formerly abducted children

Article 39 of the CRC counsels state parties to ensure that children subjected to extreme brutalities in armed conflict situations are supported to recover from such critical events (Loughry and Carola, 2003). It is noted that many agencies have increasingly implemented interventions aimed at addressing psychological and social issues, although little consensus on its dimensions emerges (Angucia, 2010; Allen and Schomerus, 2006). Loughry and Carola (2003) regard psycho-social intervention as activities that 'seek to positively influence human development by addressing the negative impacts of social factors on people's thoughts and behaviour' (Loughry and Carola, 2003, p. 2). According to Loughry and Carola (2003), therefore, psycho-social work with children in conflict situations is a new development; thus, various types of intervention exist and there are no uniform models adopted across agencies.

Other scholars have also raised concerns about how reintegration will be conceptualised when the philosophies underpinning definition and conception of childhood differ from local socio-cultural context (see Francis, 2007; Shepler, 2005). In such situations, conflict could emerge between the 'modern approach' and the traditional social institutions, thereby affecting the efficacy of planned interventions. In some cases, while staff employed within the agency might want to adapt their practices to suit local realities, the organisational philosophies and approach might make this difficult. In other situations, where the donor agency's objective is in line with the 'modern approach', local agencies might fear arguing their context-based positions for fear of not being funded.

In terms of supporting reintegration, two perspectives seem to emerge from the literature: the community-focused model and the individual FAC-focused model. It is noteworthy that many NGOs supporting the resettlement and reintegration efforts have tended to use a combination of both approaches with different degrees of variance. The argument presented is that reintegration support should take into consideration not only the needs of the target group, but also those of their families and communities. The premise of the argument is that reintegration interventions should not

be de-linked from 'broader community recovery programmes' (Mazurana *et al.*, 2008; Annan *et al.*, 2007).

In justifying a general targeting of reintegration interventions, Annan *et al.* (2006) cites the big proportion of children and young people who went directly home, without passing through any RRC (estimated at over 50 per cent of abducted children). This approach suggests improving family resource capacity and that of the community to support the children and also to address social stigma (see also Mazurana *et al.*, 2008; Corbin, 2008; Frerks *et al.*, 2005). The main issue here, though, is whether resources are available to meet a huge needs situation in the community. Individual-focused interventions are what most agencies have implemented over the years for formerly abducted children and young people (see Ochen and Okeny, 2011). It involves the agency reaching out to one individual child/young person and addressing his or her needs and to some extent that of the immediate family. Key activities involved basic education, vocational training, PSS, family tracing and reunion. Proponents of the broader community approach critique the latter approach as being too narrow and creating avenues for stigmatisation of those receiving its targeted support (see Mazurana *et al.*, 2008; Annan *et al.*, 2006, 2007).

Children's rights discourse

The concept of children's rights and rights discourse has been at the forefront of programmatic and policy interventions for children. Globally, the UN has been championing the protection of the rights of children. This has mainly been done through monitoring the implementation, observance and domestication of the CRC by state parties (United Nations, 2008). However, there are both proponents and critics of the dominant discourse on rights. Wald (2004) observes that the notion of children's rights is a controversial one which has its limitations. Wald notes that some of the issues embedded in rights should actually be framed as a moral obligation of parents towards their children and questions heavy state proscriptions and interventions in regard to some of the rights. Wald argues against granting children unlimited rights, maintaining that unlimited rights devoid of accountability might prove problematic for children. In most Ugandan societies, the promotion of children's rights has often elicited community resentment with labels such as 'children rights is spoiling our children'. This is even made more complex by the absence of local vernacular words describing *rights*. Most words that are associated with rights actually imply *power*, *freedom* and other such concepts—a scenario that has been exploited by some children to desist from submitting to parental authority. This is at conflict with the traditional conceptualisation and expectations of childhood among most Ugandan societies as a period in which children are effectively under the authority of their parents.

Lachman *et al.* (2002) argue that, while substantial progress has been made in the developed countries, children in the developing world often find themselves disadvantaged by structures (e.g. child protection policies and legislation, the police and probation departments) which do not guarantee effective protection. These structures are often not well facilitated and resourced (see Kalibala and Elson, 2010). In many instances, the stability of the family and the community structures that used to ensure it have been shattered by the HIV/AIDS pandemic, escalating poverty and a resultant atrophy of African traditional social institutions (see Angucia, 2010; Ochen *et al.*, 2010). In countries affected by armed conflict, social support inherent within extended families has also been eroded. The 1996 Machel seminal study on the protection of children affected by armed conflict makes a number of observations, arguing for culturally specific interventions to protect children's rights. However, the study was also critiqued for its universalistic suggestions and prescriptions. Significantly, while the Machel study was cognizant of the uniqueness of contexts in most parts of the world, an intervention that is culturally sensitive is not necessarily universally applicable in different cultural contexts. Recent studies in northern Uganda indicate that emphasising rights as a concept foreign to the local culture rather than integral to it could lead to misinterpretation of the philosophy and purpose of children's rights (Abola *et al.*, 2009; Ochen, 2009).

Notwithstanding its limitations, the CRC and the discourse on children rights provide a very useful framework for understanding child protection interventions and thus form part of the framework for the analysis of the data on which this paper is based. The FACM are rights holders who are not just victims of their experiences, but resilient actors in a difficult context.

Methodology

The qualitative data for this paper draw directly on in-depth narrative interviews conducted between June 2009 and May 2010 with twenty-one young women aged between seventeen and twenty-four years. All these young women had been abducted as young children, had subsequently given birth to children in the bush and had then returned to their communities. For the purposes of this article, we refer to the young women as FACM. The broad theoretical framework for the study is underpinned by interpretivism and phenomenology, as the focus was on exploring the lived experiences of the participants and their interpretation of their social world (Smith, 2008; Schwandt, 2003). It is these experiences that I attempt to interpret and give meaning to within the chosen theoretical framework. In addition to the above, seven community-based focus groups and nine key informant interviews were carried out to explore views on the efficacy of

the child protection structures. These data were analysed thematically and the issues that emerged are discussed in relation to the literature. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University of Huddersfield's School Research Ethics Panel and the research was carried out with full regard to ethical considerations. Informed consent was given by all participants.

Findings on interventions

PSS agencies interventions regarding reinsertions

CPA, GUSCO and CARITAS among several development agencies provided support to the FACM when they returned from the bush. GUSCO and CARITAS operated reception and rehabilitation centres, while CPA concentrated on supporting the returning children in the community. Interviews conducted with the Gulu district local government staff suggested that there were three main agencies operating RRC in Gulu district. These are GUSCO, which started receiving children in 1994, CARITAS Gulu and World Vision Uganda Children of War Rehabilitation Centre, which opened in 1995. At the RRC, the main thrust of the activities was to ensure that children were provided with immediate basic needs and given PSS before being reunited with their family.

Interviews conducted with RRC staff of GUSCO and with the FACM indicate that support activities in the RRC ranged from individual counselling sessions, group therapy sessions and other structured activities such as basic learning. The interviews indicated that individual counselling was reportedly aimed at supporting the FACM to come to terms with their experience in rebel captivity. Group therapy was utilised through play/dance activities and storytelling to encourage the children to express their feelings. Efforts were made to counsel family members of the FACM during their visits to the RRC:

We recognise the important role of parents and the immediate family in helping the FACM to adjust to post-reunion life at home. For that matter GUSCO has it in practice and policy to hold dialogue and supportive interactions with their family members. Such discussion focus on parents attitude son the returned child, what family resources will be made available to them and how to support the coping process of the FACM (Social worker, GUSCO).

Through such processes, the families were advised about how to interact with the FACM to enhance the success of the reinsertion and reintegration initiatives. According to another social worker with GUSCO, the challenge with the approach was that families were rarely met in their natural settings. A much better approach according to him was to reach families in their homes.

Other activities to complement family counselling and preparations included making pre-reunion visits to assess family situations and the family's readiness to receive and care for the returning FACM and her children. This was limited, however, by the fact that, at the height of the conflict, many families were not traceable, as they had relocated. The end result was that the actual reunion took place elsewhere, mostly in a rented house in the town (Gulu Municipality). Explaining the dilemma of reuniting FACM with their families in the IDPCs, one informant noted:

When I reflect on our efforts at reuniting children in the IDP camps ... that was still a location that was in transit ... it wasn't a natural home environment If we didn't have camps and we had taken these people to the community ... there would have been a very great change because in the camp almost everybody was suffering. Yes ... people were relying on handouts ... so, how do you expect somebody who is relying on handouts to support [FACM] somebody who is coming without any thing? (Obol Andrew)

Another key informant also picked out the issues of location of reunion as a challenge in the reintegration phase:

Socially they [FACM] are also not being well reintegrated in their communities since some of them have not even gone to their original homes. Well, I would say the camp situation was really artificial ... very artificial ... Therefore, it could not provide proper protection and safety for these child mothers and their children. To me, it didn't do much in terms of reintegrating the child mothers into the communities because they were living a kind of life of fear It doesn't mean that when one goes and settles in the camp then they have reintegrated (Omara Amos).

This statement implies that the context of reunion of the FACM was the temporary IDPCs, with the FACM living in fear of the community. While, publicly, the community was receptive to the FACM, in-depth interview with the young women suggested that they felt tensions in their relationships with the community members. This was exemplified by negative comments on their situation, lack of acceptance of their children and shunning them. Indeed, one FACM noted that many of them relocated to town to settle close by each other so that they could provide emotional, physical and socio-economic support for each other:

Among us here we always try to encourage each other because right now like in Kabedo-ong [town suburbs] where we are, you cannot go and ask for something from someone else and get it. So we always ask for things amongst ourselves [FACM] since we are close to each other ... we always encourage each other, share ideas and advise each other (Aloyo Maria).

It was the view of some stakeholders that other aspects of life that might have helped to enhance the chances for effective reintegration were not fully met. The FACM were also reunited with their families in a context

that had other socio-economic and spatial challenges, making post-reunion adjustments difficult for the FACM. One FACM had this to note:

When I came back my mother had passed away but my father was still alive . . . he even came to visit me at the Centre (Reception). But he was not very excited because of what people were saying that if your child comes back from captivity just know that he/she is possessed by demons . . . because there was no proper sensitization in the community. He asked me where I was going with my children. If possible I should leave those children in GUSCO and join the army because there is no place for me [at home]. So, this really broke my heart but my sister refused my father's idea (Ladira Maggie).

All the three PSS agencies (CARITAS, GUSCO and CPA) carried out a number of community sensitisation activities on issues regarding war-affected children. These were directed at addressing the reluctance of family and communities to provide unconditional acceptance to the FACM and their children as well as address sensitisation. Sensitisation activities always focused directly on the plight of children who returned from captivity. These were complemented by radio programmes as well as distribution of brochures and posters to community members:

In addition to carrying out community outreach (sensitisation) activities GUSCO also used the print and electronic media as a way of reaching to other stakeholders. We have produced several thousand copies of different types of posters promoting relevant messages in child protection and to fight stigma and discrimination against FAC and FACM. We have also conducted many radio programmes, often done on a weekly basis and a few national TV sessions to promote interests of children affected by armed conflict (Betty Ayaa).

Analysis of the FACM's views suggests that the approaches to sensitisation seemed to have been ineffective in reaching out to most people within the community.

Knowledge penetration and community response

While some effort has been made to generate and disseminate information about challenges of children returning from rebel captivity, significant gaps in terms of coverage and depth remain. These relate primarily to changes in the recovery and development context which gave rise to new challenges as depicted by one of the key informants:

As we are now in the post-conflict situation . . . land problems have become rampant . . . and most affected group of people are the child mothers. This is simply because some of them came back home and did not find their parents alive. There is therefore, no person to show them their land boundaries . . . where their parents lived . . . that is another challenge. Secondly, they came back home with children . . . these children born in captivity are not fully accepted by their relatives or parents (Agweng Ida).

As indicated above, the process of returning home presented different obstacles to reintegration. For example, some of the orphaned FACM had difficulties in claiming land from their relatives. Some FACM have opted to remain within the IDP camp location for fear of reprisals from communities they were forced to commit atrocities against. According to one FACM (Maggie), some community members were reported to have made statements like ‘if you come to the village, we are going to deal with you like you dealt with people when you were in the bush’. Yet some family members took advantage of the fear of the FACM to defraud them further of their inheritance, as indicated by testimony from another FACM:

I was abducted together with my siblings, some of who remain within the bush. As I am the eldest girl, I wanted to claim my late father’s land and cultivate it to look after my children, but my uncles (father’s brothers) are threatening me that I should not step in the village. I hear they plan to redistribute the land among their own children, when I and my father’s other children face a bleak future (Evas Amono).

Such gender-based and power relation issues require different kinds of engagement of the development agencies with the target communities. But this appears a largely neglected area in current interventions within northern Uganda.

The study suggests that the responses of the community to sensitisation and advocacy messages were mixed, with some members of community demonstrating sensitivity to the needs of FACM and others virtually unconcerned. Focus groups and narrative interviews suggest that the outcomes of community outreach activities have been mixed. While it has generated positive public perceptions of the formerly abducted children among community members, in other cases, anger and grievances of the community did not seem to have abated, as indicated by this comment:

These children are still facing a big problem. First of all, there is a lot of stigmatization/finger pointing because of what other people at home see them possessing [non-food items given by PSS agencies]. For example, they may be given some support so that they can go back to the life they had before captivity. But some community members are not happy about that. So, the community begins to think that ‘they were in the bush and committed atrocities and are now being treated better than us’ . . . that is what brings about stigmatization (Focus group with CPC, Patiko sub-county, Gulu district).

In most cases, the FACM have been left on their own without much support from both immediate and extended family, exacerbated by the weakened social support system within the community. A testimony of one of the FACM reveals some uncertainty:

We people who have come back from the bush we are finding life very difficult. If you think of getting a man, they will refuse your children first they just want you. Like for my case who is an orphan where to put your children

is a problem. Getting someone to help you pay them at school is not there. Even getting something to do to support them is a problem, food prices are very high and even clothing you cannot afford to buy for them. . . . I find life so hard and if they can see a way of helping us not me only . . . it will be very good (Aci Lorna).

Discussion

Contemporary discourse(s) on rights and children in conflict situations

The promotion of children rights in a situation of conflict and complex humanitarian emergencies raises critical issues of appropriateness, relevance and timelines of actions within the context. The planning of interventions in such a context will have to take into consideration intra-communal, inter-communal and other such factors, including the prevailing socio-cultural factors, governance framework and potentials for creation of change. Findings suggest that many communities in northern Uganda including the Acholi have strong allegiance to their culture which guides social interactions on a day-to-day basis. This is, however, not to deny the fact that contextual change as a result of both the conflict directly and other factors has impinged on the socio-cultural institutions.

The consideration of cultural issues in child protection programming has contributed to some scholars arguing in favour of finding common ground between international rights agreements and local socio-cultural situations (see [Honwana, 2006](#); [Shepler, 2005](#)). The sentiments expressed by Honwana, also supported by *this* study, are that effective protection of children from direct involvement in conflict requires the harmonisation of local and global understanding of children's rights which should be translated into local worldviews.

There is concern, however, that the current international child protection paradigm and subsequent programming appear to heavily favour Western cultural perspectives over equally important non-Western ones in defining protection problems and in prescribing responses to them. This perceptual construction of Western childhood values and dimensions as depicting the best approach to child protection presents challenges to sustainable provision of children rights. In this paper, I do not argue that the rights framework should be discarded nor do I contend that it is irrelevant to the African child or context. I rather raise awareness about the contextual issues around the applicability of the rights discourse in various countries/locations where culture and other social variables play a crucial role in defining childhood and its privileges. While emphasis on rights as enshrined within the CRC is important, and in consonance with internationally accepted practice, the lack of consideration of local realities, uniqueness and even cultural dynamics could potentially constrain the

effectiveness of the message of children's rights. This thus calls for an approach that recognises the presence of socio-cultural variables and factors, including traditional resources for reintegration of the FACM (see also Murithi, 2008; Bainomugisha, 2011).

It is my view that, when rights are embedded within the local socio-cultural context, acceptability of the message of rights becomes more tenable. Any critical analysis of the Acholi culture would show that most of the issues emphasised in the rights discourse are existent within the social institutions. The Acholi cultural institutional setting is in reality not antithetical to the CRC, except some differences perhaps on conceptualisation of childhood and motherhood. Indeed, many of the children's rights issues including the principles of best interests, child participation and even non-discrimination were inbuilt within the local traditional protection system (see also Ochen *et al.*, 2012; Ochen, 2011). This is not to suggest, however, that rights violations did not happen within the society. I also do recognise that certain cultural practices could potentially be harmful to children. But it should be recognised that some of the activities labelled cultural could in fact be a variant of individual actions that are not institutionalised, nor socially sanctioned (recommended). I do admit, however, that certain inaction exists among community members regarding promotion of certain rights; an example here is the right of the female child to education, where male children tend to be favoured. There is agreement among scholars and commentators that traditional and indigenous resources play a critical role in the lives of the children and young people returning from captivity, yet such crucial roles have been mainly neglected within both academic and policy debate (Bainomugisha, 2011; Murithi, 2008).

Recognising the differences in definition and conceptualisation of both childhood and children's rights across different cultures, it is imperative that discriminatory and oppressive practices that exist within certain African societies be addressed. It is my considered view that these issues can be addressed by consensus, generated using a dialoguing approach with the community, with special emphasis on engaging with traditional structures and leadership as custodians of socio-cultural values. Some of the dialoguing might needs to be intra-family, inter-groups, inter-family and inter-communities. The focus here is to look for points of intersections and convergence of modern rights discourse and socio-cultural values systems and practices. This could be the beginning point that would be used for further negotiation, dialoguing and agreement on issues pertaining to child protection and promotion of rights as well as addressing reintegration challenges of the FACM. Indeed, recent child protection literature focusing on Africa recognise the convergence of children's rights and local traditional practices and cultural mores (see also Ochen, 2011; Bisell *et al.*, in press; Wessels, 2009; Murithi, 2008; Shepler, 2005). It is, however, important to note that, where cultural rigidity exists, changes to social expectations and adoption of issues that includes changing cultural

practices and attitudes are best done incrementally: there is a need to aim for marginal changes over time rather than aiming for a complete overhaul of cultural systems and practices.

Limitations and challenges of addressing situations of children affected by armed conflict

The reintegration programming in northern Uganda is a complex field with a multiplicity of actors. Although, initially, UNICEF had instituted a framework for national psycho-social coordination meetings (UNICEF, 1998), this has over the years become redundant, overtaken by the agency's current focus on child protection as a concept. Even at the community level, support to the community-based structures appears to have been linked directly to child protection concern, with no direct emphasis on PSS. Whereas the changing nature of the context is appreciated, the gradual decline in psycho-social support activities implied reduced funding for the PSS agencies (Abola *et al.*, 2009). Besides, some of the agencies earlier engaged in PSS work also changed their programmes to handle child protection issues just to attract funding.

It is arguable that, although the general focus on child protection makes it possible to address rights and needs of orphans and other vulnerable children in the community, it also impacts negatively on the resettlement and reintegration of the FACM. There is a high possibility that specific psycho-social needs of the FACM and their children might actually not be fully met by such an approach. I argue that a better approach would have been to bolster the PSS system within the wider and local entrenched structures including the immediate and extended family (clan system). This is cognizant of the prevailing family system within the Acholi society, where support for personal crisis often comes from close relatives. Such an approach would also provide a better prospect for sustainability and continuity of support due to social accountability and expectations. PSS processes need to be inbuilt in all post-conflict interventions in the immediate and medium term. Such activities would then be complemented by initiatives aimed at raising the socio-political consciousness of the FACM to engage with the community and other actors in effectively meeting their needs.

Some commentators have, however, questioned the approaches used in supporting the FACM with a criticism that development agencies have created dependency among the FACM (see Fearon *et al.*, 2009). The problem of dependency comes about because some of the interventions being implemented are short-term interventions aimed at enhancing reporting situations to donors. They were mainly resettlement and reinsertion interventions, which only addressed superficial issues within a short planning framework and did not effectively prepare the community to

accept children returning from rebel captivity (see also Ochen and Okeny, 2011; Allen and Schomerus, 2006).

Psycho-social support (PSS) interventions: wither social agency?

In the context of the current study, I question the extent to which the PSS interventions implemented by the three case study agencies (GUSCO, CPA and CARITAS) are empowering for FACM in preparing them for a role in society. Their emphasis has rarely been on helping FACM become socio-politically empowered. I argue that most of the current interventions fall short of generating a 'productive social activism' in the lives of the FACM or bringing about what Hickey and Mohan (2005) call a process of social change. This is where development initiative is viewed not just as an end, but as a means to achieving social change within society. This is the radical rethink required in the conceptualisation of interventions supporting the FACM so that they are directly involved in meeting their rights.

This study concurs with Denov and Machure (2006), who suggest that programming for girls affected by armed conflict should best develop their capacity to exercise *independent thinking and action* as well proactively influencing their society. Boas and Bjorkhaug (2010) argue for an intervention approach that shifts emphasis from *tactical* to *strategic agency*, all geared towards ensuring the involvement of the FACM in general social cohesion and collective community security. This paper argues that an approach aimed at building *productive social activism* is important for the awakening of the FACM's *agency* and ensuring that they rise up to confront subtle and overt oppression prevalent in society. These oppressive acts could be exhibited in stigmatisation, engendered marginalisation and other such discriminative practices (Dagnino, 2008; Hickey and Mohan, 2005). The FACM can use the same resources, with PSS agency support to champion issues that concern them and demand services that directly address their development. Productive social activism is taken to mean focused community-level, district-wide and even national initiatives by the FACM to remind actors including government of their responsibility in the reintegration process and the provision of an opportunity for the FACM to actualise their socio-economic, psycho-social and even political potentials. It is noteworthy that the current development framework in Uganda encourages the participation of the youth and other stakeholders in the development process. FACM's engagement with government and other actors thus builds into this framework. It is pertinent to note that, while direct engagement of the FACM with their communities could also present some degree of risk, my view is that the rights of the FACM are protected within the various legislation within the country.

The involvement of the children and young people (in this case FACM) in strategic advocacy towards their welfare is in consonance with the right

discourse philosophy, which this paper espouses. Where children and young people are involved in participatory advocacy towards realisation of their rights and full potentials, it is imperative that a wider constituency be targeted for more meaningful social change. In this case, the children and young people should be empowered for the advocacy to target realisation of their rights. They will have to be empowered to undertake not just policy advocacy, but other strategic advocacy focusing on service delivery for the children, appreciation of child development challenges at community level and building of a constituency of children's rights advocates within the community.

I argue, however, that this social activism will be on a continuum, varying, based on how the issues unfold. It is my view that empowerment is either for self-development (an end in itself) or to cause a change in society. For example, when we localise the problem of armed conflict in northern Uganda, this is a recent development that was not there two and a half decades ago. It is important to carry out rigorous activities initially to allow people to appreciate the issues and challenges of reintegration of the FACM. When the level of awareness about children/human rights and the unique situational needs of the FACM is low, then more interventions, information and social activism must be championed, not only by the FACM themselves, but also by civil society and other social activists who have the young people's interest at heart. This therefore suggests high-level intensity of actions at rehabilitative and remedial interventions. When the intervention moves towards development, more routine activities would be carried out aimed at consolidating the gains made to ensure effective social reintegration of the FACM and a community child rights competence. At this point, social activism of both the FACM and other actors would then be varied based on the knowledge penetration and demonstration of child rights competence by the community members. Some reflections, however, need to be made at this point: are the issues along which the social activism was made now translated into institutional practice? Is it institutionalised within agency practice, recognised and accepted by the community? This is what I call positive demonstration of rights competence which is reflected in community action. Competence can also be demonstrated by community action to report, punish and isolate perpetrators of FACM's right violations. The entrenchment of child rights competence can also be demonstrated by the actual implementation of policies and legislation pertaining to rights and the widening of spaces for participation of the children and young people in their own development and governance.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have made a reflection on the activities of three indigenous development organisations in northern Uganda as they support the

reintegration processes of children associated with fighting forces. A number of strategies were employed including centre-based PSS, preparation of family to support their returning children and community sensitisation. I have shown that, while these activities were carried out in good faith, they were in most cases insufficient to meet an empowerment objective and enable the children and young people to be at the forefront of meeting their rights to development. What is required therefore is a radical rethink of the interventions to raise the political consciousness of the children and young women so that they proactively and effectively engage with the decision makers in their communities.

My argument is that there is a need to develop an intervention model that builds on FACM's aspirations and trains them as proactive social activists. This model should be informed by both good practices in resettlement and reintegration planning elsewhere but, more importantly, be aligned to the local socio-cultural realities. Global standards and codes in child protection and rights-based programming should be intersected with the local situational factors. I have argued for an intervention model that builds on the agency of the FACM and empowers them to demand their rights and actualise their potentials. This moves beyond conventional service delivery and is in line with the philosophy of rights-based approaches. It is only interventions that engage the political consciousness of the FACM that will make them confront the inherent challenges and injustices of their society. However, any such engagement should also consider the unique circumstances and situations of the FACM and allow them to learn and accumulate skills and intangible resources at their own pace, as they meet other life challenges. I recognise, however, that any attention and focus on developing (socio-political) activism in the target group should first consider meeting their basic individual, social and networking needs.

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